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The Dark Side of TESOL: The Hidden Costs of the Consumption of English

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▌ABSTRACT ▌

Based on case studies from Japan and South Korea, this review paper explores the hidden costs of English language learning (ELL). In a context where English has become a commodity and ELL a form of consumption, we focus on the personal and social costs of (a) studying abroad as a much-touted path to "native-like" proficiency and (b) sexualization of language teaching materials in order to reach new niche markets. The hidden costs of ELL are embedded in language ideologies which set English up as a magical means of self-transformation and, at the same time, an unattainable goal for most Japanese and Koreans. We end with the call to expose debilitating language ideologies in order to shed light on the hidden costs of ELL.

Key Words
TESOL, English-as-a-global language, English Language Learning (ELL), English Language Teaching (ELT) industry, language-as-commodity, language consumption, language desire, study abroad, English Language Teaching (ELT) materials, Japan, Korea

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will present case studies from Japan and South Korea to explore social issues embedded in the discourse of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). We endeavor to make a contribution to the literatures on TESOL by exploring English as a commodity, which is sold and consumed globally. While the promise of English – the idea that proficiency in English will enable access to economic development and participation in global and cosmopolitan spheres (Pennycook, 2007) – continues to attract millions of people, there has been little inquiry into the broken promises of English as an object of consumption. It is thus the aim of this paper to examine the hidden costs of purchasing the dream of English and we will do so by taking context-specific approaches to ideologies of English language learning (ELL) and the neo-liberal market that drives the English craze.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we will sketch the background to our understanding of English as a commodity in Japan and Korea. We will then move on to examine the costs of the consumption of English in two transnational sites: study abroad programs and the sexualization of ELL materials. In our exploration of study abroad programs we are concerned with the personal costs of the English craze and in our discussion of the sexualization of ELL materials we are concerned with the social costs of the English craze. The data for our exploration come from a review of existing research and media reports. We will conclude our paper with a call for a systematic focus on the personal and societal costs of fetishizing English both in Japan and South Korea, as well as other countries in thrall to the promotion of English.

2. English as a commodity in Japan and Korea

In recent years an increasing body of critiques of the hegemonic power of English as a global language has emerged (Kachru, 1992; Pennycook, 2007; Phillipson, 1992, 2009). These suggest that the hegemony of English creates tensions and inequalities between Centre and Periphery countries (Phillipson, 1992), between developed and developing nations (Rubagumya, 2004), and between native and non-native speakers of English (Norton, 2000). However, although we are relatively well-informed of how and why English becomes a site of power struggle between different nations or speakers of various backgrounds, there is a lack of investigation into the inequities created through a pervasive view of English as commodity. Individuals and whole nations are in thrall to the idea that learning English contains a performative power that will enable personal success as well as national competitiveness, modernization and advancement. As a result of these beliefs both individuals and societies invest heavily in ELL. However, the social and personal costs of this investment remain largely unexplored and unaccounted for in the field. Does learning English really transform lives and societies only in positive ways as the marketing brochures, media discourses and TESOL scholarship would have us believe? There are obvious costs involved in learning English: there are the financial costs of attending classes, paying tutors, purchasing learning materials or going on overseas studies trips. There are also significant opportunity costs involved as learning English obviously means that we cannot learn or do something else that might be more valuable. The less visible costs of the mass consumption of English include emotional costs (e.g., loss of self-esteem if a learner fails to attain the native accent they dream of), social costs (e.g., brain drain as a segment of society leaves to study abroad) and cultural costs (e.g., language loss). These costs are often justified as necessary to obtain proficiency in English, and, more importantly, by the expectation of economic, social and cultural rewards

in the future once the desired level of proficiency has been reached.

We explain the fact that few people pay attention to the actual costs of their investment into English with the notion of *language desire* (Piller, 2002, 2008; Piller & Takahashi, 2006). Language desire refers to a bundle of desires: not only a desire for mastery of the desired language but also desire for identity transformation and desire for friendship/romance with a speaker of the desired language. Language desire serves as a powerful analytical lens because it allows us to understand why learners ignore or downplay the costs of learning English: as Foucault (1980) has pointed out, the workings of power include the inculcation of desires that may very well work against the best interests of those who desire.

