SELLING ENGLISH IN SOUTH KOREA:
THE MARKETING OF ENGLISH AND USES OF FOREIGNERS IN THE ENGLISH AS
A FOREIGN LANGUAGE INDUSTRY

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the private English as a Foreign Language (EFL) industry in the Republic of Korea, herein called South Korea, focusing on the messages that are conveyed about the English language through hagwon advertisements and the roles and positioning of foreign (non-Korean) teachers within hagwons. I analyse the messages contained within various forms of marketing to discuss the discourses that surround the English language, foreign so-called native English speaker teachers (NESTs), and the ability of Koreans to learn the English language well, or not. This thesis discusses issues associated with the native/non-native speaker dichotomy, the native speaker fallacy, and the global spread of the English language as it pertains to the South Korean market that is incredibly education-focused and test-based, where parents and students are always seeking opportunities for social mobility. In particular, I examine how stereotypes associated with native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) shape the discourses and advertising choices of hagwons. I argue that specific choices are made in advertising depending on the target age of students, and that these choices will include foreign teachers only when those involved in creating such advertisements wish to reference the positive discourses attached to them. There is also a strong association in South Korea that persists between race and language learning ability, which has long been disproven by anthropologists but is nonetheless seemingly perpetuated by marketing that continues to reference it. Finally, I explore possibilities for the future in an industry that has seen significant changes in the preceding decades, taking into account declining birth rates and increasing the English language knowledge of South Koreans.
Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jessica DeChamplain. The fieldwork described in the Methods section was conducted under UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board certificate number H15-01007.
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Introduction

In 2013, I was working as an English language teacher near Seoul, South Korea. My school was a hagwon (학원; generally a private, specialized school, supplemental and otherwise) and I worked with a combination of Korean teachers and foreign (non-Korean) teachers. As a private business, the school was constantly marketing and working to attract and retain students, and I first began considering this research topic after examining one particular poster that was displayed beside the front door. That poster primarily pictured a White, blonde woman (meant to represent a teacher) with three well-dressed children (meant to represent students), all jumping up, looking nice and happy. The combination of these elements always struck me as important to understanding how the English education business had chosen to present itself and the messages that it was sending about its services and the English language in general. As a result of this insight, the research for this thesis began with a strong focus on the role of foreigners in marketing within the private English as a Foreign Language (EFL) industry in the Republic of Korea, herein called South Korea. This remains an important part of what will be presented, but I will also argue that they mostly play significant roles within those schools that hire foreign native speakers and which are aimed more towards younger students. For those hagwons that do not hire such teachers and/or are more strongly directed towards older students, choices in advertising foci are made with very different messages in mind.

This thesis examines the private EFL industry in South Korea, focusing on the messages that are conveyed about the English language through hagwon advertisements and the roles and positioning of foreign teachers within hagwons. This is done by employing cultural Anthropological methods, and largely by examining foreign teacher roles and the marketing of English language lessons. This project specifically investigates how the English language is
portrayed and the ways in which foreign language teachers are used, or not used, within this positioning. I will argue that the choice of whether or not to use images of foreign teachers (or foreigners in general) is made strategically, depending on what age groups and levels of ability the hagwon specializes in, or what the hagwon director is trying to say about their language classes. In doing so, I seek to help determine if and how this dynamic industry and the status of the English language in South Korea may be changing, as well as the role that this for-profit industry might play in the historical and current perception of the English language in South Korea. In this examination, I have asked if the image of the language and the industry itself are undergoing changes beyond those made in the public sector, as many seem to believe, or, if not, why a sense of precarity might exist for some employees throughout the private industry.

While the EFL industry is still quite alive, a perception has grown among foreign English-language teachers of a decline or change occurring. This is likely due to budget cuts in 2012 to English education in the city of Seoul, which resulted in cuts to the hiring of middle school and high school foreign teachers within that city in the following year. However, this has only affected the public school system, and EPIK (English Program in Korea) still claims to have placed 3,066 foreign public school English language teachers throughout South Korea in the 2013-2014 school year, from 3,477 the previous year (epik.go.kr). Koreans also continue to spend a significant amount of money on English education, thus suggesting that no significant decline in public school hiring has affected the private industry (Park, J.-K. 2009; Park, J. S.-Y. 2011). Nonetheless, there are signs that other changes may be occurring within this industry and this thesis seeks to address some of these possibilities, in conjunction with current realities.

Within the EFL industry, the term “foreign teacher” generally refers to an E-2 Visa holder (unless they have Korean ancestry). Specifically, applications for E-2 (Foreign Language
Teacher) Visas require that an English teacher be a native English-speaking citizen of one of the seven countries or areas identified as “English Speaking” by Korea’s Ministry of Justice, often referred to as the “Lucky 7”; they are the US, the UK, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and Ireland (Korean Immigration Service 2015:132; Joun 2015: 18). This classification is controversial, as it excludes a number of countries or areas with native English speakers and establishes the idea that only those which would be considered “Inner Circle” countries produce worthy teachers (Kachru 2005; Phillipson 1996). The term “Inner Circle” and the associated concept of “World Englishes” will be discussed further below. In addition to citizenship, the teacher is required to have graduated from university with a four-year bachelor’s degree or higher, but with no specification of major or training in language education (Korean Immigration Service 2015:132). Any further training or experience that an applicant might have are only assets, in that they can make an applicant’s resume more appealing to prospective employers, but are not required to be employed as a language teacher. In addition to this, a major characteristic that is still actively sought by most hagwon employers is white skin, due to a perceived connection of the English language with White people that will be further explored throughout this work.

As a result of these requirements, most foreign NESTs (Native English-Speaking Teachers) are White and have no experience or training in teaching or EFL. It is their status as native speakers and foreigners from areas that hold international prestige, in addition to their perceived race, that make them attractive employees (Cho 2012); this combination is what leads to both hagwons and the public school system spending a great deal of money bringing foreign NESTs to Korea to work for a year or two, at which point their contracts end and new teachers must be found. As might be surmised from this, such constant turnover often leads to great
inconsistencies in foreign NEST teaching and can create walls between the more permanent Korean NNESTs (Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers) and the foreign (non-Korean) teachers that are only there for a relatively short time.

I examine how English hagwons market their language lessons and, through this, the image that the industry projects of the language, which is potentially in contrast to how it is actually taught. For example, there has been a strong racial association in terms of the view of who speaks the language and therefore seen as the “best” language teachers, and this is reflected in the preference for using White teachers in advertisements portraying images of foreigners. Within an English education hagwon setting, the presence of native speakers is part of their marketing to parents, suggesting that schools use this to claim that children will somehow receive better English by going to a hagwon with foreign NESTs. Hiring practices also tend to reflect preferences for one gender or the other for teaching certain age groups and levels. Cho examines Korean-American male teachers as being considered prestigious because of their American citizenship and English language ability, as well as filling the role of teacher in a hagwon, which is considered to be both an “unstable and feminine” occupation (2012: 226). In English kindergartens and hagwons that cater particularly to elementary and middle school students, there tends to be a significant preference for female teachers, and these hagwons are much more likely to employ foreign teachers to provide English immersion for younger students. As one Korean teacher explained, before grades 5 or 6, many mothers see English classes with foreign teachers as “a special opportunity for their child,” but around grade 5 or 6, parents will look for another hagwon that focuses on school tests and these schools do not generally have foreign teachers. The reasoning behind these differences will be explored further throughout this thesis.
This is connected to the “native speaker fallacy,” the still common assumption that the native speaker has the best command of the language and therefore can provide superior instruction in it (Phillipson 1996). This is despite the fact that hagwons often split teaching between foreign and Korean teachers, with students receiving instruction from both, and Korean teachers usually have greater technical knowledge and training in both the English language and teaching strategies. Such notions correspond with the ongoing discussion within critical linguistics and among English language professionals, regarding what is specifically known as the “native/non-native speaker dichotomy,” where the two categories are seen as separate and distinct from each other, with very strong associations of certain characteristics for each (Faez 2011). There has been significant discussion of how the English language has been viewed first in terms of being a means of social mobility among the urban middle class (Lett 1998), which then developed into a tool that was considered necessary for “survival” as English examinations became increasingly important to university acceptance and employment within international corporations (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011; Nam 2005). All of these can be understood within the context of what has come to be called “English fever,” resulting from the “long tradition of education fever” in South Korea (Park, J.-K. 2009:50). The following literature review will allow for proper exploration of these concepts and developments.

