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BAKALÁŘSKÁ DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

The Discourse about Koreans' Alleged Difficulties with English

Diskurz o údajných obtížích Korejců s angličtinou

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Anotace

Cílem mé bakalářské práce je prozkoumat, proč se o Korejcích obecně říká, že nejsou dobří v angličtině, a co je příčinou tohoto problému. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. V první části vysvětluji nejvýznamnější a běžně zmiňované překážky při učení (se) angličtiny v Koreji na základě akademické literatury a předchozího výzkumu na toto téma. Ve druhé části se pak zaměřuji na online články z korejských novin a blogů, kde zkoumám, jak je situace vnímána a popisována v médiích a podávána veřejnosti. Abych získala více zdrojů a lepší představu o situaci, rozhodla jsem se analyzovat články v korejských médiích psané jak v angličtině, tak v korejštině. Z výsledků vyplývá, že většina autorů vidí současnou situaci pesimisticky, a existuje hned několik problémů, které jsou vnímány jako závažné překážky na cestě Korejců k úspěšnému osvojení angličtiny. Na druhou stranu jsou tu i pozitivní názory a náznaky zlepšení. Celá situace je složitá a její posuzování záleží z velké části na úhlu pohledu.

Abstract

Title: The Discourse about Koreans' Alleged Difficulties with English

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Keywords: Korea, English, English abilities, English proficiency, EFL acquisition, communication abilities, difficulties

Annotation

The purpose of my bachelor thesis is to investigate why Korean people are commonly believed to be bad at English, and what could be the reason behind that. The thesis is divided into two parts. In the first one, I explain the most significant issues and the routinely mentioned obstacles for English learning in Korea, based on academic literature and previous research on this topic. Consequently, in the second part I examine online articles from Korean newspapers and blogs to see what the public opinion is and how the situation is depicted by the media and delivered to their readers. To collect more sources and get a bigger picture, I decided to analyse Korean articles written in both English and in Korean. Results showed that most writers are pessimistic about the current situation, and that there are several problems which are considered severe handicaps for Korean's successful English language acquisition. On the other hand, there are also positive opinions and indications of improvement. In sum, the whole situation is complex, and its evaluation depends largely on one's point of view.

In this place, I would like to thank my supervisor Mag. Andreas Schirmer, Dr. for his feedback, suggestions, corrections, and comments on my thesis, for helping me to find the right direction of my writing and reach my goals.

Table of contents

List of Tables and Graphs	7
List of Used Abbreviations	7
Transcription	8
Introduction.....	9
1 Previous research	9
2 Language differences	11
2.1 Alphabet and phonemes	11
2.2 Syllables and word stress.....	11
2.3 Word order.....	12
2.4 Cultural aspects	12
3 English Education in Korea.....	13
3.1 History of English Language Education in Korea.....	13
3.2 The test-oriented culture.....	14
3.3 English Fever.....	15
3.4 Class environment and teaching methods	15
4 Psychological factors	17
4.1 Motivation and demotivation	18
4.2 Speaking confidence.....	19
5 Incorporation of English into Korean	21
6 Practical part.....	22
6.1 Methodology.....	23
6.2 Materials	23
6.3 Analysis	24
7 Frequently discussed problems	25
7.1 English Divide.....	30
7.2 National Pride.....	31
7.3 Comparing Korea to Other Countries	32
7.4 Development in Time	33
Conclusion	35
Bibliography	37

List of Tables and Graphs

Table 1: Number of examined articles by year of publishing.....	23
Figure 1: English proficiency assessments	24
Figure 2: Most frequently discussed problems	25

List of Used Abbreviations

CLT	Communicative Language teaching
CSAT	College Scholastic Ability Test
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
WTC	Willingness to Communicate

Transcription

In this thesis, *hangŭl* is romanized following the McCune-Reischauer system. It was used mainly for titles and quotations of Korean articles and names of authors of articles in Korean, when no English version was provided. But otherwise, the version provided by the original source was used even when it did not correspond to the above-mentioned system. Korean names are given the Korean convention (family name before first name).

Introduction

When I was in my second year of studying at university, I attended a lecture given by a native Korean who was speaking about Koreans being “bad at English”. He maintained that one of the strong factors is Korean national pride and rich entertainment culture, especially K-pop and K-drama scene. As a result, Koreans have no need to learn English for the purpose of understanding movies or songs when they can simply enjoy the content in their native language.

That was surprising for me, considering South Korea’s history, long time cooperation with the USA, economic success in the global market and emphasis on education. Moreover, the lecturer himself was giving the lecture in English. I became interested and started to search for various opinions and more layers of this topic. I found numerous articles, first in newspapers, then also in academic publications. The amount of related literature made me realize that it is in fact a broadly discussed issue.

The question is, what is the general perception of Korean people’s English proficiency and what factors are proven or believed to cause difficulties? Previous findings suggest that there are many aspects possibly affecting Koreans’ English abilities, including the education system, a generally low confidence when speaking, language differences, etc. On the other hand, Koreans seem to be highly motivated to learn English to become successful in today’s world. Moreover, there are indications that the situation is getting better as time goes by. In my thesis, I do not aim to state that Koreans are “good” or “bad” in English. My aim is to collect various statements from both academic and media area and summarize them to see the bigger picture, prevailing viewpoints, and the development over time.

1 Previous research

Koreans’ alleged difficulties with English are broadly discussed both in the media and in the academic literature around the world from different angles. For example, Guzman et al. (2006) did qualitative research interviewing 13 Korean students at the Philippine Multidisciplinary University about English communication. All subjects reported that they are experiencing difficulties, especially with pronunciation, accent, or poor voice projection. When asked about motivation to speak English, subjects reported that they need English in their everyday life in the Philippines, and that they are motivated by better job opportunities or by the fact that English is the language for international

communication. Interestingly, they claimed that their English proficiency is not influenced by any specific element of Korean culture or traditions (Guzman et. al. 2006).

In another study, Jeon, Lee, and Kim (2011) interviewed three groups of participants: teachers, school children and parents, to examine what level of English skills they think is needed and what is reached. Teachers answered that their students are strongest in reading, followed by listening, speaking, and writing respectively. This order remained the same in the second part about what level of abilities should students be equipped with in the future, suggesting that comprehension is considered more important than production among teachers.

The group of students evaluated their skills in accordance with the teachers group. However, students think that the most important ability for their future is speaking, followed by listening. In a similar vein, parents believe that their school children's reading and listening abilities are better than writing and speaking, while they consider the speaking ability to be the most important for the future. To conclude, results of this study indicate the disagreement over the objectives of teachers and students (or parents), together with the mismatch in objectives and achievements, especially in speaking.

Previous research suggests that education in general is one of the most important factors affecting Koreans' English proficiency. For example, Kang (2012) wrote a chapter on primary school English education in Korea, explaining the policies taken to improve the situation. He listed five "current problems and issues facing primary English educators in Korea", including teachers' abilities and attitudes, studying in EFL context, or high amounts of money spent on private education, creating gaps between relatively richer and poorer regions and households.

