
Language Learning as a Struggle for Distinction in Today's Corporate Recruitment Culture: An Ethnographic Study of English Study Abroad Practices among South Korean Undergraduates

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Young adults in South Korea are encouraged to constantly develop their skills and qualifications to meet the challenges posed by the job market in the country's neoliberal post-IMF crisis economy. This paper examines the ways in which changes in South Korea's labor market and corporate recruitment culture have affected the ideologies and practices of the country's youth with regard to the English language. By drawing on Bourdieu's concept of distinction and specifying the processes of distinction into *replacement*, *opposition*, and *addition*, this paper clarifies the ideological construction and effects of oral communicative competence in English through an ethnographic analysis of post-secondary learners studying English in a study abroad context. Influenced by South Korea's recruitment culture, these learners distinguish primarily between learning English for standardized tests in South Korea and learning English for authentic communication while studying abroad. However, the efforts of learners who have studied abroad to develop their oral English skills bear limited fruit in South Korea's recruitment culture, which does not fully appreciate the value of the job seeker's experience of having studied English abroad. Thus, the limits of distinction function to impose the burden of English learning on individual learners.

INTRODUCTION¹

This paper examines how changing conditions of labor markets have specific consequences for language learning practices used by South Korean undergraduates to prepare for seeking employment. Since the late 1970s, the neoliberalization of economies and societies has transformed the principles and practices underlying labor markets (Harvey, 2007). It has been witnessed that, as economic sectors increasingly rely on financial capital and tertiary industries for profit, fewer jobs have been created. In this situation—known as “jobless growth”—although macroeconomic indices have improved, the employment situation has not. The unemployment issue in neoliberal societies has had a more severe impact on the youth than anyone else. The youth unemployment rate has usually been higher than the general rate, and competition among young job seekers for a small number of decent jobs has been fierce (*The Economist*, 2013; for an academic discussion, see Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011). The intense competition in the job market compels job seekers to develop

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skills that make them more attractive to hiring corporations. It is against this background that young adults' learning and training practices have come to embody a struggle for distinction in the era of neoliberalism.

Language has come to play a gatekeeper role in the hiring process. For example, sociolinguistic research focusing on job interviews has revealed that interviewees' command of the language(s) they speak has a significant impact on their success in getting hired, although various other factors also play a role (e.g., Kerekes, 2006; Roberts, 2013). Moreover, a growing body of sociolinguistic research has examined the importance of languages in the late capitalist workplace (e.g., Cameron, 2000; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). Such studies suggest that language is an important resource for job seekers to mobilize for successful employment.

In South Korea, English plays a gatekeeper role in recruitment in various ways because of the country's culturally specific recruitment practices. Moreover, the kinds of English emphasized in recruitment have also changed as the corporate culture has changed to accommodate the effects of globalization and neoliberalization. For example, a decade ago, a score of standardized English tests, particularly the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), played an important role in the recruitment process as an indicator of English communicative competence. Recently, however, job applicants' TOEIC scores have ceased to be considered a sufficient indicator of their competence in oral communication in English. More importantly, changes in sociolinguistic notions of communicative competence have given rise to various types of language learning practices pertaining to oral communication skills in English aimed at gaining employment in competitive job markets.

With globalization, a prevalent type of educational practice for oral communication skills is learning a language in study abroad contexts (Kinginger, 2009). In South Korea, many undergraduate students aspiring to gain communicative competence in English seek to study the language abroad. Specifically, they operate on the assumption that if they possess "good" communication skills in English, they will be considered "good" applicants in the South Korean job market. This paper examines how beliefs about English study abroad are constructed and what consequences they have for English learning trajectories. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of distinction, this study focuses on the ways learners studying abroad position themselves in relation to their counterparts who study English in South Korea only to obtain high scores in TOEIC.

This paper first suggests more nuanced processes of cultural and linguistic distinction to understand the complexity of language learning in neoliberal society. Then, it offers a research review that focuses on both post-secondary English study abroad and the recruitment system called *gongchae* in South Korea. Existing literature highlights the replacement process of the preferred form of English proficiency from TOEIC scores to the actual presentation of oral skills in English in the *gongchae* system. Following the descriptions of methodological frameworks and procedures, the paper analyzes ethnographic data to show the processes of distinction. Students' discourses and practices show that English communication skills are emphasized through its oppositional relation to TOEIC English, and that the communication skills acquire an additional value through their choice of business related programs. The analysis also uncovers the limitations of students' efforts in achieving distinction. They face limits when attempting to tailor their learning experiences to the established framework of the hiring process. Finally, the paper discusses students'

struggle with distinction in English competence in relation to neoliberal social governing in education and job preparation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PROCESS OF DISTINCTION

The term *distinction* originates in Bourdieu's (1984) influential book by the same title, in which he states that aesthetic taste—which can mistakenly be seen as individual—is in fact socially constructed, inculcated according to a person's social location and stratified by various forms of capital. Bourdieu argues that because the practice of distinction reflects an individual's trajectory of accumulation of social, cultural, and educational capital, it plays a central role in reproducing social class.

Building upon Bourdieu's notion that distinction is the basic principle of generating a practice of struggle for symbolic capital, this paper aims to nuance these processes of distinction by drawing on language ideologies and semiotic approaches to linguistic practices (e.g., Agha, 2007; Kroskrity, Schieffelin, & Woolard, 1998; Kroskrity, 2000). It presents three separate but interconnected processes in assigning a value to a certain linguistic form and use: *replacement*, *opposition*, and *addition*. First, distinction occurs via replacement when an existing value system attached to a form of cultural capital does not have an effectively distinct feature. This happens when the capital is largely possessed by the lower class, or to use Bourdieu's term, is "overproduced." In such a case, a new form of capital is developed to replace the old form of capital, and in turn, the market constraining the value system judges the existing meaning of a practice to be less valuable and assigns a privileged meaning to the practice to obtain the new form of capital. Bourdieu calls this mechanism a "structural constant" (Bourdieu, 1984, as cited in Park, 2011).