Due to its nature, this project also connects to other issues of globalization and the global spread of the English language. With this spread and increases in relations between Canada and South Korea, as well as continued increases in Korean international involvement in general, any contribution to the understanding of the flows of people between these countries, and the greater contexts within which this is occurring, can further illuminate these dimensions of both societies. In focusing on a perspective that has not been explored in great detail within the South Korean
context, this project seeks to further research the subject and add to the continuing discussion in related literature.

As a former foreign teacher within this private EFL industry, I bring a relevant perspective to the discussion of the positioning of foreign native speakers within it. I am a young, White, native English language-speaking woman from Canada with a year of experience teaching English at a Korean hagwon. I initially went to South Korea as an EFL teacher with a background in Anthropology but no previous training in the Korean language. As a graduate student, I have spent two and a half years studying the Korean language through formal university courses, part of which was completed before returning for the additional fieldwork, and my goal has been to delve more analytically into my experiences as a foreign teacher in South Korea and the industry within which they occurred.

**Literature Review**

Throughout the early 2000s, researchers have examined South Korea’s EFL industry from a variety of perspectives. However, much of the literature on this country that has seen immense development in the preceding decades, and this industry, which has mostly grown in that time, is based on earlier studies and comes from a variety of fields. It is also mostly from a Korean perspective or with a focus on the influence of relations with the US. The growth of English language study in South Korea can be directly linked to South Korea’s development as a nation, and understanding how it has changed and continues to change over time can provide great insight into the shifts that are occurring in the society as a whole.

Within this history, there was a strong preference for White American and Canadian teachers to provide what was perceived to be the best Standard American English in hagwons.
The phrase “Standard American English” (SAE) is defined by Collins and O’Brien as an “idealized dialect of English that is considered by some language purists to be the proper dialect” (Collins and O’Brien 2011:144). However, the lack of a more precise definition means that it is not necessarily spoken in daily life, despite being associated with those of higher socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, within the international EFL industry in general, it is often claimed that this is the version of English that students learn through various language programs and textbooks, and it is contrasted with what may be called Standard British English, which is another problematic characterization for similar reasons. Standard American English is often associated with what is considered a “neutral” accent, generally claimed to be spoken in what is known as the Midwestern region of the US, and supposedly follows a standardized set of language rules. The preference for foreign teachers with accents that are perceived to be SAE is strongly connected to the history of interaction with the US and the continuing desire of many Korean students (consistent with their parents’ desires for them) to travel to the US to pursue their post-secondary education. Although teachers with a variety of accents are hired, there is a strong preference for the accent associated with SAE over British or even other American accents, and, even more so, over accents associated with Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. This is sometimes further emphasized by some hagwon directors instructing teachers with other accents to adjust their speech to sound closer to the “neutral” SAE accent they prefer.

This history has definitely played a part in the past development of English language education and my study has been done from a Canadian perspective in order to add to previous discussions of the industry as being affected by what is seen by some researchers as the linguistic imperialism and hegemonic power of the US (Prey 2005; Phillipson 1996). These researchers claim that the spread of the English language, especially through the efforts of government
organizations and private corporations, is a form of linguistic and cultural imperialism from nations, particularly the US in this case, which have international hegemonic and economic power. Although I acknowledge that these forces have played a significant role in the past and continue to be a part of the current position of English in South Korea, I argue that the agency of Koreans – or, at least, that of those within the EFL industry – in choosing to seek further English education and how to present the language is not to be overlooked in examining power dynamics. In contrast to this, however, there have been developments in understanding the global spread of English, including the concept of “World Englishes,” which also lead researchers to suspect that English varieties that have developed in interaction with different languages and cultures around the world are equal to “Inner Circle” varieties in their validity (Kachru 2005).

This concept, theorized by Braj Kachru (1985) and expanded by Yamuna Kachru (2005), separates English language varieties by national boundaries, grouping nations based on the historical status of English within their borders. Within this model, “Inner Circle” countries and areas are those long considered to be the native English-speaking countries and areas, which Kachru (2005) lists as including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US, based on the spread of the language through population migration from the UK (Kachru 2005:155). The “Outer Circle” is comprised of the former colonies or spheres of influence of the UK and the US, such as India, Kenya, the Philippines, and Singapore. According to Kachru (2005), these are designated as “Outer Circle” areas because there was no large-scale movement of English-speaking populations to these countries and, instead, a small number of administrators, educators, and missionaries were responsible for language spread among the indigenous populations in these countries. In the “Outer Circle” areas, the “nativized varieties of English” have become either an official language or “an additional language widely used in education, administration,
[and the] legal system” (Kachru 2005:155). Finally, the “Expanding Circle” refers to countries which, Kachru explains, are those that, though not directly colonized, “gradually came under Western influence and where English is fast becoming a dominant second language in academia, business and commerce, higher education, media, and science and technology” (Kachru 2005:155). This is where South Korea fits within this model. In South Korea and other areas within this category, English does not have an official status, but has gained significance over time (Kachru 2005).

This categorization is not perfect, as it implies some level of uniformity within national borders, but it is particularly relevant when explaining how the South Korean Immigration Service has designated its E-2 Visa requirements, defining native speakers in the above-described way, and why other countries, which also have native speakers of English, such as India and the Philippines, are not included. This concept and other movements within the fields of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and critical linguistics also support the notion that Korean English could become its own variety, equally valid in status and not necessarily requiring outside educational contribution from native speakers of other varieties. However, South Korea has not yet reached such a point in terms of the national perception of Koreans’ communicative abilities in English.

The preference for American English, specifically, is rooted in the history of the development of the language’s status within South Korea, following the end of the Japanese occupation and later the Korean War, and is linked to the relations between the Korean Peninsula and the US since the end of World War II. In terms of the racial preferences mentioned previously, however, while diversity has increased in the past few years to some extent, the possibility for greater increases in this area is impeded by the Korean E-2 (Foreign Native
Language Teacher) visa requirements that foreign English teachers can only be citizens of the seven designated “English-Speaking” areas, which are all “Inner Circle” areas (Kachru 2005). In these countries or areas, those with educational privilege and undergraduate degrees (the other major requirement for this visa) may be less racially diverse and much “Whiter”. Ruecker and Ives (2014) found that potential non-White teachers might be discouraged by recruiters and advertisements for employment that seemed to exclude them (Korean Immigration Service 2015). With such requirements, the South Korean government establishes an idea of who is considered a valid native English speaker, and where the “best” English language comes from, despite there being a number of other countries or areas from which NESTs could come to teach. Cho (2012) has examined the situation of Korean-American male teachers and their combination of Korean racial identity and NEST status, finding that they occupy a particular space that most foreign teachers do not, with very different visa requirements. By examining those that fill the E-2 Visa category, I have attempted to expand upon some of the issues that Cho (2012) raises, while broadening my scope to encompass an examination of the foreign teacher perspective more generally, taking into account different racial and national backgrounds, in contrast to how they are represented in advertising.

