The Korean Need for L2 Digital Literacy in English

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I. Introduction

While digital resources play an increasing role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Korean learners of English are typically provided with little intentional instruction in Second Language (L2) Digital Literacy. Institutional recognition of the significance of L2 digital literacy is limited.

But three important factors impact contemporary SLA, though their import is not well recognized. Firstly, the predominant use of English by non-native speakers is increasingly in communication with other non-native speakers, and not with native speakers. Secondly, the emergence of English as a global language has meant that desired online resources and discourse are mainly in English. Thirdly, a critical threshold is fast approaching whereby the majority of interpersonal communications will have become computer-mediated, rather than face-to-face.

These three factors indicate that the predominant use of English by non-native speakers will be firstly in navigating English language digital resources, in locating, editing, and contributing to online content in English; and secondly in computer-mediated communication with other non-native speakers of English. Both of these envisaged predominant uses of English by non-native speakers are computer-mediated. This has profound implications for SLA, and specifically for Korean learners of English: in EFL we should nurture and develop L2 Digital Literacy in English.

II. Communication in L2 English will mainly be between non-native speakers

EFL/ESL in Korea tends to be predicated on the assumption that students are being groomed for conversation with native English speakers, who are ideally North American, young, white and successful. These stereotypes contrast with what is likely to be the predominant reality of the use of L2 English by Korean (and East Asian) speakers of English, who frequently complain about the absence of native speakers with whom to practice conversation. Graddol argues that the predominant use of conversational English by L2 speakers is instead likely to be with other non-native speakers of English (2000). At the recent ICCIT2009 conference in Seoul more than 600 participants from over 40 different countries met and presented papers on various aspects of Convergence IT (Meurant 2009d). Delegates from Korea and from other mainly non-native English speaking countries - Ethiopia, Spain, Brazil, Italy, Indonesia, China, Japan, Iran etc. - used English freely as a lingua franca. Faced with an imperative for communicative competence, accent or dialect becomes irrelevant.

While the importance of English as a Global Language will likely increase, the relevance of American English as a preferred dialect will likely decline, as accent become less important, and as American influence wanes with a growing empowerment of other ethnicities amid a global recognition that an American way of life that is founded on unquestionable materialism, competition and capitalism no longer represents an appropriate exemplar in a global civilization that is confronted with the catastrophic side-effects of this world-view: global pollution, severe climate change, an economy in recession, and as Ulansey illustrates, the mass extinction of species (2010). These issues are compounding with other contemporary problems that include the decline of education, the politicization of integrity, and the loss of authenticity.

III. The rise of English as a Global Language and Western development of the Internet means that the predominance of desired online resources are in English

Graddol observes that non-English speaking cultures are increasingly developing Internet resources in their own languages (2006), so the rise of the

Internet partly compensates for the rise of English as a global language. Crystal argues that the increasing linguistic diversity of the Internet assists minority languages and language speakers; the accessibility of the Internet aids documentation in and of minority languages and enables physically separated speakers to maintain virtual contact (2005), while embracing cool technologies in a minority language may help persuade the youth of an endangered language community that their language remains of relevance. Rapid technological development also means that translation engines have become widely accessible, as witnessed in the student popularity of multi-lingual electronic dictionaries. Smart phone applications allow access to translation and L2 guides; Dragon Dictation app converts speech to text, which can then be translated; iPhone OS 4.0 multitasking lets location services give spoken directions from turn-by-turn GPS apps.

But the predominance of desired Internet resources and computer-mediated communication remains in English, and is likely to be so in future. For example, as a resident of Seoul, I access subway information including timetables via the iPhone app *Seoul Metro* in English. In Wikipedia, as of 3rd April, in English (2010) there were 3,241,190 articles, 19,904,611 pages, and 377,755,547 page edits since it was set up; by comparison in Hangeul (위키백과 2010) there were 131,658 articles, 378,420 pages and 5,227,589 page edits, relative frequencies of 24.6:1, 52.6:1, and 72.3:1. Most international conferences in Korea are in monolingual English; their proceedings are published in English, with conference papers indexed in English-language global indices, and published electronically by publishers such as IEEE and Springer-Verlag. These may be located through search engines such as Google Scholar, then purchased and downloaded as digital documents or accessed by subscription in electronic libraries. Globalization strengthens this trend, as individuals increasingly challenge the previously unquestionable nature of their local enculturation, which they realize to be accidental and not in the nature of things, and seek to interact with other cultures, and to partake in global culture as global citizens. Nationality is no longer what one is, but something to be worn lightly.

