



Exploring Parental Satisfaction with Public English Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored South Korean parents' satisfaction with public English education during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and its sudden educational disruption have posed unprecedented challenges for teachers, students, school administrators, and parents to ensure the continuity of quality education for all. Using a nationwide survey and semi-structured interview methods, this study examined the personal and social factors that affected parental satisfaction with emergency public English education in South Korea during the COVID-19 crisis. The survey results showed that while parental dissatisfaction was a shared psychological response across social class and gender, parents were more satisfied with in-person instruction and synchronous learning. The interviews revealed that their dissatisfaction with online, especially asynchronous learning, led to a low sense of self-efficacy over the management of children's education and growing concerns over the English divide. This research highlights the multidimensionality of parental satisfaction in the social crisis as it involves individual responses and beliefs as well as contingent public health and educational policies.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, parental satisfaction, remote learning, public education, English education

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its sudden educational disruption have posed unprecedented challenges for teachers, students, school administrators, and parents to ensure the continuity of learning and the attainment of quality education for all (OECD 2020, UNESCO 2020). Reimers's (2022) review of the research on the impacts of COVID-19 on education shows that the pandemic has disrupted education and widened educational inequalities by limiting students' learning opportunities, lowering their learning motivation and engagement, and exacerbating emotional difficulties such as stress and anxiety. Like other countries facing the pandemic, South Korea introduced emergency remote learning where a majority of classes are conducted online, either synchronously or asynchronously (Ministry of Education 2020). However, the introduction of hastily assembled remote learning modules has raised concerns regarding the quality of education and educational outcomes in South Korea (Baek 2020, Kim 2020, Lee 2020, Lee and Choi 2020). In a recent survey of 51,021 South Korean teachers, 79 % of respondents reported that emergency remote learning contributed to increased disparities in academic achievement (Korea Education and Research Information Service 2020).

Emergency remote learning and teaching during COVID-19 allows us to revisit the role of parents in education (Reimers 2022). Especially, parents' concerns over the quality of public education during the pandemic have been reported in other countries. According to Lau and Lee's (2021) online survey in Hong Kong, parents were dissatisfied with asynchronous distance learning largely because of the lack of interactions between teachers and students. Bokayev et al.'s (2021) study shows that parental satisfaction with distance and online learning in Kazakhstan during the pandemic was closely related to the readiness and competence of the government and teachers for the introduction of online pedagogy. Seabra et al. (2021) demonstrates that emergency remote teaching and learning in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic increased parents' workload at home, which contributed to dissatisfaction with the emergency education system.

To address these concerns, this study examines the personal and social factors influencing parental satisfaction with public education during the COVID-19 crisis. In this regard, this study focuses on the English subject in South Korean public education. Since language classes are generally required to provide students with interactive learning environments, the implementation of the emergency remote language learning and teaching has raised various concerns among language practitioners, parents, and students across the world (Chen 2021). The national curriculum of public English education in South Korea is aimed at improving communicative competence in everyday situations. During the pandemic, achieving its pedagogical goals involves multiple challenges as online teaching has limitations in assigning authentic language tasks and facilitating verbal interactions between teachers and students (Choi and Jang in press). Furthermore, because of its social, cultural, and economic importance in the society, English is a subject where parents actively navigate and consume educational services in the private sector, leading to the issue of the English divide (Park 2011, Shin and Lee 2019). In fact, the national assessment conducted during the pandemic showed a growing disparity in academic achievement in English, leading to higher investment in children's private English language education. Additionally, the government report shows that even during the pandemic, the monthly average amount spent on children's English language education increased from 214,000 KRW (approximately US\$189) in 2019 to 217,000 KRW (US\$192) in 2020, while the average amount spent on children's private education decreased by 11.8% (Statistics Korea 2021). Higher investment in children's private English education during the pandemic indicates the parents' dissatisfaction with emergency remote English learning offered in public education and the concern regarding the quality of public English education and an achievement disparity in English. Thus, it is necessary to identify the factors for South Korean parents' (dis-)satisfaction with their children's emergency remote English learning and understand them in relation to the discursive and sociocultural contexts of this crisis.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Parental (Dis-)satisfaction with Public English Education

