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# Failing interventions to harness English fever infiltrating early childhood education in South Korea: politics of distraction

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## ABSTRACT

As English is recognised as an influential language in the globalised world and social and economic capital for individuals, Koreans put tremendous effort and financial resources into learning English, instigating a social malady called ‘English fever.’ The fever has recently infiltrated early childhood education, leading to the expansion of exorbitant, half-day English immersion programmes for preschoolers, called English-medium kindergartens (EKs). Despite the recent policies to minimise the influence of English in Early Childhood English education and enhance students’ well-being and whole-person development, English fever is still prevalent, causing detrimental effects on children. Using the notion of politics of distraction and the ethics in language planning and policy as theoretical and analytical frameworks, this paper examines how and why the education policy fails to address English fever. Drawing on a qualitative case study at three EKs, this study reveals the perceptions, dynamics and processes in early childhood English education that are disregarded and remain invisible in relevant policies. The study sheds light on the harm of distractive policy, asking policy researchers and designers to refocus their effort on what truly matters, through integrating language ethics into policymaking, thus, refocusing on children’s holistic development and emotional well-being.

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English fever; early childhood education; policy distraction; language ethics; shadow education; English-medium education

## Introduction

Riding globalisation and neoliberalism, the English language is viewed as not only a communicative tool but also a valuable commodity for a nation’s economic development and an individual’s social mobility (T.-H. Choi, 2021; Kubota, 2011). This is also the case in South Korea (hereafter Korea), a primarily monolingual context where English is rarely used outside classrooms for communication. With the language viewed as a means to gain a competitive edge in entering higher education and getting prestigious jobs,

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Koreans put an enormous amount of money, time, and effort into English education to secure a better position in society. The intense ‘desire to acquire English [and to] ensure that one’s children acquire English as a second or foreign language’ at any expense (Krashen, 2003, p. 1) is referred to as ‘English fever/frenzy’ (Bacon & Kim, 2018; Hu & McKay, 2012).

The fever led to the lowering age of English education in many countries, including those in Europe and East Asia, both officially through public education and unofficially through private education, (Hu & McKay, 2012; Rixon, 2015). Particularly, East Asian countries such as mainland China and Korea, whose educational systems are often academically oriented, have experienced an expansion of private English education among very young learners aged 2–5 with parents introducing English education to their children as early as possible to help them have a better educational experience and, thus, the best start in life (Yu & Ruan, 2012; Zhou & Ng, 2016; Zeng & Yung, 2023).

Early childhood English education in Korea takes place in various forms with differences in expenditure scale, amount of language exposure and input, and quality (M. W. Lee et al., 2020). Among the various types, English-medium kindergartens (EK, hereafter) are popular and continuously growing as a new form of private English tutoring, especially in Seoul, the capital city of Korea<sup>1</sup> (Jeon, 2012; J. S. Y. Park, 2017). While fulfilling parents’ desire, some of EKs’ practices put children’s holistic development and emotional well-being at risk. A few scholars examined EKs’ curricula and reported academic-oriented and textbook-led characteristics (S. Y. Park, 2014), which were commonly mentioned as a potential threat to children’s emotional well-being and sociolinguistic development (N. J. Kim, 2014; Ng, 2013), requesting government regulations and guidelines on educational practices of EKs.

However, government regulators as well as researchers ‘have been slow to catch up’ with this new type of private education (Zhang & Bray, 2020, p. 331), and little research has examined English education in early childhood compared to English education at the primary level (Sun et al., 2015; Zhou & Ng, 2016). Hence, this paper aims to draw due scholarly attention to early childhood English education policy and practices by critically reviewing the current Korean early childhood English education (ECEng) policy and its impact on English fever that has pervaded early childhood education. In doing so, the study uses language ethics as a framework to review or design a policy and provides insights into what should be considered when formulating and/or evaluating language policy and planning in the case of English fever in Korea. Guided by the two research questions, i.e. (1) what perceptions, dynamics and processes remain unseen and undiscussed in early childhood English education policy? (2) how does the current policy distract attention from them?, the study examines where the current Korean ECEng policy places the balancing point in decision-making, between ethical principles or politically driven reasons, drawing on the literature and the case study. Considering the political aspects of language policy and planning (Pennycook, 2013) and its impact on students’ identities and life (T.-H. Choi, 2017), the study aims to provide other English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries where English education is being introduced at lower age with insights into what should be considered in English education policy for effective early English education without harnessing holistic development and well-being of very young learners.

The paper first introduces English education policies and how they intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the development of English fever, leading up to early

childhood English education in Korea. Then, it presents the conceptual frameworks of the study: policy distraction, which helps analyse the characteristics of the focal policy, and language ethics as the guiding principle to direct the policy decisions, before discussing the methodology. The study found that four types of policy distraction are observed in Korean ECEng policy. The findings have significant implications for English education policymaking in Korea and elsewhere, where the government has to handle English fever in early childhood education, pointing out the potential of language ethics as a referencing point. Finally, it extends the theorisation of policy process and policy as a distraction.

