

“English Is My Knight”: Descriptions of Perceived Agency within the Hegemony of English

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Abstract: Non-native speakers of English develop nuanced ways to navigate the global dominance of English. In this study, data was collected via focus group interviews in South Korea to examine how self-identified English speakers make sense of their relationship to English and to consider how this expressed relationship connects to perceived agency within the hegemony of English. Thematic analysis identified two themes: *English as my Knight* and *English as my First Love*. These themes connect to perceived agency in two ways: a) as enacted upon the participants through the process of being saved; b) as limited because even if English is difficult or challenging, they still cannot opt out of efforts to achieve competency. While English opens up spaces and opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable, there are still unavoidable pressures to learn. These perceptions of limited agency support a neoliberal sense of self with regard to English; this sense of self considers people as owners of language who hold individual responsibility to possess language skills, knowledge, and capabilities as a way to enact self-advancement.

Keywords: English hegemony, language ideology, neoliberalism, agency

1. Introduction

Non-native speakers of English have distinct and nuanced ways to navigate the global dominance of English. This study examines how English-language learners navigate the complexities of developing linguistic competency and considers how those who have been effective describe this as valuable capital. Data was collected through focus-group interviews in South Korea, when participants could discuss their experiences with each other. During one focus group, a woman shared stories of her time in university. She disliked her law major and did not achieve high grades in those courses. Instead, she was fascinated with English and spent significant time in her dorm room watching US media, imitating the dialogue to improve her English pronunciation. She slowly realized her internal self-talk was in English:

I think, after learning English, using another language, I started to think more. I always think to myself in my home.

{Focus Group: *Laughter*. Interviewer: That’s okay!}

There is no one speaking English to me.

{Interviewer: So you speak English to yourself at home?}

Yes, just when I was in my room, or when I think of something, or when I see something in the TV. So I just, I can’t speak [native language] to myself. It’s weird! So I just think English to myself, I just say, oh, what am I thinking...or what I want to do, or something like that.

This internal English monologue illustrates her internalized connection to the English language; she enjoyed the challenge of learning English and also felt a necessity to obtain fluency. Because of her conversational ability in English, she felt she did not shame her family even though failing at law. In her words, her parents were able to maintain pride in their daughter’s academic

achievements based solely on English. Her acquisition of and competence in English also allowed her to apply to a master's program and study abroad.

The international dominance of English exists within the broad context of globalization processes. While globalization can be defined in different ways, one approach is to view globalization as “the complex web of forces and factors that have brought people, cultures, cultural products, and markets, as well as beliefs and practices, into increasingly greater proximity to and interrelationship with one another within inequitable relations of power” (Sorrells, 2016, p. 35). Closely connected to globalization is the political and economic theory of neoliberalism, which prioritizes individual and private property rights and free trade; this focuses the achievement of well-being on individual freedoms and skills in enterprise and institutional frameworks (Harvey, 2005 as cited in Shin & Park, 2016). If globalization processes only focus on economic, political or cultural aspects, this creates an oversight of the linguistic aspects of globalization. Thurlow (2013) describes language “as an institution in its own right—one as powerful as any religious, state or educational system—which is also capable of creating and recreating social realities that feel so concrete and ‘natural’” (p. 228). Since language is how people think about power, language itself is political (Ives, 2009). Since English is not a neutral language, but an integral part of globalization and the language of neoliberalism, linguistic inequities are constituted and reproduced.

Globalized relations of power with regard to English do not translate into a simple dichotomy of privilege held only by native-English speakers and disadvantage experienced by non-English speakers. As with any globalization process, the intricacies of linguistic privilege and disadvantage are accessed and experienced in complicated ways, both at the macro- and micro-levels. This study examines how self-identified English speakers consider their own privileges and disadvantages; they have enacted aspects of complicity by their effort to learn English but also can see benefits from their English ability. These speakers have developed their own relationship with and sense-making functions to navigate the global dominance of English. While traditional terminology might label these study participants as *non-native English speakers* or possibly *English-language learners*, I will refer to the participants as *English speakers* to emphasize their use of English. Similar to a world Englishes approach, this works to accentuate that English is not the exclusive property of native speakers (Tarrayo, Ulla & Lekwilai, 2021). While acknowledging there are significant ways linguistic privilege differs between non-native and native-English speakers, I would like to de-emphasize how participants are non-native speakers and, instead, focus on the ways they speak and use English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ideological Beliefs Associated with English

When populations feel the necessity to acquire English-language skills for survival in a global economy, elements of ideology and hegemony are at play. This study draws on Hall's (1989) definition of ideology as a “pattern of ideas, beliefs systems, or interpretive schemes found in a society or among specific social groups” (p. 264). These belief patterns work to provide structure to society; ideology dictates and organizes dominant social norms and conventions (Felluga, 2015). Ideology can be a broad term to indicate any or all belief systems of a particular group, or the process of the production of meanings for a group (Williams, 1977). However, the term can

also indicate more focused patterns of beliefs, such as identifying specific beliefs associated with English.