According to recent studies, parents play an integral role in their children's school performance and academic achievement (e.g., Amatea et al. 2012, Desimone et al. 2000, Gibbons and Silva 2011). Parents' educational involvement can be viewed from two distinct angles. On one hand, it may be seen as ideologically governed in the contemporary society. Especially, as neoliberalism has entrenched a highly competitive belief system within today's education (Harvey 2005), it has constructed parents as important decision-makers for their children's education, and customers who actively exercise their choice in their children's education (Macleodo et al. 2013, Olmedo and Wilkins 2017). The rise of the school choice movement and the expansion of the private education sector have also strengthened the parents' role as agents of accountability, who are able to make strategic choices for their children's education (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012). Thus, it has become increasingly important to understand parental satisfaction with education and examine parents' perceptions of the quality of education. On the other hand, parental involvement in their children's education can be viewed as critical to redressing educational injustice and inequality. Parents from minority backgrounds, in particular, have sought to be involved in their children's academic achievement not only for social mobility but also for the affirmation of their culture and language (Antony-Newman 2019, Kim et al. 2018). For example, programs for minority languages in the public education system have been a subject of research and policy. Recent research has established that parents' satisfaction is a critical factor in determining the success of a language program (Olivos and Lucero 2020, Parkes and Ruth 2011, Sung 2020).

In English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts where English is viewed as a language of success, such as South Korea, the neoliberal construction of parenthood in contemporary education has been particularly highlighted (Park 2016, Park and Wee 2012). Considered valuable capital in the global market (Duchêne and Heller 2012, Heller 2010), proficiency in English enables individuals to bring self-realization and maximize the profitability of future academic or professional success (Park 2011, 2016). Because access to quality English language education remains unevenly distributed in many countries, parents' strategic educational investment is essential for their children's successful English language development and future success (Bae and Park 2020, Lee 2016).

South Korea illustrates how parents' dissatisfaction with public English education and their active investment in children's English learning has led to the emergence of a lucrative private education market and downplaying the mission for inclusive and equitable public education (Park 2009). For example, early study abroad is a prominent educational strategy among middle-class South Korean parents pursuing their children's upward social mobility and economic prosperity through heavy investment in English language education (Bae and Park 2020, Lee 2016, Lo et al. 2015). Class-based investment has widened the English divide between privileged and less-privileged students, creating structural inequality in education and society (Choi 2021, Shin and Lee 2019).

2.2 Public Education during the Crisis: The Case of South Korea

Following the nationwide school closures because of COVID-19, the South Korean government introduced and implemented a blended learning model and emergency remote education. Although the academic year in South Korea begins in March, the COVID-19 outbreak forced the government to postpone the opening of schools four times between February and March 2020. In April 2020, schools began to conduct online classes using

synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching. As the daily number of confirmed cases had decreased from about 580 in late February to less than 25 in May, schools gradually reopened for in-person classes while adhering to health and safety protocols, including use of face covering, health screening, and temperature check. To prevent the inflow and spread of the disease, schools also followed strict physical distancing measures, including scattered attendance and encouraged blended learning. The frequency of in-person instruction between May and July 2020 differed greatly depending on regional social distancing rules, which were determined by the regional breakdown of confirmed cases and the possibility of local transmission. Most elementary school students in Seoul, for example, attended school once a week while taking remote classes from home four days a week during this period.