### ***English education policies and early childhood English language education in Korea***

The pursuit of English language acquisition through early exposure and immersion has become widespread in Korea as a series of policies continuously promoted or problematised the citizens' practical English skills, in particular oral communication proficiency. For example, English listening tests were included in the national college entrance examination in 1991, and the 6th Education Curriculum (1992–1999) adopted a then-innovative pedagogy, Communicative Language Teaching (B. R. Kim, 2015). President Kim Young-sam Administration's (1993–1998) globalisation (*seggyehwa*) plan introduced English Program in Korea (EPIK), recruiting native English-speaking teachers and placing them in schools to improve students' English communication ability. Besides, English was included in the school curriculum at the primary level in 1997, which caused the 'boom in early English education' and the increase in early study abroad and short-term English study abroad (S. J. Park & Abelman, 2004). Experiencing the Asian financial crisis and the IMF crisis in 1997, neoliberal social policies were amplified, which increased the importance of English communication skills for individuals, and thus the number of students studying abroad, mostly from middle – and upper-class families who could still afford it (J. S. Y. Park, 2017). To enhance educational equity and provide short-term English immersion within Korea, English villages were established competitively by local governments in the early 2000s. The popularity of English villages was short-lived, but their proliferation brought about unintended outcomes: it normalised English immersion for learning English and drove the public to seek such an environment (Jeon, 2012). President Lee Myung-bak's English education policy elevated English fever to the next level. In 2008, his Presidential Transition Committee suggested English immersion education in public education to raise equity in English education with less financial burden on individual families. The proposal was withdrawn due to the backlash and criticism, but a series of policies were initiated to improve public English education and students' oral proficiency (see T.-H. Choi, 2021 for a historical overview). Particularly, the proposal sparked off an intense debate on English immersion in Korea, reinforced the prominence of early English education, and increased the popularity and growth of English immersion education, including EKs (L. Choi, 2021).

While the previous governments' policies maintained or even increased the importance of English in Korean society, the last two governments of President Park Geun-hye and President Moon Jae-in implemented policies to minimise the influence of English in

schooling and revitalise students' well-being and whole-person development. It was also the case for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This is because EKs are gaining popularity and functioning as an alternative to ECEC institutes, although they are not officially recognised as ECEC institutes but as shadow education institutes. Despite the concerns expressed by the government, the media and some scholars on the detrimental effects on children's holistic development, as to be explained below, the unstoppable popularity shows the pervasiveness of English fever in early childhood education and its ethical problems, making them a critical case.

Korean Ministry of Education (hereafter MoE) under President Moon's administration specifically addressed English education in early childhood with 'The 2017 early childhood education innovation plan', which promoted 'child-led play and rest' for learning and development in early childhood education, as opposed to excessive academic, subject-based learning for school preparation (MoE, 2017). MoE also announced the goal of addressing overheated English education to ensure ECEC appropriate for the developmental stage and child rights (Policy 9). Nonetheless, English fever is still prevalent, and private EKs are still flourishing<sup>2</sup>, causing detrimental effects on children's emotional well-being and whole-person development.

### ***Policy distraction vs. language ethics guided policy***

Despite the government's announcement, children's English language development is still prioritised over holistic development and emotional well-being, proving the current policy measures ineffective. In analysing the reasons for the policy ineffectiveness, policy distraction theory can offer an insightful perspective. Policy distractions' framework reveals how some policies divert attention away from the root causes of the issues, blocking the ways to reach more critical and effective solutions to the problems at hand (Hattie, 2015). Pursuing a narrow set of remedies with excessive focus, policy distractions fail to address other critical questions and, consequently, are unlikely to lead to significant changes. Consequently, policy distractions may serve to reinforce the status quo and reify ideas of what counts as normal while constructing alternatives as different and undesirable (Farley et al., 2021; Hattie, 2015).

The process of uncovering such politics of distraction can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between policy discourse and policy implementation. More importantly, it enables the critical examination of the dominant ideology and hegemony which are often the fundamental causes of an issue that a policy initiative tries to address (Farley et al., 2021; Hattie, 2015). Thus, the theory of politics of distraction is adopted in revealing the perceptions, dynamics and processes involved in the series of policies that have been issued on English fever, to reveal how the focal policy can merely distract the public from the root cause.

Particularly, we use the five elements of policy distraction suggested by Farley et al. (2021), as below:

1. Misframing the problem, the discourse, and the construction of potential solutions available, e.g. narrowing down the scope of the matter;

2. Naming phenomena in particular ways that affect our ways of knowing, understanding, and seeing them in practice;
3. Ignoring or shifting focus from broader or more foundational inequalities and the structural conditions;
4. Reinforcing the status quo or buttressing power dynamics and structural inequalities;
5. Reifying ideas of what counts as normal while constructing other groups as different, other, or deviant.