There are beliefs about English in general and also specific ideologies that affect how English is taught. In broad terms, Demont-Heinrich (2012) has named four different ideological discourses connected to the rise and necessity of English. The instrumental discourse considers English as simply an economic or communicative resource. This discourse fits a neoliberal approach to language, in which language is commodified as a neutral tool to be gained and exchanged for economic profit (Shin & Park, 2016). For example, the “neoliberal value of language is determined through the capital and commodity worth language can bring to both its users and the local, regional, and global markets where the language users live and work” (Nguyen, 2021, p. 3). The second ideological discourse from Demont-Heinrich (2012) is the multicultural discourse, which presents English as a cultural or intellectual benefit. The triumphalist discourse sees English as inevitable within the context of globalization. The universalist discourse considers English as the way toward global unity and possibly even universal knowledge production. These labelled discourses presented organized belief systems to make sense of the spread of English—as a neutral language, a benefit, or a necessity—and these ideologies impact the spread and reach of English.

Considering ideological beliefs about English in the context of global English language teaching is also essential. Several studies have focused on ideological beliefs in the setting of English as a foreign language (Lee, 2011; Lee, 2021; Moodie & Nam, 2016; Root, 2009, 2012; Yook, 2010). To briefly summarize these ideological approaches to language instruction, competency in English is recognized through conversational ability; fluency in reading, writing, grammar, or vocabulary is not considered as highly as the ability to speak fluently. To achieve this, English should be taught monolingually and use of other languages should be completely discouraged in the classroom (Yang & Jang, 2010). The most effective teacher to achieve this is a native-speaker of English (Root, 2009, 2012). The rationale is if people can speak English fluently, they should be able to pass on these skills to students (Kaplan, 2001). These beliefs support the native-English speaker fallacy (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 1992), an idea that native-English speakers have ownership of the language and are the idealization and optimum goal for a language learner. For example, a study conducted by Tarraya et al. (2021) highlights how, even when a local form of English, in this case, Thai English, is acknowledged as acceptable with specific aspects of vocabulary, there still is an emphasis that for pronunciation (intelligibility) and grammar instruction, native-speaker standards are the model. This demonstrates how even though localized varieties of English might be acknowledged at some level, in education, “native-speakerism” still exists in strong form. Even though research in language acquisition does not fully support any of these ideological beliefs about English instruction (Phillipson, 1992), they still hold strong influence in practices and policies and create significant privilege for native speakers of English.

2.1.1 The Context of South Korea

Ideological beliefs about English are translated into specific contexts; global processes intersect and interact with local contexts, as indicated by the term *glocalization* (Robertson, 1995). South Korea is an apt example of how English has been pursued as a crucial marker of progress within the context of globalization and neoliberalism. Park (2016) stresses how Korea’s economic neoliberalization cannot be separated from the concept of globalization (*seggyehwa*). This is due to the context of regularization and privatization which occurred in the mid 1990’s at the same time when Korea was striving to make a mark in the global arena. English became a crucial necessity

in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis as the way for Korea to translate itself to the world in the context of globalization (Park, 2016). English language competence became an integral part of *segryehwa*. In fact, there is the impression that the push to acquire English and attention on English-language education is most likely unparalleled than in any other country (Lee, 2011; Song, 2011; Yook, 2010). The term *yeongo yeolpung*, translated as “English fever,” has become common in expressing the pressure to succeed in English (Park, 2009; Park, 2016; Root, 2018; Shim & Park, 2008). Not only have there been constant debates whether South Korea should adopt English as an official language, but English is a required course beginning in elementary school, it is a significant part of the university entrance exam, and English test scores are usually required for job applications, even if the job entails no use of English (Park, 2016; Root, 2018).