Cho (2004) also offers some explanations regarding the difficulties based on previous research and her own experience as a teacher. In addition to above mentioned issues, she points out the role of parents, whose excessive expectations may lead to children's demotivation. She also states that there are teachers who have good knowledge of English grammar and reading but are not fluent speakers of English. Accordingly, students usually learn a "textbook English" which is quite different from that used by native speakers. Then she points at language and cultural differences and its possible implications in language learning, from students' behaviour in the classroom to group-oriented thinking, or "Korean language habits transferred into English". These problems will be further discussed in following chapters.

2 Language differences

English and Korean belong to distinct language families. English is a part of Indo-European language group, more specifically of the West-Germanic branch. In case of Korean, some say that it belongs to Ural-Altai language family (e.g., Kang 2012, 68), others suggest that it is an isolated language which shares some principles and structures with Ural-Altai languages (e.g., Cho 2004, 32). The most substantial differences and their consequences for Korean EFL learners are listed and explained below.

2.1 Alphabet and phonemes

English and Korean use different writing systems comprising not only different characters, but also different phonemes. First, there are no sounds for [f] and [v] in Korean but there are in English. Thus, many Koreans pronounce [f] as an aspirated [pʰ] (“ㅍ” in *hangŭl*) and [v] as [b] (“ㅂ” in *hangŭl*). This alteration is also observable in Korean transcriptions of English words including [f] and [v] sounds (Cho 2004, 32).

Second, Korean letter “ㄹ” is pronounced as either [l] or [r] depending on its position in a word. Thus, Korean students may find it difficult to distinguish them in English speaking and listening (Cho 2004, 32). The [l]/[r] alteration can be confusing: for example, if the word “read” is pronounced as [lead], it would change the meaning completely and cause misunderstanding. The same applies to pairs of voiced and voiceless sounds, e.g., [b] and [p], [t] and [d], [θ] and [ð] (Cho 2004, 32).

Although it was proven that native language significantly affects the production and comprehension of foreign languages, and that wrong pronunciation can cause ambiguities and comprehensibility problems, little or no time is spent on focused pronunciation training in Korean schools (Hwang 2008, 12).

2.2 Syllables and word stress

Another pronunciation difficulties can be caused by syllable structures. In Korean, the structure follows a CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) or CV (consonant-vowel) pattern. Therefore, Korean students tend to apply this pattern to English words, adding an extra vowel between consonants. (Cho 2004, 33) Also, Korean is defined as a syllable-timed language in which all syllables are pronounced with the same emphasis, content words and function words alike, creating a monotonous sound. English, on the other hand, is a stress-timed language, it includes word stress and sentence stress which makes it more rhythmic.

Getting familiar with the rhythm and stress in English raises the students' ability to understand and to be understood. Especially the right intonation can significantly enhance speakers' comprehensibility (Hwang 2008, 16–17). Those abilities are generally not taught and learned in most of Korean schools, but nowadays students can improve it in their free time, for example by watching movies, series, or TV shows in English. With growing popularity and availability of streaming platforms, Korean students' English abilities seem to be getting better.

2.3 Word order

Korean and English do not share the same word order. The typical sentence pattern is SVO (subject – verb – object) in English, and SOV (subject – object – verb) in Korean. English is a “head-initial” language, where the “head” of the sentence or clause comes *before* its dependent parts. In contrast, Korean is a “head-final” language, where the “head” comes *after* its dependent parts (Schirmer 2021, 7–8). More specifically, an adverb in Korean usually comes before the verb it modifies, in contrast to English, where modifier comes after the verb. The same applies to adverbs indicating time and place. Analogously to verb modifiers, the position of nouns modifying relative clauses is opposite too. In Korean, relative clause comes before noun, while in English it is after the noun that is modified.

These mismatches may cause difficulties for Korean students. If they are thinking in Korean, creating a Korean sentence expressing these thoughts in their head, and at the same time trying to say it aloud in English, they usually need to make a significant change in word order, sometimes even complete inversion, to say it right and sound natural. Thus, producing a sentence in English or translating a sentence from English to Korean and vice versa is a complicated process. In addition, it may lead to relatively slow responses to English questions (Cho 2004, 33), which can further decrease students' self-confidence and willingness to practice English speaking.

2.4 Cultural aspects

Korean society is rooted in Confucianism, an ideology which emphasizes authority. To express the respect to elders and superiors, Korean language includes speech levels, honorific postposition *-si* or lexical alternatives in vocabulary. For example, when talking about a classmate's house, Koreans use different word for “house” (*jip*) than when talking about a grandmother's house (*taek*). Also, Koreans usually do not call

others by their names, but rather by a relation to someone or by their roles in a society or family, e.g., *Minsu ōmōni* (“Minsu’s mother”) (Cho 2004, 34).

In English, however, there is minimum means of showing respect, there are no honorifics, English speakers address others as “you” regardless their status, and they communicate more openly and directly. Therefore, it can be difficult for Koreans to express themselves precisely in English.

3 English Education in Korea

3.1 History of English Language Education in Korea

The necessity to learn English appeared on the Korean peninsula during the late *Chosŏn* dynasty period mainly for the purpose of diplomacy and trade. Sufficient English abilities usually lead to well-paid jobs, as English-speaking personnel was needed in major Korean ports, and as certain professions required special knowledge which could be gained from English sources. Acquisition of English also lead to a better social status even back then (Kim and Kim 2019, 4).

During the Japanese occupation (1910 – 1945) opportunities to learn English were limited. Grammar and vocabulary became vital in Korean schools due to the content of exams and its growing importance. In this era, there was a change in motivation to learn English: from achieving communication skills to scoring high in tests (Kim and Kim 2019, 6). To get a good job, it was required to outperform the others’ results. This led to a growing competitiveness in schools and the whole Korean society alike.

After World War II and the Korean War, South Korea was economically devastated, and proficiency in English was considered essential for a recovery. The United States were helping Korea to rebuild the country and there were many Americans present in the Korean Peninsula. Second, Koreans aimed to enter international markets, which required the practical use of English. However, it was still the exam score that primarily determined one’s social status, rather than real practical abilities (Kim and Kim 2019, 7). Korean society remained highly competitive, and the English learning was getting more and more exam oriented.

The importance of English communication abilities rose significantly in 1980s when Korea hosted two international events, Asian Games in 1986 and Olympic Games in 1988, and became more globalization oriented. Later, in 1997, Korea faced an economic crisis which further enhanced the realization of how powerful globalization

can be in helping to recover the national economy, and that English communication is necessary to reach that (Park 2009, 52).

The government reflected these needs in the English curriculum of the 6th and 7th National Curricula, which emphasized communication and fluency as major goals for English education in public schools. Changes included preference of speaking over writing, increase in number of English lessons per week, instruction styles transformation etc (Kang 2012, 61–62). Furthermore, government relied on the growing communicative language teaching methods proposed by South Korean academic experts and promoted English-only instruction policies (Park 2009, 53). Also, English Programme in Korea was established to bring native English speakers to teach in Korea (Kwon 2009, 24). These efforts had limited effect, as scoring high in tests to be accepted to university and to get better job have remained the primary motivation for students. However, it cannot be said that no improvement is happening in students' abilities, teachers' qualification and attitudes, or overall Koreans' abilities to communicate with foreigners when necessary.