We will now turn to the widespread desire for mastery of English, at all levels of society, in EFL countries such as Japan and Korea. Both countries have undergone a similar level of the English craze, and their intensive investment in ELT has been embedded in the ideology of English as the tool for modernization – it is the language of global communication in business, economy, education, tourism, transportation and technology. Japan’s economic expansion in the 1970s and Korea’s in the 1990s, created both an increase in international exchanges and tensions with their international trade partners. Against this backdrop, the promotion of international perspectives and foreign language skills gained urgent national importance. English was unequivocally adopted as a key part of Japan’s national project of *kokusaika* (internationalization) in the 1980s (Kubota, 1998), and Korea’s national project of *segyehwa* (globalization) in the 1990s (Park & Abelmann, 2004).

In both countries, these national projects sparked an unprecedented boom in ELL, leading to a rapid expansion of the private, i.e. commercial, English language teaching sector (Park, 2010). Private English language schools of various sorts mushroomed (Bailey, 2002; Park & Abelmann, 2004). The number of English textbooks, dictionaries as well as study-overseas-program magazines grew rapidly (Park, 2009; Piller & Takahashi,

2006; Sim & Park, 2008). Large groups of Japanese and Koreans have poured out of their countries to enroll in language schools and universities in the West with the aim to learn 'real English' and gain an overseas qualification. The English language market in South Korea in 2002 was estimated at over $3.3 billion (with additional $800 million expenditures on English study abroad) (Park & Abelmann, 2004), while Japan's English market in 2008 was estimated at $7.5 billion (Yano Research, 2009).

We will now move on to explore the costs of the pervasive desire for English and the consumption practices it engenders.

3. The dark side of studying overseas

In Japan and Korea, the popularity of study abroad programs has thrived on the assumption that English as the language of global communication would ensure desirable employment in national and global job markets, and that the best way to master the language, particularly that 'perfect' accent, is to immerse oneself in an English-speaking country. Proficiency in English and an international education have become both a form of economic capital as well as a ticket for upward social mobility and for global, cosmopolitan citizenship. In Japan, English and study overseas are indeed marketed as life-changing experiences, as Piller and Takahashi (2006) demonstrate in their ethnographic study of five Japanese women sojourners in Sydney, Australia. In that study we showed how the commodification and consumption of English and study overseas is gendered and has a profound impact on Japanese women's life trajectories. Analyzing Japanese media texts and promotional materials of English language schools, Piller and Takahashi (2006) found that in Japan's multi-billion English language teaching industry, ELL and study overseas are largely marketed at young women, as a "glamorous means of reinventing and empowering one's womanhood, as a woman's indispensable weapon

to cope in chauvinistic Japan" (p. 64). The way Western countries are promoted as desirable study destinations is designed to appeal to Japanese women's *akogare* (desire) for the West as a beacon of modernity or a champion of equal opportunity for women (Bailey, 2002; Kelsky, 2001). Furthermore, native speakers of English that appear as teachers in the promotional materials are found to be nearly always White. White male teachers are presented as good-looking Prince Charmings, and thus effective teachers who would be sensitive to female students' needs. On the other hand, White women are presented as strong, self-confident career women, who, unlike their Japanese counterparts, are never afraid of speaking their mind. White women thus emerge as role models in the promotional discourse of ELL.

In fact, four out of five participants in our study stated that they had formed *akogare* for White Westerners, particularly men as romantic partners, well before their departure for Australia. It was their constant exposure in their teenage years to English teachers, exchange students from the US, Hollywood stars and Western musicians that initially sparked a keen interest in learning English and going overseas. Furthermore, all the participants considered ELL and study in Australia as a 'new start' – whether they tried to escape problems with romantic partners, gender discrimination at work or social withdrawal, they had a strong desire to change their lives by leaving Japan for a glamorous Western country. In the early 2000s, each participant arrived in Australia with a palpable sense of excitement, hope and dreams. On arrival, they all believed that the financial investment and emotional stress of being away from their family and friends would be rewarded with increased proficiency in English, friendships and romantic relationships with Australians, and an overseas qualification, all of which would transform them into international, bilingual women with bright career prospects.