Beyond these initial visa requirements, however, there is also the occurrence of institutional racism being “embodied,” as Kubota and Lin (2009) describe the practices of hiring English language teachers. They write, “native speakers of English have a privileged status in employment, a privilege that is increased by having white skin” (Kubota and Lin 2009:6). In my experience, job advertisements tend to be less explicit in their preferences – although these hiring practices are easily seen in the resulting lack of racial diversity among NESTs in South Korea – but I have also seen examples of the more “explicit” advertisements that Kubota and Lin mention
as being found in some “expanding circle” countries, such as South Korea (Kubota and Lin 2009:6). Kubota and Lin also describe the association between white skin and native English speaking ability, showing the persistent correlation between race and perceived language ability as the following essentialized dichotomy, “native speaker = standard English speaker = White versus nonnative speaker = nonstandard English speaker = non-White” (Kubota and Lin 2006:481, emphasis in original).

The English language has been a part of Korean history since the 1880s, when the Choseon era (1392-1910) government established a school for interpreters. However, widespread English language education in South Korea began fully in the 1980s (Lett 1998). In her examination of the “new urban middle class” of the 1990s in Seoul, Lett (1998) describes the intensity of the pursuit of social status among Koreans, following the collapse of the traditional class system in the late 1800s, and particularly later with the rapid development that began in the 1980s. Jin-Kyu Park explains that this collapse, combined with “modern egalitarian ideas from the West,” has resulted in a belief that virtually all Koreans can advance themselves through their own efforts, within which “education is seen as the most powerful means to achieve upward social mobility and economic prosperity” (Park, J.-K. 2009:50). These ideas are mirrored in Lett’s (1998) chapter on education, wherein she also explains how the English language gained importance when it replaced Chinese as a “marker of status” (Lett 1998:164). Lett describes the prestige associated with the language as, “in part a reaction to historical circumstances, national feelings of backwardness, and a need to ‘catch up’ following centuries of delayed development in terms of industrialization and involvement in a capitalist economic system” (Lett 1998:166). According to Joseph Park (2011), such feelings have not yet dispersed, as international corporations require English language tests and various related assessments for employment,
even among employees without any need for the language in their work. He explains how such companies are constantly re-assessing their testing methods, and always seem to find that applicants are never good enough, with claims that applicants “learn the test” instead of actually gaining the desired level of English language ability (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011). Thus, the cycle of seeking constant education and the industries that have developed around this “English fever” are maintained.

As a result of all of this, many young Koreans now have a significant level of English language ability (Collins 2005; Park, J. S.-Y. 2009). As the ability of Koreans to instruct their own children in English continues to increase, there may be a gradual decrease in the need for native English speakers as teachers. However, despite such changes, Joseph Park’s (2011) study of “the promise of English” in South Korea explained the ways in which Koreans continuously diminish the value of their own English speaking ability, through self-deprecation and criticisms of standardized tests. Whereas Korean teachers have long been viewed as having strong grammatical and test-specific knowledge of the English language, through their training, the previously perceived lack in their oral communication skill drove the desire to hire native English speakers to provide this element (Park, J.-K. 2009; Collins 2005; Nam 2005). Phillipson discusses what he refers to as the “native speaker fallacy”, regarding the common perception that a native speaker was, as he states, “taken for granted as the automatic best teacher” (Phillipson 1996:194). He adds that neither this nor the connected perception of a native speaking teacher as “the embodiment of the target and norm for learners” is necessarily accurate (Phillipson 1992:194). As Rampton explains, “being born into a group does not mean that you automatically speak its language well” (Rampton 1990:98). This perceived contrast between the strengths and skills of native and non-native speaker teachers is also called the “native/non-native speaker
dichotomy”, as discussed by Faez (2011); this concept encompasses both the stereotypes and discourses that surround these two categories and allows us to address the issues that result from the assumptions that are made about these distinctions.

Research continues to find that the persistence of the “native speaker fallacy”, and beliefs about who can speak and provide the best English are still strong, but that there are also persistent discourses connected to how NNESTs (Non-Native English Speaking Teachers) are viewed (Jambor 2010; Phillipson 1996; Faez 2011). This thesis further examines some of the forces involved in the persistence of these beliefs. Specifically, I focus on the proliferation of messages about and portrayals of the English language and its speakers, as well as the source countries or areas of its speakers. Moving beyond the historical and present status of the English language, however, this analysis acknowledges and examines the dynamic nature of the EFL industry in South Korea and the status of the language within the country, as well as the possibilities for change that may occur in the future.
Methods

This project employed a number of research methods. Library and archival research has played a major role in connecting primary research to the ongoing discussions on the topic and combining new knowledge and perspectives with those of previous research. Throughout this research, I examined sources from a number of fields due to the variety of disciplines within which related literature has been produced. Content analysis was employed to examine and analyse English hagwon marketing and public imaging, specifically looking at the content of signs, posters, pamphlets, and other forms of marketing media. This content analysis focused on the use of images – particularly images of foreigners – within the efforts that are made to sell English language education services. The collection of such examples was done mostly during the research trip discussed below, as well as through visiting hagwon company websites. Such examples can be compared to similar research done elsewhere in East Asia, such as Creighton’s works on images of foreigners in Japanese advertising and marketing (Creighton 1995; Creighton 1997). The analysis of these images within the context of discourses in South Korean society, specifically surrounding the private EFL industry, shows how such images maintain their connection to the larger social structures, particularly those of power and value, which shape and create the meanings that these images hold, which anthropologists such as Bauman and Briggs (1990) have emphasized when researching language events.

I used semi-structured interviews and other communication with non-Koreans, White and otherwise, and Koreans within the industry, in order to combine the experiences of others with different perspectives and from other hagwons. These were organized through contacts made during my time in South Korea. Although a diversity of perspectives among interviewees was sought, as the above discussions show, such diversity in background and gender was difficult to
find, as it is often rare within hagwons. As a result, the group of interviewees that resulted demonstrated less diversity than may have been desired. The analysis was also based upon observations, both from past experiences and from within the context of the below-described research trip. These include personal observations of schools’ marketing, presentation, location, and teaching practices. The locations in particular may be of great significance as they reflect the main targets of such hagwons. For example, upper middle class neighbourhoods with a large number of families are often known for having large numbers of hagwons. Finally, I used participant observation fieldwork. This involved reflections on my previous experience in a foreign teacher role, as well as my returned presence as a researcher around schools and in their surrounding areas (which will be discussed below), and my continued interaction with other teachers and former co-workers.