3.2 The test-oriented culture

Historically, Koreans have used testing to employ officials and to mark higher social status since the *Chosŏn* era (Choi 2008, 41) and the importance of testing has persisted until today. Scoring high in standardized English tests is almost inevitable step in becoming successful in the Korean society. English is a part of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), an exam which determines students' eligibility for universities. Those who graduate from a prestigious university usually have comparative advantage when applying for a good job and they are respected by others. Moreover, people are often evaluated based on their test scores, not only at school and work, but in their lives as well.

In addition, job applicants in Korea are usually obliged to submit a score report of an EFL standardized test. Certain proficiency in English is considered more important than for example academic or professional knowledge, not only to be hired, but also to be promoted (Kim 2004, 25). Because of that, English is one of the most important school subjects and students spend hours on studying it in both public and private schools.

3.3 English Fever

“English Fever” is a term by Krashner (as cited in Park 2009, 51) describing the obsession with English education in Korea. It stems from the belief that English proficiency is a key to economic prosperity and advancement in the Korean society. The term evolved from more general term “education fever” which reflects the Confucian dedication to education. This phenomenon was reinforced by the downfall of traditional social classes in the 20th century and the meritocratic conviction that “virtually any Korean can advance himself through his own efforts” (Park 2009, 50).

Official English education in Korea starts in the third grade in public elementary schools, i.e., at the age of nine. However, many parents think the public-school classes are insufficient and send their children to private schools (the so-called “cramming schools” or *hagwŏns* in Korean) to learn more. Some elementary school children are also being sent to English speaking countries to improve English abilities. The money spent on English education have been growing, and the total amounts are numbered in trillions of *wŏns* (billions of dollars) every year.

Despite huge amount of money and time invested, research on this topic indicates that methods of English teaching and learning used in Korea might not be effective (e.g., Choi 2008; Eun 2001; Kang 2012; Kim and Kim 2019, and others). More specifically, Korean students learn English to score high in standardized exams, not to become proficient in English communication.

The realization that insufficient English abilities can hurt the competitiveness of Korean companies in the global market led the government to revise contents of university entrance examinations and shift the attention from grammatical items to communicative skills (Park 2009, 51). However, the CSAT exam still comprises only tasks on listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary, with no tasks on speaking and writing (Choi 2008, 41). The situation seems to get better with government policies (e.g., the national curricula mentioned above) and growing interest in communication approaches among teachers, but the results have not met the expectations yet.

3.4 Class environment and teaching methods

Despite growing numbers of Koreans studying English abroad, most Korean students are learning English in an EFL context. In Korea, Korean is the only official and commonly used language, thus Koreans rarely get an opportunity to speak English in natural settings (Ko 2022, 2288). Overall, Korean environment and education system

may not be suitable for successful acquisition of English communicative skills for several reasons.

One of them is that teachers are perceived as faultless in the Korean culture, they should never make mistakes and always appear to be better and more knowledgeable than students (Kim 2004, 29). When leading a conversation in English, however, there is a chance that the teacher would get challenged by the student and would not know how to answer properly. To avoid this situation, which can further cause a face loss or loss of respect, teachers have relied on the audiolingual method and grammar translations.

The audiolingual method employs mainly repetition and memorization practices, based on the theory that “language acquisition is a process of habit forming” (Lado 1964; as cited in Kim 2004, 29). This contrasts with the aim of the above-mentioned national curricula, which should direct teachers towards communicative language teaching (CLT) method.

Korean English teachers’ opinion to and actual utilization of the CLT method was examined in a study by Eun (2001), using both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) methods. Results showed that subjects in general think positive about CLT, but they find it difficult to implement this method in their classes. The same applies to the use of group activities, authentic materials (e. g. videos, movies, newspapers etc.), and to the use of a target language during lessons. Teachers also stated that they find it important to teach all four language skills equally but admitted that it does not always happen in practice.

Among possible obstacles, “large class size” is rated as the most significant in Eun’s study. Another problem is the obligation for teachers to use one of the few standardized, government-approved English textbooks, which are not accustomed to CLT method. Also, the afore-mentioned emphasis on test scores force teachers to prepare students for exams which usually do not contain tasks on communication. As there are no means and measures to test speaking abilities, many students find it pointless to practice it. Some of them consider group activities and games in English a waste of time and prefer to learn grammar, which is seen as a “serious learning”. (Eun 2001, 106) At this point, students’ and their parents’ expectations conflict with the national curriculum and teachers must decide which approach to take or find a balance between the two.

Other issues include students' passive attitude during lessons and their preference of memorizing from textbooks over expressing themselves verbally. They are also unwilling to ask questions to avoid looking foolish and losing face (Eun 2001). Li & Zhou (2013) reported that most of their respondents [college students of English in Korea] has experienced feeling embarrassed and reluctant to practice speaking among classmates. Similarly, even though many students think that it is all right to make mistakes, they are shy and uncomfortable when they must speak English (Truitt 1995, 6).

In addition, communication skills are associated with pronunciation, which is an important element of foreign language acquisition affecting learner's comprehensibility and speaking confidence. Despite that, Hwang (2008) indicates that it is not usual in Korea to train pronunciation during English lessons. The reason may be that teachers themselves are not confident with their pronunciation because they had never received any pronunciation training themselves. Furthermore, the substantial language differences make it hard for Koreans, both teachers and students, to acquire native-like pronunciation of English (Hwang 2008). Interestingly, some parents take their children for a surgery to improve their English pronunciation and overall proficiency (Kim 2004, 2).

In sum, current government policies appear insufficient to motivate students to focus on speaking and communication instead of memorizing vocabulary and grammar for exams. It appears that in the competitive Korean society, a skill that is not being examined is not considered important among students, parents, and teachers, and it is less likely to be preferred over subjects of standardized exams. However, the importance of practical English for globalization and international business, together with advancements in teaching methods, can enhance successful mastery of communication abilities in future, helping to improve the situation step by step.

4 Psychological factors

Previous parts described mainly external factors affecting learners of English in Korea. This section in contrast focuses on important internal factors concerning learning processes and achievements of individuals. Issues such as one's attitude, emotional state, motivation and so forth are believed to have significant effects on the acquisition of English as a foreign language in Korea, in both positive and negative ways.

4.1 Motivation and demotivation

In the above sections on education system and history, some motivational factors were already mentioned. The primary motivation for Korean students to learn English is to reach an exam score high enough to be eligible for the best universities and/or job positions. It is so strong that it often helps to overcome students' demotivation (Cho and Chung 2014). Nevertheless, this issue seems to be more complex and there appear to be various aspects of what affects learners' motivation, and how their (de)motivation in turn influences the learning process and successful language acquisition.

One important thing is seeing English as a tool for international communication. Kim and Kim (2019, 9) suggest that once learners reach their desired exam score, they show more interest in practical verbal skills which may be useful for working or traveling overseas. This was confirmed in another study by Kim and Kim (2015) examining motivation of elders who learn English through a lifelong education. In addition to traveling, results showed that another frequent learning motivation was to be able to use electronic home appliances conveniently. In general, English knowledge is considered helpful in everyday life, as the language utilization is increasing in the world and in subjects' surroundings alike.

