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THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERALISM ON EFL EDUCATION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES IN SOUTH KOREA

Cyril Reyes[1] and Christina Dahee Jung[2]*
[1]KAIST – Daejeon, South Korea
[2]Hankuk University of Foreign Studies - Seoul Campus, South Korea
cyrilreyes@gmail.com[1] and jungcdh@gmail.com[2]
*correspondence: jungcdh@gmail.com
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Abstract
This paper explores the discourses used by English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) instructors in South Korea. The study uncovers the factors shaping educator perspectives through survey comments, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion. A preliminary analysis of qualitative data reveals the impact of neoliberal policies. In recognition of the invaluable insight of EFL educators, the researchers employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to expose how neoliberal ideology has changed EFL teaching in Korea. CDA highlighted how the language of disdain for the pursuit of profit harboured the potential for social transformation. As a result of CDA, this study demonstrates how money has become the nucleus of EFL teaching in Korea while the producers of cultural and financial capital, vis-à-vis the educators, are marginalized.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, English-as-a-Foreign Language, marginalization, neoliberal policy

Introduction
Neoliberalism's adverse impact on education has been extensively discussed, with many advocating for social change to reverse the marketization of public life (Giroux, 2009; Killam, 2023; Sardoč, 2021). The urgency of the situation is underscored by Giroux (2009), who points out how aligning market principles with the goals of education has justified the diminished educational quality by eradicating civic responsibility from academic institutions. In higher education, the prevalence of neoliberal policies has made universities more reliant on private funding, with curricula serving as corporate training grounds and school administration modelling corporate structures (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023; Newson, 2021). What began in North America as a belief in free market principles, neoliberalism in education has been an effective tool to legitimize cost-cutting measures, reduce benefits, and expand the managerial side of education (Giroux, 2009, 2010). Neoliberal expansion to international institutions exposes the peril of applying market principles to civic life, even as neoliberal policies use the language of equality and social justice (Sardoč, 2021). Despite the rhetoric of inclusion and

diversity, universities are still evaluated based on their production of cultural and economic capital (Giroux, 2009; Sardoč, 2021).

Neoliberalism in education has spread to Asian institutions in countries such as Japan, China, and South Korea (hereafter, Korea), with higher education institutions adopting capitalist-friendly principles while advocating for cosmopolitan values (Smith et al., 2025). Korea's uniqueness may stem from the fact there has been linguistic consistency in different political regimes when it comes to the purpose of Korean higher education institutions (Jeong, 2014). Neoliberalism in Korean universities has had the function of normalizing the idea that society is an extension of the economy, conditioning individuals to compete in the production of epistemic and financial capital (Smith et al., 2025). In Korea, this competitiveness has correlated with the promotion of English education (Kim, 2017), an aggressive pursuit of internationalization and global prestige (Byean, 2015; Park, 2022), and with a view of education as the principal means of acquiring and securing wealth (Lee, 2021). A critical component of this competitive network is the role of the administrative body to foster cultural and epistemic capital in order to justify and monitor educational competition; the work is often placed in the hands of educators.

Recent research on educators' well-being has highlighted the impact of labour deterioration (Reyes & Lee, 2023). In Korea, studies on the English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) profession have examined the educators in private academies and expatriate English instructors in Korean tertiary institutions have garnered particular attention (Moodie, 2023; Reyes & Lee, 2022). These educators' experiences have indicated how EFL in Korea has rapidly changed due to more prominent social factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure of remote teaching (Reyes & Lee, 2022). This research examined the educators' lived experiences and their expressive language to narrate the changes in their occupations and careers. By showing how social and pedagogical policies in Korea have negatively affected the experiences of EFL instructors, we can follow the ethical imperative to alleviate the identified problems inherent in capitalist driven education systems. By answering the questions below, we provide compelling qualitative evidence to address EFL educators' concerns and issues.

RQ1: How does the educators' descriptive language reveal the current state of EFL education in South Korea?

RQ2: How does the educators' descriptive language of their industry demonstrate the possibility of transforming EFL teaching in Korea*?*

English in Korean higher education

On the surface, neoliberalism is an ideology that advocates entrepreneurship, free trade, and free markets. However, neoliberal practice also minimizes support for social services, including healthcare and education (Desierto & de Maio, 2020; Slocum et al., 2019). Regarding policies, neoliberal ideology justifies prioritizing economic growth and corporate profit (Giroux, 2009; Kim et al., 2018; Slocum et al., 2019) at the expense of democratic representation and social solidarity (Giroux, 2010; Newson, 2021). Neoliberalism in education aims to reshape pedagogical function, with the goal of creating practices that perpetuate capitalist ideology (Jeong, 2014). As administrators and stakeholders embrace neoliberal principles, the practical outcome has resulted in a dramatic, widespread change in universities

(Newson, 2021). "Neoliberalism affects the telos of higher education by redefining the meaning of higher education" (Cerro Santamaría, 2020, p. 22). Neoliberal policies have converted the intrinsic value of education into monetary terms, emphasizing employment skills (Cerro Santamaría, 2020). Universities are no longer the inspiration for creativity and human advancement in knowledge and self-development; a university degree is now a commodity, and students and educators are both consumers and customers (Giroux, 2010; Highet & Del Percio, 2021; Killam, 2023; Newson, 2021; Sardoč, 2021). The modern university is now a corporation because institutions' policies and procedures are implemented based on market principles (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023; Newson, 2021). The current trend in most universities is to operate with the goal of global outreach and competitiveness, with the underlying logic of for-profit education (Park, 2017). Korea has followed the neoliberal trend of privileging profit over civic service in higher education (Kim et al., 2018; Park, 2022; Piller & Cho, 2013; Rabbidge, 2020). Neoliberalism's impact is most visible in the ideological belief held by Koreans that the "inability to speak English was a serious disadvantage in finding a decent job in South Korea and the international job market" (Lee, 2021, p. 227). For many Korean parents, English competence is a means to social mobility (Byean, 2015) or maintaining their upper-class status (Lee, 2021). English competence as a purchasable good further exacerbates socioeconomic divisions, generating resentment in a growing class of Korean learners who feel that their English will never be good enough (Choi, 2020).

