“Only English Counts”: the impact of English hegemony on South-Korean athletes

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** – While conceived to examine key factors affecting post-retirement career advancement of retired elite athletes in South Korea, the purpose of this paper is to report how English, as a *de facto* global lingua franca, functions as a powerful gatekeeper in the sports administration field.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu’s linguistic capital and Gramsci’s hegemony of language, the present study draws on content analysis of semi-structured individual interviews, as well as focus group interviews, conducted with thirty former South Korean elite athletes.

**Findings** – Based on the data analysis, systematic bias toward athletes was uncovered, privileging English as the single determining factor for employment. Furthermore, the educational implications for adult learners of English as a Foreign or English an Additional Language reveal unrealistic expectations of top–down language policies.

**Originality/value** – Perspectives of athlete participants, an underrepresented group in educational research, within the South Korean globalization context shed critical light on the pervasive aspects of English hegemony and its unexamined dimensions.

**Keywords** South Korea, Athlete career development, English hegemony, Linguistic capital

**Paper type** Case study

Global proximity enabled by the evolution of technology has made English language proficiency one of the most valuable commodities and, even more importantly, social capital for individuals (Crystal, 2012; Kubota, 2011; Pennycook, 1994). Canagarajah (2005) stated that while “non-Western communities were busy working on one project (decolonization), the carpet has been pulled from under their feet by another project (globalization)” (pp. 195–196). The implicit rationale behind a dominant position of English within globalized society is that English is the language of choice in cross-cultural communications, with its ever-increasing presence across many scientific fields (Song, 2011; Van Weijen, 2012). A great deal of literature discusses “the snowballing global dominance of English” (Bacon, 2017, p. 425), with many academic journals devoted to bettering English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) methods from kindergarten to college level, e.g. *TESOL Quarterly, TESOL Journal, Language Learning and Bilingual Research Journal*. There is, however, a dearth of information regarding how particular groups of people, in predominantly non-English speaking countries, are impacted by the far-reaching influence of English. Although this study was initially incepted to broadly explore the essential factors influencing post-retirement career of elite South Korean athletes, the impact of English language proficiency emerged as the determining measure of post-retirement success. Thus, with the concepts of English hegemony and linguistic capital underpinning this study, it attempts to tease out the complexities of the English language proficiency, athletic achievement, and societal forces that influence...
post-retirement success of elite South Korean athletes. In the next section, we trace what has become known as “English fever” (Krashen, 2003; Park, 2009) and connect it to the experiences of elite South Korean athletes.

South Korean globalization context from athletes’ perspectives

The impact of South Korean globalization

In contemporary South Korea (hereafter “Korea”), learning English has been embraced to an unprecedented degree (Bacon and Kim, 2018). Termed “English fever” (Krashen, 2003; Park, 2009) underscores the relentless strive to learn English to satisfy the English proficiency requirement established by hiring practices of such companies, as Samsung and LG, that specifically require their applicants to report their test of English for international communication (TOEIC) or international English language test system scores (Kim, 2008). Primary and secondary schools offer English courses as the mandatory curricula. Korean parents are willing to pay for private English lessons that go beyond the English language curriculum taught in public schools. Students go to cram schools called Hagwon after regular school-hours. There are the myriad Hagwons that specialize in teaching English to different populations: well-to-do young children getting a head-start in life, adolescents wanting to go to secondary school abroad, college graduates needing high scores in graduate record exams (GRE) to get into a graduate school overseas, and adults requiring English skills for business and travel (Park, 2009; Shin, 2014). At the university level, Korean students spend a significant amount of time and money on improving their English proficiency in order to secure high paying jobs. Students enroll in TOEIC or GRE prep courses (Park, 2011). Some higher-education institutions have established policies requiring both instructors and students speak only English in class (Byun et al., 2011). To facilitate such efforts, Korean universities often create partnerships and student exchange programs with universities in English speaking countries, e.g. USA (Choi, 2016). The drive to improve English proficiency is ingrained in the Korean culture as a skill that determines future success (Kim, 2015).