On the other hand, demotivation to learn English is a common feature in Korea. Interestingly, most students' primary motivation, the test scores, can at the same time work as a demotivator. Particularly those who experience failure and reach lower score than they have desired may feel disappointed, depreciated by peer students or teachers, and develop a negative attitude towards English based on these feelings. Results of a study by Kang (2019) showed that mid- and low-proficiency students tend to be affected more by demotivational factors than their high-proficient peers. Particularly low-proficiency students were proven to be significantly demotivated by exam scores.

Next motivator which often turns to a demotivator are parents and their high expectations about children's achievements. Pushing a child to study excessively and expecting unrealistic results may have negative consequences, such as loss of interest and motivation (Cho 2004, 32). Similarly, unfounded expectations about exam scores may source from students themselves and the demotivation and loss of self-confidence occurs when it is not reached.

Also, some students claim that the English they learn at school is not practical, that it is not necessary in their lives and that they are not interested in English speaking cultures (Kang 2019). Additionally, in a study of Truitt (1995), many students reported

that they have no intention in meeting and talking with native English speakers. In sum, Korean students lack the integrative motivation to learn.

Other demotivators were related to teachers and their attitude, personality, language proficiency and teaching style, or to the organization of lessons, class materials, pace and “boring lessons” (Kang 2019). Those results were partially replicated by Li and Zhou (2013), who found that teachers’ personalities and monotonous teaching were placed among the biggest demotivators for Korean students, along with insufficient school facilities or the inferiority to classmates.

Furthermore, students’ socioeconomic status can be demotivating in both ways. Students with a higher socioeconomic status who spend many hours every day in private institutions may get overexposed to the English education and subsequently lose interest. On the other hand, those of a lower status whose families cannot afford the private education often observe the growing gap in the English proficiency between them and their classmates, leading to frustration and possibly even demotivation to learn (Kim and Kim 2019, 11).

To conclude, there are various external and internal factors demotivating English learners in Korea and exacerbating the problems with English acquisition there. However, at least for students, the instrumental motivation of a successful future career is often strong enough to remotivate them to study hard and keep improving their English abilities.

4.2 Speaking confidence

A study by Truitt (1995), among others, proved that a lack of self-confidence in speaking is a widespread phenomenon in Korea. The majority of subjects (i.e., university students of English as a second language in Korea) agreed that reading and writing is easier for them than speaking and listening in English. They think that it is possible for everybody to learn a foreign language, but that some people have special abilities for it. Interestingly, most students feel that they personally do not have these abilities, but they are optimistic about the abilities of Korean people in general.

While the lack of motivation can lead to overall decrease in learning effort, the lack of confidence is usually related particularly to problems with communication, especially among Koreans who are uncomplimentary about their pronunciation abilities (Hwang 2008) and fear making mistakes or being incomprehensible. Kim (2004)

suggested that confidence affects willingness to communicate (WTC), and that a low WTC observed in Korean students can be in part responsible for a low proficiency.

The author further suggests that WTC is enhanced when students expect their communication partner to follow the same communication rules and social norms. This is often a challenge, because American and other English-speaking cultures' way of thinking is different from the Korean way, and many students are not interested in studying cultural aspects when learning English (Kim 2004; Kang 2019). Some people tend to judge any cultural behaviours and values distinct from their native ones negatively, rather than trying to understand them (Kim 2004, 155). Even if some students realize that knowing English-speaking cultures and integrating with native speakers can help to improve their abilities, they are often not willing, or not confident enough, to do so (Truitt 1995, 8).

Furthermore, the lack of confidence relates to foreign language anxiety and social anxiety, which may also influence learners' performance. In a study of Lee et al. (2021), it was proven that the social anxiety is strongly associated with speaking and listening anxiety. Students with high level of social anxiety are not willing to participate in integrative activities, they fear a negative evaluation of others and often reach lower performances. Therefore, authors suggest reducing the social anxiety in the EFL learning process by using a virtual reality.

In addition to the virtual reality, 21st century technologies offer many options how to study a foreign language. Especially in recent years, use of online lessons grew due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns and restrictions. In reaction, Ko (2022) examined the students' perception of online lessons to see whether the online environment has some benefits compared to offline classes. Previous research indicated that the fear of embarrassment in front of peer students and teachers cause unwillingness to communicate and can negatively affects students' EFL communication performance.

Results in part validated the hypothesis. All questioned students agreed that they feel nervous or under pressure when they practice speaking, and anxiety emerged as a most significant obstacle for speaking in a language classroom. However, students expressed no preference for online lectures over in-person ones.

The main reason was the inconvenient communication with a lecturer and classmates via online channels and the lack of interpersonal contact causing an emotional challenge. Students stated that it was better to work together with classmates

and to communicate with their teachers face-to-face during lessons. Some students admitted that it was easier for them to focus on what was being taught in the “offline” classroom environment (Ko 2022, 2293–2295). It seems that positive effects of social interaction can overcome negative effects of anxiety in English communication classes.

The English-speaking anxiety in classes can be further reduced by role-play activities, as suggested by Jeon (2017). The study compared students’ anxiety, motivation and speaking abilities before and after a semestral course of role-play activities in English. Results showed that in-class speaking anxiety was reduced and speaking abilities improved. Although there were no significant changes in motivation and outside-class anxiety, students mostly found the role-play activities helpful for learning English in EFL context and considered it a more effective way to learn and remember new vocabulary than studying them individually in a library (Jeon 2017).

To summarize, there are indications that social anxiety and low confidence can affect learners’ communication skills negatively, but fortunately there are effective ways to reduce these impacts and help students overcome their inconveniences.

5 Incorporation of English into Korean

When crossing the streets of Korean cities, listening to Korean pop songs, or watching K-dramas, the pervasiveness of English is obvious. Although the overuse of English in the monolingual Korean nation may be viewed negatively by some (see Rüdiger 2020), English signs, loanwords, and phrases have become a part of everyday life. Nevertheless, its utilization does not necessarily reflect individual’s English abilities, it is rather used for commercial reasons.

Businessmen, for example, use English names for their brands and stores to attract more customers and to look classy. Tan and Tan (2015) examined signs in the streets of Seoul and found out that the crucial information is provided mostly in Korean, either as Korean-only or Korean-English signs where code-mixing with English is used only to gain attention. Moreover, English in brand names often has a decorative purpose and the meaning is not actually connected to the scope of business.

Similar pattern can be applied to K-pop. As mentioned before, English is often associated with modernity and power in the Korean society, it indicates a high social status and the common desire of Koreans to successfully acquire this language (Baratta 2014). In addition, English may be used to challenge authorities and demonstrate resistance or self-assertion in mostly conservative and hierarchical Korean society (Lee

2004, as cited in Rüdiger 2020, 169). Sometimes it can be used for purely artistic reasons, like rhythm and rhyming, or for expressing euphemisms (Lawrence 2010, as cited in Rüdiger 2020, 169). Another reason is the so-called *hallyu* (Korean wave): as the Korean culture is spreading worldwide, artists may feel obliged to use English as a global language to address their international audience.

The globalization and expansion abroad is nowadays a widespread goal among Korean companies, pop culture institutions and celebrities. In addition, some Korean brands use English names and labels to look like American brand at their home (Korean) market (Bae 2009, as cited in Tan and Tan 2015, 78). This supports the idea that English is not necessarily used to attract foreigners, nor to suppress Korean language and culture, but simply to appear more prestigious. As Tan & Tan (2015, 77) suggested: “English has found a way into the Korean community as a tool to index their modernity, while not reducing any of its ‘Korean-ness’ in any way.”