While the successful implementation of blended learning requires adequate training and sufficient transition time for teachers (Graham 2006, Wallace and Young 2010), the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 forced schools and teachers to make an abrupt transition to online learning. This hasty implementation of blended learning has raised concerns about the quality of learning and its sustainability at all levels. According to the Ministry of Education (Financial News 2020), only 13% of online classes were held synchronously using online platforms such as Zoom and Webex in late April 2020 and approximately 14%–15% in late July 2020, most of which were held asynchronously using pre-recorded lectures created by either individual teachers or the Korean Educational Broadcasting System (EBS). Because asynchronous online classes tend to limit interactions and teachers' immediate feedback (Lin and Gao 2020), the prolonged implementation of blended learning, in which many classes are held asynchronously, has posed a growing concern among parents about the decline in students' academic achievement and the widening educational gap in South Korea (Baek 2020, Kim 2020, Lee 2020, Lee and Choi 2020).

Such emergency remote learning in South Korea enables us to consider several possible individual and social factors for parental satisfaction with public education in general and the English subject in particular. First, the public health protocols during the pandemic may affect parents' satisfaction with public education, as the policies dictate the schools' contingency plans, such as school suspension and the frequency of in-person instruction. Based on the Korean Disease Control and Prevention Agency's (KDCA) assessment of the spread of the virus and social distancing guidelines, the local school boards and individual schools make decisions regarding whether they resume or suspend classes and how often students attend physical classes. The urbanity of the school district is an important consideration because of the relationship between public health and educational policies during the pandemic. As metropolitan Seoul and its neighboring cities, or Greater Seoul Areas (GSA) called *sudokwon*, have reported a greater number of confirmed cases than non-GSA areas, public schools in these regions tend to implement online learning more frequently.

Second, as the pandemic forces schools to implement remote teaching, the type of online learning can serve as another important factor for parental satisfaction. Existing research has shown that parents are dissatisfied with asynchronous online teaching (e.g., Lau and Lee 2021). However, South Korean teachers preferred pre-recorded video clips that are uploaded by EBS over video conferencing (Korea Education and Research Information Service 2020). While the use of video-conferencing tool is not always pedagogically sound and behavioral issues may arise, teachers mostly depend on EBS video clips, which attract criticism from the parents (Gwak 2020, Mun 2021).

Third, the pandemic situation allows us to reconsider parents' background variables that have been traditionally regarded as affecting their children's academic performance. Socioeconomic factors, such as income and education level, may also influence parental satisfaction with emergency public education. During the COVID-19 crisis, dissatisfied parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds would take proactive measures to address their children's possible learning loss. This point is particularly relevant to English education in South Korea because the private sector has long attracted parents who are disappointed with public English education. As students'

remote learning requires additional parental support (Lee 2020), factors such as gender and income type are worth considering. In South Korea, where children's education is regarded as the mother's responsibility (Park and Abelmann 2004), women are more concerned about the current educational situation and strategies for their children's learning outcomes. Furthermore, sporadic school schedules may be problematic for working mothers in dual-income families as they would be unable to sufficiently support their children in online learning.

Public English education, like general education, has faced numerous obstacles during the pandemic. When COVID-19 spread, English teachers struggled to adapt to an emergency remote learning environment and deal with increased workload and stress caused by changing public health and educational guidelines, even though they eventually acquired necessary skills and continued teaching via a variety of modes and platforms (Park 2020, Park and Yin 2021). On the other hand, parents more frequently expressed concerns about disruptions in their children's English learning and the English divide. Choi and Jang (in press) showed that while South Korean parents expressed dissatisfaction with public education in general, they expressed concern that the pandemic would have a greater negative impact on their children's English learning, highlighting the importance of English as linguistic capital in South Korean education and society. Choi and Jang (in press) additionally suggest that research on the pandemic's effects on education needs to consider each school subject's distinctive curriculum, content knowledge, and teaching approaches.

3. Method

To explore aspects of parental satisfaction in emergency remote learning and identify potential factors contributing to it, we used a nationwide survey and semi-structured interviews. We aimed to gain a general aspect of parental satisfaction with public English education through the survey and contextualize it with parents' voices and experiences gleaned from interviews. In spite of the limitations of interview methods in terms of generalizability and representativeness, as well as concerns about the reliable compatibility between two distinct types of data, we believed that a mixed-methods approach was more effective in revealing the effects of unprecedented crisis on our social life, including education, in this explorative project.