They soon realized, however, that these expectations were unfounded: for the first time in their lives, they were consistently positioned as 'Asian'

and 'non-native speakers of English' in their everyday experiences of racial and linguistic discrimination in Sydney. In their view, Asians as a group were treated as 'second class citizens' and White people, whom they had admired, had very little patience for them. All the participants became disenchanted with their identities as "Asian" and their disenchantment manifested in their socialization and learning trajectories in a number of ways.

For example, Yoko began distancing herself from Asians, including Asian-Australians, dismissing them as "a waste of time", even though she knew that socializing with them would help her improve her English. In fact, she felt depressed every time she saw herself in the mirror and found that she had not transformed into a white woman. In yet another case, Erika, an ex-career woman with a strong sense of self-assurance on arrival, struggled through her six-month college course in Human Resource Management, a subject in which she had ample work experience. She reported having had a number of nervous breakdowns as a result of harassment by her lecturer who constantly criticized her (lack of) English proficiency. Yuka, on the other hand, became fed up with being positioned as a second class citizen. Instead of seeking approval from White Australians, she began forming close friendships with Chinese overseas students from her university. In this community, she was treated with respect as a well-educated, Japanese bilingual woman. With her friends' encouragement, she spent her university breaks in Taiwan and became highly proficient in Chinese Mandarin by the time she graduated.

The participants' sense of disenchantment was also tied in with their increasing financial insecurity. As the coveted level of English proficiency took longer to materialize than anticipated, they stayed on in Sydney beyond the originally intended period and, consequently, had to face an extra financial burden. Yet, the expected rewards of these sacrifices – fluency in English and friendships with white Australians – were not forthcoming and none of the participants were able to use their language

skills or overseas qualification to secure desirable employment after leaving Australia, except Yuka whose multilingual skills resulted in an international career in an IT company in Taiwan.

While Piller and Takahashi's (2006) participants were single women, the sense of disillusionment, and the financial burden of study overseas, becomes even more acute when a whole family is involved and is unable to attain the rewards, as can be the case for families who are part of the "Korean education exodus" in which more and more children leave South Korea temporarily for *chogi yuhak* ("early study abroad") in the USA and other English-speaking countries. According to Song (2010), in 2006, 29,511 Korean elementary to high school students pursued education visas, with around half of these of elementary school age. Furthermore, these numbers do not include children who accompany their parents, i.e. where the reason for the visa is some parental activity. Overall, more than 40,000 Korean children seem to be living abroad in order to pursue an early English education and to acquire that 'perfect' accent. The typical pattern for these children is to be accompanied by their mothers while the fathers stay behind to financially support their children's foreign education. So widespread is the pattern that there is a special term for this type of family formation: *kiregi kajok* or "geese family" – like geese, they fly every now and then to see each other.

Song's (2010) study illuminates how the allure of English is such that people are willing to trade close family bonds for the desired level of English language proficiency. Not only family bonds as a matter of fact but also their children's friendships. One of the mothers in the study is quoted as being upset about the fact that her young daughter's best friend during her study abroad year in the USA was another Korean girl and that they spoke Korean with each other. This mother felt cheated of her investment into her daughter's English proficiency. By contrast, happiness for the mothers interviewed by Song (2010) was tied to a good return on their investment as measured by their children's English

proficiency, and particularly their accent. One mother had this to say:

> English is the place where you can see a close correlation between the money you spend and the improvement of children's learning. The more you spend, the more efficient the learning. Yes, especially when the children are young, the amount of money spent in their English education is visible, which makes me happy. (p. 30)

Comments such as the above clearly show how learning English emerges as a form of consumption addiction. Seeing that in 2002 the South Korean English language teaching industry, excluding *chogi yuhak*, was worth around 3 billion USD according to an *LA Times* report (Demick, 2002), the comparison with a drug market feels not entirely inappropriate. The craze for English among Koreans is such that there is even a market for plastic surgery, lingual frenectomy, to supposedly improve English pronunciation (Simkin, 2005).