In past years, there have been debates about establishing English as an official language in Korea. Although Koreans recognize the importance of English as a global language and they are putting high efforts to learn it, they are still using mostly Korean in their everyday lives. In a study by Shin (2003), results showed that Korean people sense the importance of learning a new language and culture since childhood and that 54 % of respondents would agree with English becoming a second official language, but it was found unacceptable to replace Korean with English as the only official language.

To sum up, the presence or even abundance of English words and phrases in Korea does not reflect actual English proficiency and utilization in everyday life. Despite globalization, English fever, and aspiration to reach high levels of English proficiency, Koreans value their language the most and, at least for now, there is no intention to replace it with English. Nevertheless, the growing amount of code-mixing and absorption of English words and phrases in Koreans’ everyday conversations can help them with a successful EFL acquisition.

6 Practical part

Previous chapters provided an insight into the academic research on Koreans’ possible difficulties with English. The following part offers another point of view. I decided to examine newspaper and blog articles to see how the media report about the issue and whether the main ideas are similar to findings in the academic literature, or whether there are different viewpoints, as newspaper reporters are usually freer to express their

own opinions, include judgments and emotions. This part aims to mostly English-written Korean newspapers and blogs. In addition, I decided to add few articles written in Korean with no English version available. This is because I think that the two languages target to different groups of readers, which may eventually lead reporters to put certain things another way, or to simplify some issues for the global audience.

6.1 Methodology

The first step was to search for relevant articles via the Google browser using the following keywords: “Koreans’ English abilities”, “English proficiency in Korea”, “English education in Korea” and “Koreans’ problems with English”. When searching for the articles in Korean, I used Korean equivalents of the above, such as *Han’gugin yŏngŏ sillyok*, *Han’gugin dŭl ũi yŏngŏ* or *yŏngŏ kyoyuk* via both Google and Naver browsers. I decided to quote both Korean original and English translation in the following chapters to be more accurate.

6.2 Materials

Using the internet browser and keywords listed above, I found 40 articles from online newspaper sites and blogs, out of which 23 were in English and 17 in Korean. The oldest article is from April 1, 2009, and the most recent is from March 13, 2023. Numbers of articles from each year are shown in the Table 1. It is important to say that the date of publishing does not necessarily correspond to the time described in the article, as for example an article from 2022 addresses the development of English education in Korea since 1883. Therefore, the articles in range of 14 years could guide us through approximately 140 years of English in Korea. Also, the relevance and eligibility of articles for the examination was not determined by the year of publishing, but by the title and content matching the thesis topic and keywords.

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
3	0	0	1	4	14	0	1	0	3	2	3	1	6	1

Table 1: Number of examined articles by year of publishing.

English articles were obtained mostly from two sources: *Korea Herald* and *Korea Times*. The former one published a series named “Eye on English”, which was rich in valuable information and opinions relevant to my topic. It contains 30 articles published in the years 2013–2014 by various writers and fields (e.g., “culture”, “national”, “social

affairs”), out of which 14 were analysed in my thesis. Korean sources include articles from *Hanguk Ilbo*, *Naver Blog* and a variety of others.

6.3 Analysis

All 40 articles were examined with a focus on its viewpoint on the English in Korea, or English proficiency of Koreans. The main ideas and evaluations extracted from each article were divided into three categories, labelled “negative”, “positive” and “neutral”, to see how Korean writers feel about the situation and what is the general sentiment in the media about this topic.

Articles placed in the “negative” category contain phrases stating that Koreans have problems with English, and/or that their proficiency levels are low, thus evaluating the situation pessimistically, e.g.: “English skills has been far from satisfactory” (Song, 15 January 2014) or “the nation lags behind many others when it comes to English language skills” (Oh, 15 January 2014).

In contrast, articles in the “positive” category state that the situation is good or that is getting better, e.g.: “English education in Korea got better and I think nowadays young people speak English quite well”¹ (Kim, 9 September 2022). The third, “neutral” category was added because some of the relevant articles only discussed an issue connected to English in Korea with no assessment or clear evaluation. Numbers of articles by categories are displayed in the Figure 1.

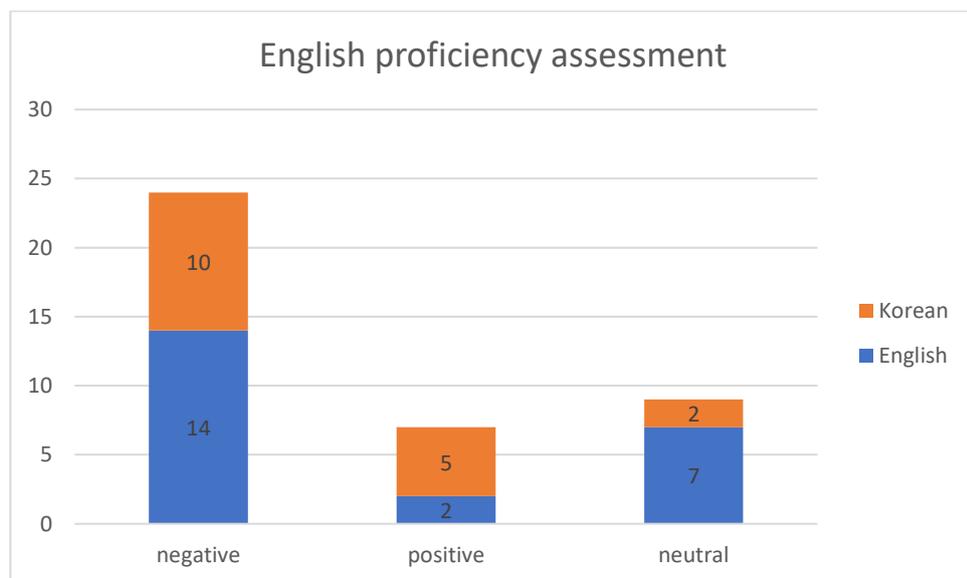


Figure 1

¹ “과거와 달리 한국의 영어교육도 많이 좋아져 요즘 젊은층은 영어를 꽤 잘한다고 생각한다”

Results showed an obvious supremacy of “negative” viewpoints, which appeared in both English- and Korean-written articles and among the whole examined period, reaching for a total count of 24, compared to 7 “positive” and 9 “neutral” ones. These results indicate that English proficiency in Korea is regarded as a problem that needs to be discussed and, in the best case, solved. It should be noted that the result could be in part caused by the keywords used for searching, although the word “problem” was only used as a substitute to neutral keywords such as “abilities”, “proficiency” and “education”, which brought more results.

7 Frequently discussed problems

To see what aspects are considered the most problematic by writers, I focused on the topic of each article and exact statements about what is the reason for low proficiency or what is the problem with English language, especially communication, in Korea. Problems which appeared most often were classified in 7 groups displayed in the Figure 2 and explained below, ordered from the highest to the lowest occurrence rate. The x-axis shows the number of articles addressing each problem. The total number of items does not correspond to the total number of articles examined in the thesis, as some of the articles covered more than one issue, while other articles did not point at any negative aspect or problem.