Because “English becomes progressively associated with future employability” (Bacon and Kim, 2018, p. 13), Korean students spend roughly around 100,000 hours studying English upon graduating college/university (Kim, 2008). However, statistics like these can be misleading, as not everyone gets access to the same opportunities to study English. One particular group of students whose studying patterns and academic trajectories do not follow the typical path is student athletes. Educational plans outlined for student athletes in Korea prioritize developing athletic excellence. Student athletes typically spend much of their time perfecting athletic skills and traveling to competitions, rather than learning English and other academic subjects afforded to non-athlete students (Park et al., 2012). Cho (2012) interviewed former Korean judo players who succinctly accounted for the ways, in which academic learning in general took a backseat to training:

In middle and high schools, I could not concentrate on morning classes because I was so tired after early morning training sessions. In university, I did not feel the importance of classes and in addition training was so intense that I could not attend classes. (p. 159)

In order to win medals at the international competitions, the Olympics being the ultimate goal, the Korean government has heavily invested in identifying and preparing elite athletes (Cho, 2009) and allowing them benefits that would ensure their athletic development and success. For example, Korean student athletes are largely exempted from both the national college entrance exam and the required minimum high school graduate point average (Park et al., 2012) and are admitted to universities solely based on the athletic performance. Such privileges reflect Korea’s strive for a strong presence in the international sports, which is a source of national identity and pride. The symbolic sentiment aside, the reality of elite
athletes is that beyond their specific athletic skills, they are largely unprepared for a successful career transition upon retirement (Cho, 2012; Park et al., 2012). International jobs are particularly out of reach because of athletes’ limited academic performance and language proficiency (Park et al., 2012). To remedy the situation, the Korean government developed several specialized post-retirement professional development programs for elite athletes to make up for the education they missed during formal schooling. In 2007 the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism created the Next Generation Sports Talent (NEST) professional development program, which offers English language training for retired athletes. NEST programs provided English courses at the basic and intermediate levels, as well as additional opportunities to take advanced language courses at a university in the USA. NEST aimed to invest in retired athletes’ career transition opportunities to become sports administrators in both domestic and international sports organizations (NEST, 2013). Between 2008 and 2016, a total of 139 former Korean athletes participated in the NEST’s English training program. Upon completion of the NEST program, a small number of athletes were selected for internship in international sports organizations, e.g. National Collegiate Athletic Association or International Military Sports Council (NEST, 2013). In addition, Korea Sports Promotion Foundation (KSPO), established in 1989 to pursue various projects for sports promotion, supports Korea’s elite athletes by providing opportunities for professional development, e.g. studying English abroad. Programs like these aim to close the learning opportunity gap experienced by Korean athletes; thus, examining such programs from multiple theoretical and methodological perspective is of great importance in furthering these athletes’ career beyond their retirement. This study, thus, aimed to investigate what factors influenced post-retirement career of elite South Korean athletes according to the athletes who participated in NEST and KSPO professional development in one American university.

Theoretical framework and literature review

To shed light on the dynamic relationships among English as an international language, social class, power and employment in the field of sports administration, we draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) linguistic capital and Gramsci’s (1971) hegemony theories. These theories are potent for explaining the ways, in which language determines individuals’ economic opportunities and becomes a socio-political instrument of exclusion (Bourdieu, 1984).

Linguistic capital. Reconstructing the concept of capital beyond that of economic wealth, Bourdieu (1984, 1986) posited that the underlying rules of social mobility, power structures and functions of institutions are based on the capital that is symbolic, whether embodied, objectified or institutionalized (Dillon, 2014; Ritzer and Stepinsky, 2014). In Bourdieusian (1986) views, elevated socio-economic status is closely connected to the personal capital in that a lack or absence of such resources results in one’s poor academic achievement, lifetime earnings and demoted social standing.