Second, the principle of distinction through opposition is fundamentally based on "the logic of difference" (Moore, 2008), that is, the opposition between the "vulgar" and the "noble" or the "lower" and the "higher." Although the boundary of demarcation in a social practice may keep changing, the oppositional relation of the values embedded in the social practice is maintained in the field of practice. Further, as long as the opposition is continually enforced, for example, through a range of activities and discourses, the degree of discriminatory power is strengthened. With regard to linguistic ideologies and practices, this process is more clearly explained in Irvine and Gal (2000). They argue that linguistic differentiation inevitably highlights a certain linguistic form while erasing another form. The opposition of the two linguistic forms or varieties becomes dominant through similar recurrence in practices and ideologies in other social and cultural domains.

Lastly, distinction through addition is the practice of intensifying the distinctive value of an existing form of capital by adding a new meaning. Because of the added meaning, the possessor is able to be more competitive than those without it and thus possibly lead the market. According to Heller and Duchêne (2012), the strategy of distinction as adding value is one of the key strategies for capital expansion in late capitalism, as it is aimed at "making a set of consumers distinctive" (p. 9).

Although I have specified the strategies of distinction in the above manner for the purpose of my analysis in this study, it should be noted that these three processes often occur simultaneously and, in many cases, are inseparable. For example, studies in Duchêne and Heller's (2012a) book show that when the keywords "pride" and "profit" are used to capture the transformations in language ideologies and practices in late capitalism, the

relation between these two values can be replaceable (from pride to profit), oppositional (pride versus profit), and additional (pride as profit) in various sociolinguistic fields. In the introduction of the volume, Heller and Duchêne reasonably suggest that sociolinguistic practices and ideologies under the discourses of “pride” and “profit” necessarily take conflicting forms because of the changing logic of the material or symbolic markets and social actors’ negotiations with old and new forms. For them, the analysis of sociolinguistic phenomena in late capitalism aims to probe the complex processes that work in a field, to locate tensions in mobilizing linguistic or non-linguistic resources, and to ask about consequences of tensions for managing or legitimatizing the sociolinguistic practices. In this sense, the conceptualization of the ways that distinction works as replacement, opposition, and addition can help us to understand intertwined sociolinguistic practices and ideologies in late capitalism.

BACKGROUND

Eobagyeonsu: Post-secondary English Study Abroad in South Korea

Research on study abroad in higher education has examined various types of programs in geographical and institutional contexts (Kinginger, 2009). South Korean post-secondary English study abroad (called *eobagyeonsu* in South Korea), which will be the focus of this paper, has several features that distinguish it from other study abroad programs at the tertiary level. First, the main purpose of study abroad is to learn English outside of academic contexts. Most countries that offer study abroad programs are English-speaking countries such as the U.S., the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Additionally, the institutes that conduct such programs are private ESL schools or language centers affiliated with universities. Second, English study abroad is financed by students’ parents or, in rare cases, by students themselves. For them, studying abroad is an investment made to learn English. Third, the choice of destination country, accommodation, language institute, and study abroad program, etc., depends on the student. Students have to invest much effort into making their study abroad plans by obtaining information through diverse sources such as websites, online communities, and study abroad agencies. Fourth, the length of English study abroad is about six months to one year, which means that post-secondary students have to obtain leave from their South Korean universities for one or two semesters. As their graduation and entry into the workforce are deferred as long as they study English abroad, English study abroad is also an investment of time.

The issue of why South Korean young adults engage in English study abroad these days may be explained by examining their position in life and society. In South Korea, where more than 70% of high school students enter college or university after finishing their school education, the transition from school to work is made only when young adults complete their tertiary education. However, since the IMF crisis in the late 1990s, this transition has not been a smooth one. As a way to recover from its economic crisis, South Korea began a neoliberal restructuring of its economy (Song, 2009, 2011). However, the financialization of its economic structure and outsourcing of manufacturing factories to developing countries has failed to create a sufficient number of new jobs for the large number of college graduates in South Korea. In addition, to tackle the issue of the high wages commanded by the South Korean labor force, companies have introduced various types of irregular or precarious employment. Such transformations in the South Korean labor market have had pronounced

effects on young adults seeking jobs for the first time in their life. As opposed to former generations of South Koreans, who enjoyed the benefits of economic development, South Korean young adults are facing a grim situation in terms of employment: high youth unemployment rates, lack of new forms of employment, the spread of irregular positions, and higher competition for decent jobs (Woo & Park, 2007). They experience a feeling of anxiety based on the fear that they will be left behind in such a competitive mainstream society if they fail to make considerable investments into succeeding in life (Nam, 2013). Consequently, they strive to increase their value in the job market through continuous self-development projects (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; Jang, 2013). They perceive English study abroad as one of the self-development projects for job seekers to possess (Kang, 2014; J. S.-Y. Park, 2009, 2011).

***Gongchae*: South Korea's Recruitment Culture**

In order to understand the role of English in the youth employment issue, it is necessary to explore South Korea's recruitment system called *gongchae* [open recruitment]. According to Lee and Kim (2010), as a way of selecting new employees in large South Korean companies, the *gongchae* system was first introduced by the Samsung Corporation in 1957. However, it was in the 1980s, when the South Korean economy was successfully industrialized, that the recruitment system was firmly established in the career culture among both the corporate world and job seekers. Essentially, *gongchae* was designed to recruit a large number of white-collar office workers and technical professionals at once. The skilled workforces entered the labor market in massive numbers with the expansion of higher education, and with the growth of the South Korean economy, the demand for them increased in South Korean corporations. Given the great demand for a trained labor force and the large supply of eligible candidates, the headquarters of large South Korean companies centralized selection and placement procedures for new employees instead of delegating them to their branches or outsourcing them to recruiters. Thus, to select skilled workers efficiently, several stages for evaluating applicants in the *gongchae* were set up. The basic framework of the system currently consists of *seoryu jeonbyeong* (screening of application documents), *pilgigosa* (written test), and *myeonjeop* (interview). Applicants must pass the first round to move on to the next round, and most applicants are eliminated in this first round.