IV. We are fast approaching a critical threshold where interpersonal communications become mainly computer-mediated and not face-to-face

But the most important of these three factors is the radical shift from face-to-face contact and communication as being the norm to that of computer-mediated communication. This change, which informs Glister's seminal recognition of the critical importance of digital literacy (1997), is profoundly revolutionizing language, the ways in which it is used, and what it is used for. It is shocking to realize just how ubiquitous computer-mediated language use is becoming, a trend seen in surveys of the student use of online resources (Meurant 2007b, 2007d). Consider the amount of time that is spent and volume of information that is communicated and attended to via television, videos, movies, the Internet, email, instant messaging, bulletin boards, blogs, wikis, computer and video games, telecommunications such as cell phones, texting, VOIP, landlines, videoconferencing, smart phone apps, social networking sites etc. Extend that to include everyday activities of traffic control systems, power gas and telecommunication billing, the banking system, online and telephone banking, ATMs, T-money, subway fare information and control systems, health systems etc. The pervasiveness of computer-mediated use of language is staggering, and increasing at an exponential rate.

Arguably, as computer-mediated communication becomes more pervasive and more preferred, face-to-face communication will become less desirable and less popular as a means of interaction. Globalization, the reorientation from the extended family to the nuclear, and from the nuclear family to the individual, together with mass transportation systems and extreme urbanization means that for many students, contacts with their families are increasingly by cell phone. Even if still living at home, they spend considerable time commuting and enjoy little free time at home for socializing with family.

This extensive use of computer-mediated communication is inevitably changing language. The vocabulary is rapidly extending and transforming to accommodate new realities, from surfing the web to blogging to online etiquette to acronyms (HT, IMHO, FYI, LOL) to mash-ups. Crystal recognizes the potential for a new academic study of Internet Linguistics that would include, at the very least, a comparative study of the style of different formats and the development of language change within these new

media (2005). The advent of new language styles and forms engendered by the Internet, and related communication developments such as SMS messaging, should be greeted with delight; this is the greatest opportunity for the development of the English language since the advent of the printing press. He argues that resources for the expression of informality in writing have hugely increased, something not seen in English since the Middle Ages, and linguists should be exulting in the ability the Internet provides to explore the power of the written in a creative way (interviewed and cited in Philipkoski 2005).

V. Implications of these three factors for the use of L2 English

Davis first recognized that the uniqueness of this new digital literacy requires special skills, which should be systematically addressed in L2 instruction (2000), and that L2 digital literacy should be taught just as L2 analog literacy has been. Meanwhile, at least in native speaker education of English in Korea, one would be forgiven for thinking that the digital revolution had not even taken place. At a private mid-level Seoul university, on complaining of the provision of just two computers to service 20 staff, I was informed by the then Director of the department, that the university preferred traditional means of study. This may help explain the dearth of their publications; of these twenty native teachers, I was the only one publishing; the only one using online learning management systems (LMS), which I review elsewhere (2009b); and the only one to be offering online placement tests (which I discuss elsewhere in 2009a), tasks, quizzes and exams, an undertaking made challenging by the limited computer labs available to students, with aging computers lacking sound cards. Recent efforts to influence textbook selection in favor of web-oriented material found little appreciation there, but were deemed acceptable for presentation in Japan (2010b). Wherefore Web 2.0+ thinking, which discards outmoded centralized power for enlightened mutual enabling support?

