In pursuit of linguistic gold: mothering in a globalised world

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A follow-up of Jin-Kyu Park’s contribution in ET97 on ‘English Fever’ in South Korea, by examining one of the consequences in Singapore – the destination for thousands of ‘study mothers’ who migrate from South Korea and China to help their young children acquire ‘linguistic capital’ by learning English.

GOLD in any form has always been desired – linguistic, social, physical, economic, etc. The language with the highest monetised value today may be said to be English since it is not only intimately linked to modernity, technology, economic and scientific know-how but also manifested in the service, advertising and entertainment industries. It may be regarded as a form of ‘capital’ which according to Bourdieu (2001) takes 3 major forms: economic capital such as money and property; cultural such as educational qualifications; and social which is made up of social obligations or ‘connections’, all of them convertible into financial capital at opportune moments. We will regard ‘linguistic gold’ as synonymous to ‘linguistic capital’ since both possess economic value and are means by which people (and nations) may achieve varied goals relating to research, finance, manufacturing, and public relations. Qualitatively, migrants today are outnumbered by transmigrants, that is, sojourners who frequently cross national boundaries to work and build their lives in several places beyond that of the country of origin. They claim multiple political and religious identities, just as they claim national and transnational identities. They work, play, and express their political interests in several contexts rather than in a single nation-state (Yamanka, 2005).

The feminisation of migration seen today in its women working predominantly as maids, nurses, entertainers and lately accountants, doctors and administrators adds to the qualitative difference. The Philippines, for example, is a country where given the lack of opportunities at home, the notion of the ideal wife/mother is...
synonymous with that of a good manager and provider through the provision of an income to supplement her husband's earnings (Huang and Yeoh, 2008). Of particular interest in this study are transnational ‘study mothers’ who accompany their children while they are studying in a foreign country and whose primary aim is the pursuit of linguistic gold. Once their linguistic goals are attained, these mothers and their young wards may return to their country of origin or journey onwards to other parts of the globalised world exchanging the gold in their pockets for other kinds of value.

Only a handful of studies have examined linguistic migration. Huang and Yeoh et al (2005:311) describes the recent existence of ‘sacrificial mothers’. Other studies e.g. Collins (2008) focus on marketing strategies and the profit-driven global education industry. There have been studies on ‘astronaut husbands’ (professional parents who sought to relocate their families in ‘safe havens’ such as Canada and the United States) and ‘satellite kids’ (children who remain in the host country even when their parents have returned to country of origin) as a means of attaining economic and social capital for the family by Chee (2003), Waters (2005), and Matthews and Sidhu (2005) but these studies centre on the processes of migration. Hence, a vacuum exists with regard to the issues of ‘linguistic capital’, ‘linguistic mothering’ and ‘linguistic migration’ and this study attempts to address this silence.

Mothering and gold: research subjects

This paper focuses on the existence of around 7000 Chinese (PRC) and 5000 Korean study mothers in 2007 in the Republic of Singapore (Toh, 2008). Known in their respective home countries as ‘wild goose mothers’ (kirogi omma) and ‘study mothers’ (pei du mama), these mothers leave their husbands behind while they accompany their children, some as young as 7 years, to a foreign country in the pursuit of linguistic gold. ‘We have good science and maths at home but we need the English to make it work.’

It aims to uncover the conditions existing prior to such linguistic migration in the sense that these conditions constituted a problem that migration was meant to solve. What is the nature of the linguistic migration – who are the players? How and to what extent is the English language involved in this? What are the sociolinguistic circumstances behind the buying and selling of linguistic capital?

The answers to these questions are summarised from four focused interviews conducted with four groups of mothers – 8 Korean and 7 Chinese mothers, all tertiary educated, and who have resided in Singapore for an average of 4½ years – on four different occasions with the aim of getting them to discuss and reflect on their own migratory and childrearing experiences. Each encounter took place after a ‘social’ which comprised a dinner followed by the discussion. This methodology ‘among friends’ enabled participants to be relaxed in each others’ company, comfortable to discuss issues with myself in an atmosphere that at times became personal, reflective and sometimes emotional/excitable.

It should be noted that the interviews were initially difficult to arrange as mothers were reticent and hesitant – and for good reasons. Where the Koreans were concerned, they had been suffering from a negative press in Korea (Tokita, 2006). Concerned with the significant exodus of such mothers, the South Korean government had condemned the migrations as unnecessary and shortsighted (Lee, 2008). Hence, their continued presence in Singapore would appear to announce the ‘lack of ‘patriotism’ on the part of the mothers. In addition, the Chinese mothers were also suffering from a bad press, not so much in China but in Singapore. The bad press was a result of some of their members’ involvement in the sex and massage trade with its accompanying low status and gangland activities. Naturally, both groups guarded their ‘privacy’ and were highly sensitive to public opinion: ‘…I sincerely do not want to be an issue. This is a private matter.’