More recently, however, the benefits of *chogi yuhak* and English proficiency have come under fierce scrutiny. There is a growing concern with the first generation of overseas-trained Koreans who have returned home and who are struggling to convert their English skills and overseas qualifications into economic gains. One informative source of research on this matter is 조선일보 (*The Chosun Ilbo*), Korea's multilingual news outlet in Korean, Japanese and English that has been conducting a series of investigations of *chogi yuhak* and the English craze. *The Chosun Ilbo* interviewed 100 first generation Koreans who went abroad to study and found that 24 out of 100 found jobs overseas, while 60 out of 100 found work in Korea, four still studying abroad or back home, and 12 still engaged in courses with the view for future employment. It emerged that although the average annual income of the 60 participants (approx. 43,000,000 won) was slightly higher than locally educated Koreans, it fell significantly short of the cost of their education or their expected

salary. The reasons for return to Korea rather than seeking work overseas is also illuminating and demonstrates that *chogi yuhak* does not automatically ensure cosmopolitanism nor employment in global markets. The three most common explanations were that overseas students were sick of life overseas and desired to come home; that they could not secure a permanent residence visa in the destination country; and that their “identity as a ‘foreigner’” was an obstacle to promotion at work in the destination country (Chosun Ilbo, 2009c). *Chogi yuhak* even worked as a disadvantage in some cases as returnees reported experiencing tremendous stress in performing in English in the workplace. Because companies expect a native speaker level of English from the returnees, their linguistic capital is treated differently from those who never left (Chosun Ilbo, 2009b). Furthermore, it was revealed that English is no longer considered the kind of premium it used to be by recruitment officers, but that, instead, the market has moved on to valuing multilingualism in Korean, English and other languages, particularly Japanese and Chinese (Chosun Ilbo, 2009a).

The Chosun Ilbo’s reports above clearly demonstrate how the promise of *chogi yuhak* and English fall significantly short of expectations. It is against this background and the global financial crisis that the market for *chogi yuhak* has contracted in recent years (Chosun Ilbo, 2009d). The financial burden of *chogi yuhak* cannot produce more devastating consequences than the recent family tragedy of the Baek family in New Zealand (Chosun Ilbo, 2010). In typical *kiregi kajok* fashion, this family had split up between Korea and New Zealand. The two teenage children, accompanied by their mother, were attending a local school in Christchurch, New Zealand, while the father sent money from Korea. When the father’s business ran into financial trouble, they were forced to sell their Christchurch house and consequently faced a visa issue. The havoc that the desire for perfect English can cause briefly hit the headlines when the family committed suicide in May 2010. It is family tragedies such as this one,

together with the struggles of returnees and their failure to get an adequate return on their investment, that make greater scrutiny of the commodification of English as a global language and the consumption of ELL so urgent.

4. The sexualization of language learning materials

So far, we have discussed the commodification of ELL in relation to study overseas and its consequences. In this section, we will shift our focus to learning materials to show another distinct way in which the English craze is promoted, namely through sexualization and eroticization. The use of sexual innuendos in marketing is nothing new. "Sex sells" has been an advertising truism in many capitalists societies for a long time. What we are concerned with here is the fact that the 'sex-sells' marketing doctrine is increasingly taken up by publishers of ELL materials and the ways in which it goes unchecked and unscrutinized by policy makers and English language education experts. We will demonstrate this through an exploration of three different sets of ELL materials published in Japan, namely 'Relationship English' materials, *Gaigo TV* and *Moetan*.

English for Relationship Purposes (ERP) is probably the latest addition to the ever-increasing spectrum of English for Specific Purposes, reported as emerging in countries such as Germany, Russia and Japan (Kubota, 2008; Piller & Takahashi, 2006, 2010; Webb, 2007). In Japan, ERP materials, termed as "戀愛英語 (*ren-ai eigo*)", are largely targeting Japanese women, offering vocabulary, phrases and communicative routines deemed useful for starting and maintaining romantic and sexual relationships with foreign men. In Piller and Takahashi's (2010) analysis of a widely circulating ERP text book, *Roppongi English* (Johnson, 2006), the discourse of ERP was shown to be problematic in a number of ways. We found that *Roppongi English* presents an "essentially national and traditional version of intercultural relationships." For instance, a "traditional" Japanese woman

and a college-graduate White American man are constructed as a model interracial couple, where the shy woman's English improves through romantic and sexual encounters with the White man. By contrast, the relationship between a bilingual Japanese woman who grew up in California and her ex-navy Black American partner is represented as sexually devious and dysfunctional. Far from promoting cultural and racial diversity, the overall effect of *Roppongi English* and similar ERP materials is to sexualize language learning and intercultural relations in a way that valorizes mainstream identities and stigmatizes minority identities.