Such policy decisions can be created deliberately or inadvertently, as is often the case for any language policy. For instance, in a study conducted on a language policy in Hong Kong, T.-H. Choi and Wong (2024) reveal how the government uses diverse strategies (e.g. ‘placation’ or a symbolic gesture) to evade addressing the public’s demands. Concerning a medium of instruction policy, parents demanded that there must be a transparent regulation concerning the high-stakes decision of streaming students to either the popular English medium stream or the less popular Chinese medium stream. The administration agreed to this twice in public consultation meetings when parent representatives were present, but this agenda was omitted in subsequent policy formulation processes, in their absence. However, such distractions may occur unplanned. In a study conducted in Australia, Creagh et al. (2023), show how the care for immigrants’ language needs is inadvertently side-lined, with the policy decision to move the responsibility from the educational offices to schools and provide funds on a per capita basis. For schools with only a few migrant students, the fund was insufficient to create any supportive provision. Whether it is deliberate or unplanned, what is important is that such ‘distractive’ language policies at macro – and micro-levels maintain the status quo, which informs our investigation on the reasons for the current ECEng policy’s ineffectiveness in fixing English fever.

Furthermore, this study attempts to suggest the direction a language policy should take, using the conceptual framework of language ethics. Policy distraction theory is useful because it gives due attention to the root causes and the real problems, but it does not suggest a direction or a standard that policy should adhere to when fixing the problem, which language ethics can provide. Language ethics is defined as ‘the set of values, norms, and principles that govern our thinking on moral agency in language in the face of a reality of linguistic (as well as moral) difference’ (Peled, 2020, p. 11). Adopting this stance involves examining ‘the moral issues that pertain to language, such as linguistic freedoms, equality, autonomy, legitimacy, and dignity in multilingual societies’ (Peled, 2018, p. 144). Language ethics is also about ‘considerations guiding our understanding of the purposes and benefits of language for individual and communal well-being, and the conduct that comes in the wake of such understanding’ (Avnon, 2020, p. 32). With normative ethics playing a crucial role in it, language ethics asks and tries to answer ethical questions such as ‘what is a good?’, ‘what is right?’, ‘how we should act?’ in context (Peled, 2020). Language ethics is significant, especially when it comes to public policymaking, since a policy based on individual beliefs and attitudes without a systematic and principled ethical theory of language can inadvertently bring about adverse effects (Avnon, 2020; Peled, 2020). Thus, it is imperative to design a language policy abiding by language ethics and based on critical review about the language rather than political intent or uncritical acceptance of circulating discourses

(e.g. T.-H. Choi & Poudel, 2024), often influenced by naturalised colonial ideologies such as raciolinguicism (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

## Methods and materials

Using the notion of ‘policy distraction’ (Farley et al., 2021; Hattie, 2015) and ‘language ethics’ (Avnon, 2020; Peled, 2020) as both theoretical and analytical framework, this paper examines how and why the current ECEng policy fails to address English fever that has permeated into early childhood. In particular, this study aims to reveal the perceptions and dynamics to which the policymakers turned a blind eye in designing the ECEng policy.

The study takes a qualitative case study approach (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018), drawing on policy document analysis and interviews with seven teachers and three directors from three EKs. The procedure adhered to the ethics requirements of the first author’s institute, such as obtaining participants’ informed written consent to take part in the research prior to the commencement of the study and ensuring their anonymity. 16 policy documents, which were published for the past decade of 2013–2023, were collected to investigate the relationship between English fever and national policy that aimed to decrease the influence of English. The last two governments have issued a series of initiatives to control English fever in ECEC and to promote children’s well-being and holistic education. Shadow education policy, as well as the broader ECEC policy concerning English curriculum and instruction were collected, as ECEng is mostly provided by private institutes (See Supplemental Material for policy materials accessed and examined). The official policy documents, published by the central government, MoE, and the local educational offices, include parent education materials, and MoE’s mass-media outputs for the purpose of advertising or amending statements of other news reports. In addition to the policy documents, the interview data were used to examine the perceptions, dynamics and processes of the ECEng policy, which are noticed by school staff but are hidden and remain unseen in the policy.

The three EKs are located in one of the famous educational districts in Korea that is well known for cramming schools and English tutoring institutes. The case institutes are EKs I, II and III, which have run for 20, 19 and 8 years, respectively. They serve students aged three to five. We conducted an in-depth ethnographic study at EK I, a medium-scale kindergarten. The study involved interviews with all staff and observation of their lessons over a month. In the other two, only directors were interviewed for a triangulation purpose. The long years of operation make them the sites with rich, in-depth information, as at least some staff members are aware of the historical development of relevant policies and related practices in their institute (Cohen et al., 2011). Besides, the case EKs have a good reputation and popularity among parents in the areas, based on blog posts and comments made by parents about these institutes, which means that they would have a good understanding of parental needs, which can provide insights into English fever and the early English education.

EK I has eight staff members, the director, the headteacher, two native English speaker teachers, and four Korean homeroom teachers (see Table 1 for the participants’ profiles). With each of the staff, a semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted, which lasted about an hour. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent.