Although the framework of the *gongchae* system has remained stable, employee skills and competences required by companies have changed, as companies have attempted to adapt to changes in economic conditions and dominant discourses in business culture. When the South Korean economy was globalizing in the 1990s, the importance of interviews was highlighted and interview techniques were diversified in order to employ more creative and talented applicants who could deal with ever-changing business environments and create a niche market, while written tests were removed or replaced with standardized tests developed by certified institutes (Lee & Kim, 2010). These days, South Korean companies try to focus more on business skills and competences that can be directly applied to the workplace (Lee & Kim, 2010). Thus, many corporations have begun to introduce techniques to assess applicants' potential for flexible skills such as global sensitivity, teamwork, and communication—all core values in neoliberal discourses on skills and selves (Urciuoli, 2008). For example, South Korean companies have created *injaesang* [a model of the Right People] that epitomizes their business philosophies and work-related skills in specialized areas and designed tools for quantifying their core values (Seo, 2011).

Because of the above changes, in the application documents screening stage, corporations have focused on multiple elements capable of assessing applicants' competences and skills and selecting the best applicant, including GPA, work experience (e.g., internship), certifications, prizes and awards, as well as standardized English scores and educational backgrounds (e.g., major area and prestige of university). In the written tests, they avoid *sangsik* [general knowledge subjects] and instead measure applicants' *inseong* [character] and *jeokseong* [aptitude], in order to determine whether they are compatible with their unique workplace culture. Interview methods are still a key tool in recruitment procedures, but to assess applicants' intangible and flexible skills and competence, companies implement multiple stages of interviews with staff, managers, and executives.

Such changes urge applicants to develop various skills and experiences before applying for jobs or even when they are still in university. Moreover, job applicants have to be very strategic in the course of the recruitment process. To illustrate, in listing skills and qualifications in application forms, applicants need a strategy to manipulate their strong points in line with the core values of the companies they are applying to. In particular, the cover letter, called *jagisogaeseo* [statement of self-introduction] in South Korea, is highly important because applicants are able to appeal to companies by strategically highlighting and validating their skills and qualifications through their narratives (Byun, 2012). In the interviews, they need to demonstrate their skills and qualifications to prove that what they have documented in their application forms is "live" knowledge applicable to any situation.

Distinction as Replacement: The Role of English in Contemporary South Korea's Recruitment Culture

English has come to play a gatekeeper role in South Korea's recruitment system. Applicants' English competence is assessed in various ways at each stage of the recruitment process. Moreover, the focus and relative weight of assessment methods have been adapted as the recruitment culture has changed. In *seoryu jeonhyeong*, applicants must submit the results of standardized English tests. This language policy was introduced in the mid-1990s as the importance of communicative English came to be stressed more than knowledge of grammar, reading, and vocabulary in written English tests. When many leading South Korean companies such as LG and Samsung first began asking applicants to submit TOEIC scores as a part of their application documents, there were decisive effects on college students' English learning behaviors. Consequently, TOEIC preparation institutes were established and spread, and the publication market for TOEIC workbooks boomed.

For the above reason, as Park (2011) shows in detail, "the rise and fall of TOEIC" precisely corresponds to the emphasis on English oral skills in South Korea's recruitment culture. Although TOEIC was introduced to assess applicants' communication skills, language policies led to students' devising test-taking techniques, which raised the overall mean of the acquired scores, with the eventual result that the originally-intended validity of the test was lost. Moreover, although TOEIC purports to assess communicative competence, it can do so indirectly as a written test, so the introduction of TOEIC has not changed the traditional ways of learning English in the classroom. Prospective test-takers still tend to memorize frequently occurring vocabulary items and grammatical structures and to practice reading with time constraints. Consequently, many corporations have complained that applicants with high TOEIC scores do not always have good oral communicative competence in English. To tackle this issue, companies have invented alternative ways of

assessing applicants' oral skills in English. In the application documents screening stage, the recent trend has been to ask applicants to submit scores or certifications of standardized English speaking tests, such as TOEIC Speaking or Oral Proficiency Interview-computer (OPIc) along with the application documents.

In the next stage of recruitment, which involves written tests, English was originally included as a subject in order to assess applicants' English knowledge. Since the introduction of TOEIC, fewer companies have implemented the written English tests. Instead, emphasis is still placed on interviews being conducted in English. As TOEIC is losing its ability to indicate the test taker's English oral communication skills, job interviews are changing into ways that applicants mobilize various types of linguistic knowledge and performances. For instance, questions are becoming more complex and abstract. In the past, the questions were mainly concerned with general topics such as applicant introductions (e.g., tell me about yourself) and the reason for applying to the company and position (e.g., why should I hire you?). Recently, interviews conducted in English have contained, besides self-introduction questions, questions designed to tap into applicants' professional knowledge and skills. To assess their answers to such questions, native English-speaking interviewers are often present. More importantly, even if the questions are simple, how they are answered matters; in late capitalism, job applicants need to give elaborate answers and show self-reflexivity and high command of oral skills in English to be hired (Roberts, 2013). Moreover, in the interview stage, linguistically-different genres are included in the form of group discussions and presentations. As discussed in research on communication in the workplace, such genres require a different kind of communicative competence from that required for interviews (Schnurr, 2013). However, corporations are motivated to include them in the *gongchae* system so that they can access actual demonstrations of oral competence in English.

Not all corporations implement English interviews, group discussions, and presentations. Moreover, some companies even say that English is not the most important skill needed to find employment. However, the fact that English plays a gatekeeper role in recruitment and that diverse methods for evaluating different types of oral English skills of applicants are implemented by companies has led to ideological consequences for English learning practices. South Korean young adults perceive English to be the most difficult skill to acquire when preparing for job seeking, and so they invest most of their time and money into learning English (Kim, 2012; Ryu & Shin, 2014). Thus, they often search for an innovative way to improve their English more effectively and efficiently. This desire is what the English study abroad market aims to engage in South Korean undergraduates' aspirations for English communication skills.