With the widespread implementation of neoliberalism, Korean universities have implemented policies and strategies to commercialize their institutions (Byean, 2015; Park, 2022; Shin & Chung, 2020). Many Korean universities embrace Western education (Jung, 2018), often believing that neoliberal approaches will increase student intake (Yeom, 2016). The neoliberal policies in Korean universities are evident in recruitment tactics, such as adopting English as a medium of instruction for global prestige (Kim, 2017). Korean universities have adopted neoliberal models for survival since the Korean student population is rapidly decreasing (Byun et al., 2011; Jon et al., 2020). Many Korean universities have followed an American neoliberal model of prioritizing financial gain over the civic function of education (Byean, 2015; Park, 2022; Shin & Chung, 2020). The current climate of Korean higher education was predicted a decade ago. Piller and Cho (2013) claimed that competition between Korean universities would lead to fewer winners and many people feeling left out. Over the past decade, research on how Korean universities have emulated for-profit organizations has reported a detrimental impact on domestic students (Jung, 2018; Kim, 2021; Park, 2017). As English becomes part of Korea's intercultural fabric, the neoliberal element of English competence in its commodification (Byean, 2015; Park, 2022) as a source of injustice has real consequences (Williams & Stelma, 2022). Kim (2017) reported on how Korean students and instructors have resisted the expansion of English instruction in content classes because forced English instruction and communication have led to frustration, depression, and suicide. Despite reported dissatisfaction, the trend continues. English competence remains an intercultural shibboleth, separating a class of privileged competent speakers from underprivileged monolingual Korean speakers (Choi, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Piller & Cho, 2013; Williams & Stelma, 2022). Although it has been discussed how

English education in Korea is a form of neocolonialism (Kedzierski, 2016; Piller & Cho, 2013), the industry has been interpreted as beneficial to expatriate educators, whom Korean institutions hire for having privileged citizenships of an exclusive set of Western nationalities (Appleby, 2016; Moodie, 2023; West, 2019). It was assumed that these educators reaped the advantages of overseas EFL teaching, especially in northeast Asian countries (Moodie, 2023). International professors who speak and teach native English are usually hired based on their passport rather than their teaching credentials (Moodie, 2023). EFL educators in Korea occupy a strange place in Korean society—they are privileged as native speakers of English but marginalized as commodity producers in the EFL industry. These Western educators have socio-economic privileges but are socially and professionally disenfranchised; they lack the respect usually attributed to educators in Korea (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Moodie, 2023; Sherman, 2023).

Research origin & rationale

Based on the current extant research in this field (Reyes & Lee, 2022; Reyes & Lee, 2023), it has become clear that a more profound analysis was required to explain the determining conditions affecting EFL educators' experiences. There is a need to make explicit the implicit factors behind participant experiences and language (Wodak, 2004). Frequent discussions and analyses of the collected data revealed the heterogeneity in educator responses. This research arose from a perceived need for an immanent critique that interconnects the diversity of these voices to expose the ideological context for the negative experiences of EFL educators. Despite differences, this paper will show how the current EFL discourse in Korea interconnects personal and professional grievances.

Qualitative approach: Critical discourse analysis

We chose the work of Martin and Rose (2007) as the principal guideline for interpreting educator experiences. Martin and Rose's (2007) approach to discourse analysis was deemed appropriate since it enabled us to conceptualize the data as a heteroglossia, an aggregation of multiple voices situated on a social field needing critique. We decided that a descriptive analysis was not enough: the analysis required that we formulate a pathway of resistance and a corrective response to the neoliberal policies in Korean higher education. Martin and Rose (2007) write "[t]here is no meaning without power" (p. 314) to suggest that the vested and competing powers express their presence and significance in a field of social relations. We deemed CDA appropriate given that neoliberalism in education is another example of how the multiplicity of voices present in each discourse reveals the ideological struggle between liberty and oppression. We have interpreted the participants' language as being encoded with some experience of inequity and injustice; their words highlight the influence of a hegemonic power naturalizing itself as legitimate but persisting in impugning the rights of individuals (Kivle & Espedal, 2022; Martin & Rose, 2007; Van Dijk, 1995). We chose CDA to unmask ideology and initiate social change (Kivle & Espedal, 2022; Martin & Rose, 2007; Van Dijk, 1995; Wodak, 2004). CDA is also about giving individuals a voice, to prescribe the possibility that as educators, we are not merely subjected to coercion and oppression (Martin & Rose, 2007; Wodak, 2004).