Bourdieu (1984, 1986) categorized capital into three distinctly different, yet interrelated, forms: first, economic capital, which converts into monetary value, helping people amass wealth; second, social capital, represented by the occupational title or connections, leading individuals to opportunities that allow them to elevate their social status and economic capital; and third, cultural capital, defined as one’s knowledge inherited or attained via education. It refers to an individual’s familiarity with the dominant culture that permits him to behave and communicate in accordance with the norms of that culture. The attainment of educational qualifications becomes impetus for transforming cultural capital into economic capital. Individuals with the right cultural capital can not only obtain a tangible status, but also earn group membership. Of interest to this study, linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1993) is a form of embodied cultural capital. Although Bourdieu did not classify it as a discrete capital,
it refers to an individual's capacity to use a particular language in a particular context characterized by its own implicit rules of which specific properties are known only to the dominant or specific group. Linguistic capital is also highly fluid in nature. That is, as dominant groups change, so does the demand of linguistic capital. For example, in the late nineteenth century French was considered the most dominant language in the world market (Bourdieu, 1977); however, after World War II English increased its dominance in world affairs, economy, and science and became the most globally spoken language (Macedo et al., 2015; Nickerson, 2005). Reasons for English’s dominant status in the world can be further explained by Gramsci’s hegemony theory, which complements the ideas put forth by Bourdieu.

_Linguistic hegemony._ Gramsci’s (1971) description of hegemony is highly influential in contemporary sociology in explaining imperialism, colonialism and globalism in which the supremacy of power of one country or group dominates others with coercion and consent. Language plays an essential role in establishing hegemony. Linguistic hegemony can be explained as the process that devalues minority languages and presents the dominant language as the language of success and prestige (Eriksen, 1992). At the same time, it can subtly serve as a language of oppression for the people who do not speak the symbolically prestigious language (Macedo et al., 2015; Phillipson, 1992; Tietze and Dick, 2013).

In the modern era, English has been denoted a _de facto_ global lingua franca, which is an indication of hegemonic practices that privilege English speakers only (Phillipson, 1992; Tietze and Dick, 2013). English dominates just about every aspect of the international communication (Demont-Heinrich, 2007). For instance, all maritime and aviation communications exclusively take place in English. Many countries colonized by the UK use English as the language of governmental administration. Gramsci posited that language policies are a manifestation of linguistic imperialism. In Singapore, for instance, English became a language of instruction in schools because of the overwhelming demand by parents who considered English to afford a competitive edge for their children’s individual success (Gupta, 1997). Yukio Tsuda (in Alexander et al., 2014) writes of the same phenomenon in neighboring Japan:

In Japan, English-language learning was introduced to elementary education. So many children start learning English even before they master their own language. In business, more and more companies adopt English as the company’s official language, imposing English upon the employees. To survive, most Japanese study English every day. In universities, the use of English is encouraged for lectures. As a result, most Japanese students have difficulty understanding lectures. And in almost all aspects of Japanese life, English dominates. (p. 49)

As such, various communities across the globe perceive that learning English provides access to better life and improved socio-economic status. Korea serves as a vivid example of thriving English hegemony and its pervasive influence on socio-cultural spheres of life through economic competition.

_Methodology_

The present study drew on content analysis of semi-structured individual interviews, as well as focus group interviews, conducted with three cohorts of NEST program and one cohort of KSPO to examine key factors affecting former Korean elite athletes’ post-retirement career advancement. Both individual and focus group interviews were conducted to add methodological rigor. The advantage of conducting focus group interviews is that the group dynamics allow participants to co-construct their responses and researchers to obtain more in-depth insights that might not have surfaced during individual interviews.

_Participants._ Former Korean “elite athletes” who visited the USA to improve English were invited to participate in the study. Elite athletes is a classified term meaning
“athletic specialists” who participate on school, professional and national teams in Korea. The purposeful convenience sampling was used to identify retired athletes who were seeking employment in the field of sports administration. Participants were recruited from three NEST cohorts and one KSPO cohort that participated in the English as a Foreign Language program in a university located in the Southeast region of the USA. Of 21 males and 9 females, all were elite athletes including international and Olympic champions, from a variety of sports, e.g. soccer, track and field, windsurfing. In total, 26 out of 30 participants were in their late 20s or early 30s, with the mean age of 30. Seven participants reported speaking other languages in addition to English, including Chinese, Portuguese and Russian. Additionally, athletes reported their TOEIC general and speaking test scores, which serve as a proxy data for participants’ English proficiency. According to the educational testing service (ETS), 900 in TOEIC is equivalent to 602 in test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL). The most universities in the USA require a minimum of 500 or 550 on the paper-based TOEFL for admission. Table I presents participants’ demographic information. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Data sources. Data for the study were drawn from semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews conducted either in the USA or in Korea with retired elite athletes who participated in the NEST and KSPO programs. Individual interviews lasted approximately 25–45 min. A total of four focus group interviews – one focus group interview from each cohort – was conducted. Focus group interviews were held for 60–90 min. Since two of the authors in the study are bilingual in Korean and English, during both individual interviews and focus groups, participants were informed that they could use either language, as they might feel more comfortable with one language over the other. Most participants chose to respond in Korean; however, a few code-switched between English and Korean. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English by two of the bilingual authors. If there were disagreements with the choice of words when translating, a third Korean/English bilingual doctoral student weighted in to determine the translation on the final transcription. All verbatim data transcribed in Korean and English were sent to the participants for member checking for accuracy of the data. If the participants felt that translations did not capture their intended meanings, two bilingual authors met with them to discuss and finalize the verbatim data.