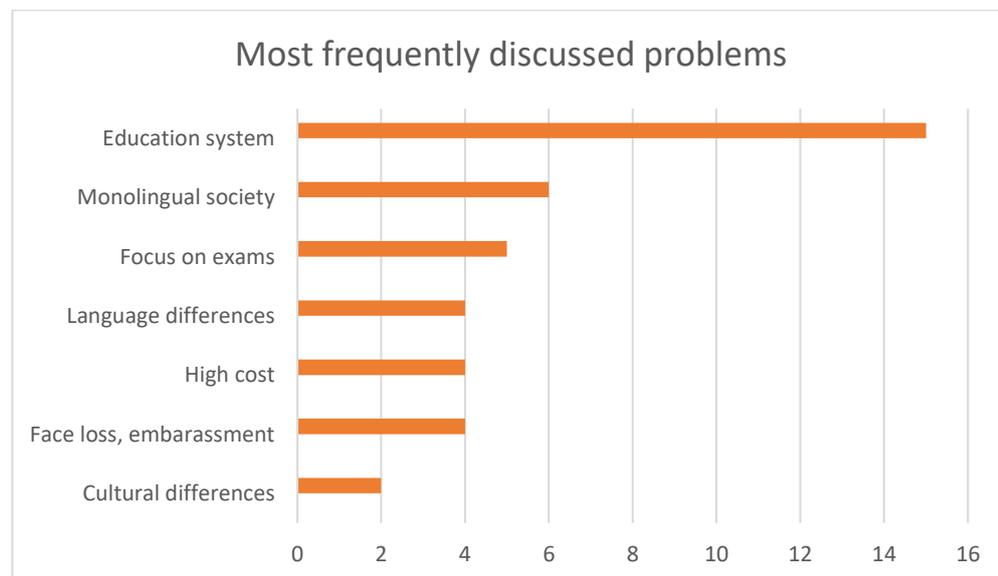


Figure 2

1. “Education system” comprises issues such as school curriculum, teaching methods, class content, lack of communication practice during lessons etc. and its impact on students’ abilities. It also covers articles that emphasize the gap between reading and

speaking test scores and rankings in international English proficiency tests. Results showed that Korean education system is blamed most often. As this topic was already discussed in the theoretical section, I only provide few examples from articles belonging to this group:

- A. “Many Korean students are expressing their frustrations at how they spent countless hours on their English education that seldom helped them communicate with a native speaker” (Yoon, 5 February 2014).
- B. “Choi Seok-moo of Korea University said the problem lies in lopsided education that focuses mostly on some of the English skills such as reading, writing and grammatical structure and disregards speaking and writing” (Yoon, 5 February 2014).
- C. “[An English teacher based in Seoul] noted that learning grammar structures through textbooks containing endless data on tenses ... that are not exactly useful for communication is not the best use of a class time” (Oh, 17 April 2014).
- D. “RM emphasized that he attended more than 20 English academies, but it was the American drama “Friends” that made him improve his skills”² (Cha Yoo-chaе, 4 April 2022).

2. The term “monolingual society” reflects the fact that Korean is the only official language used in the country and therefore many Koreans have no chance or reason to speak English in their daily lives and practice communication naturally. This category also comprises articles about the debate on whether English should become an official language in Korea. Here are some examples:

- A. “In my opinion, there is only one reason why Koreans cannot speak English well. Because they have no use for it”³ (*Melotopia*, 6 November 2013).
- B. “In Korean, even if you do not use English, it has no effect on your life, but if you do not know Korean, it can cause significant difficulties in daily life in this

² “RM 은 “영어 학원을 20 개 넘게 다녔지만 결정적으로 실력을 향상하게 한 건 미국 드라마 '프렌즈'였다”고 강조했다.”

³ “내가 생각하기에 우리나라 사람들이 영어를 못하는 이유는 딱 하나뿐이다. 쓸 일이 없으니까...”

‘monolingual’ country”⁴ (Naver blog: *Tongan ch’ōngsonyōn suryōnkwa*, 6 April 2021).

3. “Focus on exams” reflects mainly adults’ efforts to score high in English tests, motivated by the possibility to get a better job and/or to reach higher social status and gain respect. Although problems with exam-focused official education are already included in point 1, it appears that the obsession with test scores does not end with admission to university, graduation, nor with becoming employed, and that high test score does not guarantee a high level of English communication abilities, as we can see from the following examples:

A. “I don’t think a test can improve English skills, but I have no choice, and most companies here request applicants to submit the English test score” (Oh, 15 January 2014).

B. “So what? First, we need to change our perspective. ... Do you really think TOEFL and TOEIC are helpful for communication? I don’t think so”⁵ (An, 6 February 2019).

4. “Language differences” cover problems with word order, intonation, pronunciation etc., which are believed to be a great obstacle for Koreans on their way to successful mastery of English. It also serves as a reason or excuse for the unsatisfactory results of Korea in international English tests, where Korea must compete with countries whose languages are linguistically closer to English:

A. “As for Korean, it is hard to find any similarities in pronunciation of characters, word order, or anything else. That is why they need considerably greater effort than Europeans to become proficient in English”⁶ (Park, 31 April 2022).

B. “If one thinks in a complex way as in Korean, such thoughts will have a structure that is clearly different from the English way of thinking (i.e., sentence structure).

⁴ “한국은 영어를 전혀 사용하지 않아도 생활에 아무런 지장이 없지만, 한국어를 모르면 생활 자체에 큰 어려움을 겪는 ‘단일 언어’ 사용 국가입니다.”

⁵ “일단 관점을 바꾸자. ... 정말로 토플과 토익이 소통에 도움이 된다고 생각하는가? 필자는 아니라고 생각한다.”

⁶ “한국어는 글자의 발음과 어순 등 거의 모든 점에서 영어와 공통점을 찾기 어렵다. 영어를 잘하기 위해서는 유럽인들과 달리 상당한 노력이 필요한 이유다.”

Translating complex thoughts from Korean to English in an instant is a stage that for most learners is not easy to reach”⁷ (*Koreanenglish.com*, 20 April 2020).

5. “High cost” category includes the often-mentioned discrepancy in the huge amount of money spent on English education and the unsatisfactory outcome. Many articles provide data on how much Koreans spend on private English lessons, English kindergartens, studying abroad or even surgeries to improve English pronunciation, but that these investments have not brought notable results. Also, these spendings are proven to vary between regions and families, which can possibly disadvantage some students in the competitive society, as can be seen in example C.

- A. “Korea ranked number 1 in the world in money spent on English language education and 121st in English speaking ability” (Breux, 15 November 2013).
- B. “English education accounts for the largest amount (about 6 trillion won as of 2016) in the Korean private education market”⁸ (Park, 31 August 2022).
- C. “One’s TOEIC score does not only reflect one’s linguistic abilities but may also signify one’s socioeconomic and regional background” (Lee, 26 March 2014).