My interview participants were more diverse than ads and prevailing ideas may suggest. Out of six formal interviewees, four were White North Americans, one was African American, and another Filipina American. They were primarily women, and although this means that I have not included as much of the male perspective, to some extent, this is representative of the industry and the racial diversity is also what might be expected, at least based on how foreign teachers are expected to look as a result of the discourses perpetuated about who speaks English. They also came from a variety of hagwons, both larger franchises and smaller independent institutes, all of which had differences in programs and marketing strategies. The racial and gender diversity of foreign teachers employed within hagwons varies drastically from school to school and likely by neighbourhood as well. For example, the hagwon at which I was employed only hired female teachers and all but two of the foreign teachers were White. One was of Korean descent and one of Indian descent, and all but one was a citizen of Canada or the US; it
was the woman of Indian descent who was British. I visited or heard of other schools with either a greater diversity of racial backgrounds or an even more homogeneous assortment of White teachers, but all teachers were still from one of the “Lucky 7.” To maintain confidentiality, the participants are not mentioned by name, but characteristics will be mentioned where relevant to the information being discussed.

**Fieldwork**

A portion of the research for this thesis involved a one-month research trip to Seoul, South Korea, over the summer of 2015. The main goal of this trip was further examining the private EFL industry and the positioning of the English language in South Korea, as well as the role of foreign teachers within it, through exploration of the marketing and organization of language education at English *hagwons*. I combined my personal experience and background as an English-language teacher at a *hagwon* near Seoul with the above-described semi-structured interviews to compare and compile experiences of marketing and hiring, and the messages that are projected through such practices surrounding the “Foreign English Language Teacher” and this person’s role within the industry.

On this trip I also collected examples of *hagwon* marketing and presentation for the above mentioned content analysis. Specifically, I photographed media, such as advertisements and posters, and gathered flyers and information packets dispersed by *hagwons*, in addition to accumulating more experiential examples of involvement by interviewees in events, such as “Open Houses,” to analyse. I then analysed how marketing strategies were structured and the messages contained within this marketing about the language education provided. In particular, I focused on the teachers and how teachers are represented in such marketing. However, the ways
in which students are shown was also examined for what this may say about how the language continues to be portrayed in terms of being necessary for a child’s future and promoting that child’s success in school and a future career (Park, J.-K. 2009).

In addition to the above-described marketing media collection for content analysis, the goals of this trip included conducting as many in-person interviews and as much informal communication as possible. As previously mentioned, I selected my participants from non-Koreans and Koreans who are working, or have worked, within the private EFL industry in South Korea. Although there are other groups which could offer great insight into the marketing of the industry, such as parents and students, the language barrier and added time requirements made their inclusion impractical for this particular project, but could be further explored in the future.
Analysis

As the above literature review shows, the factors surrounding the status of the English language in South Korea are many and complex. The role of English in South Korea has changed drastically over the past 40 years. Previous works have examined the change in the perception of the language from a tool for advancement to one for survival (Nam 2005; Park, J.-K. 2009). English language ability has become a requirement for students to be accepted to prestigious Korean universities (especially those considered the three SKY universities – Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University), or to go abroad (preferably to the US due to its historical significance and continuing prestige) (Nam 2005; Park, J. S.-Y. 2011; Park, J.-K. 2009). These same students also require competitive scores on their English language tests for employment in international companies, government, universities, and for other sought-after positions (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011). Such positions are exactly what parents hope for regarding their children’s futures, both for the opportunities they can bring their children and the effect the resulting higher prestige positions can have on the social status of their families (Lett 1998).

As a result of these requirements, English hagwons are ubiquitous throughout South Korea, and especially within the Seoul Metropolitan Area, which was the main focus of this study. Koreans spend immense amounts of money sending their children to such institutions (Park, J.-K. 2009; Park, J. S.-Y. 2011). In addition to this, although public schools include English language classes, the amount of time that such a school can spend teaching both the English language and other subjects in English is limited and those Koreans with the economic means to do so seek further private lessons for their children (Lett 1994; Nelson 2000; Park, J.-K. 2009). As Ahn (2013) explains, English is taught primarily in a classroom setting, so the lack of English language interaction within the daily lives of most Koreans led to foreign native speaker
teachers being seen as necessary to provide cultural proficiency and an environment that is closer to linguistic immersion. *Hagwon* directors know that they have a market of parents seeking to provide their children with a competitive edge. In many ways, the market seems oversaturated, with multiple *hagwons* of the same subjects clustered together in relatively small areas—especially near apartment buildings. As a result, their advertising generally focuses on sending the message that they are the best at providing the English language ability that Korean children are supposed to possess for success. *Hagwon* marketing, therefore, is focused on invoking parents’ hopes for their children’s academic and professional futures. I argue that how *hagwons* choose to communicate this message depends on who their target students are.

Although there are undoubtedly many messages and discourses to be explored within the Korean language text of *hagwon* advertisements, this study focuses more on the messages and discourses being communicated through the visual imagery of *hagwon* advertising and the framing of foreigners within more active forms (which will be further discussed below). Specifically, this involves asking how images of foreigners in such marketing might affect how the language lessons offered by a *hagwon* are viewed by potential customers, including both those concerning foreign teachers and those with more subtle symbolic meaning (see Creighton 1995 for a comparable discussion of foreigners in advertising imagery in Japan). The ways in which different forms of advertising draw attention to specific symbolic elements or send certain messages can shape how the product being marketed is viewed by the consumer. In this case, the product to be consumed is English language education, with the promise of future proficiency, and the consumers are generally mothers, with high hopes for their children’s futures. As Nelson (2000) explains, managing children’s education is seen as the role of mothers, who are judged
negatively if their children do not succeed, and mothers are therefore a significant part of the audience for the marketing of extra-curricular institutes, or hagwons.

The following analysis examines the imagery of hagwon marketing, beyond the simple description of programs and services offered, and connects these images to relevant meanings surrounding English within the South Korean cultural context, to emphasize that there are societal discourses that play significant roles in how these marketing strategies might be received and why such marketing may be effective in perpetuating these discourses (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In this analysis, I examine both visual/physical and more active forms of marketing. Visual and physical forms of advertising include flyers, signs, and the displays erected on the surrounding doors, walls, and windows of a hagwon. Active forms of marketing that are used by hagwons include open houses, word-of-mouth dissemination, seminars, and other events that generally choose to highlight certain features of the school. I assert that when using either form of advertising, hagwon marketers use or combine certain main foci in their advertising choices and that their choices in these foci play a significant role in how their services are framed and how discourses surrounding the position of the English language in South Korea are perpetuated. I first focus on the emphasis placed on hagwon programs and especially on test preparation and students’ test scores. Second, I discuss how hagwons often choose to use images of students and teachers within their marketing, especially when they employ foreign teachers. Finally, I discuss the use of symbols and specific imagery, further categorized below, in communicating certain messages to the parents of prospective students.
Three Main Foci

When programs and tests are used as the main marketing focus (at least in visual displays), the programs offered are outlined in detail, often on posters and pamphlets, lining the walls around the hagwon. Test scores are highlighted, either through lists of students’ scores and successes, or by posting rows of certificates for each student outside the entrance, emphasizing the number of successful students that have graduated from these programs. For example, these scores and successes are also often emphasized in active marketing through presentations at open houses. This is a focus that would be spread significantly through word-of-mouth dissemination, as parents with students of test age are often looking for programs that will help their children get the best test scores. As certain English language proficiency tests are required for university acceptance and later employment in government, international companies, and universities (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011), programs that prepare students for these tests are often prominently advertised. These are generally shown simply through bold print of the test’s acronym, with TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and TEPS (Test of English Proficiency in South Korea) being the most common. The frequency of advertisements for SAT (formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test, then Scholastic Assessment Test, now commonly simply called SAT), SSAT (Secondary School Admissions Test), and ACT (formerly American College Testing, now commonly simply called ACT) test preparation programs also communicates the strength of the market for those planning to study abroad in the US, as these are all tests that are taken as part of acceptance to various educational institutions there.