Data analysis. All transcripts from the focus group and individual interviews were loaded into the QSR NVivo 11.3 software program for analysis. The use of NVivo, which is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, was instrumental for supporting the collaboration of three authors and for ensuring clear coding-audit trails within the data set. The data set was subjected to a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) in order to identify key patterns relevant to the research questions. The study used open and in vivo coding (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), as well as extensive memos, to keep track on what was noticed in the data set. The authors individually read through the transcripts multiple times to manually develop initial categories and textual units and also met regularly over the course of the data analysis to achieve a consensus with respect to the characteristics of the participants, main categories and potential sub-themes.

Initially, numerous potential categories were found based on word frequency, e.g. English domination, English as a global language, global sport politics, educational limitations, athletic achievement, career limitations, test scores, job market and career goals. Through an iterative analysis, these initial codes were collapsed into three final categories: nullification of other languages, the English language proficiency as superior to other job-related skills and getting no break due to intense pressure to score high on TOEIC. When final themes were identified, representative textual extracts were selected from the data set to illustrate and explicate a particular theme. Table II presents the initial codes, final
themes, and their properties, which are the definitions of captured themes, along with representative excerpts from all interviews. In the following section, findings are detailed and connected to the theoretical underpinnings of linguistic capital and hegemony.

**Findings**

The participants shared several factors that they perceived to hinder access to gaining meaningful employment in the field of sports administration after they retirement from their careers in sports. Without using the terms like capital or hegemony *per se*, they, nonetheless, identified English proficiency as the key to their career success. While affordances of knowing English as a *lingua franca* have been widely researched (Cogo and Dewey, 2012;
English domination, English as a global language, global sport politics

Only English counts

English as a dominant language over any other languages

Only English is perceived as valued linguistic capital for career advancement; proficiency in other foreign languages is discounted

Even though I speak other foreign languages like German and Portuguese, I cannot be a strong job candidate unless I speak English fluently. As the Chinese business market has been getting bigger, some Korean college students learn Chinese, but English is still more important for getting jobs, at least in the sports industry. I learned Japanese before I learned English and my Japanese is better than English, but sports organizations won’t hire me because I don’t speak English well.

Educational attainment and athletic achievement discounted, graduate degrees as insufficient, language as capital

English as a gatekeeper

The English proficiency as superior to any other skills

Specialized athletic skills, trainings, and achievement are perceived as sub-servient to the English proficiency

 […] no matter how hard you try, you cannot land on a competitive job if you don’t speak English well. Even though I earned 4 medals in the Paralympics, I couldn’t get an administrative job because of my low English proficiency. I have a Master’s degree, but it doesn’t help with getting a job.

TOEIC, career goals as limited by English test scores, competing with non-athletes, what counts in a job search

Getting no break pressure to score high on TOEIC

Retired elite athletes compete with non-athletes for sports administration jobs; non-athletes get jobs because of advanced English language skills; athletes are disadvantaged by low English language proficiency

In South Korea, the TOEIC test is THE evaluation criteria for job seekers when institutions hire. […] knowledge and skills related to sports are our strengths, but they become our weaknesses. But I suspect that jobs go to non-athletes whose score is a tad higher than retired athletes. If personnel managers in the sports industry do not give us a chance or opportunities to get jobs, we don’t really know where to go or what to do. […] we are passionate and very knowledgeable about our sports, but it is difficult to find jobs because of English.
Henry, 2016), the participants in this study critically spoke of the hegemonic role that English plays as the only language counted when seeking jobs within sports administrations, a desired employment for all participants. They described English proficiency as the single most valued skill that hiring entities in sports administrations expect them to demonstrate, thus, proficiency in English is an absolute necessity in obtaining a post-retirement career. One of the findings revealed that their athletic achievement or knowledge of sports was frequently overlooked in the light of their English proficiency. Below we report three themes related to English as linguistic capital and its hegemonic function.