Researchers' positionality

As researchers teaching EFL in Korea, we have experienced career obstacles and challenges like the participants. We bring the emic perspective by situating ourselves within the participants' cultural and institutional environment. However, from an etic perspective, the researchers made observations from an outsider's viewpoint of the participants in their environment. The researchers have examined the factors affecting changes in the labour conditions in the university that have made the effects of neoliberal policies more salient as universities further resemble corporations instead of public institutions (Killam, 2023; Rousseau, 2020). The research framework allowed us to assess our prejudice and thereby consider a less biased perspective instead of complaining about the host institution's failures. This paper emerged from a desire for social change (Killam, 2023; Van Dijk, 1995). It was insufficient to blame our employers when the problem was more systemic than our immediate working environment. More importantly, we wanted to assess our work's social impact. We were mindful of the danger while undertaking this research with the help of colleagues and friends. These considerations constitute emic and etic perspectives, as we observed educators' experiences and sympathized with their struggles. Because we documented and analysed the participants' discourse while being agents of EFL education, the production of this work emerged from the same hermeneutic horizon.

Method

Data collection

After receiving approval from the host university, an online questionnaire was distributed to EFL instructors from three Korean tertiary institutions. They were invited to complete an online questionnaire using Google Forms. At the end of the data collection, 105 out of 150 survey responses from EFL educators in Korean higher education were considered appropriate for analysis; about 45 participants either did not complete the survey, with a few educators interpreting the survey as an outlet to vent about their occupation and their employer. We removed these responses since they were incomplete or the reactions targeted institutions and specific employers. We analysed the statements either in verbal or written form if the statements were general descriptions of the EFL industry, not a specified criticism aimed at any person or institution.

From the pool of participants who completed the entire survey, invitations were sent to instructors teaching from three Korean universities, asking if they were interested in being interviewed and joining the focus group discussion. Participants were considered eligible if they were currently teaching EFL in South Korea. Once the interviews were completed, the researchers held a focus group discussion to confirm the preliminary emergent themes. We invited all twenty-one interviewed participants, and twelve accepted our invitation. The focus group discussion consisted of survey and interview participants. The theme of the group discussion was to share their thoughts and opinions on EFL instruction in Korea.

Table 1. Qualitative instrument

Interview Questions
How did you start your EFL career?
What were the motivating factors for you to continue teaching EFL, given that career options were available?
How would you describe the story arc of your teaching career?
How have you adapted to the changes and challenges of teaching EFL in South Korea?
What would you say to your younger self? What advice would you give that person starting their EFL teaching career?
Questionnaire & Focus Group Questions
What factors affect your perception of the EFL industry? Can you recall any specific instances or experiences that influenced your views?
How would you describe the recent changes to the EFL industry?
What are the EFL industry's current and future challenges?
How would you describe the future of EFL in South Korea?
What advice would you give to aspiring EFL teachers?

The discussion lasted an hour, with both researchers asking questions, leading the discussion, and taking notes. Before documenting the audio recording and notes, we informed the participants of their privacy and reminded them that their participation was voluntary and that they could exit the discussion anytime.

Table 2 provides the demographic statistics of the target population at the end of the data collection process, while Table 3 contains the profiles of the interviewed and focus group participants.

Table 2. Demographic information

GENDER	N	%	YEARS OF EFL TEACHING EXPERIENCE	**N**	**%**
Male	79	76.0%	2 to 5 years	8	7.7%
Female	21	20.2%	5 to 10 years	4	3.8%
I prefer not to say	4	3.8%	10 to 15 years	37	35.6%
RACE/ETHNICITY	N	%	Over 15 years	55	52.9%
White	80	76.9%	YEARS OF EFL		
Black	4	3.8%	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	N	%
Hispanic	10	9.6%	Less than a year	19	8.30%
Asian	1	1.0%	2 to 5 years	38	36.50%
I prefer not to say	5	4.8%	5 to 10 years	19	18.30%
Other	4	3.8%	10 to 15 years	13	12.50%
Age	N	%	Over 15 years	15	14.40%
25 to 35	4	3.8%			
35 to 45	33	31.7%			
45 to 55	42	40.4%			
Over 55	25	24.0%			
			TOTAL	104	

Table 3. Interview and focus group participant characteristics

Participant Names		Gender	Country of Origin	Teaching Experience	In Korea
1.	Educator #1	Female	United Kingdom	> 10 years	> 10 years
2.	Educator #2	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
3.	Educator #3	Male	United Kingdom	> 10 years	> 10 years
4.	Educator #4	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
5.	Educator #5	Female	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
6.	Educator #6	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
7.	Educator #7	Male	Australia	> 10 years	> 10 years
8.	Educator #8	Female	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
9.	Educator #9	Female	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
10.	Educator #10	Female	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
11.	Educator #11	Female	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
12.	Educator #12	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 5 years
13.	Educator #13	Male	South Africa	> 10 years	> 5 years
14.	Educator #14	Female	South Africa	> 10 years	> 5 years
15.	Educator #15	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
16.	Educator #16	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
17.	Educator #17	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
18.	Educator #18	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
19.	Educator #19	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
20.	Educator #20	Male	United States	> 10 years	> 10 years
21.	Educator #21	Female	United Kingdom	> 10 years	> 10 years

A cursory glance at the sample population reveals that most participants were white, male, and between the ages of 45 and 55. The educators have had considerable teaching experience, with 53% reportedly having over fifteen years of providing EFL instruction. Over 80% of the educators have invested in EFL professional development, with 45% having had five years or more of training. Although it was not asked, the sample population fits the demographic profile investigated in past literature about EFL teaching profiles: the participants represent the type of EFL educator usually hired by institutions and organizations in Asia, reflective of prejudices about the ideal kind of English instructor (Appleby, 2016; West, 2019). To maintain the privacy of these individuals, we did not ask them about their salary; we did not ask them to specify which institution they taught for. We can divulge that these teachers belonged to two private universities and one public university in Korea, with all three institutions having a long-standing EFL program dedicated to teaching first and second-year students. We elected to remove any specific information about the host universities and programs to protect the participants, so the comments reported here could be generalized to the larger context of EFL teaching in Korean higher education.