3.1 Parent Satisfaction Survey

Based on previous studies and government reports on parents' perceptions of emergency education in South Korea and elsewhere, we developed a questionnaire pertaining to the satisfaction with public English education and related variables. Satisfaction level was measured using a four-point Likert scale. Related variables included child grade, parental background (i.e., gender, educational level, income type, income level, and region), and learning process characteristics (i.e., frequency of in-person class per week, types of online learning practices). The questionnaire used in this study can be seen in Appendix. We identified a target population of parents with the first child studying in grades 3 to 9 because public English education begins in grade 3 in South Korea and becomes more test-oriented in grade 10 for the college entrance exam. We obtained responses using a poll service with a nationwide panel of parents in August 2020, when the first semester of emergency remote learning ended for summer vacation.

Responses from 1,102 parents (50.6% females) were gathered (see Table 1 below). The majority of the respondents (57.0%) had a four-year university degree, followed by those with a two-year community college degree (17.3%) and a graduate school degree (16.0%). Slightly more than half (51.4%) belonged to dual-income households, while 56.2% of the respondents reported a monthly household income between three and six million KRW.

Table 1. Respondents' Profiles

		n	%
Gender	Male	544	49.4%
	Female	558	50.6%
Education level	High school	107	9.7%
	College	191	17.3%
	Undergraduate	628	57.0%
	Graduate	176	16.0%
Type of income	Single income	536	48.6%
	Dual income	566	51.4%
Income level	< 3M KRW	97	8.8%
	3-4M KRW	189	17.2%
	4-5M KRW	219	19.9%
	5-6M KRW	212	19.2%
	6-7M KRW	131	11.9%
	7-8M KRW	128	11.6%
	> 8M KRW	126	11.4%
Region	Seoul	302	27.4%
	GSA	373	33.8%
	Others	427	38.7%
Child's grade	G3	129	11.7%
	G4	136	12.3%
	G5	135	12.3%
	G6	146	13.2%
	G7	191	17.3%
	G8	194	17.6%
	G9	171	15.5%

Table 2 shows how emergency remote learning was carried by survey respondents' children during the first half of 2020. It indicates that 78.4% of their children's learning was disrupted; they were unable to attend schools in-person at least once a week and were forced to continue their learning remotely. When children engaged in online learning, the most frequently used method was watching video lectures broadcasted on EBS or recorded by teachers, while 21.5% of the children experienced real-time video conferencing.

Table 2. Child's Educational Activities

		n	%
In-person class frequency (per week)	1 day	386	35.0%
	2 days	256	23.2%
	3 days	176	16.0%
	4 days	46	4.2%
	5 days	238	21.6%
Types of online class*	Video conferencing	237	21.5%
	EBS	399	36.2%
	Recorded lecture	399	36.2%

*Multiple choices allowed

Because the dependent variable (i.e., satisfaction level) was measured at the ordinal level, a series of the Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to compare the satisfaction levels among parents with different characteristics. As a non-parametric counterpart of analysis of variance, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the statistically significant difference between two or more groups of each of the independent variables (McKight and Najab 2010). Following any significant difference for variables with more than three levels, Dunn's test was performed with a Bonferroni adjustment for post-hoc pairwise comparisons of the groups. Given the limited literature and theory on this topic, the significance level was conservatively set at .01, to reduce the type I error. All analyses were conducted using Stata 15.1 (StataCorp 2017).

3.2 Semi-structured Parent Interview

Based on the survey data, we conducted follow-up interviews to examine parents' lived experiences and perceptions of public English education during the pandemic to gain a contextualized understanding of the survey results. We first recruited four participants from two metropolitan cities—two from Seoul and two from Busan, the second largest city in South Korea, located in the Southeast region. We interviewed 15 parents using snowball sampling. The parents were first asked to fill in the questionnaire we had used for the survey, and we initiated the interview with their answers and tried to obtain more detailed accounts of specific points we found important in relation to the research questions. Each interview was conducted for 15 to 30 minutes and voice-recorded when allowed; some parents did not consent to being recorded because of their harsh criticism of government policies. All interviews were transcribed, thematically coded, and triangulated with the survey findings and previous studies.