**Table 1.** Participant profiles.

EK	Participants <sup>5</sup>	Position	Academic background	Previous career other than English teaching	Years of working in English education
EK I	Charles	Director	Statistics and Computer science	Nil	13
	Jane	Headteacher	Psychology	Nil	17
	Amelia	Korean homeroom teacher	Social welfare and Childcare	Nil	4
	Aubrey	Korean homeroom teacher	Tourism and business	Nil	15
	Christine	Korean homeroom teacher	Music	Nil	13
	Sally	Korean homeroom teacher	Physical education and English language and literature	Nil	13
	Scarlet	Native English speaker teacher	Outdoor education	• Swimming instructor	2
	Nancy	Native English speaker teacher	TESOL	Nil	3
EK II	Susan	Director	Nursing and Counselling	• Nursery nurse • Daycare centre	17
EK III	Mary	Director	Early Childhood Education	• Kindergarten teacher	8

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involves iterative processes of descriptive coding, recognising patterns, and identifying emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the coding was largely inductive, we also conducted deductive coding around themes identified in the literature. In taking the inductive approach, as a way of generating codes, we jotted down the notes describing the themes next to the thought units, which can be phrases, sentences or even a paragraph. We then read through the themes and identified relationships among them, with the research questions in mind. For instance, the themes announcement of the policy to normalise public education, lack of specific plans, no tangible changes in public education provision was understood to reveal that the policy taken was a symbolic gesture rather than a genuine change plan (see the section *New category: Symbolic gesture*). Our analysis was also deductive, guided by relevant research. For instance, using the politics of distraction as a conceptual framework and an analytic tool, we adopted the five elements of policy distraction suggested by Farley et al. (2021) and organised the data around distraction typology. To illustrate, in order to examine if the first element of policy distraction, i.e. misframing, is observed around the ECEng policy, the nature of the English fever problem as perceived by interviewees and its nature as presented in the policy documents were compared (see the section *Misframing: Deceiving EKs and deceived parents* for the comparative analysis outcome).

## Findings

Based on the comparison of the policy documents with the participants' comments about the enactment of the current ECEng policy and its impact on their educational practices and children's development, this section presents policy distraction identified in the current ECEng policy, revealing the perceptions and dynamics regarding early childhood



English education that remain invisible in the policy. Three out of the five policy distraction types suggested by Farley et al. (2021) and a new type of distraction that is unique to this study emerged from the data. The findings demonstrate that the policy in its current form distracts the public from the real problems and ineffectively addresses English fever that infiltrates early childhood education, unlike its announced policy goal.

### ***Misframing: deceiving EKs and deceived parents***

The first distracting strategy observed from the current ECEng policy is framing and simplifying parents' desire to provide their children with English education as a misinformed blunder caused by EKs' deception. For example, in ECEng policy documents, EKs are described as 'expensive private English tutoring institutes targeting preschool children causing parents' anxiety about their children's English education' (Policy 9, p.3) and 'wearing the mask (*tal* in Korean)' of a kindergarten (Policy 6) to confuse parents.

On the contrary, the participants' responses during the interviews demonstrated that parents opt for an EK over a Korean-medium kindergarten with specific reasons and clear understanding about the institute, not because they are misled by EKs' manipulation. The EKs self-differentiate themselves from Korean-medium kindergartens, and help parents choose the right type considering children's needs and parents' wishes. The following response from Mary, the director of EK III, shows that the parents would choose the school, knowing what their children will gain and miss by attending the EK instead of a general kindergarten.

I tell parents what we can offer. If their priority is a child's social skills, then they should send the child to a general Korean-medium kindergarten since there will be more time to develop social skills there than here. ... If parents' goal does not match our school but rather fits more general kindergartens or daycare centres, then I recommend those [ECEC institutes].

As perceived by the EK's staff, one of the reasons for parents to choose EKs is, not surprisingly, children's English learning either out of a child's genuine interest in English (mentioned by Jane and Sally) or the necessity of English ability (Jane, Aubrey, Amelia, Mary, and Charles). In addition to the educational purpose, parents also have instrumental motivation. A Korean homeroom teacher in EK I, Aubrey, claimed that some parents enrol 'to show other people that they can afford EKs', suggesting that EKs function as a symbol of one's socioeconomic status.

The perceived reasons for parents to choose an EK, which are more than children's English language learning, explain why EKs are popular alternatives to general Korean-medium kindergartens. Meeting the parental needs regarding not only English learning but also equipping their children with a high social status marker, EKs have become a place of premium education and worthwhile investment. As Charles, the director of EK I, claimed, 'parents tend to invest more in their child's education and want more from educational institutes as they have only one child these days.' Parents would *willingly* choose an EK over an ECEC institute, despite the higher tuition, as they think it is a better investment for their child's future, not because they were misguided by their deceptive naming.