To ensure confidentiality and privacy, we have anonymized the names of the interviewed educators and questionnaire participants. We have used ordinal numbers to distinguish them. For example, a quote from an interviewed educator has been labelled as Educator #12 (attributed to the twelfth interviewee) and an anonymous survey responder has been labelled as Participant #57 (attributed to the fifty-seventh person who completed the survey).

Data analysis

The educators' language was coded and categorized to convey multiple expressions of their intentionality. Focusing on how the differences in opinions and perspectives converged on a report of their personal and professional experiences was vital.

Table 4 characterizes the process through which we coded and interpreted the participants' language as a potential resource of resistance. Martin and Rose (2007) suggest that by engaging with their discourse, the people we examine help us better understand our community, thereby enacting some form of change in that community. Their individual repertoires of knowledge and experiences have a dialogical relationship with the social context vis-à-vis the social reservoir. We interpreted the intensity of their choice of statements and phrases as demonstrative of the capitalist ideology embedded in their view of the EFL teaching profession. Utilizing Martin and Rose's (2007) framework of judgment and appraisal, we examined how the participants narrated their personal and professional journeys as EFL educators to discover a possible form of social change.

Table 4. Individual repertoires & social reservoirs (Martin & Rose, 2007)

Codes	Appraisal and Judgment Categories	Exemplars of neoliberal ideology inherent in participant discourse
Low wages Lack of opportunities Korea's declining population Impact of technology Need for professional development	Social Reservoir: the present struggle of EFL educators	The pandemic was a struggle for everyone, and it was said that everyone's hard work was appreciated during the pandemic. However, most educational institutions have decided to refrain from rewarding this hard effort but to reduce pay and try austerity measures instead. Too many educators must be more qualified and competent, which can harm students' learning. The low birth rate in Korea will dramatically downsize the EFL industry as it will for the entire education industry. Everyone is scrambling for money.
Higher calling Teaching as a public service Search for better alternatives The end of EFL	Individual Reservoir: Reflections on the tension of education as a duty and the professional survival of needing more money	Don't do it. Find a career path that offers more opportunities for real success or greater recognition from society. The golden era dream of being a world traveller through English instruction is over. Do it for love, but not for the money. If you are young enough, work towards a degree in a high need 'hands-on' vocation such as plumbing or electrical wiring.

We determined the impact of neoliberalism by analysing how the educators reflected on their status relative to their institutions (Martin & Rose, 2007) in terms of how they see their roles as educators in the greater context of their universities and Korea. We were able to infer neoliberalism's impact on their well-being through an active engagement with the discourse used by the participants to describe their current social standing.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The following section represents the aggregate opinions that situate participant experiences in precise linguistic categories (Wodak, 2004). From their accounts, we recognize their words reported how the EFL field in Korea is headed in the wrong direction. Their words provided signifiers to account for the changes in normative values in EFL education in Korea (Kivle & Espedal, 2022). Three themes emerged that portray the negative impact that neoliberal policies have had on EFL educator experiences.

A story of low wages, fewer opportunities, & diminished status

Whether publicly funded or privately owned, EFL institutions and organizations in Korea are navigating seismic changes. The EFL educators described their resilience in the face of these challenges. Despite expressing grave concerns for the financial health of their field and the rapid changes occurring in the context of Korean society, the study participants continue to strive for excellence. Educator #12, while describing the future of Korea's post-ERT era with a bleak assessment, also hinted at the potential for resilience and adaptation.

> *The pandemic was a struggle for everyone, and it was said that everyone's hard work was appreciated during the pandemic. However, most educational institutions have decided to refrain from rewarding this hard effort and instead reduce pay and try austerity measures.*

The participant's free-market language indicates how the educator's functionality is reducible to production and money. Economic austerity describes the emotive reality experienced by the participant when asked about the future. Participant #57 responded to the same question about the EFL industry with a formula that connects EFL education in Korea with other social factors.

> *The diminishing birth rate in Korea, changing government regulations, and outdated conceptions of education are complex factors that result in fewer job opportunities for foreign educators and limited opportunities to integrate more innovative, student-centred approaches. Understanding this intricate web of factors is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by EFL educators in South Korea.*

For this educator, it is a simple formulation that best captures the situation. The two principal factors of declining population and institutional pressure lead to fewer job opportunities and lower educational quality for students. The formulation showed the inseparability of Korea's demographic decline and a shrinking job market. The language used to explain this formulation shows a fatal determinism.