Table 3 summarizes the backgrounds of parents participating in this project. In comparison to the survey respondents' profiles, the parents interviewed may have represented the following groups: female, educated, upper-middle or higher class, dual-income households, and parents of elementary school children. Despite these representational differences between survey respondents and interview participants, as demonstrated by the findings in the next section, these socioeconomic factors had no statistically significant effect on levels of satisfaction with public English education. Additionally, interviewees' children engaged in remote online learning more frequently than survey respondents' children—a factor that was found to be significant in terms of the satisfaction level. Thus, we determined that the interview data could be useful to contextualize survey findings by providing narratives about parents' lived experiences and perceptions of the issues raised by emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis.

Table 3. Interviewees' Profiles

Parent	Gender	Education level	Type of income	Income level	Region	Child's grade	In-person class frequency	Online class*
1	F	Undergraduate	Single	6-7M	Busan	7	2 days	V
2	F	Graduate	Dual	6-7M	Busan	6	1 day	V
3	F	Graduate	Dual	4-5M	Seoul	3	1 day	E
4	F	Undergraduate	Dual	5-6M	Gyeonggi	6	1 day	E
5	M	Graduate	Single	5-6M	Seoul	8	2 days	E
6	M	Undergraduate	Single	> 8M	Gyeonggi	4	1 day	V, E
7	F	Graduate	Dual	5-6M	Busan	6	1 day	R
8	F	Graduate	Single	> 8M	Seoul	3	1 day	E
9	F	Undergraduate	Dual	5-6M	Gyeongsangnam	5	3 days	V
10	F	Graduate	Dual	7-8M	Gyeonggi	6	1 day	-
11	F	Graduate	Single	4-5M	Chungcheongnam	3	2 days	V, R
12	F	Graduate	Dual	7-8M	Chungcheongbuk	6	1 day	R
13	F	High school	Dual	5-6M	Gyeonggi	6	2 days	R
14	F	Graduate	Dual	> 8M	Seoul	7	1 day	E
15	M	Graduate	Dual	7-8M	Gyeonggi	9	1 day	E

*V: Video conferencing, E: EBS, R: Recorded lecture

4. Results

4.1 Survey

As seen in Figure 1, 67.4% of parents were highly or somewhat dissatisfied with the current public English education offered during the first six months of the pandemic ($M = 2.25, SD = .62$). Table 4 shows the statistical results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests along with, when applicable, those of Dunn's post-hoc tests on the parent satisfaction level.