Their stories, which were told in Korean and Mandarin respectively, were tape recorded, translated, and subsequently transcribed using thematic and narrative analysis.

Migrating for gold

The lure of linguistic gold is closely related to the spread of globalisation which has brought in its wake a general destabilisation affecting all societies, vast population mobility, the emergence of multi-cultural societies in many places, and an exponential increase in human interactions. In Korea, two thirds of the top 700 companies in Korea have branches or
The seekers of linguistic gold are usually those who cannot find them at home. The speed of the reform has led to a huge shortage in qualified English teachers. Indeed, English teaching capabilities are stretched to breaking point in colleges and universities where enrolments are increasing. This situation is not helped by the fact that both China and Korea are ‘expanding circle/EFL nations’ (Kachru, 2005) and few learners have real-life contexts where they can communicate with speakers from outside the PRC. Such a situation has led to the emergence of private businesses outside regular schools and universities particularly in big cities. Nunan (2008:110) reports that there may be approximately 600,000 new enrolments in private English conversation schools every four to six months.

Moreover, the growth of a new middle class with higher disposable income and technical expertise as a result of industrialisation in Korea from the 1960’s and in China from the 1980’s has led to its reification as a marker of middle-class identity (Bolton, 2008). Bearing in mind that half of China’s population are below the age of 25 and that Peking university alone has received more than a million applications in recent years for its limited undergraduate courses (Canton, 2006:307), structural mechanisms are in place for further rises in the numbers of study mothers. The middle class are not afraid to seek temporary or permanent migration as a solution to the structural and cultural imbalances between their expectations of upward mobility and their lack of means to realise them in their own country. A favourite strategy is to give their children an edge by helping them become fluent in English while sparing them and themselves the stress of pressure-cooking in their own countries’ education system.

**Study strategies**

Of the 15 mothers, 13 revealed satisfaction with their children’s progress in English, while 2 expressed concern that their child was experiencing ‘emotional’ and ‘academic’ difficulties with schoolwork. But they were not ready to give up or return home: ‘It would be worse in Korea (or China).’ Or ‘It will be a disgrace to give up after all your efforts.’ In the first place, they had migrated because they were convinced that it would be impossible for their children to compete in their own countries. Hence,
it was a case where returning home was of greater difficulty than going forward. Instead, they were considering further ‘mobile’ remedies, such as moving to another school or another country (Malaysia or Philippines where there were schools using English as a medium of instruction) in the hope that the changed environment might provide a solution.

But such ‘problems’ fortunately belonged only to a minority for my mothers were generally pleased with their children’s progress academically and linguistically. Asked to share the ‘study strategies’ which could have led to such favourable results, the following are typical responses:

My son spent his first month in Singapore when he was 15 memorising all the vocabulary. He has a notebook and everywhere he went, he would take down notes. He also joined all kinds of activities and clubs so that he would be forced to learn and use English. (Her son eventually scored an A2 in the GCE ‘O’ Level Examination within 2 years.)

We are swim-or-sink circumstances myself and my child so together, this is our realisation always...

We don’t have families here, so we can give our total commitment.

Studying is no burden because back home we already study from 7 am to 7 pm.

Their children and themselves lived seemingly ‘harmonious’ and ordered lives, organised around the strong focus of study and social mobility:

They are in school from 8 am to 3 pm. When they come back they usually does homework until 10 pm. English and Maths tuition take place from 4 pm to 6 pm…

The responses of our sample correlate with Singapore newspaper reports that ‘while foreign students make up ‘zero to 20 per cent of educational institutions, they are disproportionately visible in their achievements in and out of the classroom, for example, in 2004, 6 out of the top 17 Primary School Leaving Examination candidates were born in China’ (Soh, 2004:23). At the upper end, although foreign students comprised less than 10% of the course enrolment, 30% of the Honours class was foreigners (Quek, 2007). This is something worth further investigation in view of the fact that current research views the ‘potential’ switch in expanding circles from EFL to one where English is a medium of instruction as a ‘costly and dangerous remedy that ignores the research of educational linguistics and the clear evidence that students require 6 to 7 years to reach a level of proficiency in a new language that will make teaching and learning efficient’ (Spolsky, 2008:98). Hence, the ‘so-called wild geese’ phenomenon is ‘ill-advised popular demand’ and one that will lead to detrimental academic and emotional performance overall (ibid.).