Against this framing, the policy tries to 'educate' parents that EKs are not ECEC institutes but private tutoring institutes. The policy documents justify the government's

exclusion of the EKs from the ECEC sector for two reasons (1) EKs do not implement the national ECEC curriculum ‘which is developed considering child development’ (Policy 13); (2) the qualification of teachers working at the EKs are not regulated. For Korean-medium kindergartens, only the nationally certified in early childhood education and care can be employed, while EK instructors ‘are to be appropriately deployed by the founder and operator’ without required qualification (Policy 15). Besides, through blog posts, refutation of media reports, and press releases, the policy emphasises that it is illegal for English kindergartens to use the word ‘yuchiwon [kindergarten]’ and similar terms such as ‘kindergarten’, ‘kids’ school’, ‘preschool’, and ‘kinderschule’ in advertisement and name of an institute since the institutes are not kindergartens but private tutoring institutes. It encourages media and online parent communities to use the correct expression ‘private English tutoring institutes’ instead of ‘English kindergartens.’

These policy actions frame EKs and parents’ choosing an EK over an ECEC institute in particular ways. It simplifies parents’ choice as a simple confusion or anxiety caused by EKs and gives the impression that parents are deceived into believing that EKs are a type of ECEC institutes like general Korean-medium kindergartens with similar practices. By blaming EKs for parents’ misplaced desire, the policy diverts attention from the root causes of parents’ motivation for early childhood English education. At the same time, it frames EKs as actively manipulating and deceiving agents. Moreover, while differentiating EKs from ECEC institutes, the policy conveys the nuance that EKs are inferior to Korean-medium institutes whose curricula and teacher qualifications are nationally certified.

### ***Selective focus: EKs as the sole cause of English fever***

Another distracting strategy found in ECEng policy is narrowing the focus and relying on the narrow policy frames to address the issue. The policy only addresses specific types of ECEng, namely after-school English programmes in Korean-medium kindergartens and EKs, excluding other practices such as study-abroad, English-medium international schools, and maternal English education. The policy narrows down the frame to ‘*excessive* private English education targeting preschool children and *illegal* practices’ (Policy 9, p.2, Emphasis by authors), directing the focus to excessive academic learning occurring only in EKs and Korean-medium ECEC institutes, without acknowledging the society-wide, across-level English fever. Besides, the policy draws attention only to the negative impact of EKs on children. For example, MoE announced that it would ‘first address the harmful consequences of overheated early English education, such as English tutoring institutes for children’ (Policy 9, p.1). The policy equates EKs themselves with the harmful consequences of English fever. In another document emphasising the importance of play and rest in early childhood as opposed to academic and subject-based learning, a child attending an EK is used as an example of having attachment problems with parents, emotional issues, and difficulties with peer relationships (Policy 8, p.3), unfairly insinuating that these problems happen with EK attendants only. By emphasising the negative impact on children and presenting EKs as an example, the policy diverts attention from the broader context of English fever in early childhood education. By excluding other ECEng practices, be they academic or play-based, the policy relies on the limited set

of solutions, such as regulating the after-school English programmes in Korean-medium kindergartens (Policy 10, p.2) and monitoring EKs.

Ironically, the staff of the EKs are the ones who discuss the brutal consequences of the English fever openly and try to address them. All directors acknowledged that English learning cannot be all pleasant and enjoyable for their students, explicitly or implicitly. Mary of EK III, who had a professional background in ECEC, confessed that she thinks teaching English to such young children is ‘unethical’, since ‘teaching English to children itself is inappropriate from an educational point of view.’ Mary knew how stressful it can be for children to learn and be asked to speak another language, causing physical reactions such as tic disorders in some cases. However, she decided to start the institute in order to address the country’s malady of English fever and resultant ‘child abuse’ by providing less stressful and easier English education suitable for children, which allows ‘children to be children.’ Likewise, Charles of EK I and Susan of EK II valued fun and low-stress learning environment and tried to take care of children’s emotional well-being in their curriculum. The teachers also considered reducing children’s academic stress as crucial. For instance, Jane, a headteacher in Charles’ institute (EK I), said it was good for her school to prioritise children’s emotional well-being over making progress on English textbooks, unlike some other bigger franchised EKs’ ‘harsh’ practices. In addition, the directors and the teachers regarded addressing other learning domains for children’s holistic development as important. Thus, all three EKs offered various subjects other than English language arts, such as physical education, arts and crafts, and science. Some of them even provided Korean language class and a bit of the national ECEC curriculum.

However, it is not easy to pursue such ideals; parents, government or the market in general place emphasis on English education only. Charles, the director of EK I, spotted the changes in parental needs and noticed the trend of parents prioritising academic English learning over English immersion. Aubrey, Sally, and Jane, who had been working at EK I for many years, argued that parents indeed demand specific English learning programmes and more intensive English learning. To meet the parental demands, Charles recently revised the school curriculum:

So, in the past, it was more like, it felt that [our] students go to a kindergarten [and have fun]. More like that, rather than [studying] hard. Mmm. But now, we are [reducing] that aspect and adding more academic aspects.