Within this context, ideological beliefs about English have developed in South Korea. There is a strong perception that English is beneficial to learn, even when not needed in daily life in Korea (Lee, 2019; Park, 2016). The gap between English competence and actual knowledge is not questioned, so English is commonly seen as knowledge itself (Lee, 2021). In other words, English proficiency is linked to intelligence, both perceived and performed intelligence (Bacon & Kim, 2017, Lee 2016). Lee’s (2016) research, an interview study with elderly women in Korea, presents the interviewees’ perception that a lack of English skills is not only seen as an “intellectual flaw” (p. 331), but is also rhetorically presented as a form of disability. In a similar manner, Park (2016) highlights how the absence of English ability can be perceived as causing intelligence, skills, and ability to be marked as useless, if they cannot be translated to other contexts than Korea.

Finally, in one study examining Korean youth and how they personally navigate macro-level policies and forces of language ideology, the results demonstrate the reification of an idealized native speaker (Bacon & Kim, 2017). For example, even if not accessing any specific native-English speaker in their daily lives, the perceived end goal for these youths was to accommodate a monolingual English speaker and, most likely, one from the USA, since this country was most strongly linked not just to English but also to economic status and power. A study by Yoo (2011) examined Korean students’ perceptions of English accents; the overwhelming preference was a North American English accent. Even amongst different dialects of world Englishes, then, there are beliefs attached to which might be more valuable or effective. Another way that an idealized native-speaker of English was considered was how Korean students performed competitiveness with each other over English ability, with “the goal of presenting native English speakership for a primarily Korean audience” (Bacon & Kim, 2017, p. 17).

2.2 The Hegemony of English

These ideological beliefs about English carry great influence, attesting to the hegemony of English. Hegemony is a complicated process in which a dominant group maintains dominance by communicating their ideological beliefs as necessary, which results in those who are subordinated or subjected by these beliefs to accept them as “natural” or as “common sense” (Felluga, 2015; Tietze & Dick, 2013, p. 123). This approach to hegemony borrows from Gramsci in considering how political, social, and cultural forces create processes of dominance and subordination, resulting in complicated yet specific inequities (Williams, 1977). Not only is language a crucial factor in establishing hegemony (Brown, Ward, & Nam, 2019), but, with the case of English, the language itself is the hegemonic power.

The hegemony of English refers to the active and nuanced processes of how English has become the global, dominant language. This began during the era of colonialization and the early days of

capitalism, through the spread and reach of the British Empire and then continuing in the twentieth century, specifically after World War II, with the United States establishing a world power status (Holborow, 1999; Kaplan, 2001). If there are any beliefs or opinions that the dominance of English is accidental or coincidental, the result of a “neutral” or “natural” process, this supports the strength of English hegemony.

The hegemony of English sets up inequities in which some can master English with no overt effort, as their native language, while others must invest time, and educational and economic resources to communicate in English (Demont-Heinrich, 2012). This creates linguistic disparity, threatens linguistic diversity, and creates more hierarchical divisions and linguistic and communicative discrimination (Alexander et al., 2014; Tsuda, 2013). Even the inequity of not being able to communicate individual ideas/opinions or access others as easily as native-English speakers reproduces disparity. The act of translating ideas into English “also involves the threat of subsuming local insights under English discourses” (Lunny, 2019, p. 70). The hegemony of English centralizes not just language, but cultures, experiences and knowledge. In the context of neoliberalism, the dominance of English continues to reproduce the inequities that neoliberalism creates (Shin & Park, 2016). Park (2016) discusses how language “will always work to index and reproduce the social constraints and social differences that the neoliberal subject is expected to transcend” (p. 457).

When considering linguistic hegemony, both Gramsci’s and Bourdieu’s approach to hegemony are helpful. Gramsci focused on hegemony as “domination by consent,” highlighting the political process to establish consent (Chuang, 2019, p. 51). Gramsci’s approach to hegemony considers the consensual basis of how the global language has shifted, whether or not it appears that individuals, institutions, or political entities can freely choose or not to teach/learn English (Ives, 2009, p. 662). This sets up unequal power relations based on language. From a Gramscian point of view, “the spread of English is a problem to the extent that its role within particular hegemonic blocs prevents subaltern social group consciousness from developing and creating critical counter-hegemonic responses” (Ives, 2009, p. 663).