The following excerpt, taken from an English study abroad guidebook, clearly demonstrates the promises offered by English study abroad by stressing that TOEIC scores should be replaced with oral communication skills as the more practical means of assessing English proficiency among South Korean job seekers:

What skill is needed for entry into the workforce?
Needless to say, that skill is 'English' [*sic*]. More specifically, it is 'English communication' [*sic*]. The times have gone when suitable scores and grades could be obtained by looking up sample questions from previous tests and memorizing question types. The issue of the uselessness of TOEIC has been raised since 2005, and interviews in English have become mandatory for job recruitment. It has long been stated that English study abroad is a requirement for graduation, as practical English for

conversation with foreigners is preferred to perfect TOEIC scores from people who cannot speak a word of English in practice¹. (Kim & Lee, 2012, p. 27)

The above authors, who run an English study abroad agency, argue that high TOEIC scores lack a distinctive value in the job market, as they do not accurately reflect applicants' English communication skills. They encourage English study abroad on the grounds that communicative English is assessed through actual oral skills, rather than through the presentation of standardized English tests. This *replacement* process, whereby standardized testing is replaced with actual communication skills, is central in South Korea's recruitment culture in terms of English skills. While this process of distinction as replacement has been well-documented (e.g., Park 2011), it is not the only process at work. The remainder of this paper will examine the ways in which the processes of distinction as opposition and addition are also at play in the learning of English by Korean students preparing for *gongchae*.

METHOD

The current ethnographic study explores the complex nature of language learning practices in today's neoliberal South Korean society. Taking critical sociolinguistic ethnography as a theoretical and methodological framework (Heller, 2008, 2011), I conducted fieldwork in a large private ESL school and other sites in Toronto, over a period of 13 months (March 2013–March 2014). A group of South Korean college students attending the school during this period participated in the study as informants.

The recruitment and selection of informants began when I met a Korean student named Insung² in May 2013. He was introduced to me by a teacher at the language school and, in turn, introduced me to another Korean student, Dongil. Both Insung and Dongil agreed to participate in my study as key informants. We had lunch together almost every weekday at the school, and this granted me access to other Korean students. By early July, I had access to a social network of Korean students at the school that was composed of thirteen male and three female students. I took this group as the focal unit of the study. It should be noted that this unit differs from those of case studies, which tend to trace and analyze a key participant's trajectories of practices and ideologies.

Although the relationships among members of the peer group varied in terms of the degree of friendship and the nature of networking with other social and ethnic groups, there were commonalities that may affect the analysis and interpretation of the data. First, the participants were undergraduates or recent graduates of non-elite universities in South Korea. As Abelmann, Park, and Kim (2009) showed, college rank is a significant factor in South Korean young adults' goals and plans for their employment and future lives. Second, the participants in the present study came from middle-class families. Their parents provided either full or partial financial support to cover their tuition and living costs in Toronto. Given that the total for such expenses ranged from 25 to 35 million KRW, it may be argued that post-secondary English study abroad is an educational practice of middle-class families. Third, upon their arrival in Toronto around January to March 2013, the present participants began their English studies with low-intermediate courses at the school. They often took the same courses more than once, so that they could become better acquainted with each other and build friendships.

My relationship with the participants was intersected with my social identities such as a Korean national, doctoral student, and a married male with a daughter. However, it was less

research-oriented than relation-oriented as seen in the fact that they addressed me as *hyeong* or *oppa* [bro]. I assume that this is because we shared most of the Korean cultural values and experiences.

During fieldwork, I observed them not only during school hours (e.g., classroom, break, lunchtime, school events) but also during other social activities (e.g., social meetings, local festivals and events, tours), in order to understand their everyday practices and ideologies with regard to learning English. I also formally and informally interviewed the school's non-Korean students, teachers, and staff members. In April 2014, I also carried out fieldwork in South Korea, to meet the informants who returned there after studying abroad, and to determine what markets played an important role in creating the necessity of English proficiency in job seekers. While in South Korea, I also attended seminars on English study abroad and other types of English learning for job seekers.

This paper reports on one part of the larger research project outlined above. Ethnographic fieldwork usually generates a number of interesting themes. One theme that emerged in my fieldwork was the role of English in South Korea's recruitment culture. Most of my informants became job seekers upon returning to South Korea. Although various themes emerged and interacted with each other in relation to their English study abroad, this paper will analyze the ways in which South Korean study abroad students construct a form of English competence as a valuable resource for job seeking and tackle conflicts faced during English study abroad to maximize profits from their investment into English learning. All data in this paper were obtained from participant observations and interviews with fourth-year students or recent graduates who were likely to apply for job positions within one year of returning to South Korea.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Distinction as Opposition: Study Abroad Learners' Ideological Construction of Communicative English Competence

As discussed above, TOEIC has been replaced with oral skill demonstration in South Korea's recruitment system. This does not mean that TOEIC is completely useless, as seen by the fact that many companies still require applicants to submit their TOEIC scores. In South Korea, as in Japan (Kubota, 2011), TOEIC represents a property irrelevant to English competence, such as self-management and diligence (Jang, 2013). More importantly, when it comes to the mechanism of language ideology construction, TOEIC still has some functions; as the value of TOEIC as a measure of communicative competence decreases, the importance of oral communication skill in English increases. As a result, English for TOEIC is constructed as oppositional to English for oral communication, thus justifying investment into English study abroad programs.

The perception of TOEIC scores as an indicator of non-communicative competence is invariably connected to educational practices regarding TOEIC in South Korea. Study abroad students do not believe that preparing for TOEIC is conducive to improving English communication skills. Rather, students believe that preparations for TOEIC can be reduced to acquiring test-taking skills.