Depending on the neighbourhood and the type of hagwon, the focus of marketing may be skewed more towards emphasizing the hagwon’s employment of foreign teachers, or the
marketing at least makes use of images that call upon the perceived prestige of White foreigners and the association of white skin with native English speaking ability. There are even some hagwons that utilize images of foreigners in their advertisements despite not employing foreigners. This can be because they are franchises of companies that are based in other countries using the advertising images that were created in those contexts, but it can also be a conscious reference to the many meanings associated with foreigners in South Korea, and thereby meant to attract the parents of students within their target age groups. Kubota and Lin have argued that the correlation between race and perceived language ability persists, as shown by the essentialized dichotomy, “native speaker = standard English speaker = White versus nonnative speaker = nonstandard English speaker = non-White” (Kubota and Lin 2006: 481, emphasis in original). When foreigners are used, in addition to their visual connection to native speaker status, hagwons are also making a reference to their foreigners’ source countries. Such connections speak to the prestige of Western universities and the opportunities available for students outside of South Korea if they have received a strong English language education. Although these connections have been in place for a long time, advertisements that focus on this element of their offerings are also furthering the “native/non-native speaker dichotomy”, by making it clear that the important teachers there are the White, Western, native English speakers.

As will be discussed further below, the gender of the teacher used also connects to significant meanings in South Korea, such as the idea that women are more nurturing and seen as the best caretakers of younger children, and that men are supposed to be stricter and therefore better at preparing older students for their adult roles. For example, the hagwon I worked at focused on kindergarten to middle school students and only hired women as teachers until recently, so all of its advertisements with teachers generally used images of young, White
women. Advertisements that utilized images of foreign teachers were often less explicit in their use of written information, choosing instead to communicate these messages through the image(s) of the foreigner(s) and all that this image has come to mean in South Korea. However, there are many stereotypes associated with foreign teachers, and foreigners in general, that have become widespread, so it was rare that any school would focus solely on the employment of foreign teachers, opting much more often for a combined approach. This will be discussed further below.

Children, representing students, are also pictured in some ads. They are generally well-dressed, in Western style clothing, and look happy. These images usually employ symbolism to send clear messages about these children’s future success. This symbolism may be more abstract, as the ad described above with the jumping children and teacher, happily moving upwards in life, or more explicit, as I witnessed in a poster that framed a young Korean boy wearing a Western style suit within an imitation magazine cover for “Fortune” magazine. Well-dressed, seemingly happy children are used in these advertisements so that parents can imagine their own children in these positions, and to show the opportunities for future success that the hagwon claims to provide by referencing parents’ hopes with specific symbols and imagery.

Throughout my research, the choices that hagwons make concerning the imagery that they include in their visual marketing have followed certain clear themes in their messages and how they are conveyed. Although there are a number of themes that can be explored, and this imagery is only a small part of this complex situation, I have chosen to examine three of the more overt themes that I have found throughout my collection and examination of hagwon advertisements. These three themes are expressed through symbols of (1) upward movement, (2) growth, and (3) global travel or opportunity (particularly focused in Western countries, especially the US). There is significant overlap in the messages being conveyed by these and
other symbols, but even when the symbols are not the explicit focus, their presence in framing other elements of advertisements adds to the messages that are being more explicitly conveyed. Some images are more serious, while others have a whimsical quality, communicating more about the projected atmosphere of the hagwon and the target age groups of students.

Generally, the overall message being sent is that attending this hagwon will provide children with the best English education, thereby allowing them to be successful and have the international opportunities that many parents want for their children (Kang and Abelmann 2011). Within this more general message, specific ideas are also being communicated. The theme of upward movement or mobility is conveyed through images that denote or imply such movement. This includes explicit examples, such as upward-facing arrows, staircases, ladders, airplanes, and hot air balloons, but it can also include more implicit images of birds and flying insects, or sky imagery (clouds, rainbows, the sun, and stars). English language education has long been associated with increased social mobility and opportunities in South Korea (Lett 1998; Park, J. S.-Y. 2011). By referencing upward mobility, these symbols or images bring more than decoration to marketing efforts. They send messages to parents (and students) that this hagwon’s services will bring the social and educational capital of English that will allow them to increase their social mobility and improve their chances for success. Even though, as Lett (1998) explains, they may not want to claim a social status higher than “middle class”, they are still constantly seeking ways to increase their social and economic capital and mobility within this status category. The amount of such capital that English language ability brings may have changed over time, but the discourses that communicate this association continue to be perpetuated by such advertising.
Within a similar theme, many hagwons (especially those that focus on kindergarten and elementary-aged students) use symbols and imagery in their advertising that emphasize or communicate messages of growth. This can include images of plants, such as trees and flowers, and the combination of images of younger students with those of older students, showing the age range of students and implying many years of attendance at that one hagwon. For example, one large poster shows a drawing of children reading outside with trees and flowers growing behind and around them. In another example, the hagwon equates growth and advancement through the different TOEFL test levels by showing children of different ages with their associated levels. Thus, they connect their growth as children and students with this hagwon – it grows with them, so they do not need to look for any other hagwon. With metaphors that show strong growth, hagwons are sending positive messages to mothers of potential students that want their children to grow into successful adults. This can be particularly effective when the hagwon’s students are younger children, as messages of nurturing their growth will connect well with what many people believe younger students should be taught.

Many of the hagwons that were documented emphasized the global opportunities that could be provided by English language proficiency. This is done through prolific use of images that reference the associations between English and international opportunities in South Korea and, in particular, the connection of English to Western nations (Kang and Abelmann 2011). This can be seen in images of the world, maps or flags of the “Lucky 7” countries or areas mentioned earlier, foreign (Western) landmarks, and images of people that are not of Korean descent (usually, but not exclusively, those that are recognizably White). One school lined the walls of its stairwell with maps of the “Lucky 7” countries or areas that are considered English-speaking, from which foreign teachers come and to which many parents and students hope to
travel for education and employment. Although there are an increasing number of English teachers who are Korean in South Korea, both those that have lived in South Korea their whole lives and those who have achieved native speaker levels in a Western country and returned, this emphasis still implies the persistent connection between Western countries, White foreigners, and the English language, perpetuating beliefs that the language is one that is only really spoken well by people in Western countries and is something imported to South Korea (Lin and Kubota 2006). The perceived possibilities afforded by these global opportunities that English language ability can bring are made clear by one hagwon’s choice to use a quote from Paul Freire in their advertising line: “Read the word and the world,” placed prominently under the stylized globe image on their logo. Thus, the connection between English and the ability to travel, study, work, and live abroad (especially in Western countries) is maintained.
Discussion

_Hagwons_ in different geographical parts of the Seoul Metropolitan area often show certain trends in the kind of marketing that they employ and what they choose to focus on. Many schools within Seoul itself do not overtly advertise whether or not they employ foreign teachers on their signs, though they may mention them in other forms, such as the advertised seminars that one teacher mentioned delivering regularly at his school in Seoul. In the neighbourhoods that were visited outside of Seoul proper, marketing tended to place more focus on foreign teachers. Many of these schools were franchises of larger brands, which I found were more likely to employ and emphasize foreign teachers or, at least, images of non-Koreans. The images of foreigners that are used by many _hagwons_ are almost exclusively of attractive White people, and other research has shown that even recruitment ads for teachers seek this as the ideal (Ruecker and Ives 2015). Images of foreigners in _hagwon_ advertisements serve the purpose of contrasting those _hagwons’_ programs with those of schools that specialize in test preparation. However, despite many conceptions about the advantages of hiring native speaking teachers, NESTs are definitely not seen as perfect in solving the issues surrounding the intensely test-focused educational system in South Korea. This is because foreign teachers are often untrained in language education and there are a large number of stereotypes and discourses that surround perceptions of foreign teachers and their ability to teach English to Koreans.