Bourdieu emphasized the institutional processes to reproduce language, focusing more on “symbolic domination” (Ives, 2009, p. 663) or symbolic capital as the resources, or lack thereof, that someone has to achieve or navigate through life (Brown et al., 2019). Three main forms of symbolic capital are economic (capital that connects to monetary value or helps people gain wealth), social (capital in which social connections and relationships work to elevate status and money), and cultural capital (capital that connects specific forms of knowledge and behavioral norms to group membership). Lee (2021) sums up the importance of capital as a “social power resource for individuals from which to construct their values and attitudes...possession or lack of capital determines their power and privileges in different social contexts” (p. 223). While Brown et al. (2019) state how English proficiency is “one of the most valuable commodities and, even more importantly, social capital” (p. 222), linguistic capital has also been identified as a form of a highly fluid, embodied cultural capital (Lee, 2019). In the context of South Korea, English is currently a “significant capital to gain and maintain class distinction” (Lee, 2019, p. 223); English ability has become the overt marker to represent the middle class in South Korea.

2.3 Agency Within the Hegemony of English

Within complicated global contexts of English hegemony, individuals must navigate the pressure and necessity to become competent in English. The concept of agency is one way to consider how

an individual or a group negotiates hegemonic processes. A basic definition of agency is having the ability to exert choice and power (Felluga, 2015). Agency considers questions of who the subject is and who the object is: Who is capable of doing the action and who is receiving this action or who is being enacted upon? One aspect of enacting social justice is to consider activism as efforts to open more possibilities of agency to dominated or marginalized groups (Felluga, 2015). Critical theory, however, also questions the validity of agency: Is it possible for someone to have free authorship of actions and decisions? For example, language can impose structures to agency, or Marxist critiques question if someone can be in control or actually driven by larger economic forces of society (Felluga, 2015). Others, such as Butler, highlight that “when we act, we are not so much independent, self-willed agents as we are ‘actors’ performatively repeating conventions...that in fact constitute us as agents only in the act of performance” (Felluga, 2015, p. 14).

For the purpose of this study, the concept of agency considers how individuals are performative actors within the larger processes of hegemony; people make choices even if there is limited scope to those choices. Individuals can consent to hegemony and enact resistance in complicated and even simultaneous ways. According to Williams (1977),

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits...it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. (p. 112)

Agency, then, is considering the possible ways people exist within the lived process of hegemony.

To summarize, the hegemony of English is a crucial aspect of globalization and reifies disparity and inequity of achieved capital. While research has examined the nuances of ideological beliefs connected to English, few studies have explored how individuals articulate their perspective of personal agency within these hegemonic processes. To better understand how individuals navigate their way through these beliefs, this study asks:

- 1) How do English speakers make sense of their relationship to the language?
- 2) How does this expressed relationship with English connect to their perceived agency within the hegemony of English?

3. Research Methods

Data for this study was collected during a sabbatical when I had the opportunity to stay in Seoul for five months. My positioning for this study as the researcher is as a White, cis-gender, US American woman and native-English speaker, who spent four years teaching English in South Korea in the early 2000's. I am aware that all participants could easily view me as a native-English speaker, and therefore, a potential teacher or expert in English even if I was not their own language instructor. However, since I had no long-term connection with these participants, and since their discussions included negative or frustrating aspects of English study, it appears there was some level of authenticity and honesty in the discussion. As a qualitative researcher, I designed the study as focus-group interviews to help alleviate problematic biases of one-on-one interactions with me. In the focus groups, they could share similarities and commiserate together, which allowed authentic interactions to occur. The choice to collect data in English allows the participants to share their experiences in the language they are consenting to learn. I am also aware of the connotations

to linguistic imperialism this study could present: I travelled overseas to collect data from a place of my own curiosity and possible career betterment. I am continuously working to address and examine aspects of my own privileged identities while admitting that I must continuously interrogate and unpack the complexities and know I still have blind spots. However, the hegemony of English should be interrogated and examined in English, by native-English speakers, too.

Six focus-group interviews were conducted in Seoul, South Korea, after receiving Institutional Review Board approval from my home university. Recruitment posters were located at three different university campuses within or close to Seoul. Recruitment also occurred via word of mouth. All 16 participants independently volunteered to participate in the study and provided verbal consent to be interviewed and recorded for the purpose of research; all focus groups were facilitated in English. The average length for a focus-group interview was close to an hour. For gender distribution, 15 women and 1 man participated. The age range was from 20 – 45 years old. Since there are international students studying at Korean universities, not all participants who volunteered were South Korean. The nationality demographics included 12 from South Korea, two from P.R. China, one from Vietnam, and one from Thailand. While, of course, these participants from countries other than South Korea have experienced differences in ways that English education is approached in each national education system, since the hegemony of English is international, all participants shared similarities of having English education imposed on them during elementary school, with outside social pressure from family and society to excel in English. In addition, the international students in South Korea were able to gain access to a graduate program because of their English-language ability, not due to their fluency in Korean. Therefore, their answers to the question prompts were similar enough to each other that it was not necessary to separate out participants from different national cultures. To protect the anonymity of participants, no names or overt identifying information will be used during the presentation of data in the analysis section.