6. “Face loss and embarrassment” are typical aspects of Korean society, in this case resulting from the feeling of Koreans that they can be judged based on their English proficiency. It can be related to low self-confidence. Koreans who think that their English abilities are not good, and they do not have a “native-like” pronunciation, tend to avoid speaking English so that nobody can hear their imperfection, which they think is a motive for disrespect (as in example A.). In contrast, people of higher status or superior positions often feel obliged to prove themselves competent in English, regardless of their actual proficiency (example B.):

- A. “Speaking English with a Korean accent, often looked down upon as an element of ‘Konglish,’ is a cause of shame for many who never studied overseas” (Lee, 16 April 2014).
- B. ““Of the officials in high-ranking positions, people who think they speak English well enough are reluctant about using a translator, even though it is clear that they

⁷ “한국어를 할 때처럼 생각을 복잡하게 떠올린다면, 그런 생각은 영어식 사고방식(곧, 영어 문장의 구조)과는 확연히 다른 구조를 갖게 됩니다. 한국어로 떠올린 다소 복잡한 생각을 영어로 순식간에 옮기는 것은 대부분의 학습자가 오르기 쉽지 않은 단계입니다.”

⁸ “영어교육은 한국 사교육 시장에서 가장 많은 금액(2016년 기준 약 6조)을 차지한다.”

can benefit from professional assistance. This is because they feel compelled to appear as though they are fluent in English to save face,' he [a professional translator] said" (Yoon, 3 July 2016).

7. "Cultural differences" here refer to those relevant to communication and language. Korean is based on indirect communication, hierarchy and showing respect, while English is designed for clear and direct communication. Thus, Korean learners of English with a Korean way of thinking may feel uncomfortable when speaking English to someone superior, or simply find it difficult to express themselves in English while thinking in the Korean way:

- A. "Those Koreans who learn English find it impossible to imagine that they can speak like that to their superiors or their children, uniformly and simply" (Jon, 24 April 2009).
- B. "I think this is not simply due to the Korean's English ability, but because the linguistic structure of Korean is not a low-context structure based on clear communication... Learning a foreign language requires efforts to understand the way they think" (*Naver blog*, 4 June 2009).

To conclude, results showed that education system is considered the most significant obstacle to successful mastery of English by Korean reporters and bloggers. This result is partially in accordance with the academic literature, where class content and teaching methods are often discussed for its inadequacy or imperfections. It should be noted that the rating provided above has its limitations, as it is a result obtained from only a sample of articles on English in Korea, not from the whole internet and all the relevant media.

Also, some of the articles were published in reaction to the results of English Proficiency Index provided by EF (Education First). The EF reports usually include notes on what is the possible reasons for the survey results, e.g.: "Korea's traditional English instruction that focuses on memorization and grammar partly contributed to the lack of improvement" (quotation of the EF report in Oh, 6 November 2013). Therefore, some of the writers might have been biased by, or following up on such claims.

Besides the education system, results showed that there are other significant factors, mostly language- or culture-specific, repeatedly mentioned and discussed. It indicates that unsatisfactory English proficiency in Korea is a complex problem with

many possible causes interconnected with each other. Following paragraphs provide more detailed insight to some of the problems and relations between them.

7.1 English Divide

Some writers describe the mismatch in high spending and low improvement in English proficiency as a concerning issue. At the same time, others suggest that the amount of money that each family can spend on private education can create significant difference in students' results. Reporters often call this phenomenon "English divide", referring to a gap between relatively richer and poorer families or even regions in terms of their English abilities and spending abilities.

For example, in the inter-Korean comparison of average TOEIC score reached in years 2011–2012, students from Seoul scored the highest while those from South Jeolla province scored the lowest (Lee, 26 March 2014). Similar differences, reflecting the affluency of certain districts, can be observed in Seoul, not only through test scores, but also through the concentration of expensive English kindergartens, which are located mostly in districts like Gangnam, Seocho and Songpa (Lee, 19 February 2014).

In connection to growing popularity of English kindergartens, there have been debates on what age is the best for children to start learning English. Many parents think that "the earlier, the better" and send their children to these institutions despite its cost. Some experts say that it is not reasonable to start learning English before a child fully acquires Korean, as Oh (12 February 2014) noted in his article for the Korea Herald, referring to the opinion of experts: "...teaching a second language before the first is mastered may do more harm than good" and consequently "children may become lacking in both."

Besides private education in Korea, some parents send their children to English speaking countries to learn the language and improve communication skills in the natural environment. While this practice may be effective, it also brings some problems, such as separation of families, or children's struggles with the Korean education system that they are not used to when they return from their school abroad. Interestingly, communication abilities mastered abroad may not be useful in Korean English exams. A mother who sent her child to study abroad claimed for the Korea Herald that "her daughter's English proficiency didn't help her do well in the Korean-style English exam, which focuses on memorizing" (Lee, 22 January 2014).

In summary, parents are responsible for their children's English education in terms of money and attitude. Especially parents who personally experienced difficulties with English in their lives tend to push their children to study English regardless of their individual talents, ambitions, and possible negative consequences. Although there are many opinions that this attitude is wrong and it is causing more harm than good, there is no substantial proof. On the contrary, children can get comparative advantage, at least for the Korean English exams.

7.2 National Pride

While parents are mostly encouraging students to study English zealously, the Korean environment might sometimes be discouraging. First, those who struggle with English may feel negative emotions when they hear a fellow Korean speaking in fluent English and perceive him as a "show-off" (Lee, 16 April 2014). A case has been reported that a 19 student who practiced English with his classmate on a subway platform was beat to dead by two men who were "annoyed by the student, who had been talking to his friend in English" (Lee 2014).

This case is quite old, dating back to 1999, but the negative sentiment it reflects has in part persisted until today. It is apparent from the debates on establishing English as an official language in Korea or simply using English instead of Korean when it is not necessary. Those who use English in such way can be seen as "betraying their Korean identity" (Lee, 16 April 2014).

Similarly, members of the famous K-pop group BTS were concerned with this issue, stating that they would not sing in full English if that would mean a loss of their Korean identity. The group started to sing in full English due to COVID-19 pandemic, claiming that there was no other way for them. Interestingly, one of the BTS members called Jin stated that singing in English felt unnatural because "The English I learned in class was so different from the English in the song. I had to erase everything in my head first" (Frishberg, 26 August 2021). This again demonstrates the above-mentioned problems of education, mainly content of English classes in Korea, together with a statement of another BTS member RM, who has been admired for his English abilities, which in his words he got from watching the TV series "Friends", not from Korean schools (Cha, 4 Apr 2022).

7.3 Comparing Korea to Other Countries

Many articles include comparison of Korea to various other countries. Mostly, they are using language differences, especially word order, as an excuse for the difficulties with English, stating that Korean is more different from English than for example European languages, and thus “Compared to Europeans, Koreans have more difficulties with acquisition”⁹ (Kim, 9 September 2022).

On the other hand, comparison can also be used to disprove the previous argument. The best example is Finland which belongs to the Uralic language family close to Korean and thus it would be logical that they share the difficulties. However, “Finland consistently ranks within the top 10 in global surveys of English proficiency among non-English-speaking adults”, and therefore the Koreans’ struggle “doesn't seem to be simply a matter of word order”¹⁰ (Park, 31 August 2022).

In another article, Finland is given as a “wonderful example for English education in Korea” because they share linguistic characteristics, but “Finland has refrained from putting too much emphasis on English grammar” and “cooperative learning is put before competition”. Also, the reporter emphasizes the “consistency” of basic education policies, compared to Korea where “education has been subject to drastic changes under the pretext of educational innovation whenever a new president is elected” (Yu, 18 November 2012).

