The meaning of bilingual education within the South Korean multicultural education policy

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The South Korean government has supported and developed bilingual education programs for children from multicultural families for the last three years. Two bilingual educational programs targeting Chinese and Vietnamese mothers of young children who have married and immigrated to South Korea are supervised by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST).

I used Fairclough’s (1995) critical discourse analysis as a methodological framework to focus on the lexical and thematic analysis of bilingual education to investigate how MEST deals with the minorities’ linguistic rights and differences in Korea, examine what bilingual education means for MEST, see the ideologies being promoted through bilingual education, and why they have invested money in the development of bilingual education. In other words, what does the Korean government want bilingual education to mean in the Korean context, especially because Korea is seen as a monolingual country whose official language is Korean?

The major findings highlight three aspects regarding the conception of bilingual education in the policy layer: (1) its compensatory framework: strengthening parenting skills and children’s basic learning skills; (2) its early childhood educational approach: developmentally appropriate education; and (3) its “tourist” approach in actual lessons.

Despite the rhetoric promoting learning about “mothers’ home languages and cultures” (MEST, 2010), the purpose is not to maintain their heritage culture and identity. The program does not promote the presence of different languages throughout the country. Therefore, the MEST suggests using bilingual education programs in multicultural families’ homes or in multicultural education centers, but not in public schools.