For data analysis, all focus groups were transcribed and the analysis was based on the detailed transcriptions of each focus group. Therefore, to conduct data analysis, open coding was initially applied to the data. I read and re-read all transcripts multiple times, identified initial themes, and then compiled and synthesized the data into those themes. Thematic analysis was conducted based on similar elements of analysis as presented by Owen's (1984), Aronson's (1994), and Saldaña's (2016) approach to thematic data analysis. The first step is to identify any patterns or recurrence of ideas, considering repetition but also forcefulness, emphasis, or resonance to "personal or disciplinary concerns" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 203). The next step is to highlight and reorganize all data connecting to these patterns to develop theme statements (Aronson, 1994). As suggested by Saldaña (2016), these thematic categories were labeled directly from the participants' own words to represent connecting ideas.

4. Research Findings

Two broad themes emerged from the data, and while both include positive attitudes and attributes toward English, there is acknowledgement of the nuanced complexities these individuals experience with English. The first theme emphasizes how English has provided possibilities and opportunities. The second theme emphasizes conflicting emotions attached to English, including aspects of both love and hate. To name each theme, direct expressions from the participants were used: 1) *English as my Knight* and 2) *English as My First Love*.

4.1 English as My Knight

The idea of English as a knight is that English can save someone, or at least provide options for rescue. While there were several analogies within this theme, the emphasis from participants is how much English has helped them or how much they have gained from having skilled ability in English. A participant expressed this specific analogy because a knight helps people and she felt like English helped her, specifically in university: “I think it saved the reputation for me.” This is the participant from the introduction who was not motivated to attend class or apply herself to her major, so she didn’t take the law exam and described herself as failing at law. However, because of her high level of English, her family still was able to feel proud of her and this allowed her to apply for a master’s program.

Other analogies besides the knight portray English as a good or best friend, someone who is always there as an integral part of life. One participant described English as her power, similar to having a super-power. Another specific analogy is English as a pen: “And, my dream is a book, and I need a pen...When I want to achieve my dream, if I do not have my pen, I can’t write...” These analogies convey a sense of English as a positive influence, something that either has helped them achieve goals or dreams or has provided a sense of connection or comfort. English as a form of rescue (i.e., a knight) at least allows these participants to feel more powerful or equipped for achievement.

The ways in which English has provided options or possibilities include seeing new sides of their personality, gaining a broader perspective, and providing feelings of confidence. This was not only confidence to communicate in English itself, but this occurred in broader ways, including gaining confidence to interact with tourists, to help others, and to change their character or personality. One participant specified how even though initially a quiet person, because English is more expressive, they felt “more bright, [used] big expressions, and somehow enjoy those things.” Another discussed how she felt more motivation to have an open mind and attributed English to change her personality from quiet to more open and active. Learning English helped one participant learn to adapt to new situations, so she expressed how she was less afraid of trying new things or meeting people. A few even expressed that English was a good fit for their personality or character, stating how it matched their style and now they prefer this feeling which English provides. One participant felt she was not a good fit for Korean culture:

Actually, I have open mind compared to other Koreans, and I’m not that formal person, not like other Koreans, so...because their thinking and my thinking is really different, very often, and that makes me feel really, like, maybe I am not Korean or I’m not belonging to them. What if they think I am wrong? Or what if they don’t like me? But, if I see English drama, or and when I meet foreigners, they have really open mind and they always encourage me: You have very, kind of, ah, new generation mind, and...maybe you are, maybe you will do great when you go abroad...They always encourage me, and that makes me feel happy.

English provided the opportunity for her to find a community from which she felt more acceptance.

In a similar manner, participants were aware that others might perceive them differently. One participant focused specifically on her mother. Since the daughter is good at English, her mother has something she can be proud about to show off her daughter. Two other participants highlighted their awareness of how friends distinctly remember them in connection to English. Some feel like they were treated better than in the past, or treated like an intelligent person, and some were happy when their friends would come to ask for help in English.