Example 1: An interview with Sangwoo (four-year student, engineering major, male)³

- Sangwoo:** Recently, companies have become less interested in TOEIC. They know how TOEIC scores are obtained. So in some cases, they do not even leave a blank for TOEIC scores in application forms. Everyone takes OPIc. It seems that companies prefer someone who speaks English well. I don't have to have a very high score in TOEIC. I may be OK with a score within the range of 850-900. Too high a score is not good.
- Researcher:** Does the experience of English study abroad make a difference with regard to recruitment? For example, in English interviews or discussions?
- Sangwoo:** Of course. Even if the score in an English speaking test is high, actual English speaking competence will be determined through the interview.

Sangwoo is referring to the situation where high TOEIC scores have lost their distinctive value in the recruitment process. He believes that this is because companies are already well aware of how applicants prepare to obtain high scores in the test. The established ways to obtain high TOEIC scores include attending cram schools, learning test-taking skills, and familiarizing oneself with question types by studying *jokbo* [a collection of previously asked questions]. All this does not help to actually improve English communication skills. Thus, he goes on to claim that large companies that prefer applicants with good speaking skills in English remove the TOEIC requirement and replace it with speaking tests such as OPIc. Interestingly, he argues that even standardized English speaking tests do not evaluate actual oral communication skills during recruitment because preparation for them is driven by the same strategies as preparation for TOEIC—studying in a cram school in South Korea and memorizing *tempeullit* [a template], or a set of formulaic expressions. Thus, those who study speaking tests in South Korea solely to gain high standardized test scores are assumed to have little flexible ability to manage actual communication in English in situations such as interviews. For Sangwoo, communicative competence gained in the study abroad context cannot be reduced only to standardized test scores, because what the standardized English tests, in particular TOEIC, index is not so much actual communicative competence as test-taking skills codified in private English test preparation education. Thus, Sangwoo's case shows that the opposition between TOEIC English and communications skills in English recurs on another order of distinction between standardization and flexibility. As Duchêne and Heller (2012b) argue, the latter opposition is a central tension in terms of language training in the workplace in late capitalism.

Another ideological process through which TOEIC English is made less valuable involves associating it with “academic” English, which is characterized in traditional ways of English learning in South Korea.

Example 2: A conversation between Insung (four-year student, graphic design major, male) and Dongil (four-year student, computer engineering major, male)⁴

- Insung:** My second class is reading class. She is very fast reading.
- Dongil:** Audrey?
- Insung:** Yeah, she is really fast. Almost two times to me. But my reading skill

- is very, very low. So... I really, I, I... When I read some book, I'm very through...thoroughly ...thoroughly ...umm sentence, and then I remember and understand. But she really fast.
- Dongil:** Maybe she got great score in TOEIC test, maybe. Because people who learn, study TOEIC are very fast
- Insung:** reading
- Dongil:** yeah, yeah.
- Researcher:** Did you take a TOEIC or TOEFL course?
- Dongil:** No...no ...TOEIC ...in Korea...two times I took a test.
- Insung:** Only two times?
- Dongil:** Yeah, that's it...Because in TOEIC test, we have not enough time, so you should use skill to...yeah...Useless TOEIC. But I'm not sure if I go back to Korea now and take the TOEIC test, I'm not sure about score (laugh)
- Insung:** (laugh)
- Dongil:** Maybe it's about, already, almost same or...
- Insung:** I don't have the confidence to take the exam and high score, get high score.
- Dongil:** Because we have already done study abroad so we should get over 800.
- Insung:** At least 700.
- Dongil:** Yeah, 700. But...
- Researcher:** You know, to get the high score in TOEFL...or in TOEIC, you have to study TOEIC.
- Dongil:** Yeah...yeah ...with academic. yeah...useless test.
- Insung:** Just score is number.
- Dongil:** Ah. Yeah...

When Insung talks about how fast his classmate, Audrey, a female South Korean student, reads, Dongil suggests that her TOEIC scores would be high because the time constraints in TOEIC make fast reading a key test-taking skill. As with Sangwoo's example, Dongil and Insung show that TOEIC English is characterized as a test-taking skill. Further, both seem to agree that they are unlikely to achieve high scores in TOEIC when they return to South Korea and take the test. Shortly after this, revising his opinion about TOEIC scores right before, Dongil says that he expects both of them to achieve a relatively high score in the TOEIC after their English study abroad. The reason that Dongil think this way is that test-taking skills are necessary but insufficient to obtain high scores in TOEIC. TOEIC requires proficiency in what Dongil calls "academic" English. What he means by "academic" English can be understood when we consider what TOEIC preparation institutes in South Korea emphasize and what students commonly do to achieve high TOEIC scores. Traditional ways of English learning in South Korea are at issue here, such as reading passages, solving grammar questions, and memorizing vocabulary. In other words, to obtain high scores in TOEIC, students need to improve their reading comprehension and grammar and vocabulary knowledge, as well as their test-taking skills. Thus, as study abroad learners have taken courses at language school as well as being exposed to English in Toronto, Dongil believes that they would achieve at least more than 700 without "studying" test-taking skills. In spite of this expectation, however, from their perspective, TOEIC English is still "useless" as it is unrelated to oral communication skills, and the goal of studying for

TOEIC is not to improve oral skills in English but to obtain as high a score as possible. As Insung said in this conversation, “The score is number,” and as Dongil mentioned in an interview with me, “TOEIC is not English.”

Study abroad students, in their everyday discourses, ascribe a distinctive value to what they are learning in English study abroad by making TOEIC English less valuable. For them, TOEIC is less valuable because it represents test-taking skills or “academic” skills rather than oral communication skill. Further, the distinction between TOEIC English and study abroad English is connected to the distinction between “good” and “bad” English in South Korea’s recruitment system. This distinction contributes to reiterating the promise that oral communication skills in English will be a great asset in each stage of the job recruitment process. Through this process, the oppositional relation between the two types of language competence strengthens the presupposition that English for TOEIC should be replaced with English for oral communication.