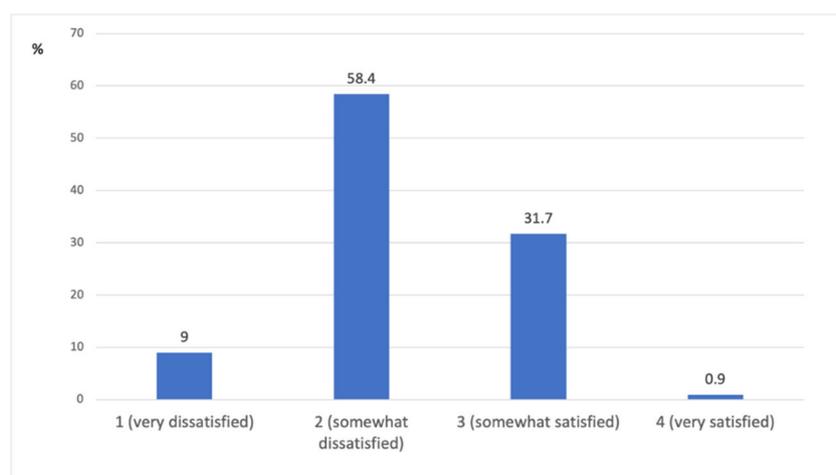


Figure 1. Satisfaction with Public English Education during COVID-19

Among the 10 grouping variables included in this study, only three variables yielded statistically significant results. Parents showed different levels of satisfaction depending on their region ($\chi^2 = 23.947, p = .000$). Parents who resided outside the GSA showed a significantly higher satisfaction level compared to those in Seoul or the GSA. The frequency of in-person class was another significant factor associated with parental satisfaction ($\chi^2 = 37.106, p = .000$). The level of satisfaction of the parents whose children attended schools in person only once a week was significantly lower than that of other groups whose children received in-person instruction more frequently. Among the variables related to the practices of online learning, online class through video conferencing was the only variable in which the level of parent satisfaction differed ($\chi^2 = 12.703, p = .000$).

Table 4. Results of Kruskal-Wallis Tests on Parent Satisfaction Level

Grouping Variable	Category	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i> -value	Significant Difference
Gender	(1) Male	2.26	0.63	1	1.013	0.314	
	(2) Female	2.23	0.61				
Education level	(1) High school	2.41	0.61	3	8.642	0.035	
	(2) College	2.29	0.65				
	(3) Undergraduate	2.21	0.62				
	(4) Graduate	2.21	0.58				
Type of income	(1) Single income	2.23	0.60	1	0.722	0.395	
	(2) Dual income	2.26	0.64				
Income level	(1) < 3M KRW	2.32	0.57	6	4.178	0.653	
	(2) 3-4M KRW	2.25	0.69				
	(3) 4-5M KRW	2.29	0.70				
	(4) 5-6M KRW	2.20	0.57				
	(5) 6-7M KRW	2.21	0.58				
	(6) 7-8M KRW	2.27	0.60				
	(7) > 8M KRW	2.19	0.55				
Region	(1) Seoul	2.18	0.59	2	23.947	0.000	(1)-(3), (2)-(3)
	(2) GSA	2.16	0.61				
	(3) Others	2.37	0.63				
Child's grade	(1) G3	2.28	0.66	6	5.654	0.463	
	(2) G4	2.20	0.61				
	(3) G5	2.25	0.61				
	(4) G6	2.24	0.64				
	(5) G7	2.31	0.60				
	(6) G8	2.18	0.62				
	(7) G9	2.26	0.62				
In-person class frequency (per week)	(1) 1 day	2.08	0.60	4	37.106	0.000	(1)-(2), (1)-(3), (1)-(4), (1)-(5)
	(2) 2 days	2.32	0.61				
	(3) 3 days	2.31	0.62				
	(4) 4 days	2.41	0.54				
	(5) 5 days	2.35	0.62				
Online: Video conferencing	(1) No	2.20	0.62	1	12.703	0.000	(1)-(2)
	(2) Yes	2.39	0.61				
Online: EBS	(1) No	2.24	0.63	1	0.081	0.775	
	(2) Yes	2.25	0.61				
Online: Recorded lecture	(1) No	2.23	0.63	1	0.583	0.445	
	(2) Yes	2.27	0.61				

These statistical findings highlight three significant points about the parental (dis-)satisfaction with public English education during the times of social crisis. First, emergency language learning during the crisis evoked shared concerns and discontent among South Korean parents. Parental socioeconomic status (SES) is a prominent factor contributing to parental involvement and students' academic achievement in English in South Korea (Kim 2015, Park and Jang 2012, Park et al. 2013, Woo 2013). Additionally, the English divide between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds becomes pronounced with higher grades, creating dissatisfaction among South Korean parents (cf. Kim 2019). The survey results, however, show that regardless of their social class, gender, or other social and educational position, South Korean parents were dissatisfied with the public English education affected by this unprecedented social crisis.