Many were aware of how their English skills had an impact on their point of view or life perspective. There was acknowledgement of being able to access more information, from books, from the internet, from media such as TV dramas, and even from conversations with others. Cultural information was accessed in this manner, along with history and specific topics. For example, for some university majors, all textbooks were either only in English or else the original English text was more accurate to access, since some of the translations to Korean were not as thorough. Also with regard to knowledge and point of view, the term “open-minded” was mentioned several times in different focus groups. This was linked to learning how to treat others equally and to “think in a more positive way.” Participants expressed how English “changed what I think about” or “changed my thinking.” English was also attributed to help someone become an independent thinker; as detailed in the introduction, one participant even mentioned how she now uses English for her internal self-talk.

Finally, another way in which English provided a type of saving or rescuing was in the feeling of having more possibilities. There was overt discussion on how a high level of English would open up not just more chances for employment, but allow access to better jobs. Several also mentioned, in a similar manner, that having the ability to work abroad was important. There was a subtle indication how this opportunity could allow someone to escape from their home country if they wanted, as one person stated: “If you have a difficult living in Korea or if you feel depression or if you want to leave here, then you have chances...” Even if someone did not want to work overseas, the fact that English would also help people travel for vacation was crucial. English was stated as being “useful and practical” for that reason. However, some almost instantly put a disclaimer next to these statements, specifically when discussing working abroad. Some expressed how they would not want to do this, or they do not see themselves doing this: “I’m not meant to go there, but if I want to, I can do that...” In other words, the crucial emphasis was the feeling or awareness of possibilities, even if someone had no current inclination to pursue a specific option. The word “hope” was brought up a few times in this context: “...that gives me a little hope. I can, maybe, I can challenge more...”

Cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains are identified in these themes. They overlap and intertwine, but it is clear how these participants perceive an ability to do well in English impacts the affective level in producing more confidence, an openness to new things, and a curiosity to keep learning. This results in behavioral changes, a willingness to interact conversationally with others and overtly express that confidence. In the cognitive realm, not only are specific areas of knowledge accessed (i.e., via books or media such as TV dramas), but less tangible knowledge regarding culture and different worldviews are also accessed. This theme of *English as my Knight* emphasizes feelings of hope, relief, confidence, and pride in acknowledging possibilities connected to English.

4.2 English as My First Love

The second theme also acknowledges positive aspects associated with English, but the emphasis is more on the nuanced complexities and mixture of emotions that participants have experienced. The analogies mentioned for this theme were several references to family members, such as a cousin or a life partner, but also words such as frenemy, colleague, or even housework were used to explain their relationship to English. The metaphor of English as a first love is apt at illustrating this sentiment. The participant who named English as their first love described this relationship as

having certain sentimental attachments along with a sense of disappointment in the reality of the relationship:

The Far and the Near is a title of a book...the “far” means the far and the fantasy and ideal thing, and the “near” is the real life, the reality. And, as you know, the reality is not that good, as much as fantasy, and I think that is like my first love. Everybody, not everybody, but I think almost people will be disappointed about their first love if they meet them again. Yeah, so, I think English is my first love.

The other analogies are just as complex in highlighting the tension between having some favorable connection to English and struggling with it. The term *frenemy* was used in a similar manner to highlight how one participant was initially interested and curious about learning English, but over time, she found it difficult to acquire, not only because of grammar and vocabulary, but also because of the cultural contexts connected to English. The reference to English as a cousin was to describe the feeling of knowing someone for a long time but not necessarily being friendly or feeling a strong connection to them. This was similar to the reference to English as a colleague, as someone you have to work with but you can also have fun with occasionally. Housework to describe English was explained in this way: “If I accomplish, I feel happy and satisfied, but still burden. I can’t see the end of the things. I keep doing every day or every whole life time.” Finally, one other example to illustrate the complexities in attitudes toward English is when asked to describe her relationship to English, one woman directly said, “Not friend! But close relationship.” When probed to explain more fully, she said it was like a husband: “You have to live together because of money. Because of career.”

In this theme, the awareness of how English has had an impact or caused a difference focused more on the challenges connected to this difference. One participant claimed she felt confused by speaking in English; she feels different, but the difference is not clear or does not make sense to her: “I’m really confused a lot.” Another mentioned her mixed feelings: “When I say something with the easy topic, I feel...confident in English, but when I speak very difficult topic or in the public without preparation, then I would feel very nervous and not satisfied about myself...it’s a kind of difference.” When speaking in English, participants were aware of a greater cognitive processing load; some mentioned feeling more hesitant or feeling limited by vocabulary and needing time and preparation for more challenging topics. One participant was also concerned by an awareness of others perceiving her differently. Instead of feeling happy about this perception, it made her feel self-conscious and concerned about the connection of English ability to personality:

...maybe I can speak English better than them, but that doesn’t mean I’m a better person.