Interestingly, there is an article using another north-European country, Norway, as a comparison to Korea in terms of English. This time it is not about word order and linguistic differences, but about the environment encouraging to acquire English. Since 1960s, when Norway opened to globalization, “major Norwegian companies (...) have chosen English as their business language”, “important scientific papers, books and other research materials for the higher educational sector are published in English”, “English movies, TV series, plays and music have never been dubbed in Norwegian, but have always been subtitled”, “popular domestic artists all sing in English, and the blockbuster movies have always been in English.” Hence, English became a natural part of Norwegians’ cultural life, business, and education, helping them to “live the language”

⁹ “유럽인에 비해 한국인들이 습득하는데 어려움이 있는 것은 사실”

¹⁰ “핀란드가 항상 전 세계 비영어권 성인 대상의 영어능력지수 조사에서 10 위안에 드는 것을 생각해 보면 단순히 어순 차이의 문제는 아닌 듯하다.”

and reach top results in international English ability rankings. The situation in Korea is slightly different, as author pointed out: “In K-pop you can hear a mixture of Korean and English,” but still, “Korean is the dominant language,” in culture and many other fields (Davidsen, 19 February 2014). Therefore, many people do not need to use English for anything in their daily lives but the exam preparation.

Because successful European countries are quite distant, it appears more suitable to compare Korea to its Asian neighbours, mostly to China and Japan. This tendency appeared almost as soon as English education started in Korea. For example, the first English teacher at Yukyoung Park, which was the first official English school in Korea established in 1886 by king Kojong, praised Koreans’ English: “Korean students’ English abilities by far outperform those of Chinese and Japanese.”¹¹ (Park, 31 August 2022). Similarly, “In 1901 (...) a British consul in Korea reported to his home country government that ‘Koreans are the best linguists of the East. Not even 14 years have passed since foreigners first entered Seoul, but Koreans’ English language competence is no different from that of Chinese or Japanese’”¹² (Park 2022).

7.4 Development in Time

One possible reason why the English learning in Korea appeared more successful around the year 1900, at the end of the *Chosŏn* era, could be that those who studied were mostly men from Yangban families. Those men were usually proficient in Chinese, which might have helped them with acquisition of English, as the two languages share similar word order¹³ (Park 2022). Also, they had different learning materials and methods to mark English pronunciation, which could have been more effective, and as a result, “Koreans at that time were able to master general English communication in shorter period, like 6-10 months”¹⁴ (Park 2022).

¹¹ “조선 학생들의 영어 구사 능력은 중국이나 일본보다 훨씬 뛰어났다”

¹² “1901 년 (...) 영국영사가 본국 정부에 ‘조선사람은 동양에서 가장 뛰어난 어학자로 서울에 외국인이 들어온지 불과 14 년도 안됐지만 영어의 능숙함은 중국인이나 일본인은 가히 따르지 못할 것’ 이라고 보고했다”

¹³ “덕분에 이들이 한자와 어순이 같은 영어문법 또한 쉽게 받아들였다는 주장도 있다”

¹⁴ “영어를 익힌 조상들은 짧게는 6 개월에서 10 개월 정도면 일반적인 의사소통이 가능한 수준이 되었다고 한다.”

The situation got worse with the Japanese annexation in 1910–1945, when Korean education system was transformed by Japanese and English became to be used for exams and rankings rather than for the international communication. Some consequences have persisted even after Korea gained independence, especially the orientation to exams, and thus the situation was comparatively worse than in the end of *Chosŏn* era, when Koreans' English abilities were praised.

These days, Korean English abilities are evaluated according to results of standardized English tests, international rankings and their development in time. Articles reflecting these trends are often pessimistic: “Despite huge investment and educational zeal, the English language skills of Korea’s adults have not improved and have remained at a moderate level over the past six years” (Kang, 1 April 2009). It can get even more pessimistic when compared to the progress of other Asian countries: “Korea’s score has dropped by 0.73 point over the six-year period [2007 to 2012], while the rest of Asia, including Indonesia, Vietnam and China, has made dramatic gains” (Oh, 6 November 2014).

In contrast to the statements above, numerous articles examined in this thesis provided indications that the situation is getting better, e.g.: “If you look at Korea’s English education in a microscopic manner, then there are problems you would want to point out. Yet over the last several decades, there has been much improvement in teaching methods, teachers’ capabilities and overall” (Song, 30 December 2013). Comparing the abilities of emigrants from Korea to English speaking countries, it appears that in contrast to struggles of the 1st generation, “the 2nd generation of emigrants have no problem with communication”¹⁵ (Kim, 9 September 2022). Another optimistic comparison was offered by a professor who was teaching both Canadian and Korean university students and stated that “Koreans are not especially poor at English compared to other nations”¹⁶ (Kim, 2022).

Usually, what determines the judgement is author’s point of view and the criteria he or she uses. When we look at evaluations of the EF EPI, it is often stated that Koreans were ranked “below Asian neighbours like Malaysia and Singapore and only slightly higher than Japan” (Oh, 6 November 2013), which does not sound very positive.

¹⁵ “이곳 2 세들은 왜 소통에 문제가 없는가.”

¹⁶ “한국인들이 다른민족에 비해 특별히 영어실력이 부족하다고 생각하진 않는다.”

However, when a writer adds a distinction between Asian countries where English is an official language and where it is not, it sounds more optimistic: “Considering that Asia’s 1st Singapore, 2nd Philippines, 3rd Malaysia and 4th Hong Kong are all countries which use or used English as an official language, Koreans’ English abilities are in fact rated as the best in Asia”¹⁷ (Kim, 30 November 2022).

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine the general discourse about Korean’s English abilities. Various arguments, opinions and insights from academic literature were collected and evaluated in the theoretical part, and from Korean newspaper and blog articles in the practical part.

Results indicate that English in Korea remains problematic in the eyes of many, but at the same time there are suggestions of improvement. My analysis of articles revealed that the education system is mentioned most often among the possible causes, followed by the mostly monolingual environment where English is not a part of people’s everyday lives. In addition, there are notable differences between the two languages, cultures, and ways of thinking which can cause problems, exacerbated by Koreans’ shyness, fear of face loss and unwillingness to speak English unless they reach the highest level of mastery. If all these issues persist, it might be difficult to get to the level of admired Finland and other European countries in terms of English-speaking skills. The question is whether contemporary Korea really needs to reach this level, when it has not yet reached the level of multiculturalism that European countries have.

Despite still prevalent negative opinions, positive views are emerging, suggesting that the situation is not hopeless. The South Korean education system is going through reforms and innovations towards more communicative language teaching method and contemporary teachers are well qualified in all aspects of English. Korean society is becoming more and more globalized through business, tourism, entertainment, and international events, which can help citizens realize the need for English communication skills and enhance their motivation to learn English for purposes other

¹⁷ “아시아 1 위 싱가포르, 2 위 필리핀, 3 위 말레이시아, 4 위 홍콩 등이 영어를 공용어로 사용하거나 사용했다는 점을 감안하면 한국인의 영어 실력은 사실상 아시아 최고 수준으로 평가됐다.”

than the test score. If the progress continues in this direction, it would be interesting to observe the future advancement of English in Korea.

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