**Only English counts: nullification of other languages.** The hegemonic role of English in the field of sports in Korea and beyond persisted across the data set. Min-Hwan who competed internationally in diving stated that, although both French and English are the two official languages of the Olympic games (followed by the language of the hosting country), English is the *de facto* language of communication among athletes:

Min-Hwan: In the Olympics, French is the official language. That's why I took up learning French thinking this language is as important as English […] On the contrary, whenever global mega-sports events are held, like Olympics, English is the most dominant language used for communications […] I painfully found out that knowing French didn't help me at all.

Cha-Bin, whose sport is rhythmic gymnastics, further exemplified the unspoken rule of English being the only language of communication during international sporting events:

Cha-Bin: I realized the importance of English in international meetings with referees from countries like China or European countries. Regardless the nationalities, English is definitely the communication tool commonly shared within the international sport communities. Everybody knows the spoken language is English. We just do not do not talk about it.

Based on a high status placed on English in the international competitions and sports administration communities, the participants reported that proficiency in other language is secondary to English. Jin-Young and Eui-Yoon were proficient in Chinese, German and Russian, but their linguistic knowledge of languages other than English was deemed unimportant in reality and did not aid them to find jobs of their choice:

Jin-Young: I speak Chinese well. I participated in the 2008 Beijing Olympics as an interpreter. When looking for a job, still English is more important than any other languages, at least in the sports industry. In South Korea, no matter how hard you try, you cannot land on a competitive job if you don't speak English well.

Eui-Yoon: Being multilingual is considered important in the South Korean job market, but with a catch. I speak German and Portuguese fluently. I spent 3 years in Brazil as a kid and 2 years in Germany as a teenager attending soccer academies. When I finally took up English, I was 25, after I retired. I realized that I couldn't get a job without fluent English proficiency. Even though I speak other foreign languages like German and Portuguese, I cannot be a strong job candidate unless I speak English fluently. If I like it or not, English proficiency is a must.

The participants in this study, although frustrated, accepted *ipso facto* English proficiency as a commodity they need to secure employment and did not challenge the status of quo of English. The domination of English over other languages appears institutionalized within sports communities. The emphasis put on English proficiency echoes the sentiment that, because of its power, prestige, and pervasiveness across the globe, English is promoted and rationalized as “natural, neutral and beneficial” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 9). Such a stance illustrates Gramsci’s linguistic hegemony of coercion and consent in full action. These participants appeared to willingly sub-ordinate themselves to the undue influence of English even without apparent coercion within international organizations or among athletes themselves. The verbatim from the participants exemplifies ways in
which English gained its legitimacy as a global language. No matter how implicit, privileging English denigrates the status of all other languages and subjugates non-English languages.

*English as a gatekeeper: English proficiency as superior to other job-related skills.* In addition to describing the dominance of English, the participants recounted how their extraordinary achievements in athletics were considered insignificant during job searches. Throughout all interviews, the participants highlighted that athletic achievement is recognized only if it is paired with English proficiency. Bong-Joon (judo) described his personal struggles in finding an administrative job as follows:

Bong-Joon: I won two international championships in Judo. Compared to a superior athletic career that I have, my life after retirement has been extremely difficult. I had only temporary coaching positions at the collegial level. That’s it! In South Korea, if athletes speak English fluently, they can have far greater career opportunities and better positions regardless of their athletic career. We do not have to show a brilliant athletic resume. Job opportunities are incredibly limited, if not none, without fluent English proficiency.

Without fluent English, opportunities for employment are limited since employers value English proficiency over any other qualifications. Thus, obtaining a well-paid permanent job in sports administrations seems out of reach for most of the retired elite athletes. During the focus group interviews, Dong-Mi and Eun-Ji discussed how their future careers are uncertain because of their limited English proficiency. These retired athletes with outstanding sport careers must learn English to gain access to new careers in sports management:

Dong-Mi: I was a national level athlete for 18 years [...] with extraordinary athletic careers, we are guaranteed no job after retirement.