While White men are constructed as the object of *akogare* for Japanese women in ERP materials, White women as English teachers tend to be sexualized as exotic sex objects for their male audience, as Piller and Takahashi's (2010) analysis of *Gaigo TV* (Jeffs, 2008) exemplifies. *Gaigo TV* is a form of edutainment that provides multimedia English lessons in which young women, who are allegedly Hollywood actresses and called "hostesses" instead of "teachers," teach English while performing a striptease. In the open-access sample lesson (www.gaigo.tv; last accessed on 24/05/2010), a White "hostess" in a stylized classroom seductively utters, "As an English teacher, I don't speak too quickly" [takes off her top], "I don't speak too quietly" [turns around and looks into the camera], "And I don't take off my clothes too fast." Gaigo TV's teaching methods are claimed to be based on the latest research (http://gaigotvaboutus.blogspot.com). However, as we pointed out in Piller and Takahashi (2010), the educational value of these materials is non-obvious and must be considered close to zero. However, the social cost of these materials is inevitably high – they sexualize language learning in a context where the representation of women as sex objects has become acceptable again as part of 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005; Piller, 2010a).

While ERP and *Gaigo TV* sexualize adults, *Moetan* presents an even more urgent concern with the eroticization of ELL as it includes child pornographic images and targets young learners of English. *Moetan*'s

storyline involves a smart high school girl, Inku, who has a crush on her classmate, Nao, an underachiever. To help him improve his marks in English, she magically turns herself into a witch, Pastel Inku. *Moetan* has many illustrations of Pastel Inku and her magical friends, and some of these illustrations are extremely disturbing in their explicit pornographic content. Although Inku and Pastel Inku are supposed to be senior high school students, they look to be somewhere between 8 to 12 years old. In many of the illustrations, Inku and Pastel Inku are showing their underwear, almost naked, or posing in sexually seductive positions.

It is not only the images of *Moetan* that are disturbing, but also the English phrases that are supposedly taught. Examples include the following: *Accept*: "Even if you are a man who is only interested in two-dimensional beautiful girls, you will *accept* the real girl when she declares herself" (p. 22); *Broadcast*: "They *broadcast* the scene of glance at the panties of the national icon" (p. 32); or *Bet*: "When I fell in love with her, I thought that the girl was my stepsister. I *bet* if I had known she was my real sister I would not have fallen in love with her" (p. 198). The publisher of *Moetan* in fact does not specialize in English language teaching materials but '*otaku*' subcultures. Disguised as an English workbook for high school students, *Moetan* targets Japan's '*otaku'* demographic, i.e. teenagers as well as adults who have a fetish for young girls or anime/manga characters that depict them. By marrying the *otaku* culture and the allure of English, *Moetan* has achieved significant business success. More than 200,000 copies of *Moetan* have been sold, making it one of the best-selling English phrasebooks in 2003-2004 in Japan, and there have been further *Moetan* products including more phrase books, DVDs, CDs, figure models, *Moetan* DS produced by Nintendo (www.if-lupinus.com/moetan_ds). It is interesting to note that *Moetan* is no longer a strictly Japanese phenomenon but has become a transnational phenomenon. *Moetan* has made it into the Korean market ("엽기영단어"), the Chinese market ("萌英语单词") and the Taiwanese and Hong Kong markets ("萌單"). Furthermore, listed

at a major online shop, amazon.com, *Moetan* products are available for purchase internationally.

Moetan can be considered child pornography in educational disguise and it is the destructive social trends of the depiction of women as sex objects and the eroticization of English that piggy-back onto the English craze that also need to be counted among the social costs of English over-consumption.

5. Conclusion

We have examined the intersection of language ideologies, ELL and study overseas in our attempt to start mapping the costs of the English craze for Korea and Japan. The key aim that we set out to achieve in this review paper was to expose the hidden costs of a widespread desire for ELL.