Jane mentioned that EK I had to introduce a reading programme that is popular among parents and widely used in the English education field in Korea to meet the parents’ demands. She explained how obsessed moms were with the score and the grade of the reading exam as the indicator of a child’s English ability.

Moms are obsessed with reading, moms who are interested [in English education]. ... Anyway, there were more and more demands, so we introduced the programme, and we’ve been using it for a year, ... and [the moms] love it.

The curriculum reform in EK I, which introduced the new reading programme and a more academically-focused atmosphere, demonstrates the power parents exert on the EK curriculum. This suggests that EKs might not be the only cause of English

fever but rather a byproduct of English fever. The policy selectively focusing on EKs and portraying them as the sole cause of English fever hinders investigating other types of early childhood English educational practices and identifying the structural and cultural factors that can provide insights into the root causes of English fever.

***Turning a blind eye to issues and structural conditions: ignoring the status quo at the cost of children's well-being and development***

The current ECEng policy ignores the fact that EKs are explaining a considerable proportion of ECEC education. Such neglect leaves the education of the EK-attending children at the mercy of the institutions' discretion. The students, who are attending the EKs are in the critical age for holistic development. However, currently, EKs can only teach English. The directors and the teachers perceived non-English language learning subjects as important for helping them with other domains of child development. However, under the current shadow education policy, it is illegal for EKs to include subjects other than English language learning in their curriculum. Some navigated themselves around this policy and included such subjects in the curriculum, either using a strategy of naming the subject seemingly relevant to English learning or simply hoping that they would not get caught.

The nationality requirement concerning foreign instructors limits the recruitment pool, eventually compromising education quality. According to the current policy, the working visa for teaching a foreign language is issued only to the citizens of one of the seven recognised native English-speaking countries: the United States, Canada, UK, Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa<sup>3</sup> (English Program in Korea, n.d.). Charles and Mary found this policy as 'constraining', 'irrational', and 'irritating.' Mary explained the reasons as follows:

It makes recruiting a foreign instructor difficult, and it gives those people [from the allowed countries] some kind of privileges. Because we can hire only them. There might be a Filipino who can speak very good English and take good care of children, but we cannot [hire] because they are nationals of Philippines. ... In contrast, I must hire an American even if he/she has no [teaching] ability and only speaks good English and even pay a high price just because he/she is American.

The situation is further aggravated by parents' wants. Mary noted that parents' preference for Caucasian instructors, and American English over British English create additional constraints on recruiting native-speaking English teachers, narrowing down the available choices to only two countries: the USA and Canada.

Restricting the recruitment pool based on one's nationality can lead to unsatisfactory teaching quality. For instance, three Korean teachers reported unprofessional behaviour of native English-speaking teachers in the past, including playing YouTube video(s) or hosting a simple game like hangman throughout the entire lesson, insufficient lesson preparation and starting the lesson late. Mary said it is the Korean homeroom teachers who 'compensate for the incompetence or poor teaching of a native English-speaking teacher.' Knowing how important it is for teachers to address students' needs adequately, Mary said she would hire a teacher with an ECEC background, at least for three – and four-year-old classes.

However, the current recruitment policy does not mandate any teaching certificate, degree, or even knowledge of ECEC or English education for hiring both native English-speaking teachers and Korean homeroom teachers in EKs. Given the above description of the current recruitment policy, it entitles the founder and operator of the institutes to recruit and assign instructors on their own. As a result, all three directors had different school policies regarding employment, some of which were perceived as inadequate by the teachers. Mary and the teachers felt the necessity of imposing a nationwide qualification threshold in recruiting ECEng teachers, as ‘those without training do not understand the needs of children, nor can provide necessary pastoral care.’

Meanwhile, the ECEng policy leaves the matters of EK students’ healthy development up to individual institutes and the logic of the market. It is surprisingly silent about the developmental needs of children in EKs, bracketing its discussion. As mentioned by one of the teachers, Sally, who had been working as an English teacher for preschool children for ten years, more guidelines to protect the rights of the children attending EKs are urgently needed.

### ***New category: symbolic gesture***

Finally, we have found policy that can be categorised as a symbolic gesture with little or only short-lived impact as it fizzled out. In 2014, the special act on the promotion of public education normalisation and regulation on pre-curriculum education was issued. Aiming to ‘promote sound physical and mental growth of students’ and ‘ensure normal implementation of [public education]’, the policy ‘regulates activities inducing pre-curriculum education and pre-curriculum learning by education-related institutions’ (Policy 2, p.8). Although this policy concerns public education, Charles said that curricula of private tutoring institutes, including his, were affected when it was announced. However, he stated that the impact is not as noticeable as before. He said, ‘it is lifted because, unlike other subjects, there were some kind of [arguments that] English is, you know, a language, highlighting that [English] is global [language], and that it can’t be pre-curriculum education.’