Participant #97 explained how the "low birthrate in Korea will dramatically downsize the EFL industry as it will for the entire education industry." The expression 'low birthrate' is a descriptor that traverses the social imagination. Participant #70 described the issues affecting educator's perceptions:

> *There needs to be higher pay, and all I see are an unprofessional work environment, unqualified educators, shallow motivation in EFL students, a low career ceiling in Korea, and the separation between Second Language Acquisition theory and what educators do.*

The use of the word 'low' is significant. The term 'low' indicates how this educator has appraised the status of EFL educators. The judgment explicitly illustrated how educators have lost their quality and value. When asked about the future challenges to the EFL industry, the same participant used the word 'low' again: "Being a professional in an industry which is always trying to deprofessionalize us, low pay, low career ceiling." The educator explains how the EFL profession's current state inhibits professional development with a new signifier, 'deprofessionalization.' The neologism connects the neoliberal idea with the reality of Korea's shrinking population; both factors affect educators' feelings of diminishing status. The connection was evident in the mind of another anonymous educator. Participant #103, when asked about the future of EFL in South Korea, said, "Falling birth rate. Low pay. Low-status jobs." The repetition of 'low' and 'fallen' highlighted the sense of decreased social standing. These participants used market language to describe their perceived diminutive role. For many participants, teaching EFL has an unavoidable business side—but now the business side has taken precedence over everything.

During the focus group discussion, Educator #21 and Educator #3 criticized the practice of EFL in South Korea as having very little interest in education.

> Educator #21: *I am getting older and more cynical about the world and seeing it increasingly more about money in the EFL industry in Korea. It's about making money, and it is about business. It's about making a profit. But do we help our students learn anything? It is decreasingly important.*
>
> Educator #3: *That's realistic. Education is number two.*

Both participants see education reduced to profit interests, with students' well-being and education relegated to secondary priorities. The word 'decrease' in the exchange underscores the perceived increase in cynicism, age, and profit interests. For Educator #21, EFL in Korea is a business, with administrators being indifferent to the welfare of both educators and students. Educator #21's cynicism is not isolated. The convergence of market forces and employment policies has forced educators to accept lower living standards and wages. With money as the principal element in education, educators' morale and confidence have been significantly reduced. When asked about the factors affecting educators' perceptions, Educator #12 stated:

> *Wages are demoralizing, having stayed mostly the same during the last ten years. Despite everything else rising in cost, it does not seem like a good career option for those considering an industry ahead of them. As student*

> *numbers and universities decrease, it is an excellent time to focus on high-quality educators. However, many seem focused on getting the cheapest workers to do the job.*

The educator's suggestion is instructive. The possibility of schools adapting to Korea's shrinking demographic ought to be considered from the perspective of improving educational quality. Instead, many universities focus on profits and cut labour costs. The same educator underscores the importance of quality when asked about the future of EFL: "The quality of education in the EFL industry is vitally important. Therefore, well-qualified educators are required to have experience."

The convergence of educational capital & technological competence

While a few participants described how they felt pressured to provide high-quality education, many believed new technologies would minimize the demand for their labour. It became evident that many had career anxiety. For example, when asked about the factors affecting the EFL industry, Educator #7 wrote: "Technology, technology, technology." The repetition shows how technological competence is now inseparable from the pedagogical lexicon. This was clear when compared to other statements. Educator #11 described how "the shift to online teaching is detrimental to the students, the professors, and the industry." Responses towards technology were divided, but negative comments connected the dependency on applications and remote teaching with worse student behaviour and lower educator value. This became apparent during the focus group discussion. Educator #13, expressed his worry about the increasing obsolescence of his career.

> *I have considered the devaluing of the educator's role as technology advances. You record everything, and it is done, but the educator's level or position in student interaction is not considered. No one thinks of the interpersonal skills required for language development in a physical classroom.*

Educator #13 associates the reliance on technology with diminished educator and student relationships. His words reveal how the recent excessive obsession with technology in the classroom effaces the intersubjectivity of learning for convenience and efficiency. As educators and students become entrenched in computer-assisted learning, they become more dependent on administrative procedures and indifferent to their emotional well-being. Participant #35 exhibits the pressure that educators are facing:

> *More institutionalization and corporatization are needed. There needs to be more emphasis on technology and more on the needs and genuine desires of the students studying foreign languages.*

As institutions invest in developing educational technologies and services, educators' and students' needs are obfuscated and diluted. The EFL vocation has exemplified the intersecting interests of capitalist profit and technological competence, where individuals must adapt to rapid changes at the risk of being left behind. Educator #8, a veteran EFL educator from America, explained the perceived necessity of digital competence:

> *We, as educators, need to become more tech-savvy. We are dinosaurs, digital archaic, anti-digital, and antiquated. We are the ones who need to become more in tune with technology. A person who uses the chalk-and-talk method will eventually have to implement some technology in their coursework. I am sorry, but that is the reality.*

It is not an accident that Educator #8 uses "we" in the interview. She takes the authority to speak on behalf of her peers and speaks from a position of knowledge and experience. She knows that technology is an asset. For Educator #8, there is no point in debating the necessity of technological competence in developing an educator's repertoire. Technology is now part of an educator's reality, given the widespread use of computers, applications, and screens in the classroom. Educator #8's concessionary language reveals the rhetorical ambivalence of apologizing for the unfair system. She undercuts the expectation that she feels sympathy for colleagues uncomfortable with technology. Instead, Educator #8 focuses on following the pedagogical trend, which no longer supports the chalk-and-talk method. Technology has made it obsolete for her, given that educational capital must now be produced with digital applications.

Educator #8 is far from alone. Many participants felt the need to expand their teaching repertoire. For some, implementing classroom technology is an asset to pique student interest and improve classroom management and instruction. Participant #74 explained, "Integrating technology and diverse online materials is necessary to match learners' needs and expectations. These changes are positive and critical." The convergence of education and technology in the EFL classroom can be associated with adding diversified materials. Attitudes towards technology differ to the extent that for some participants, technologies in the school can provide a positive experience. The resilience in the face of technological disruption became apparent in the language of a few educators. Educator #2, a veteran American educator, enthusiastically observed how technology and society changed during his career.