Eun-Ji: I agree. I was a professional athlete for 13 years and a national athlete for 5 years. I’ve been studying English ever since I retired. I am over 30, but I am not really sure about my future because of my English. I picked up English because my acquaintances advised me that. If I become fluent in English, I might be able to get an administrative position in a sports organization.

Athletic achievements and other language proficiencies are not the only qualities deemed irrelevant when comparing with the English proficiency. Attaining advanced educational degrees does not guarantee employment post-retirement either. Eui-Yoon described how English proficiency as the only qualification criteria undermines the advanced degrees that athletes worked hard to obtain, “Even if you are holding an advanced degree, employers will not see its value if you don’t speak English fluently.”

*Getting no break: pressure to score high on TOEIC.* In addition to the insufficiently justified use of English as the sole criteria for hiring practices by sports admirations in Korea, the interviews from the participants revealed that the English performance standards set for the jobs in the sports fields are unreasonably high for the athletes who stated that they usually start studying English after retirement. Jin-Chul clarified that a TOEIC score of 900 or above (the highest score is 990) is the sine qua non to be competitive in the job market:

Jin-Chul: In South Korea, the TOEIC test is THE evaluation criteria for job seekers when institutions hire [...] Your TOEIC scores must be above 900, almost a perfect score (990). If not, forget about it.

Such high school on TOEIC seems to be an unreasonable requirement by employers looking for sports administration employees. Furthermore, the retired athletes are also in competition with non-athletes for the same sports administration jobs. Non-athlete candidates often possess superior TOEIC scores, but they lack expert knowledge in specialized sports. Having focused all of their time and efforts on improving their athletic
competitiveness during the course of their sports careers, retired athletes must immediately switch gears to quickly acquire English and score enormously high:

Kyung-Min: In my opinion, we have the talents that non-athletes do not have. I mean, knowledge and skills related to sports are our strengths, but they become our weaknesses, as you can see. If hiring folks in the sports industry do not give us a chance, we don’t really know where to go. A small number of people do get high scores on TOEIC, which is a true accomplishment for us who did not study English intensively as non-athletes do. But I suspect that jobs go to non-athletes whose score is a tad higher than retired athletes’.

Despite athletes possessing a variety of capital including exemplary athletic achievement and knowledge of several languages, the capital that they worked hard to achieve does not become competitive leverage if social institutions privilege English as a lingua franca. We maintain that it is unrealistic to demand athletes who had no equitable access to intensive English training due to practices and competitions and subject them to the same English standards set for non-athletes who spend more time on learning English and scoring high on TOEIC without sports-related knowledge. The system is set up in ways in which these athletes are prevented from capitalizing on years of hard work.

Discussion

Consistent with the purpose of this study that aimed to explore factors affecting former Korean athletes’ post-retirement career development, the findings demonstrated that English proficiency appears to have hegemonic influence on the job prospects of these retired athletes. At the international sports organization level, linguistic homogenization is touted as bringing global unity and understanding. However, our findings revealed the dominance of English puts elite athletes at a great disadvantage when they pursue employment within the sports administration positions. Regardless of their athletic accomplishments and multilingual proficiency, the English hegemony is a factor that denied many capable individuals access to aspired employment and financial security. Although there are no simple solutions to the problematized situation, we suggest that a conversation about the notions of linguistic capital is long overdue.

Globally speaking, English is regarded as the key to professional success for non-native speakers of English (Jenkins, 2007). Korea invests a great deal of energy and resources in English education: English is offered as part of the regular curriculum from the third grade up. A number of children from high socio-economic households start to learn English from kindergarten (Park, 2009). Businesses unofficially adopt English as an official language and universities mandate English to be used as the language of lectures. Yukio Tsuda argues that the English hegemony is “threatening the linguistic diversity in the world” and creates “linguistic and communicative discrimination” (cited in Alexander et al., 2014, p. 49). Striving to gain linguistic capital and international athletic competitiveness might be important or even necessary to Korea’s national identity in the global communities, yet the unanticipated negative impact of English dominance needs to be closely examined before formulating national policies.