With the policy lifted, or at least its impact gone, children attending EK would master phonics, learn English grammar, and read and write English sentences, which may be beyond their readiness. For instance, one of the case EKs set the learning goal for a 5-year-old year 1 class as to get a score of 1.0 on a reading exam.<sup>4</sup> It is already a very ambitious goal, considering the children’s age and the linguistic context. However, one of the teachers at the school reported that some moms even want a score of 3 or 4. In contrast, formal English education that starts in third grade in primary school begins with phonics; English grammar and reading and writing English sentences are introduced far later, in Years Five and Six. Pre-curriculum learning is apparently conducted in EKs, making it harder for public English education to be normalised, as some students will already have advanced English level, when they join primary schooling. While the government promises ‘establishing the foundation of formal English education *that meets the eyes of parents*, without resorting to extra private education,’ (Policy 9, p.4), there have been no specific plans regarding how to investigate what parents want or consider significant in terms of their child’s English learning. Besides, formal English education has not been changed after the announcement. Thus, this promise without practical plans to

realise it leaves the policy a symbolic gesture that maintains the status quo, parents resorting to the private sectors for their children's ECEng. Such symbolic gesture gives the public an illusion that the government is aware of the issue and willing to solve the problem without allocating limited resources to handle the issues. It calms down the public temporarily and gives them the sense of being heard at the moment by papering over the problems and whitewashing the public. However, without clear direction, detailed plans, or follow-ups for implementation, it quietly dies out after a while and ends up maintaining the status quo until the same problem that has not been solved is brought up and comes up to the surface again, giving the public fatigue and an idea that maybe the problem is unfixable.

## Discussion and implications

This paper, drawing on policy documents and the interviews with the directors and the teachers in the case EKs, demonstrated how the ECEng policy in Korea distracts attention from the broader social context of English fever, including the role of English as a marker of status and important social capital as well as parental wishes. We have identified three categories of distractive practice of the five elements of policy distractions suggested by Farley et al. (2021) in ECEng policies in Korea: misframing, relying on the narrowed-down policy focus and solutions, and ignoring structural conditions and related inequalities.

First, the policy misframes parents' motivation for using early childhood English education as the result of EKs' deliberate marketing to mislead parents to choose EKs over Korean-medium ECEC institutes out of anxiety and confusion. Another distractive strategy was selective focus on EKs (and after-school English programmes in Korean-medium ECEC institutes), ignoring other ECEng provisions that reflect English fever. We also revealed that the policy ignores the status quo of the EKs playing the role of ECEC institutes and the negative consequence of setting the absurd prerequisite for employment of native-speaking English teachers according to their nationality.

In addition to demonstrating the existence of politics of distraction in English language education policy, our paper contributes to the debate on policy distraction by expanding Farley et al.'s (2021) typology. We found a new type that was not suggested, which we labelled as symbolic gestures. This strategy concerns the government's policy that is announced and/or initiated but then dies out without sufficient follow-up or that has no direction. This type of policy creates an illusion that a new government attempts to fix the problem, but in the end, the measures are quietly dropped, leaving the problem unaddressed. Such phenomenon may arise inadvertently in fast-paced policymaking contexts, like Korea, where educational policies change and new initiatives are made every five-year with different presidential parties, or with a politically-motivated appointment of a new Minister of Education (T.-H. Choi, 2021). It may also occur intentionally, as shown in the case of the medium of instruction policy in Hong Kong. If the distraction of the English fever concerning policies proves intentional, the citizens and researchers may need to engage in negotiation and pressuring the government to address the issues, as the citizens did in the case of Hong Kong through strategies such as network mobilisation and appealing (see T.-H. Choi & Wong, 2024 for details of the strategies).

Drawing on the interview data, we revealed the perceptions, dynamics, and processes that have been disregarded by ECEng policy. The clear understanding of the institution and purposes in choosing EKs over Korean-medium ECEC institutes, as reported by the participants, shows that the apprehension was not the product of private tutoring institutes' deliberate effort but of the parents' pursuit of English language proficiency for their children in preparation for their future competition. The hegemony of English as a global language has made English a gateway to education, employment and economic and social prestige (Warriner, 2016). The interview data show that this ideology of 'the promise of English' (Pennycook, 2006) and a localised ideology of 'stratified competence' – connecting English proficiency to social status (J. S. Y. Park, 2017), are manifest in Korean parents' motivation to choose EKs over general ECEC institutes despite the high cost and potential negative impact on their children's emotional well-being and all-round development. The fact that if the play-based pedagogy is emphasised, parents complain or withdraw their registration is evidence of the effect. Also, one case EK's change in curriculum reflecting parents' opinions demonstrates the parental demands for children's English language learning and the relative power dynamics between the parents and the institutes, which contributed to the unhealthy English educational practices. When public education fails to meet parents' demands, parents turn to private education (E. M. Kim & Lee, 2002). Largely, almost exclusively, conducted in the private sector, early childhood English education is under the great influence of parents' expectations and demands as they are the customers who sustain their operation. Such dynamics between parents and EKs suggest that parents are simply trying their best to provide their children with a competitive edge and the best start in life (Yu & Ruan, 2012; Zhou & Ng, 2016) by prioritising English education in a society where English language is viewed as a 'weapon' and a 'pure potential' that anyone as a neoliberal subject can train and master (Bacon & Kim, 2018; J. S. Y. Park, 2017), which indicates the adverse effect of blindly purchasing the uncritical reproduction and circulation of discourses and the ideologies around English language in the Korean society (T.-H. Choi, 2021).