> *The rapid pace of social and technological changes over the last two decades has been a significant adjustment for many, including educators. The impact of the internet, smartphones, SNS, and social and political upheaval has become a massive part of our daily lives. In this context, it's important to acknowledge these changes' challenges and uncertainties. As an educator, I can relate to the feeling of 'Hang on, you cannot imagine what is around the corner.' This acknowledgment can help educators feel understood and supported in adapting to these changes.*

While many participants complained about the institutional pressure to learn new technology, some voices embraced new tools. Educator #2's speech focuses on how the disruption was not visible as a young man. However, the disruptive technologies of the last two decades have been integrated into his daily life. His resilience and hopeful attitude indicate the potential for educators to overcome the challenges ahead. More significantly, Educator #2's language, specifically in the words 'massive' and 'upheaval,' emphasizes the magnitude of transformations. His narrative positively responds to many educators' marginalization with a call to imagine a better future.

"Don't do it! Don't teach EFL!"

While attitudes towards technology were not uniform, attitudes towards EFL as a career were pessimistic. When asked about what advice they would give to prospective EFL educators, most of them described a doomed profession. Educator #6 answered the question, imploring young educators to "find a different career path!" The same educator explained the reasons for thinking about EFL in this fashion:

> *Do not look to us as models and pursue something else. If you are interested, be prepared to adapt and be part of remaking this industry in an online platform and the metaverse.*

While a few participants could identify the redeeming qualities of their jobs, the theme of finding another vocation was a consistent thread in the heteroglossia of the qualitative data. Participant #55 advised aspiring educators to see EFL as "a temporary job, and [they should] gain a transferrable skill set and get out as soon as possible." The participants appraise the EFL vocation as inherently unstable, requiring continual development and training. Participant #38 implored young people to see EFL teaching as a dead end.

> *It is the same as the advice for aspiring poets, artists, musicians, actors, etc. Please don't do it! Find a career path that offers more opportunities for real success or greater recognition from society. The golden era dream of being a world traveller through English instruction is over. Do it for love, not for the money.*

Unpacking the participant's language reveals three levels of meaning. The first is an association of education with creative arts, but the association is far from complimentary. The second level of significance is a warning. A career in education does not offer any success or recognition. The third level of importance opines the end of EFL instruction as a viable path; in the past, it was a career choice for young people. Teaching EFL is an act of madness in this current state of the world. It became clear how the collected data, as a body of discourse, has money as its thematic nucleus. Teaching EFL appears to be a field deprived of social and economic capital. The results here show how the tenor of the participants evokes a condemnation of the EFL field, and the mode of language deployed here is replete with imperatives not to enter the EFL profession at all. An explicit account of this mode is evident in the mind of Participant #55:

> *Please don't do it. Alternatively, at least do it for a while, but you must upgrade your skills. I recommend training in something other than EFL. Something that will pay the bills better in the future. Previously, there was a route to get qualified up to the Ph.D. level and step up to teaching proper content courses with a salary that reflects that responsibility. That is now much less likely.*

According to this educator, teaching EFL is an unsustainable, temporary job. Not only does the job lack financial rewards but continuing this career path is also financially irresponsible. However, even if most participants poorly appraise EFL

as a career, a few still believe in the merits of teaching. When asked about his advice to young aspiring educators, Educator #6, an American educator, described the EFL vocation as a noble but impoverished profession.

> *You are not working in the private industry where you will make lots of money. However, if you are okay with that, teaching is a gratifying and enriching career. That is what I would say. If you are in it for the money, don't teach.*

Educator #6 became teary-eyed while ruminating about the decades of his teaching career. He recalled students who thanked him over the years. Although he had been teaching for a long time, it was only in Korea that he began to save money. He admitted that financial stability mattered, but the relationships he had formed with his students motivated him to be an educator. It was about making a small but significant difference. Educator #6's career exemplifies the ideal EFL instructor who positively impacted the lives of young people.

Discussion

How does the instructors' descriptive language of the EFL industry in South Korea reveal the state of higher education?

The participants' expressive language vividly represents EFL educators' anxieties. Their report on their present social standing reveals how the current neoliberal policies have diminished their privileged status as educators. As the literature states, English acquisition has become a form of cultural capital and personal acquisition integral to neoliberal aspirations (Byean, 2015; Park, 2022; Piller & Cho, 2013). In the past, English education in Korea was often associated with neocolonialism, given the pressure to enhance the linguistic competence of Korean citizens (Piller & Cho, 2013). EFL educators were once privileged because they had the status of native speakers (Appleby, 2016; Moodie, 2023; West, 2019). Yet the participants revealed how their privileged position of native English speakers has changed and how money has become the nucleus of education. Money was used to describe how educators have become mere labourers in capital production (Giroux, 2010; Highet & Del Percio, 2021; Killam, 2023; Newson, 2021; Sardoč, 2021). The normalization of reducing education to a commodity, as identified by Piller and Cho (2013), was a central concern and significant to participants' anxiety. Many contextualized their difficulties and substantiated their negative appraisal in explicit neoliberal terms, with a specific emphasis that EFL educators are not paid enough.