Right? But people think that, Oh, they look so good of me. So, I don’t think that’s right. So I always talk to my students...your English ability doesn’t mean that your personality [is better]...I always say that, but people just say, Oh, but I do envy you.

There were many times when participants stressed how they do not have a choice to study English. When asked why they were studying English, one participant said it the most directly: “There is no why!” Several reasons for this were articulated. One main reason is that all participants needed to know English for any job or major at university. For certain majors, the required textbooks were all in English, and there was possibly not any adequate translation available. Since South Korea has been flirting with the idea of making English an official language for many years, Korean companies prefer English speakers. One participant stated “it [English] is closely related with money, in Korea, especially.” Because of this, parents really pressured their children to study English, so for a few participants they expressed stress from family. Finally, a

few participants also claimed they had no choice to study English because they felt it was the only thing they were good at: “For me, it is for job, and this, honestly, this is the only thing that I am good at. So, I have no other choice but to do this.” Another participant studied abroad in the USA for a few years as a high school student. Because of this, he was actually behind in his studies when he returned to Korea to prepare for the Korean university entrance exam:

I went to America, to high school for two years, and then came back to Korea, and...that time, everyone was good at math, science, history, everything, but I couldn't follow them, so, for two years, I didn't study anything, then, I didn't prepare for the Korean SAT or the school grade, I only did TOEFL, TOEIC, and...interview practices, so, for two years I went to another institution, and I was like, working as well, so...my parents and all the teachers were like, I think, he has to go, he can go to university with only English, that's the best way.

He and his family were aware he had a low chance to get into university with his exam scores, so they put all their hopes in his English ability.

This sentiment of English being the only option was echoed in the category of English providing opportunities. Since English ability did provide more options, or had the potential of opening more doors, this also prompted a sense of inevitability. Even if someone enjoys English, or is good at it, they still might feel forced into that because of the advantages English provides. It becomes an advantage that takes effort and from which you cannot escape:

When I was young, I enjoyed learning English because I was good at English than my friends, but as time goes by I was not the one who was great at English, so...from that time...I felt a lot of pressure, so now I study English because English is an official language.

The theme of *English as my First Love* represents the complexities of emotions connected to the study of English. A first love can be remembered with nostalgia but also with a sense of loss, pain, and disillusion. This category demonstrates how there are both positive and negative aspects of having a skill that can be beneficial, but also requires a significant amount of time and effort and from which you cannot escape.

5. Discussion

These results provide insight into how English speakers make sense of their relationship to the language and consider how this expressed relationship with English connects to their perceived agency within the hegemony of English. According to Demont-Heinrich (2008), “The hegemony of English refers to the hegemony of specific English language speakers and writers, meaning actually existing human social actors working toward the (re)production of a particular (global) linguistic order” (p. 137). These participants describe how they are social actors participating in the broad context of globalized English by more overtly discussing awareness of Bourdieu's emphasis on capital. Even if not using Bourdieu's specific vocabulary, they are conscious of what there is to gain or lose based on English ability. Participants describe their English competency as a gain in capital by also de-emphasizing their personal effort to obtain this, along with a possible lack of awareness of how other types of capital such as economic or social capital could impact the acquisition of English. Specifically, there are two ways in which these themes connect to perceived agency. Agency is perceived a) as enacted upon them through the process of being saved, and b) as limited because even if English is difficult or challenging, they still cannot opt out of efforts to achieve competency.

Particularly in the first theme, participants focused on how English just happened to “fit” them, or was the one subject matter in which they excelled. The placement of English as the savior is an expression of English as the agent, or the entity of agency, not the person learning or speaking English. In the example from the introduction, the participant did not describe ‘saving’ herself by her active and engaged study of English, but instead, English was the savior, the entity that allowed her to be saved, to find some semblance of success with her academic experience, and to have her family be proud of her. Participants de-emphasized the effort of spending years to study English (per participant the average is 16 years of English study) and placed more emphasis on all the ways English has provided opportunities and prompted positive changes such as increased confidence; all of this seems to exist outside of the efforts of the English speaker, but instead on the abstract entity of the English language.