Distinction as Addition: Selection of Work-related Courses and Programs

The perception of oral communicative English that students in the study abroad context have is ideological or “metacommunicative” (Briggs, 1986). It involves “statements that report, describe, interpret, and evaluate communicative acts and processes” (p. 2). Their beliefs about communicative competence are embedded in social and cultural contexts, which may be at odds with the academic concept of communicative competence (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Council of Europe, 2001; Hymes, 1972). Their ideology of communicative English is constructed in opposition to TOEIC English. However, the ideological foundation of communication skills in English becomes a source of tension in actual language learning practices. In choosing courses and programs in school, my informants keep confronting the issue of what knowledge and techniques they need to strategically focus on in order to achieve their goal of improving their oral communication skills in English. This tension first emerges in the communication course they take in school. In the course of addressing this tension, they start another practice of distinction to maximize their investment into English study abroad: enrolling in work-related English courses such as Business English or taking up voluntary internships.

Most South Korean students begin their English learning with communication courses. On their first day in school, new students have to take a written placement test of listening and reading and then an oral test with a teacher. Subsequently, the teacher has a short meeting with the student to understand his or her learning needs. In my fieldwork, I observed that most Korean students admitted to teachers in the meeting that they wanted to improve their speaking skills, and, presumably, the teachers recommended a communication course. South Korean students’ expectation from a communication course is that they will have the opportunity to speak English a lot with their classmates and teachers, and, consequently, their speaking skills will improve to the extent that they will be able to communicate with native speakers without any difficulty.

However, the curricula of the communication courses in the school do not focus only on speaking or oral skills; it also contains instruction on and activities pertaining to grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing. These areas are indeed what South Korean students tend to think of as part of “academic” English, in opposition to their ideology of communication skills in English. Further, according to my classroom observations of communication courses, expressions used in the courses, in particular in the beginner- or low-intermediate-

level courses, are repetitive and formulaic. Dissatisfied South Korean students in the school look for other programs, believing that communication courses do not offer enough learning opportunities to improve their oral communication skills. They are thus drawn to programs on work-related skills such as Business English certificate programs or internship programs.

When choosing Business English programs, students assume that the benefit of taking such programs is knowledge and language skills relating to business, as described in the program aims. In other words, students appreciate the additional value provided by the Business English program because although they are taught grammar, reading and writing, these skills are associated with business areas and contexts such as marketing, business writing (e.g., emails, cover letters, resumes), and business communication skills (e.g., public speaking, interviews, meetings). Further, when students complete all the required courses of the program, they are given a certification of completion, a document able to demonstrate to future employers that they have business knowledge and communication skills.

In the following example, Minsik talks about the additional value of Business English courses:

Example 3: An interview with Minsik (four-year student, automotive engineering major, male)

Minsik: The communication course is good for making friends in the first month. I met Danny, Hyuk, and Nayoung in the communication course and made a lot of Japanese friends there, too. In fact, the Business English course was similar to the communication course. For example, we learned grammar and writing in both. But I liked the fact that Business English courses taught something consistently in its contents. I had the feeling that I was studying. I could have got two certificates of Business English programs if I had taken one more course, but that was cancelled because there were not enough students taking it that time. So I have one certificate only.

While studying English abroad, Minsik took a communication course for three months. Then, he changed to a Business English course. In his reflections on his English study abroad trajectory, he evaluates his communication courses as beneficial primarily for forming friendships in Toronto. Although he notes that the language skills focused on in the communication course and the business course were similar, he appreciates the latter because it covered more specific contents than the former, which tended to teach general contents designed to facilitate communication between students from different cultures (e.g., holiday, etiquette). He was satisfied with the fact that he obtained knowledge on business from the Business English course.

In a sense, the fact that he favors business-related contents more than intercultural contents may be connected to the neoliberal reforms that have taken place in South Korean higher education. As some universities have set their educational goals as helping students to find more prestigious jobs, they have introduced courses and implemented programs that offer students business knowledge and foster entrepreneurial mindsets. At the same time, there also exists a trend of students opting for business administration or commerce courses and deciding to double major in their own fields and in business administration (Jang, 2013). Thus, Korean study abroad students believe that business English courses may offer an additional value for their career development.

Another example of distinction through addition is students' choice of an internship program. During my fieldwork, I found that Geonyoung became interested in an internship. However, South Korean students disagree as to the benefits of the internship: some say that most companies that hire unpaid interns—simply give them trivial and repetitive work, whereas others insist that working in an English-speaking workplace can be a rewarding experience. After listening to her friends' internship experiences, Geonyoung decided to do an internship in a small sports-marketing company. The company was related to her university major, which led her, above all, to conclude that this experience was a career-oriented step that would help her to find a job in her field later. Thus, she delayed her return to South Korea and worked in the company for two months.

When I met Geonyoung after she had finished her internship, I asked her how her experience had been. She said that the internship was a great experience that helped to improve her English skills.

Example 4: An interview with Geonyoung (four-year student, physical education major, female)

Geonyoung: I would have regretted it if I hadn't experienced internship. I asked my friends a lot if an internship would be rewarding. All their answers were different, depending on the people they were and the firms they worked with. But I thought that I had to do it. Internship was a chance to use English. Once I used a word that I learned in school and when I heard a Canadian use the same word, I was glad. It was fun.

For Geonyoung, the reason an internship was worth doing was that she could use English in real communication settings, unlike in school. More importantly, the English she learned in the school was also used in her workplace by her Canadian colleagues. This realization led her to think of the English skills learned in the communication course as useful and necessary for successful communication. She added, "learning grammar, reading and writing in the communication course helped a lot," although at first she complained about the communication courses that she took. After doing the internship, she felt confident that her English knowledge was practical, authentic, and communicable—all ideological components of communication skills in English as opposed to TOEIC English. Along with the experience of working in a Canadian company, she could acquire the experience of using English in an authentic workplace setting.

These study abroad students changed their language programs from communication courses to work-related programs because of the mismatch between what they perceived as oral communication skills and what their school constructed as communicative competence through its curriculum. Thus, their course selection was driven by their ideological construction of "good" English communication skills, rather than by their actual engagement with classroom activities. The shift in the focal area of learning did not mean that they abandoned their goal of improving oral communication skills in English; rather, it was a way to increase the value of their communicative competence. In the process, they strived to enhance their communication skills by acquiring business knowledge and skills. This illustrates that English communication is being conflated with other properties anchored in skill discourses in the South Korean job market. This phenomenon of packaging communication skills with other skills has become characteristic of communication and language use in late capitalism (Allan, 2013; Heller & Duchêne, 2012; Urciuoli, 2008).

