

Korea Focuses on English Too Much

by Lee Eunhee

Let's go outside and look around town. Strange to say, we might be able to see more English signs than Korean ones. Even those may give the illusion that we're abroad here. Most people who want to get a good job or career are willing to sacrifice their own enjoyment, money, and time for studying English. Many kinds of English books are overflowing on bookstore shelves. The news related to English studies is updated everyday. Besides, the new government recently declared it would implement English Immersion Education Policy, which all classes must be taught only in English in public schools from 2010; fortunately, they have modified their policy completely.

However, I think we are already in an English Immersed society. Of course, non-native English speakers need to acquire English because English is used as the international language all over the world. However, the current excessive enthusiasm of Korea for English is too much. Do you think that making three-year-old children start to learn English even though their mother tongue is not fluent yet is sensible? Why is the whole country immersed in English? What's the matter with us? How can we get over this abnormal situation? Let's consider the matter in all its aspects.

There is no doubt that English is an international language. If we have English communication skills, we'll have lots of opportunities in international society. If so, English education has to be conducted effectively. But, the current English education system is not pragmatic because it concentrates on grammar

and reading comprehension, and only for university entrance exams instead of for real communication. As a result, even though we usually have studied English more than 10 years, we still have trouble with speaking even simple expressions in English when we meet English speakers. So-called English experts say that approximately 800 hours, total time of English class in Public schools, is not enough time to communicate fluently. In addition, the structure of Korean is quite different from that of English so it feels more difficult. Nevertheless, the government and the Ministry of Education are responsible for finding solutions and eliminating unproductive educational methods. The basic purpose of any language is communication. Because of this, our English education policy should be changed.

As a consequence of an impractical education system, we usually spend extra billions of won each year on private English courses and English studies abroad, because our society pressures people to focus on English. Actually, most companies make English a job requirement, regardless of whether English ability is necessary or even useful in that position. Therefore, many people dedicate years to studying English to get qualifications, and especially almost all undergraduate students study for the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) exam, the most popular qualification, as if TOEIC was their academic minor. It's not necessary for all people live as though their life goal was English. Some who really need English should study English; others should invest their money, time, and efforts in building up expert knowledge in their field. Korean society must not stop

forcing people to be lame, to become people who have only English ability and are ignorant in other areas.

Let's take a look at the products that we use daily such as clothes, cosmetics, jewelry, school supplies, and so on. The brand names and important texts on them are all written in English, and this is done intentionally. It's hard to find any Korean words on these Korean products. That is, Korean is beginning to disappear in Korea. The ridiculous thing is that many of them are broken English or weird expressions. What do you think of these phrases written on products? "happy virus", "~on new lovely baby's birth", "hunt kids", "The taste of asshole" (quotation from the article of Maeil Newspaper /Mar 27, 08) Do these phrases even make sense? Even native speakers don't understand these expressions, or why we overuse broken English. Why do we try to make our products look like foreign products?

The other day, I read a funny story on the internet. A Korean student studying at a university abroad applied for a scholarship, but the school refused her request after checking her information. The reason was that her home address in Korea was ~castle, the name of an apartment. Needless to say, the brand names of expensive goods such as cars, electric home appliances, and apartments are all named English. That's because many people think that English brand names are more attractive and cool. Why do we regard Korean brand names as tacky, and English ones as sophisticated?

Let's suppose that we meet English speakers on the street, and they ask us some questions about directions or something else. If we can't speak English, we

might feel ashamed and so sorry to them. Isn't it so weird? We are Korean and we are here in Korea. Why should we feel like this? We focus on English too much to realize that we are missing many important things. That is, we are losing Korean language and national identity.

I heard one story from my acquaintance. There was a 10-year-old boy and his parents made him study with an English tutor very fiercely from 3 years old. As a result, his eventual English ability was wonderful; on the other hand, his Korean was terrible for his age. What a pity!

A language of one country reflects its own culture, tradition, history, and philosophy. Therefore, losing a language is to lose whole country. Korea is not one of the United States of America. It's important to follow the trend of globalization by learning English. However, it's much more important to keep and develop things unique to Korea and be proud of them. We are already accustomed to the food, and popular culture of western culture and so-called developed countries. We don't have to give up our mother tongue. Many foreigners who visit Korea say it's difficult to feel Korean native culture in Korea. There is something wrong with this, isn't there?

For all people to focus on only English is a huge loss both individually and nationally. Now it's time to stop our blind pursuit of English and to love Korean and Korea once again; Unless we really want to meet the world where Korea is completely controlled by English soon.