Too often, policies are driven and set by the socio-economic, socio-political forces, not necessarily by research or common sense. For instance, investing in the nation’s athletes may be a valid undertaking; however, expecting adult athletes to master a foreign language within six months is unsound and unrealistic at best. Second language acquisition is a long-term undertaking. It can take up to 10 years for non-native speakers to become proficient in using discipline-specific English in such professional arenas, as international sports administration (Cummins, 2008). Authentic practices in meaningful linguistic environments in a prolonged manner is the essential key to achieving a high-level second language acquisition required for the preferential jobs. Additionally, by highlighting one skill only,
which is English proficiency in the case of the participants, many other fundamental qualifications can be entirely disregarded. Emphasizing the importance of English proficiency excludes other vital job qualifications, such as expert knowledge of sports. When identical requirements and expectations are imposed on all job candidates, irrespective of their professional backgrounds, the selection process privileges the ones who are equipped with the right capital, i.e. the possession of English proficiency (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This suggests that athletes are unfairly asked to do a great deal more than other job seekers who are vying for the same position.

The study findings show that the impact of language goes beyond a common form of communication injustice that Tsuda discussed. The invisible hegemonic force appears to dictate what counts as valuable capital, determining the employment and, ultimately, the quality of life and lifetime earnings for the retired athletes in Korea. The social issue of exclusion, based on the lack of a privileged capital, warrants further scrutiny. At the macro societal level, the well-being of the individual should be an important goal, not a byproduct.

Further, this study warrants a line of research that would address the intersections of linguistic, athletic, and other professional skills within various contexts. Scholars concerned with the issues of equity can qualitatively and quantitatively analyze the impact and the pervasiveness of English hegemony not only from the perspective of former athletes, but also from the perspective of government officials and former athletes who succeeded in securing a sport administration employment. Policy analyses, especially those conducted from historical perspective, can contribute to understanding of how national policies set in motion processes and events that directly impact Korean athletes and their post-retirement career options.

Limitations
Limitations of this study include a relatively small number of interviews and focus groups, as well as a limited number of participants drawn from a larger pool through purposeful convenience sampling. Due to this limited access to retired athlete participants and the absence of voices of policy-makers and sports administrators, the study findings cannot be generalized or broadly applied to other contexts. Despite these limitations, the perspective of the participating retired athletes offers significant insight into the intersections of language, athleticism and employment.

Conclusion
Gramsci's (1985) words ring true: “Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore” (p. 183). Even if the broad influence of linguistic hegemony and capital is indisputable, or perhaps some even might say unavoidable, critically investigating social phenomena accepted as inevitable is imperative to identify winners and losers. In this case, Korean retired elite athletes appear to be on the losing end. Governments must exercise a balancing act between pursuing socio-politically and -economically ambitious goals for their people and unintentionally creating systemic biases that exclude the stakeholders from benefiting from their policies.

To remedy the situation that this study unmasked, systematic changes in hiring practices are critical to ensure that retired elite athletes have a fair chance at successfully obtaining administrative jobs. To that end, we argue for a form of affirmative action that values retired athletes’ sports expertise over English proficiency and provides a level playing field. The suggested action plans are as follows: the governing body of sports hires retired athletes based on their athletic performance, professional career and knowledge of needed sport rules and regulations along with the minimum intermediate English proficiency. Once a selection is made among retired athletes, they should be paired up with
an assistant who can provide linguistic support, i.e. interpretation or proofreading. They should also be offered continuing professional development that allows them to improve their English. By doing so, retired athletes can conduct official meetings and write formal documents with assistance from personnel who can fill in the linguistic gaps. This would be a perfect example of applying Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, which recognizes learners’ potential ability to solve problems with a help of more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). When learners are provided with the appropriate scaffolding, or assistance – in this case, retired athletes – they can execute increasingly more complex linguistic tasks and eventually perform their jobs independently. Reversing hegemony or even resisting hegemony is a just cause that requires a long-term commitment by the government and hiring organizations. As such, we reason that critical conversations pertaining language, hegemony, and employment must take place among educators, sports administrators, and policy-makers in order to open up change-making, inclusive spaces to bring fairness to disenfranchised groups of people, namely, retired Korean elite athletes.

References


Further reading


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