The participants' language also demonstrates how EFL educators now experience a comparable degree of marginalization and alienation by Korean educators and students (Kim et al., 2018; Piller & Cho, 2013; Williams & Stelma, 2022). They established semantic bridges with their social status as professionals in a shrinking market due to demographic changes (Moodie, 2023; West, 2019) and how reducing English education to a business practice has led to their low appraisal (West, 2019). Their diminutive position spurs them to expand their technological repertoire in a field with little financial reward and limited career prospects (Shen, 2022). The anxiety in some participants' language demonstrate COVID-19's lingering effects, with educators admitting a lack of recognition and reduced professional well-being (Lee et al., 2021; Nazari et al., 2023; Zhang & Hwang,

2021). The studies of teacher burnout during the pandemic (Moorhouse & Kohkne, 2021; Stewart et al., 2022) report an increase of negative attitudes and emotions (Reyes & Lee, 2022; Reyes & Lee, 2023). However, the pandemic appears to have catalysed the impact of larger and more significant power relations in the social field (Martin & Rose, 2007). When asked about the state of EFL education in Korea, many warned others to rethink a career in EFL teaching (Reyes & Lee, 2022). The educators' descriptive language indicates an intense degree of marginalization (Samadi et al., 2020; Shen, 2022). Figure 1 represents how current EFL teaching in Korean higher education enshrines economic output while educators' feelings and opinions are neglected.

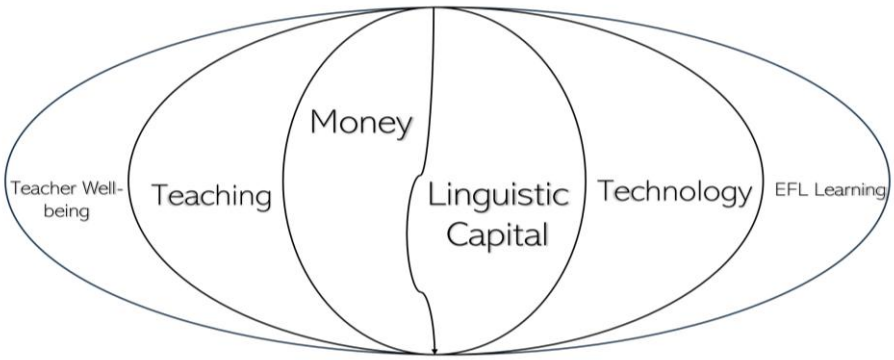

Figure 1. The nuclear relations of neoliberal EFL education
(A figure adapted from Martin & Rose, 2007)

How do instructors' descriptive language of their industry reveal the possibility of transforming EFL teaching in Korea?

A central tenet of CDA is that personal and profound writing is always about the future (Martin & Rose, 2007). The purpose of CDA is to facilitate the discursive process to bring about social change. When we ask these educators about their feelings about teaching, their words impart a future where educators are pushed aside, replaced by technology, and unrewarded and unrecognized by Korean society (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Sherman, 2023). Their language accords with the growing trend of educator fatigue and career frustration (Reyes & Lee, 2023; Samadi et al., 2020; Shen, 2022). However, the educators' language also provides insight into how to upend the neoliberal trap in higher education. An educator's agency is often underestimated in the widespread examination of institutional reform; we usually point at the large hegemonic structures governing our worst behaviour. Critics of neoliberal education have utilized Foucault's philosophy to describe the prohibitive nature of neoliberal hegemony, impugning human liberation and the governmentality shaping the normative function of our actions (Peters, 2021; Tašner & Gaber, 2021). However, hegemony necessitates complicity. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2007) interprets Foucault's conception of power as a narrative script of normative rules that guide individuals to act. We live in a society comprised of associations. Our discourse demonstrates how everything has been laid open; nothing is hidden. Social change can be thus extracted from the participants' language in that rules of neoliberal ideology are ultimately demonstrable, thus manipulable. Following Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault, it can be interpreted how the participants, vis-à-vis the educators, have a hand in

neoliberal education; they are not just passively receiving the effects. Instead, they are agents complicit in the process of generating cultural and financial capital. After all, some desire more economic capital; their sense of accomplishment and merit corresponds to how much capital they receive. Resistance in education thus begins with recognizing the propagation of neoliberal values in the models of success and acquisition latent in the teaching vocation (Highet & Del Percio, 2021; Killam, 2023; Sardoč, 2021). The instructors' anxiety and frustration are, in part, self-inflicted. An educator's function often necessitates modes of governmentality and the reproduction of dominant values (Bright, 2020).

Consistent with the previous literature, the participants reveal their contradictory feelings towards the oppressive system they are part of, even if they occupy a privileged position as native English speakers (Appleby, 2016; Moodie, 2023; West, 2019). A crucial linguistic category can be extracted from the analysed discourse (Kivle & Espedal, 2022). The complaints against the EFL industry show that the participants are actors in a system that combines education with market principles (Byean, 2015; Giroux, 2009; Killam, 2023). Recognizing one's complicity enables one to conceptualize the necessary agency to transform the social field. Negative appraisal instructs us to consider social change (Wodak, 2004), especially when we consider how ideologically entrenched neoliberal polices are in Korean higher education (Jeong, 2014; Smith et al., 2025).