Phillipson (1992) proposed the “native speaker fallacy,” arguing that native speakers are generally assumed to be the best language teachers because of their native speaker status, but this may not necessarily be the case. While the stereotype of native English speakers being better persists in South Korea, numerous other stereotypes among South Koreans keep foreign teachers from fully being seen as the ideal teachers. According to several interviewees, both Korean and
foreign teachers, some prevalent stereotypes of foreign teachers currently include the perceptions that (1) they are not qualified and do not know anything about teaching; (2) they enjoy the night life too much and are only in South Korea to party and be promiscuous; (3) they could not get a job in their own country; and (4) they generally do not know much about South Korea and are not open to learning more about the language and culture. Race also factors strongly into these stereotypes and, as one teacher put it, “for Koreans, foreign teacher means only White people, not the teachers who have different skin colours” (personal communication, February 29, 2016). There can also be concerns among some parents, some of whom may believe that male foreign teachers are primarily interested in having sex with Korean women.

Due to stereotypes of this kind (among other reasons) and the fact that my interviewees’ responses even showed that foreign teachers often feel there are actually many foreigners who perpetuate them, it is not surprising that hagwons do not rely solely on the presence of foreign teachers for marketing. In addition to this, I found that the presence or lack of references to foreign teachers depended on the neighbourhood and the type of hagwon. The bigger name franchise where I worked, in a smaller city connected to Seoul, had numerous hagwons surrounding it that employed foreign teachers, and they all made sure to show this to some extent in their marketing. I found this to be true in similar areas with similar hagwons. However, within Seoul, particularly in the more expensive areas, like Gangnam, that are known for having elite hagwons, I found more variation and a higher occurrence of marketing that focused on Korean teachers and Korean program founders, as well as different forms of reference to Western countries, which will be discussed below.

In addition to the discourses and stereotypes surrounding foreign teachers, there are many that compare them to Korean teachers, essentializing the strengths and weaknesses of both. For
example, although the teaching of the middle school students at the hagwon where I worked was still split between the Korean and foreign teachers, they would stop receiving instruction from foreign teachers whenever they had an important English exam approaching, during which time only Korean teachers would help them with their review. This was due to the view that the Korean teachers were stricter and provided more of the specific knowledge required to do well on such tests. Throughout my research, I have found that such preferences are mirrored in other schools with similar policies of hiring foreign teachers. My interviewees generally confirmed that their employers perpetuated this perception by consistently allocating the responsibility for teaching more grammar or other specific elements of the language to Korean teachers, while relying on foreign teachers for their native level speaking ability. This is also emphasized within other forms of marketing, where some hagwons will host open houses and similar events for prospective students, at which foreign teachers may be present. In such instances, the responsibilities of non-Korean teachers vary – some will be asked to show their teaching abilities through a demonstration, but others may feel like they are only there for appearances.

I was present at a kindergarten open house where other foreign teachers and I were asked to stand at the entrance and welcome the families, then we were relegated to a classroom to play with the children while their parents were given a presentation. We were not asked to do anything more than be there, and the parents were never truly shown anything more than the fact that we were all White women and our nationalities were enough to send the message that we were native speakers of English and therefore well-suited to instructing their children in the language. This experience, while very much on the extreme end of such marketing, demonstrates the feeling that some foreigners have that they are hired for how they make the hagwon look, and this makes sense when paired with other comments from Korean interviewees about foreign
teachers being seen as a “special opportunity” for young children in the eyes of children’s mothers. In such cases, placing images of foreigners – especially those with white skin – within their marketing can be all that is necessary to attract younger students to an English language hagwon. As mentioned above, however, other teachers experienced some variety in their participation within active marketing. One teacher regularly delivered seminars, using a translator, and he felt that he was valued much more for his teaching abilities than simply his native speaker status and country of origin. His students at this hagwon seem to have been older than mine, and this matches well with the notion that parents are seeking a different kind of school and teacher as their children get older. A school that is catering to students that are older and working hard to pass school tests would require that all of their teachers be better qualified for the job – especially foreign teachers, as the widespread stereotypes surrounding their teaching abilities could make parents question their ability to properly prepare their children. A focus on their English grammar training would be much more important in such a case than the otherwise common emphasis placed on appearance and country of origin by others.

Although this sample size of interviewees is too small to accurately represent the gender distribution of foreign teachers, it is also worth noting that the teachers within this group who were hired to instruct younger students (or were moved from teaching a broader range to only younger elementary students over time) were all female, no matter what their educational background was, while those hired for older students with more of a focus on teaching education were male. This reflects the gender stereotypes surrounding notions of who should teach what students. As previously mentioned, Cho (2012) describes the feminine quality that is stereotypically associated with teaching, and this remains true, but the level of femininity also seems to depend on the grade level of the students. According to both interviewees and my own
experiences and conversations throughout my time in South Korea, the ideal teacher for elementary students is considered to be female and nurturing, with women foreign teachers being presented as the best elementary-level English teachers because they are both feminine and offer the benefits of an immersive experience in native English speech. Korean women are the next best option, then foreign men and, finally, Korean men. However, as students advance through their education, this seems to reverse, as parents seek stricter teachers with the specific knowledge required for success on tests. Korean teachers in general are seen as more strict – foreign teachers are often seen as the “fun teachers” – and men are presented as the most desirable on this spectrum.¹

This spectrum corresponds closely with what have been gender ideals in South Korea. According to Elizabeth Choi, an ideal Korean woman was “passive, quiet, and chaste; she was expected to be an obedient daughter-in-law, devoted wife, and dedicated mother, and this image of the ideal woman is still deeply entrenched in Korean values” (Choi 1994:192). Choi (1994) also explains that this ideal included dependence upon and submission to the males in the family. Tikhonov describes the “disciplined, militarized masculinity” that was formed from traditional Confucian ideals and interactions with European notions of masculinity (Tikhonov 2007:1061). In many ways, Korean society has changed significantly since these ideals were at their height, but studies like that of Cho (2012), which discusses the gendered perceptions of the teaching profession and how Korean-American male teachers are seen within this context, show that many of these ideas still persist within the current job market in South Korea. This is demonstrated by hagwons when marketing to their different targets; hagwons that specialize in older students and test preparation seem far more likely to employ images of Koreans in their

¹ It should be noted that this was previously a common pattern within North American schools as well.
visual/physical marketing, generally with a Korean man as the main focus (likely the program founder or hagwon director), while those targeting the parents of younger children will have images of women to represent teachers. In these ways, the contrast that is created by the differences between hagwon marketing, depending on the hagwon’s target customers, accentuates and perpetuates many of the discourses and stereotypes that surround the English language in South Korea and the teachers within it.