Misframing and blaming EKs for parents' desire for early English education, the government eludes its responsibility to review and enhance the English education system. By failing to pay attention to and uncover what causes parents to invest in children's English learning at an early stage and why official kindergartens cannot satisfy these parents, the government diverts the attention from the issues in public English education and maintains the status quo of English language functioning as a gatekeeper. Furthermore, while problematising EKs' harmful effects on children, the policy ignores the structural conditions that fuel the detrimental practice, gives little guideline and merely takes symbolic gestures that die out when it comes to curriculum and teaching. In addition, the current policy either intentionally or unintentionally reinforces native-speakerism, which is more favourable towards American English (Ahn, 2017; J. S. Y. Park, 2017) as demonstrated by Mary's response. The current ECEng policy does not address such continuous promotion of native-speakerism in English education policy in Korea, which is not guided by education principles but by the political influence and language ideologies shaped by coloniality and the historical context of Korea (i.e. U.S military government after liberation from Japan) (Ahn, 2017; Min, 2007). This insight emphasises the importance of de-colonisation from native-speakerism (Jee & Li, 2021; see also, Flores & Rosa, 2015). In the meantime, the policy, driven by the politics of distraction, constantly points to shadow education



providers as the problem of educational equity and students' well-being, shaping 'the way we think about policies, propose potential solutions, and identify root causes' (Farley et al., 2021, p. 167). Without a critical and comprehensive review of ECEng practices and English fever, the policy fails to regulate the market and providers but maintains the status quo of parents falling back on private education that is susceptible to their needs. By conveniently blaming the shadow education market, the government evades its responsibility and neglects children's need for quality learning experiences for healthy development.

We hope this paper serves as a catalyst for a more critical review of English education policy in other EFL countries experiencing the expansion of English education among very young learners and enriches the field of early childhood English education research, which still needs more scholarly attention (Sun et al., 2015; Zhou & Ng, 2016). As a potential solution, while agreeing with the suggestions that the government should develop an age-appropriate curriculum for EKs, or at least the guidelines to ensure children's well-being (J. H. Lee & Kim, 2020), we propose a more fundamental approach grounded in language ethics to address early childhood English education and English fever. Administrations across presidencies have been criticising and attempted to control English fever, for interfering with students' physical and emotional well-being and increasing educational inequality, but the battle against English fever has not been successful.

Theoretically, we propose that the design and evaluation of a language policy be informed by the politics of distraction framework, in conjunction with adopting systematic and principled language ethics. Language ethics will help examine the moral issues regarding language planning (Peled, 2018), situated in the context and with flexibility and agility (Ebrahim, 2010). This, in turn, will help identify a different approach to a chromonic issue, such as English fever in early childhood English education in Korea. Such an approach may help review and redefine 'good' language education and provide governments and individuals with 'a significant context of choice in their own linguistic surroundings' (von Busekist, 2018, p. 422). In the Korean case, such alternatives are parents being supported to make informed choices between English – and Korean-medium kindergartens, by weighing the pros and cons, rather than blaming EKs for English fever. Such process may contribute to identifying and addressing the hidden or subtle dynamics of language ideologies and asking the right questions such as 'What are the purposes of the mother tongue and additional language(s) for the citizens?', 'What are the benefits of additional language education?', and 'How can the goal that is socially constructed be realised for very young learners?' In order to understand how hegemonic languages such as English have a firm grip on society thus creating distractive policies, how myths around them are reproduced by whom through what methods, and any countering actions and their impact, need to be investigated. Such studies will be the starting point for deconstructing and rebuilding deep-rooted and unhelpful ideologies (Phyak, 2016; Young, 2014). Only when we approach language issues from this fundamental level, can they be tackled in a sustainable way, so as to protect very young and other learners from unintended harm.

## Notes

1. The number of English kindergartens in 2016 was 428, increasing by 30% over four years to 653 in 2020 (Kim, 2020). About half of these are in Seoul (The World Without Concerns for Private Education, 2022).

2. Both Korean-medium and English-medium early childhood education in Korea are largely provided by private institutes.
3. Under the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), Indian citizens became additionally eligible for positions if they meet all other requirements and hold a valid teaching certificate in English education (this requirement cannot be fulfilled by a TEFL/TESOL/CELTA certificate).
4. The reading programme diagnoses a student's reading level based on test performance, using a grade equivalent ranging from 0.0 to 12.9+. A score 1.0 means that a student reads at a level equal to that of a typical US first grader, who uses English as the mother tongue.
5. Pseudonyms

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