Changing the system begins with the recognition of one's community. Educator #8's use of the collective pronoun "we" when describing the necessity of technological competence in the classroom unconsciously shows the required solidarity to resist neoliberalism. Educator #8 evoked the imperative to recover the educator's role as an agent; her words look ahead and move forward, conceptualizing how EFL educators can be conjoined in a taxonomic relation (Martin & Rose, 2007). Educators in this study can assert their collective will as a pack and group belonging to the same class to upend the neoliberal ideology of their profession. Her words pave a pathway for how all EFL educators (including us) must grow (Bauer, 2021). That potential is visible as many of them were able to flex their creative potential amidst the disruptions brought about by new technologies. We interpreted Educator #8's excerpt with a positive imperative that an educator's growth should keep up with the times. A closer examination of her statement's structure was a rallying call for adaptation. Her words point toward a redemptive arc for older educators who feel out of place, for growth and adaptation require an affirmation of a communal "we" and not just the individual "I" (Bauer, 2021). Educator #8's call can be compared to Educator #2's account of creative resistance in the recent teaching challenges; he is both a witness and an actor in the positive difference he has made to those around him (Bright, 2020). Educator #2 sees himself as part of the learning community, both as an EFL teacher and a developing professional. The participants' language (in Educator #6's reflection on teaching as a noble profession) reveals that education should be a creative undertaking (Giroux, 2010). EFL teaching is like music and poetry. Education should also be helpful to society, not just because it produces cultural, economic, and symbolic capital. Instead, the process of cooperative learning engenders democratic and civic participation. Education brings people together, and its vital activity opposes alienation (Giroux, 2009; Killam, 2023).

A community of creative actors is an ideal that can be extracted from the selected discourse of this study as an alternative process to the economic reduction of higher education in a neoliberal framework. Educators #2, 6, and 8 are model educators inspiring others to rethink the centre of EFL education. As EFL educators, what should we value more than money? Using CDA, we arrived at a critical juncture to recognize how the cynical words of the participants betray a sentimental view of an imagined past, a nostalgia for a time when EFL educators had a more respectable position. Their accounts help us see both personal and collective distress (Wodak, 2004). Analysing their discourse enabled us to rethink new scripts, identities, and perspectives to be a different type of educator (Bright, 2020; Rabbidge, 2020; Westman & Bergmark, 2019). The respective accounts of Educators #2, 6, and 8—their struggles, challenges, and strategies—highlight the necessary praxis to exit neoliberal ideology. Educator #2's story is a moral of flexibility and adaptation, of a teacher willing to grow amidst the chaos of becoming. Educator #6 embodies a type of educator that fosters the virtues of intellectual and emotional generosity (Alcalá, 2022). At the same time, Educator #8 teaches us how to grow together as teachers, not as atomistic individuals but as a community (Bauer, 2021). Their words aid us in understanding how to be an English educator who positively impacts young people, which requires a goal more significant than consumption and capitalist production. As for the rest, we interpreted their complaints as converging on a singular idea: to be an educator is to labour and suffer with little financial reward. From their words, we can interpret the pathway to resisting neoliberalism as foregoing the pursuit of capital and fostering the spirit of a community and a democratic society (Giroux, 2010; Killam, 2023). Based on our analysis, after countless hours of self-reflection, the moral imperative for those in education is reorienting the centre of EFL teaching. This reorientation will then produce policies and decisions following the ethos of our participants, whose decade-long dedication to EFL education comes from a love of teaching, not money.

Study limitations

A significant limitation is that our positionality removes us from objectivity. We are situated within the same neoliberal field and often speak the same discourse that associates our occupation with economic production. More gravely, it is likely that the suffering we have attributed to the neoliberal policies implemented in EFL teaching in Korea was caused by other factors (Herzog, 2016). Competing interpretations are also quite relevant, and we should be our devil's advocate (Kivle & Espedal, 2022) and admit that the adverse impact of neoliberal policies on EFL instructors is of a different order compared to the suffering of Korean students and teachers. For many Koreans, "inability to speak English was a serious disadvantage in finding a decent job in South Korea and the international job market" (Lee, 2021, p. 227). Korean students are pressured to learn English to climb the socioeconomic ladder or be left out (Piller & Cho, 2013; Williams & Stelma, 2022). Given that the subjects of this paper are native English speakers, they still occupy a privileged position in a social milieu where English is an attribute of economic stratification (Kedzierski, 2016). Because teachers' experiences constitute only a partial account, future research must reveal neoliberalism's negative impact on Korean students and educators.

Conclusion

Our work has portrayed how EFL education has been reduced to a process of commodification. Producing English in terms of acquisition, learning, studying, and teaching, has been conjoined with money and converting linguistic competence to cultural, social, and epistemic capital. The participants' language confirms the notion that Korean higher education operates within a neoliberal framework with detrimental effects. Teaching EFL is inseparable from the epistemic structure by which cultural and economic capital are mass-produced, reinforcing the values of the market ideology (Smith et al., 2025). Predominant feelings produced in such a system are alienation and diminished social status. These feelings were visible in the questionnaire responses and interviews. Flexibility and adaptation have become essential life strategies as replacement appears inevitable in neoliberal thinking, with some participants resigned to career obsolescence in the growing use of technology in the classroom. Thus, the experiences shared in this research should inspire policymakers to rethink the centre of educational experiences since many educators in this study do not have a positive mindset. Neoliberal ideology has exalted financial capital as the highest value, bringing misery to many. An educator's emotions significantly impact the classroom (Blake & Dewaele, 2023; Dewaele et al., 2019), and many educators in this study do not have a positive mindset.

CDA was implemented to uncover how market ideology has changed EFL education in Korea. Our analysis of the participants' language reveals the need for solidarity and creative resistance, pointing toward the evolutionary potential residing within the commune of educators. If neoliberalism is to be resisted, we must promote the values of community and generosity. A pedagogy based on these virtues is not just one that educators deserve; it is what everyone needs.

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