English teaching hagwons also tend to fall on a spectrum in terms of how and what they advertise. Big name franchises that have foreign teachers will generally include images of foreigners in advertising, and this is particularly clear in the clusters of hagwons that were studied in the smaller cities of the Seoul metropolitan area. On the opposite end of the spectrum, those that do not have foreign teachers or are independently owned tend to focus elsewhere. There are of course exceptions and variations within this range, often with certain trends present in particular neighbourhoods. Although all hagwons are marketed to some extent or another through word-of-mouth dissemination, many independent hagwons rely very heavily on their customers telling others of their satisfaction, as they do not have the name recognition or funds of many franchises. I was also surprised to find that some neighbourhoods seemed to prefer to emphasize their Korean teachers (or at least teachers that are of East Asian descent) in marketing. My own experience involved marketing that focused almost exclusively on foreign teachers and students, rarely showing any images or representations of Korean teachers. Hagwons that focused on Korean teachers were often in trendy or well-known areas of Seoul, which could mark a change within the industry that may make its way out to other areas in the future, but this may also just mean that they are hiring Korean-Americans or Koreans that have spent enough
time living abroad to achieve a high level of English language ability. It is also possible that they are targeting different grade levels, and therefore have a different focus.

Even if these *hagwons’* advertisements represent a shift, one Korean interviewee echoed the self-deprecating discourses concerning the English language abilities of Koreans that Joseph Park (2011) describes. She argued that, “English is not [considered] a language in Korea, it seems like a skill” that people spend too much money to get. Ultimately, she explained that *hagwons* directed at older students are based entirely around teaching students to get good scores on their English test scores. As she summarized, “they teach skills – not for [communication, but] for a good score [on the tests]” (personal communication, April 10, 2016). This continues to be a common feeling among Koreans, but they also continue to spend money to prepare their children for these tests in order to secure their futures. Thus, *hagwons* that focus on tests and scores in their marketing speak both to this feeling of need for test preparation, but also perpetuate the established perception that Koreans only learn tests, and even the notion that this preparation is necessary for success.

**Possibilities for the Future**

There are a number of factors that could affect the future of the private EFL industry in South Korea. Within this atmosphere of English as a necessity, the focus on English language learning has continued to increase in recent decades, but the pursuit of other foreign languages may become more important as English becomes an expected skill within Korean students’ repertoires, and therefore no longer as strongly connected with significant increases in individual or family social status. Due to its change in status over time, from a skill that might give students a competitive edge to something essentially required as part of students’ education and university
acceptance, the English language no longer offers the same level of social capital that it once did within South Korea. Despite this, *hagwons* continue to sell their ability to make students stand out among their peers, both in school and in later examinations. In Gangnam, a neighbourhood known for its upper middle class, status-seeking residents and prestigious *hagwons* (Lett 1998; Nelson 2000), many *hagwons* encourage students to learn more foreign languages. These *hagwons* may specialize in these other languages (such as French or Chinese) or provide a combination of English with other languages. For example, I found a sign at one *hagwon* that described the combination of English and Japanese as the, “Gateway to Success.” The possibility for expansion into such marketing of other languages connects well with the constant pursuit of status and a competitive edge that many Korean families seek (Lett 1998; Nelson 2000). If the English language alone no longer offers a significant increase in these areas, then a shift towards adding further language “skills” like these is a likely possibility.

When looking to the future, a major question from the foreign teacher perspective has been whether or not some of the current trends may be signaling a significant decrease in foreign teacher hiring. The “English boom” (Nam 2005) has encouraged a large number of young non-Korean teachers to travel to South Korea in the past few decades to fill the positions within the private and public sectors of English language education. Ever since Koreans have been learning English, there seem to have been discourses in South Korea about their language abilities and whether or not they can really learn English well (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011). There have even been those that sought surgery to re-shape their children’s tongues in the hope of making them more physically similar to those who are viewed as the real speakers of English – White Westerners – and therefore better capable of pronouncing certain sounds, like the ‘r’ in English (Takeshita 2010). A similar mentality can be seen with the phenomenon of “singing doctors” – doctors that
are supposed to help those diagnosed with poor singing ability – that Creighton (2006) discusses when examining noraebang (singing rooms) in South Korea. This tongue surgery was not effective and put children in unnecessary danger, but it was apparently popular enough to warrant government warnings about the surgery’s ineffectiveness and the dangers of undergoing it (Takeshita 2010). Whether or not this fad was as widespread as might have been believed, it spoke to underlying beliefs about a genetic connection between language use and descent, and the notion that many Koreans continue to believe that Koreans can never really speak English well (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011).

Anthropologists have long shown that any child learns the language of the people with whom the child is raised and there is no genetic connection between “race, language, and culture” (Boas 1940). In a classic example, Kluckhohn (1949) for example, describes a man with blue eyes and blond hair, from American parents, who was orphaned as an infant and raised in a remote Chinese village.² He was fluent in Chinese and even his mannerisms were seen as much more Chinese than American – so much so that he found himself much more comfortable returning to China than staying in the US (Kluckhohn 1949: 18). That people of Korean descent cannot speak English well is clearly contradicted by all of the Korean emigrants and their descendants who have moved to English-speaking countries and speak English as their native language. Whether or not these beliefs are based in fact, discourses that emphasize connections between genetic descent and language add to the perpetuation of the “native speaker/non-native speaker dichotomy” and create a clear delineation between what it means to be a NEST or a NNEST in South Korea. As long as native speakers are viewed as the best speakers who have no specific knowledge geared towards South Korean English language tests and non-native speakers

² This is discussed in Kluckhohn’s work, Mirror for Man. The use of “man” to refer to all people was prevalent at the time, but Anthropology has since promoted not using male based terms for all humans or the general case.
as poor speakers who can test well with their strong test-based knowledge, foreign teachers will continue to be hired based on minimal requirements and Korean students and teachers alike will continue to speak of their own English language ability in self-deprecating terms, believing that since it is so difficult for Koreans to speak English well, learning the specific test requirements will have to be enough. While employers continue to increase their requirements for English language abilities to include more emphasis on speaking and communication (Park, J. S.-Y. 2011), these are often still done in ways that can be studied for, continuing the test preparation emphasis for older students. If such practices and requirements were to change, more foreign teachers may be required to teach more natural speech to older students, but, for the most part, the emphasis on having them remains more in hagwons that cater to younger students that are not yet required to take these tests.

Whatever may happen within the EFL industry in the next few years, most foreign teachers in South Korea are not really looking that far into the future – they are often newly graduated from university and are only planning to work in South Korea for a year or two, after which they plan to return home to “real life” and get a “real job”. This thesis does not allow for a more in-depth examination of how many foreign teachers view their time in South Korea. However, they often describe it in terms of being a liminal period in their lives, separate from reality and the real world of life back in their home country. For many, it is their first time living far from home, without the stress of student life, and with a relatively easy job that gives them disposable income. As a result, for many their focus is short-term, and I have found that it is common for foreign teachers not to worry much about anything beyond their current job and their ability to enjoy the experience of living in South Korea. They are also often very dedicated to performing their work well, but there is a reason that the stereotype of inexperienced foreign
teachers that are only there to enjoy the night life is quite prevalent among both Koreans and foreigners. Although this stereotype is not without some truth, there are many teachers who are trained in language teaching who come to South Korea as part of their career goals, with plans to spend a much longer time there. These teachers are generally much more aware of what is going on in the industry, how it may be changing, and what that might mean for those future goals. For example, among my interviewees within this category, they were much more aware of the issues surrounding the birth rates in South Korea, but they also often gave the second answer below.