There are some signs that consumers of English in Japan and Korea have started to notice those hidden costs, too, as the growth of the English language teaching market in Japan and Korea has started to contract in recent years. In Japan, the under-performance of the industry has been making newspaper headlines with the recent bankruptcies of major *eikaiwa* (English conversation) schools (Matsutani, 2010; Nagata, 2009). Furthermore, Japanese youths seem to be losing interest in going abroad. Undergraduate enrollment from Japan in the U.S. has reportedly fallen 52% since 2000 (Harden, 2010). Similarly, after the peak years of 1990s and early 2000s, the number of young Koreans who leave the country to go on study overseas has started to decline (Chosun Ilbo, 2009d). It is usually the slow economy of both countries that are considered as the main reasons for the decrease in investment in learning English. However, maybe there is more to it. Maybe disillusionment and skepticism towards the economic and socials benefits of ELL and study overseas

are coming to the fore as hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Korean returnees have begun to tell their stories. Their lived experiences – be they a loss of identity, experiences of discrimination, inability to secure desirable employment, or a sense of shame resulting from being unable to achieve native-like proficiency in English – may well serve to raise consciousness of the dark side of the English craze and of its hidden costs.

However, the question remains why individuals continue to consume English despite the myriads of costs that they encounter in the process and despite the fact that the hidden costs of ELL are starting to become visible. One explanation that we have suggested elsewhere (Piller, 2010b, 2010c) is that ELL has become a form of addiction. It can be argued that this addiction is the result of prevalent language ideologies which, on the one hand, set up English as a kind of Holy Grail that will magically transform individuals and societies. On the other hand, beliefs in the primacy of the native speaker and the standards of American and British English make that Holy Grail impossible to achieve and learners always need to do more – to study harder, enroll in another course, buy more materials, travel to a center country etc. – in order to keep a foot in the game. The language teaching market and its promotional discourses make the goal and the benefits seem magical and, at the same time, impossible to reach. That is where the other language ideology identified by Song (2010) comes in: linguistic self-depreciation. For all their investments into English language teaching and learning, most Japanese and Koreans feel that their English is terrible and that English language teaching in their countries is hopeless. Being in thrall to an English language teaching industry that is so rampant that it makes people value proficiency in English more than family relationships and that is geared to instilling a perpetual sense of inferiority is surely a recipe for great profits on the one hand and significant mental health risks on the other.

We also examined how the English craze is promoted through the

sexualization and eroticization of ELL, and highlighted its problematic identity construction of learners and teachers as well as the transnational spread of child pornography in educational disguise. ELL has clearly become another form of 'edutainment.' Given the fact that the mainstream English language teaching market has started to contract and that consumers in many EFL countries are facing tough financial times, the TESOL industry is turning to yet another niche market (*otaku* in our example), in their search for perennial expansion.

We hope to have demonstrated in this paper that there is an urgent need to scrutinize the discourse of English as a global language, produced and reproduced both in academia and the English language teaching industry. As Piller and Pavlenko (2009) argue, it is naïve, if not unethical, to extol the dreams of English language learning and study abroad without producing context-specific evidence of their benefits and pitfalls. As English has become a commodity and language learning a form of consumption, the educational paradigm no longer fits. Consumers need to be put in a position to rationally weigh the costs and benefits of the investment they are making and the market needs to be regulated to ensure consumer protection and fair trading.

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Teaching Tolerance in School Education

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❚ ABSTRACT ❚

Tolerance education must be based on the fact that *tolerance* like *democracy* cannot be achieved once and for all. Students must learn to constantly watch political and cultural processes for negative developments. Tolerance for others' values and behaviour can be learnt by studying previous historiographical views. The basic attitude to be learnt is repect for other cultures - within one's own culture as well as foreign cultures.

Key Words
tolerance education, democracy, cultural relativism, multiperspectivity, the study of history, "uri", respect

For an excellent introduction to the topic I want to refer to K. Peter Fritzsche *Tolerance and Tolerance Education – An Introduction* published by the *Institut fuer Friedenspaedagogik[Peace Education Institute],* Tuebingen/Gerrnay, which can easily be found in the internet.

I will summarize and rephrase without further acknowledgement some of the contents of this article, and then will add some remarks based on my experience as a student of Korean culture, and of cultural studies