Nevertheless, most of my discussants were generally thankful for the ‘rewards’ they found in linguistic migration. They felt that life was ‘purposeful’ – which they attributed to the ‘sacrifices’ which they had made for their children’s education. Although admitting that life was partly ‘worrisome’ and ‘tiring’, they felt ‘charged’ and ‘motivated’ compared to past feelings of ‘helplessness’ and ‘desperation’ in their home countries. They admitted to becoming more ‘cosmopolitan’. The sense of ‘oppression’ which they had experienced in the first year in Singapore gradually ‘transformed’ as they found new friends and as their children began to speak English with ease after the second year. They were also unexpectedly pleased with the ‘unexpected bonus’ of finding a ‘critical mass’ of similar people like themselves with whom they could identify in Singapore.

However, it was evident from the conversations that these women paid a heavy price – such as loneliness and insecurity – in their quest for linguistic capital. This loneliness can be attributed to separation from their families as well as inadequate communication skills in English. A lot of the mothers come from places where people do not normally speak English. For example, none of the Korean mothers I spoke with appeared to know more than 100 words of English even though half of them had stayed in Singapore for over two years. They confessed that they spoke completely in either Korean or Chinese with their children at home and that the ‘immersion’ they sought was more of benefit to their children rather than themselves.

Separated spouses are often very lonely, relying mainly on ‘virtual intimacies’ (Wilding, 2006) through electronic media such as the telephone, email and Skype as means of solace and comfort. Some mothers alluded to the prevalence of extra-marital affairs by both spouses in their respective places of abode. When these become public, marriage ties weaken and separation or divorce are the
results. Hence, it is ironical that while linguistic migration was seen initially as a means of strengthening the family through the accumulation of linguistic capital, it has not infrequently led to their disintegration. Some mothers confess to bouts of crying:

I break my heart if I hear some bad news from home as I am far away to help them.

My child cries when he sees fathers of his classmates bringing them to eat and shop.

The gold in non-native Englishes

While most linguistic migrants journey to the UK and the US, others head for ‘outer circles countries’ (Kachru, 2005) such as Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia and India (cf. Mena, 2008). Such countries are becoming attractive overseas destinations not only because they are geographically nearer and more culturally similar, but also because they are more ‘cost-effective’ in terms of lower fees and relatively high standards of English. One such ‘seller’, Singapore, announced in 2002 its intention to attract 150,000 foreign students by 2012, and that like the City of Boston, it would be a ‘Mecca for Education’ (Ko, 2004). This statistical objective is set to challenge the vast continent of Australia which currently attracts about the same number of overseas students (Duhamel, 2004).

To engage in the lucrative linguistic trade, the Singapore government has denounced its affinity with Singlish, the basilectal form of Singapore English with its distinctive grammar and lexis. Hence, in 1999 then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (Goh, 1999) warned Singaporeans: ‘We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish… Poor English reflects badly on us and makes us seem less intelligent.’ Colonel Wong, Chair of the Speak Good English Campaign (SGEM), in 2000 reiterated: ‘It is important that while we develop a brand of English which is uniquely identifiable with Singapore, it should not be a Singlish type’ (Straits Times, 31 March, 2000), a perception which ties in neatly with the aspirations of our mothers: ‘We understand the value of Singlish in Singapore but it is certainly not what we want.’

The primary goal of SGEM is to persuade Singaporeans to switch to the acrolectal variety of English. Hence, the currently ongoing campaign sees the organisation of hundreds of activities and programmes on good English at schools, libraries and community clubs. At the same time, the mass media has discreetly cut down on its use of Singlish, especially in popular television sitcoms. Singapore is thus poised to ‘export’ its own variety of Standard Singapore English, in keeping with the practice of ELT-exporting nations such as the Canada, UK and the US.

Korean mothers are more ‘brand conscious’ and three of my mothers have sent their children to the pricier international schools, rather than the government ones which the Singaporeans go to, ostensibly because: ‘I want my child to have good pronunciation.’ However, the other 6 Korean and 7 Chinese mothers with children in government schools say that while native-speakers are admittedly their preferred choice, they do not mind government schools as long as classroom talk is not in Singlish. ‘As long as my child can be understood by professors in the US,’ there is ‘no need to speak like an American’. Generally, it is clear that mothers desire a fluency and clarity which will enable their offspring to participate on equal footing in the international arena, which they noticed is ‘what Singaporeans can do well despite their agility in Singlish’. The mothers have also done their calculations. While being ‘brand conscious’, they are also ‘cost conscious’. Weighing the ‘pros and cons’ have seen most children attending Singapore government schools. The idea behind the mastery of English is after all not an intrinsic interest in the language or its speakers, but the desire to access scientific and technological information, international organisation, global economic trade and higher education (cf. McKay and Bokhorst, 2008).

