Revisiting language learning as investment in uncertain times: A case of South Korean post-secondary study-abroad

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Learning a dominant language is often viewed as investment, whereby language learning is motivated by the promise that the proficiency will bring socially or culturally valued resources to language learners (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2000). Drawing on critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2011), this study examines how the discourse of investment in language learning can be recaptured in a social context that neoliberalization threatens social stability.

This study focuses on South Korean post-secondary study-abroad. South Korean society has been transformed into a neoliberal regime since the IMF crisis in the late nineties. Above all, as the job market has been unstable and the entry into it has been increasingly competitive, South Korean young adults, in particular, face difficulty with seeking jobs. Along with the discourse of globalization, good English skills have been considered one of the important qualifications for employment. For these reasons, South Korean post-secondary study-abroad takes a form of investment, mediated by the promise of English.

My sociolinguistic ethnography of South Korean learners in Toronto shows that, although my informants are aware that English study-abroad is a large investment in terms of costs and efforts, they also admit that their transnational education would not be rewarded in seeking their future job. Their perceptions of the investment are divided into two narratives: one is that, despite few visible outcomes, they do their best to learn English; the other is that their experience of studying in an English speaking country itself is enough, believing that companies would not discriminate against them on the grounds of the experience of living or studying abroad. These findings reveal a conflict in ideologies of language learning, in that the first is related to the neoliberal ethos of self-development whereas the latter is a practice similar to purchasing insurance to reduce an uncertainty in the future.

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