Distinction through addition works in the neoliberal configuration of skills including language.

The Limits to Distinction: The Struggle to Institutionalize English Skills

Investment into learning a symbolically valuable language is not always successful. Institutional and sociocultural constraints play out during or after learning, so the gains that the learners expected from their educational investment are often not realized. Although learners make efforts in developing language and professional skills for a better future, it is players outside the educational field that control access to material and symbolic resources. For instance, Allan (2013)'s study on professional immigrants in Canada demonstrates that the value of their linguistic development in language programs remains little distinctive when they are faced with the reality that the job market does not acknowledge their skills and experiences. Under these circumstances, learners, as job seekers who usually do not have the ability to affect the market, must revalorize their available resources and justify their investment to themselves.

For my informants, the resignification of their oral communication skills, which were improved in Canada, begins when they are returning or about to return to South Korea. Returning to South Korea means that it is time to fully engage in job seeking. This, in turn, leads to the question of how to mobilize their English skills in the *gongchae* system. When students begin the recruitment procedure, the first challenge is submitting application forms and documents that substantiate their skills and qualifications. They soon realize that if they do not overcome this obstacle, no opportunity will be offered to them, even if they have good English skills. As such, the first two things they must possess are good scores in English standardized tests (e.g., TOEIC and speaking tests) and a well-written cover letter.

Yet, my informants did not study TOEIC in Canada, because they believe that TOEIC preparation institutes in South Korea, which are famous for strategic instruction based on test-taking skills, are much better at helping students to obtain high scores. Therefore, upon their return to South Korea, they begin to attend TOEIC preparation institutes. They believe that their English study abroad experience will help them to obtain good scores in English speaking tests. Although there are several English speaking tests, TOEIC speaking and OPIc are the primary ones for South Korean young adults preparing for job seeking. However, the perception among students is that TOEIC speaking is a better choice for those with high TOEIC scores or experience in preparing for TOEIC, because the vocabulary and phrases that appear in TOEIC can also be used in TOEIC speaking. OPIc is believed to be suited to those who can speak in more natural communication settings, as its question items are customized to take into account test-takers' personal backgrounds (information on which is provided by the test taker before the test). Because of the relation of TOEIC speaking to TOEIC and the emphasis on natural communication in OPIc, young South Korean job seekers generally prefer TOEIC to OPIc. However, most South Korean students whom I met in Toronto said that they would take OPIc. The following conversation will show why:

Example 5: A conversation between Jungmin (graduate, electrical engineering major, male) and Dongil

Jungmin: When I return to Korea, I'll take OPIc first.

Dongil: OPIc?

Jungmin: Have you ever taken it before?

Dongil: No, I haven't

- Jungmin:** I've taken it once to apply for Samsung internship. I received the minimum score that they required.
- Dongil:** Is it hard to get a high score? Everyone told me that I have to take OPIc or TOEIC speaking tests when I return from English study abroad.
- Jungmin:** From my perspective, those who studied English abroad would have higher scores in OPIc [than in TOEIC speaking]. TOEIC speaking has *gongsik* (formula; test-taking skills), so we have to gain the skills. But you can get good scores in OPIc if you speak well.

In this conversation, Jungmin is planning to take an OPIc test when he returns to South Korea. Based on his experience of taking the test before, Jungmin perceives OPIc to be more favorable to students with English study abroad experience. TOEIC speaking items, on the other hand, are more fixed, making test-taking skills important to obtain high scores in TOEIC. His reasoning that OPIc is designed to assess actual oral English competence reminds us of the opposition between TOEIC English and English communication that serves to justify investment into English study abroad. In the same fashion, by undermining the validity of TOEIC speaking, he constructs OPIc as a speaking test for oral communication skills in English in which it is difficult to obtain high scores by studying only in South Korea.

Just as South Korean students' oral communication skills in English needs to be demonstrated during job recruitment in the form of an OPIc score in the application documents screening stage, so do their English study abroad experiences, particularly what they learned, need to be "entextualized" (Blommaert, 2005) in the form of certified documents. The first such document that my informants can present is a certification of completion. This form is issued by their ESL schools or internship companies when they meet their minimum requirements for, among other things, attendance. However, my informants usually tend to consider their certificates to be of low importance or sometimes even "useless." The main reason for this is the low prestige of the above schools and companies in South Korea. As Bourdieu (1986) points out, institutionalized forms of cultural capital, such as credentials, are recognized as legitimate only when the institutions have reputation or prestige—namely, symbolic capital. In the South Korean job market, ESL language schools are not considered prestigious enough to mark their students as distinctive. This is true of companies that South Korean students worked in as interns. As not all foreign companies are well known in South Korea, a certification of completion of internship is not a guarantor of distinction in the recruitment process.

Another document that is able to entextualize English study abroad is the cover letter. Unlike resumes, which only allow applicants to list their experiences and qualifications, cover letters allow applicants to narrate their experiences in distinctive but consistent ways by referring to the core values of the companies they are applying to (Byun, 2012; Jang, 2013). Through applicants' narratives, companies evaluate their personalities as well as determine how they developed their skills and qualifications and how much time and effort they have dedicated to acquiring them. Further, when applicants pass the application documents screening stage, their cover letters serve as a key document for interviewers who ask applicants questions based on the statements in the letter, inviting applicants to elaborate on what they have written. For this reason, my informants continued to debate how to effectively record their experiences in Toronto in their cover letter. As in the case of

certification from low-prestige institutes, they remained unsure about whether their experiences will be of value in the South Korean job market:

Example 6: An interview with Minsik

Minsik: If I have to use this internship experience, what is important is how I describe it. Perhaps I will mention it in the application form. I will mention it as additional experience, but I don't know if someone will ask about it.