Pedagogical preferences

The seekers of linguistic gold are looking for a pedagogy that is challenging and achievement oriented: ‘I choose Singapore and not Australia because there is more homework here so more similar’ (Korean Gp 1).’

Singapore schools are known to be academically vigorous. Indeed, migration agents make it known in their brochures that Singapore students have consistently won prizes in Science and Mathematics in the international Olympiads and that they consistently rank high in Mathematics and Science competitions, reading literacy skills and other international measures of performance (Lee, 2008).
The high standards are maintained in part by the Confucian state ideology which places family and examinations, the competitive ranking of schools and the streaming of children at an early age as important measures of excellence. Singapore students are banded first at the end of their fourth year and again at the end of Primary 6 when they sit for the nation-wide PSLE. In secondary schools, the more able pupils are placed in four-year ‘special’ or ‘express’ courses while the remaining pupils are put into four or five-year ‘normal’ academic course. The Confucian emphasis on rigour also adds to its appeal for our mothers despite its ‘non-native’ status.

Implications

The presence of study mothers in many parts of the world and their single-minded desire for linguistic capital may be said to represent a strikingly new phenomenon in both migration and linguistic studies. In addition, the accumulation of various kinds of capital may also be understood in the context of a more general child-centred familial strategy of capital accumulation in East Asian families and also in terms of the increasing feminisation of decision-making both in and outside the family. We have also seen that such migration has been directly conditioned and motivated by pull and push factors – by the educational and interactional constraints of the source country as well as the ideological and material conditions of the destination country.

Implications abound for language planners. First is the eradication of the assumption that national borders are impermeable and that people will live their lives always in one place. Nation states can no longer prescribe and/or prohibit access to and use of their political language of choice for their citizens. In other words, globalisation has lessened the capabilities of nations to direct linguistic preferences. Next, when migrants live their lives generously across political borders, they challenge many long-held assumptions about membership and linguistic identity. Geographic mobility, professional change and vagaries of life give a person multiple social identities that get played out alternatively on the complex framings and reframing of daily encounters. In short, multiple social, geographical, political, and religious identities cannot help but influence language use (cf. Omoniyi and White, 2006).

The phenomenon of study mothers has also made it obvious that linguistic migrants are not basically seekers of culture or history but of economic wealth. As Graddol (2006) points out, the learning of English is a ‘tool’ for the acquisition of linguistic capital. It is also likely to be an ‘enhancement’ of their human rights rather than an ‘infringement’ (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Such a perspective implies that a global lingua franca such as English should ideally seek to align itself more closely with a world core curriculum centring on values such as globalism and multiculturalism. Facing an increasingly multicultural setting in her class, the English teacher sees in the children’s faces their psychological, economic and political pressures behind the transnational migration of parents and the subtle and sharp diversities of customs and values. How then can she use the varied backgrounds of the students to stimulate learning about themselves, about communication techniques, about the cultures they represent, and about other cultures around the world?

In this sense, Seidlhofer’s (2006) attempts to find a pedagogical core of phonological intelligibility so as to prioritise features which are more relevant and realistic to learning targets becomes increasingly relevant in a world where sellers and buyers are non-native and where the majority of transactions in English take place increasingly between non-native speakers rather than between native and non-native speakers. Jenkins (2007) believes that an ELF pedagogical model should place emphasis on intelligibility and communication between non-native speakers, promoting a sense of togetherness, stressing commonality rather than differences between people.

While this study has only drawn from data given by study mothers, one notes that there are even more vital data pertaining to language learning strategies and attitudes that have yet to be researched. What are the linguistic, sociological and psychological issues faced by immigrant children, their parents and educators as they interact increasingly in transnational arenas? What part do instrumental and integrative motivational strategies play in the learning of global languages? How do transnational children impact the educational and linguistic landscape of both the source and host countries? How do both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ circles countries attempt to meet the linguistic demands of ‘expanding’ circles and how will their efforts impact the face of English today? Are study mothers only the tip of a sweeping...
globalisation will see even more novel sociolinguistic practices? We are, it seems, on the edge of a new era of transnational linguistic research with a host of unanswered questions. Language identities, language learning and teaching and the English language appear irretrievably impacted by forces of globalisation, with only the tip of the iceberg apparent.

References


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