Second, the frequency of in-person instruction was a prominent factor that was positively correlated with South Korean parents' satisfaction; parents of children who attended schools in-person once a week were less satisfied with their current English education compared with the other groups. Furthermore, the effect of in-person instruction on parental satisfaction partially explains the statistical significance of the region in the survey results. Because the outbreak was more severe in metropolitan Seoul and neighboring cities, municipal governments and public health authorities in these regions implemented stricter social distancing protocols, and public schools were obliged to offer online learning more frequently. According to a chi-square test, the relation between the frequency of in-person instruction and region was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 307.3, p < .001$). Parents living in Seoul or GSA responded that their children were less likely to attend in-person class.

Third, the type of online instruction was another prominent factor for South Korean parents' overall satisfaction. In particular, parents whose children received synchronous English language instruction using platforms such as Zoom and Webex showed a higher level of satisfaction compared with other parent groups. However, no statistical differences in the level of parental satisfaction were observed between children learning through EBS or pre-recorded lecture videos, and those without the videos.

4.2 Interview

The questionnaire used in the survey was completed by the parents who participated in the interviews, and the results confirmed the findings of the nationwide survey. Thirteen out of fifteen parents indicated that they were dissatisfied with public English education during the pandemic. Additionally, the variables identified as statistically significant in the nationwide survey results, namely region, the frequency of in-person instruction, and video conferencing, appear to have a significant impact on their level of satisfaction, as illustrated in Figure 2. The following sections detail their reasons for being (dis-)satisfied with the current state of public English education under the emergency education plan. Their statements were categorized into three themes: shared concerns and discontent, the frequency of in-person instruction, and a preference for synchronous online learning.

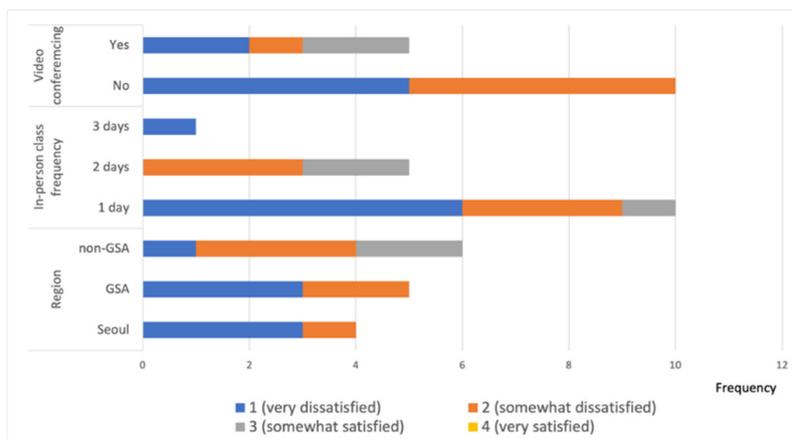


Figure 2. Interviewees' Satisfaction with Public English Education during COVID-19

4.2.1 Shared Concerns and Discontent with Public English Education During a Crisis

According to the quantitative data, dissatisfaction with English education offered in public education during the pandemic is a shared emotion among South Korean parents, regardless of their SES, education level, children's grade level, and gender. During the interviews, many parents similarly shared their concerns about their children's academic achievement in English during the crisis, and expressed increased feelings of frustration, tiredness, and anger regarding the prolonged emergency language education and its perceived ineffectiveness.

I think students learn nothing in public English education these days. (Interview #4)

I have never forced my son to study. But I started to worry about him not learning any English at all [through remote language learning]. (Interview #10)

Additionally, prolonged emergency English education negatively influenced the parents' sense of self-efficacy. Parents' self-efficacy refers to their perceived capabilities to aid in their children's learning and school success (Hoover-Dempsey and Sadler 1995, 1997). A low sense of self-efficacy can evoke increased feelings of helplessness and loss of control over their children's academic achievement (Bandura 1995, Cuevas 2020). Indeed, many parents expressed feelings of frustration when they were unable to fully monitor their children's online learning and provide adequate support.