In the second theme, agency, or lack thereof, is perceived somewhat differently. There is more overt awareness on the effort needed for English competency and on the disillusion this creates. Participants acknowledge how their relationship with English is complicated and carries emotions of obligation and duty. They experience dialectical or contradictory reactions to English. They can feel fortunate to benefit from English skills, but with such luck comes pressure, too: pressure to navigate cultural contexts, to continue to study at a high level, to deal with the burden of cognitive processing in English, and so on. In this theme, English still carries a heavy percentage of being the agent of change, though a broader awareness of effort and the influence of external contexts exists.

These perceptions of agency (or the lack thereof) connect to a neoliberal sense of self. In the context of English language learning, the effect of neoliberalism can be seen in how language has been commodified as something that can be gained and exchanged for economic profit (Shin & Park, 2016). Park (2016) claims that examining the commodification of language is significant not only because it is another example of how the logic of neoliberalism subsumes every dimension of our being, including aspects that have traditionally been considered a more inalienable part of our selves, such as language. It is also significant because it is an illustration of how our conceptualizations of language serve as a key element in the ideological processes that support and rationalize neoliberalism. (p. 453)

This concept of an “ideal neoliberal self,” as described by Nguyen (2021), supports a neoliberal approach to language by presenting English as a tool or product of self-development. To acquire or achieve this self-development, all effort comes from individual roles and responsibilities. In the linguistic domain, an ideal neoliberal sense of self includes “language owners who conceptualize themselves as possessing language skills, knowledge, and capacities as a source of self-advancement and life advantages” (Nguyen, 2021, p. 3). The participants’ nuanced descriptions of their relationship to English all broadly echo these conceptualizations that their possession of English, even with the challenges of language acquisition, have rewarded them with certain levels of advantage and aspects of self-advancement.

However, they seem to take their connection to English a step further. The way participants describe their years of involvement with English demonstrates how English has become a significant performative aspect of their identities. They do not know who they are without English, in similar ways that involuntary identities such as gender and nationality are crucial elements to identity. These results also demonstrate an underlying belief of language ability as linked to some inherent talent or skill; this intangible talent can override or carry just as much weight as individual effort. Even if everyone had money, time, and effort to learn English, there is the underlying assumption that some are better at achieving linguistic competency than others. Some people just

“naturally” fit better with English. Not only does this description as English “fitting” someone overlook the complexities of cultural components connected to the Englishes they speak, but this assumption distinguishes what is achievable or reachable to attain capital in ways that other inequities play out. For example, with racial, gender, or sexual identities, there are also elements of distinction that are outside of someone’s control. The abstract idea that English fits someone better than another presents a notable addition to ideological beliefs of meritocracy, the problematic belief that allows privilege to be overlooked and creates confusion with regard to how much work or effort has/has not impacted outcomes or life experiences. With language competency, the necessity of hard work to study and practice is partnered with an idea that competency is genuinely easier or more attainable for some than others.

This belief of language competency being dependent upon inherent talent or even as a connection to personality affects perspectives regarding agency. If English is perceived as the entity of agency, not someone’s personal effort or agency, and if English is also ascribed to having an unpredictable quality of being a more suitable fit to some than others, then the direct connection to problematic and oppressive systems and structures of globalization that have crafted the hegemony of English are obscured in significant ways. English as the “saving knight” distracts from the ways in which English operates in oppressive systems and institutions. According to Park (2016), “...the contradictions of the neoliberal regimes of language are often concealed and obscured through the way social conditions of language use are reinterpreted as matters of individual responsibility” (p. 463).

These research findings present how certain English speakers perceive agency within the global hegemony of English. Since the study participants have achieved conversational abilities in English, they have put in significant effort to reach this and have been able to consider possibilities that would not be available without English competency. In considering the complexities of how inequity exists within hegemonic processes, this study provides insight into how individuals navigate differing levels of gained capital and privilege. As this study demonstrates, there can be a scarcity of discussion surrounding macro-contexts, specifically social, economic, and political contexts, with regard to English. Agency, or the ability to have choice in how to respond to English hegemony, is presented as limited, including English as the agentic subject or the entity that saves or rescues. This perception separates English from the complex forces, institutions, and systems in which it exists. Park (2016) provides a possible way to address this: “A practice-based view of language that understands language as always already rooted in social conditions of human interaction can help us problematize the ideology of language as pure potential and the logic of neoliberalism that it sustains” (p. 447). It is important to hear how individuals communicate their perception of English to understand how these complex ideologies of neoliberalism and the hegemony of English function.

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