I became interested in the research for this project after a number of foreign teachers expressed to me some level of worry that their jobs may not be around for that much longer. I wanted to understand their worries (likely related to the cuts in the public sector discussed in the introduction) and I have found that everyone has different ideas about why there may be a significant decrease in the hiring of foreign teachers in the future. When asked what they thought the industry may look like in the next ten years, teachers generally gave one of the following responses: 1) foreign NESTs will no longer be needed, as Koreans will have reached a high enough level of English language ability to make foreign teachers unnecessary; 2) the lowering birth rate will decrease the number of jobs for language teachers overall, as there will be fewer students to teach, and many schools (public and private) will close as a result; and 3) it probably will not change much at all, as it has been operating in this way for quite some time and shows no real signs of changing.

The first response connects very closely with notions of World Englishes and the potential strength of NNESTs in language teaching. With such a focus on learning English throughout their school years, and as English language ability continues to improve among South Koreans, there is the possibility there will be a decreased need for foreign NESTs (Native
English-Speaking Teachers) as Korean NNESTs (Non-Native English Speaking Teachers) continue to become more comfortable in their English communication abilities. Such a change would also be tied to the strong focus on examination marks and conceptions about who best teaches for those kinds of examinations (i.e. strict Korean teachers vs. “fun” foreign teachers). However, the persistence of the perception that Koreans only learn English for the test and not for practical use makes it clear that any hagwons seeking to offer strong speaking ability to customers will likely continue to perpetuate the “native speaker fallacy” in their marketing and hiring practices (Phillipson 1992). Thus, this is a potential future that would be stunted by the self-deprecating discourses that surround perceptions of the English language abilities of Koreans and whether or not Koreans can learn English well within the current system, but it remains possible in a system that is also largely built around an intense focus on test preparation and scores, which Korean teachers are seen as better at providing.

The second response is based in the concerns that have grown surrounding the consistent decrease in South Korea’s birth rate and the seemingly oversaturated private market. The low birth rate is an issue that is much discussed in South Korea and should be acknowledged when looking to the future of the hagwon industry. As has been observed in other nations following rapid economic development, the birth rate in South Korea has declined, as families choose more urban lifestyles and have fewer children (Takayama and Werding 2011; Suzuki 2013). There are already signs that this issue is affecting class sizes in public schools, where the infrastructure was built for a larger student population (Yoon 2015). One foreign English teacher mentioned that this issue was regularly discussed at his workplace as a concern for the future.

This seems like an issue that would be of interest to anyone employed within an industry that provides services to young students, but my Korean co-workers and employer never
mentioned it openly while I was working there. I also found that many of my interviewees were completely unaware of it, and those that were aware of the issue had learned about it outside the context of their workplace. Part of the lack of communication about this issue between Koreans and foreigners could simply be a matter of knowing that foreign teachers will generally not be around long enough for it to matter much to them individually, or a desire to save face in front of foreigners. For hagwon directors and owners, this decreased birth rate is definitely a concern for the future, but, for most foreign teachers, it is only a minor concern that is not likely to have a significant effect on their relatively short time in South Korea. Therefore, although it is true that a market that was built to serve a larger population of students will likely face decreases in hagwon numbers as the student population declines over time, most interviewees felt that this would not dismantle the whole EFL industry, and would instead affect individual hagwons and increase competition.

The third response is interesting, as well, because it speaks to continuity and the persistence of this private industry and the system that has encouraged its growth. South Korea is an extremely education-focused country and this industry will thrive in one form or another as long as the South Korean education system requires English language learning and tests for entry into desirable universities. There may be fluctuations in class sizes and the number of hagwons in a neighbourhood, but despite the other concerns expressed by many of my contacts and interviewees, there was generally still a sense that the EFL industry in South Korea is here to stay. Although these were the three main responses from interviewees, another possibility that should be noted here is that hagwons may shift more towards providing language education to older groups of the population if South Korea were to see a shift towards a greater emphasis on lifelong education, as has been seen in Japan in previous decades (Fuwa 2001; Kawanobe 1994).
Conclusions and Contributions

Due to strong beliefs among Koreans that English language education in the country is not yet good enough, there remains significant potential for changes in the future, but as long as test scores remain the major focus of later English education students will continue to be trained to do well on tests and complete their educations feeling that they do not really know the language well. This feeling is likely a very strong force in the flow of Korean students to English-speaking countries for education. Thus, a clearer understanding of how the English language is perceived in South Korea, in combination with the various discourses and beliefs that permeate the society’s views of Koreans’ English language ability, can contribute greatly to understanding the flows and the motivations behind these international flows and their connected discourses. This exploration of the roles played by foreign teachers within the private EFL industry in South Korea also brings further clarity to the flows of foreign NESTs from the “Lucky 7” countries and areas in the opposite direction and the roles that they play within these discourses and the continued spread of English. The forms that English language ability takes within Korean society vary greatly and are shaped by the attitudes toward the language and the ways in which it is positioned more as a “skill” or asset on which to be tested and to be listed as one of many qualifications on a resume or application, but not something that most Koreans can actually speak or actively use.

These discourses also refer significantly to beliefs about language ability and biological or genetic descent, connecting whether or not one may be capable of speaking English well with one’s biological parentage. Ideas like this have long been disproven by the work of anthropologists, both in showing that race is not biologically real but culturally constructed, as well as demonstrating, as Boas (1940) and Kluckhohn (1949) did in the 1940s, that children
learn the language and culture of the people by whom they are raised, no matter what their genetic descent is. The EFL industry has seen increases in hiring of teachers with greater racial diversity, moving away from earlier practices of only choosing young White teachers to some extent, but hagwon advertisements featuring foreigners still heavily use images of White people as their represented ideal. No matter what the situation is in the classroom, the continued representation of foreign teachers, and native speakers of English in general as almost exclusively White simply continues the discourses that say the only people who are capable of speaking English well are White. This racial connection will remain strong as long as advertisements perpetuate it, but there is hope, at least, that those who have non-White native speaker teachers employed in their hagwons or public schools may begin to realize how incorrect these discourses and others similar to them are.

Through my examination of the representation and marketing of the English language, I have sought to examine the roles of foreign teachers within the private EFL industry, and explore why their roles, and the industry itself, may be facing changes now and into the future. The research for this thesis first began with a strong focus on the role of foreign teachers in marketing within the private EFL industry in South Korea, and this remains an important part of what was found, but only in those schools that hire foreign native speakers and are aimed more towards younger students. For those that do not hire such teachers and/or are strongly directed towards older students, the advertising focus is still strongly placed on test preparation and test scores, and the opportunities and successes that are seen as resulting from strong scores on these tests. The choice to focus on the foreign teacher within the industry’s marketing is meant to show that there are multiple forces and agencies involved within this dynamic industry and adds to the other perspectives that have been examined in previous research. As mentioned earlier, much of
the existing literature discussing English language learning in South Korea was done some time ago and from disciplinary perspectives other than Anthropology, and covered these issues from more of a Korean perspective or one with a focus on US-Korea relations. By examining this complex situation, my goal has been to add to this ongoing discussion from my perspective as someone who has been a Canadian foreign teacher in South Korea and as someone with an Anthropological approach to the specific discourses and messages that permeate and are perpetuated by the EFL industry. Thus, my work updates and expands upon the literature on the situation in an industry that has already seen great change and may see even more in the coming decades.

Although the scope of this specific project limits research breadth, follow-up research projects or further expansion of the results could be sought through a study of parents and students, and how they view the language, or what leads them to choose certain hagwons or other sources of English language education. More in-depth study of the Korean teacher perspective within the industry would also be important. Thus, this thesis provides a strong contribution to the literature examining this industry and related issues, and it suggests avenues that could be explored and further developed in future research projects.
References

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