We need to consider just what language is used for, and how that is changing. Traditionally, language has been used primarily for interpersonal communication. But the stored knowledge of humanity has vastly expanded and is now becoming readily accessible to all. Language is shifting from the primary means of immediate communication between humans, whether one-to-one or one-to-several, to the primary means of individuals enjoying distance communication with the very many, and individual distance access to, interaction with, and contribution to the stored collective knowledge, meaning and wisdom of all. This reorientation will become more concentrated with the development of artificial intelligence; human-to-human interaction may become too limiting and boring to bother with for autonomous individuals, who will instead favor human-machine interaction, spawning innumerable private universes of intelligence that recognize no imperative to interact with one another.

VI. Implications of mainly computer-mediated L2 English for EFL/ESL

These trends and tendencies have implications for EFL/ESL. Firstly, students are prepared for hypothetical conversation with native North American native speakers, when in reality EFL students will mainly use their L2 English to communicate with other non-native speakers. The illusion is perpetuated that these students are somehow attaining enculturation into North American culture, when most will never settle in or even visit that culture. Instead, the orientation should be to that of a loosely defined global culture and civilization, to enable communication with other mainly non-native English speakers of a diverse range of ethnicities, whom students will inevitably encounter socially and professionally. A diversity of English accents and dialects should therefore be welcomed. Secondly, students should be educated in the use of L2 English to access digital resources and to contribute to them, a policy that has increasingly informed my educational philosophy and practice (Meurant 2007a, 2007c, 2007e). Thirdly, L2 digital literacy should be recognized as a factor of major importance in EFL/ESL, to where it is given as much importance as conversational English, a thesis I expand upon elsewhere (2009c, 2009d), where I also suggest specific ways in which L2 digital literacy can be encouraged (2010a). Comprehensive computer-mediated language learning should be implemented in the L2 classroom, and administrative resources should be diverted to teaching needs.

VII. Implications of mainly computer-mediated L2 English for EFL/ESL in Korea

Firstly, what appears as a contemporary Korean monocultural preoccupation with North American lifestyles and accents will hopefully mature into an

acceptance of a more diverse range of English accents, native and non-native, and an increasing willingness to embrace ethnic diversity. Secondly, Korea has an enviable status as the most wired nation on the planet with the fastest Internet connections in the world (Sutter 2010); this should be capitalized on by vastly increasing the opportunities for computer-mediated second language learning, particularly for native teacher English classes. The provision of computing facilities needs to be revisualized, recognizing that multimedia capability is necessary, the web is now mobile, and the Internet needs to be put into the hands of all students and teachers. Current computer labs favor fixed desktop installations that inhibit pair, small group and whole class interaction, while encouraging cheating. Obsolete labs should be replaced with systems that provide all students with adequate computing facilities, anywhere, anytime. A feasible solution would include upgraded and comprehensive campus wifi networks, with a teacher's computer console in <u>every</u> classroom with high-speed Internet access and OHP. Most importantly, <u>each and every</u> student should be provided on enrollment with a wifi/3G enabled Apple iPad or similar tablet computing device, which also functions as an e-book reader, onto which would be downloaded frequently updatable e-texts for L2 English learning (as well as for other subjects), to be utilized within an integrated LMS - which as I elsewhere recommend forces L2 English use (2009b). Students would bring these tablets to class, but in principle any part of the campus could then serve as a networked classroom. On graduation, individual student debts incurred for tablet computer and e-texts would be written off. A way to finance the provision of suitable computing facilities that acts in students' real interests, as I discuss elsewhere (2010c), is to more effectively deploy existing resources to enhance the educational value of L2 pedagogy in Korea; and perhaps it is time to curtail wasteful administrative and MT expenses. Thirdly, L2 English distance communication should be encouraged by facilitating international class-to-class Skype video-conferencing, as I have conducted with Obari (2009) in Japan. Fourthly, the lack of transparency and accountability I have noted among a few second language administrators might be redressed with their belated education in Web 2.0+ philosophy, so that the lip service paid to student interests becomes authentic. Finally, I trust that the suggestions made above may help address Korea's critical need for L2 Digital Literacy in English.

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