While talking about his experience of internship in a small local car service center, Minsik, an automotive engineering student, said that what counts in job seeking is how one describes one's internship experience rather than a simplistic statement "I did my internship overseas." His narrative may be about, for example, what efforts he made to communicate with coworkers or how his knowledge can benefit the company he is applying to. However, he doubts whether his internship experience is distinctive enough and if his interviewers will be interested in him, because the firm that he worked in was small and community based and not a famous auto company such as Toyota or Ford.

When my informants take advantage of English study abroad experiences during job seeking, they have to describe their experiences and English skills on documented forms in the application documents screening of the *gongchae* system. In this process of institutionalizing their skills and experiences, they also mobilize the ideology of opposition between TOEIC English and oral communication skills. However, the limit to the distinction is set up because the institutes mediating their learning experience in Canada do not have symbolic power in the South Korean job market.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data above has revealed the processes of distinction in language learning and its consequences for job seeking. The processes are not linear or binary, but complex and intertwined, as two different markets, namely the job market and the English study abroad market, govern the practice of language learning. Changes in the ways English communicative competence is measured in the recruitment system are determined by the process of *replacement*. Higher TOEIC scores obtained by job applicants have less distinctive value in the job market. The "overproduction" of TOEIC value has led both recruiters and job seekers to draw attention to alternative ways of assessing English communicative competence, and the spontaneous presentation of oral proficiency has emerged as a distinctive language skill. The language education industry has detected this change in the value of the TOEIC and stresses that English study abroad is the best way to improve English communicative competence, thus increasing the likelihood of successful employment. Specifically, by the process of replacement, the English study abroad market suggests a frame of *opposition* between English learning for TOEIC and English learning overseas. While the process of replacement creates this opposition between old and new practices, the relationship becomes ideological through the process of opposition playing out in everyday practices and discourses, as seen in learners' conversations and interviews in this study. One problematic consequence of this ideological effect is the misconception that arises about English communicative competence. While the mechanism of the markets is not

questioned, students tend to reproduce the language ideology in order to justify their educational investment.

The struggle to be more distinctive in terms of English skills does not end with the process of opposition. English study abroad students also attempt to *add* to their English ability knowledge about or experience in other fields, pursuing business education or internship. Such additional knowledge and/or skills have high value in the current labor market, which favors workers with a range of skills and experience. The package of English communication skills and other business skills is an attractive option for English study abroad learners, as they can thereby distinguish themselves from other South Korean students who learn only general communicative English. It seems that this conflation of English communication and business skills is the most distinctive recent trend.

The findings of this study also show that learners' efforts to procure distinctive forms of linguistic capital are not always adequately rewarded when they return to Korea. They are put in a situation where their English learning experiences and skills are judged by their alignment with the recruitment system. Not only do they have to take English tests that they have previously dismissed as illegitimate, but they also have to tailor their English learning trajectories to the values of the recruiting companies. In this process, they discover that their English skills and learning experiences are not valued as highly as they expected before the English study abroad.

Such trajectories demonstrate that the practice of learning a global language like English is part of an ongoing struggle to stand out in linguistic and institutional markets. As education and labor markets constrain and adjust the process of value formation, the full benefits of learning English are deferred. Even if language learners acquire a desired form of linguistic capital, they often realize that they need to invest in another type of learning, as the capital turns out less valuable than they initially expected. This is a way of governing learning subjects in neoliberal regimes and leads learners to the "unattainable" project of self-development (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Park & Lo, 2012; Park, 2010, 2011).

The process of constructing language learning as a continual self-development project can lead to unfair consequences. As seen in this paper, individual students assume all responsibility for learning English despite the fact that both corporations and universities stress the importance of English in recruitment and employment. Although students seem to have the freedom to choose from different types of English-learning programs, this study has shown that the types of English competence that they acquire are influenced by corporate discourses. However, while South Korean companies desire to recruit job applicants who already have good English skills, they tend to ignore the fact that their language policies in the recruitment system have a sort of washback effect on job applicants' language learning. They may also neglect the importance of language training tailored to specific areas and needs, perceiving English communication skills as a panacea for any communication in business settings.

Although South Korean universities have taken steps to improve their students' English competence, the ideological background of language policies in higher education is problematic. Many universities in South Korea have increased the number of courses taught in English and introduced an English competence requirement for graduation. These policies, however, are driven in part by initiatives for global competitiveness that have a strong effect on global and national rankings and, in turn, on universities' reception of

funding from the government and other grant institutes (Piller & Cho, 2013). When these policies are implemented, voices from students and faculty members go unheard, and steps for reaching a consensus are not taken (Cho, 2012). While South Korean universities engage in the blind pursuit of English education, the issues of what to teach students and why or of inculcating a culture of self-development in students are not addressed.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined South Korean young adults' trajectories of language learning in the study abroad context. The ideologies and practices of South Korean young adults indicate that English learning is a practice of distinction. The opposition between TOEIC English and oral communication skills continues to justify and facilitate their decision to study English abroad. When studying abroad, they focus particularly on acquiring oral communication skills as a means of becoming competent in English and look for the best ways to improve it. Specifically, courses and programs that teach workplace skills, such as Business English and internships, are chosen in the belief that they have more practical uses. However, the fact that job seekers' first challenge in the recruitment process is to pass the application documents screening stage makes them more aware of how to entextualize their study abroad practices into standardized English test scores, certifications, and narratives.

As discussed in this paper, the recruitment culture, which is dominated by corporations, serves as an institutionalized language policy that affects language learning practices. Given the increasing risk of unemployment, the impact of the corporate culture on language learning needs to be more thoroughly examined in order to gain an understanding of neoliberalization in language education.

¹ All translations in this paper are my own.

² All the personal names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

³ All the interviews and conversations, except Example 2, were conducted in Korean.

⁴ Insung and Dongil conducted this conversation in English. This is because Insung wanted to practice his English during interviews or conversations for this research. All verbal mistakes are left unrevised in the transcript.

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