It's hard to figure out what my son is learning in asynchronous English language classes. I am concerned about his achievement. (Interview #3)

Although I am very unhappy about the current public English education practice, there is nothing I can do to make it better. (Interview #8)

I am worried because my daughter is losing interest in learning English...But I don't know what to do. (Interview #12)

4.2.2 The Frequency of In-person Instruction

According to the survey, a majority of South Korean parents prefer in-person instruction and consider it as more effective. During the interviews, many parents described in-person language learning more “engaging,” “interactive,” and “meaningful” while describing online language learning “limited,” “one-way,” “teacher-directed” and “easily distracting.”

Teachers can constantly monitor students’ progress during in-person instruction, which is difficult in online language learning. (Interview #1)

Unlike in-person instruction, kids rarely receive feedback in online English classes. I think that is why students tend to achieve less [in online language classes]. (Interview #5)

In in-person instruction, students are under pressure to speak in English, at least saying a few words in English. However, there is no such pressure or expectation in online instruction. (Interview #10)

I believe that in-person instruction provides an authentic English learning environment that supports meaningful interaction and collaboration among students. (Interview #11)

Thus, many South Korean parents prefer maximizing in-person instruction to facilitate their children’s successful English learning and use. They believe that in-person instruction creates an interactive and supportive language learning environment in which students are provided support and guidance to engage in meaningful interactions with their peers in English.

Furthermore, the relation between the frequency of in-person instruction and region in terms of parental satisfaction were also revealed in the interview data. While all of interviewed parents residing in Seoul or the GSA were dissatisfied with the public education, some parents from non-GSA regions felt that the schools were functioning normally because their children attended physical classes more frequently.

My daughter’s school didn’t close except for the first two or three weeks after the outbreak. She attended school at least every two days. Compared to other regions, students in this region attended school more frequently. I felt that the school functioned normally because of regular classes. (Interview #9)

4.2.3 Synchronous vs. Asynchronous English Language Teaching and Learning

In all interviews, the parents highlighted the immediate need to provide and/or maximize synchronous English instruction in public education.

All the English classes in middle schools are 35-minute long but the pre-recorded English lessons my son’s English teacher provided were much shorter ... It was very disappointing. (Interview #2)

I really can’t understand why schools don’t provide synchronous English classes. How can students learn English by simply sitting in front of the television and watching EBS? (Interview #13)

I heard that private school students can actively participate in group discussions and presentation using a video-conferencing platform. However, my children are expected to learn English just by watching EBS. This is so upsetting. (Interview #14)

Evidently, many South Korean parents consider synchronous instruction as more effective in learning English online compared with asynchronous instruction. Furthermore, many parents expressed concerns about growing disparity in English learning between students who received synchronous English instruction and those who did not. Such concerns are invariably connected to the issue of private English education, which could further widen the education gap (cf. Kim 2015, Park and Jang 2012).

During the current pandemic, the education gap in English will only widen because there seems to be a huge achievement gap between students who can afford quality English education and those who solely rely on recorded classes. (Interview #9)

My kids are learning zero English these days. I am really worried because many children in Gangnam [the most affluent neighborhood in Seoul where parents pursue private education most proactively] are receiving extensive private English education to mitigate the learning loss caused by the pandemic. (Interview #15)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Using a nationwide survey and follow-up interviews, this study illuminates the factors affecting South Korean parents' (dis)satisfaction with public English education during the current pandemic. The survey results showed that the variables of region, frequency of in-person instruction, and the use of video-conferencing tools were significantly associated with the level of parental satisfaction. However, the variables relating to parents' SES, education level, and gender were not statistically significant. The interviews with parents more clearly indicated that dissatisfaction with emergency English education during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is a shared psychological response experienced across social class and gender. Although parents understand that the abrupt outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges to the public education system, it has also evoked feelings of discontent, concern, and even lack of self-efficacy in managing their child's education. Such unfavorable emotions toward public education during the pandemic were immensely provoked in English education, as parents' strategic investment in English has been at stake in South Korea (cf. Bae and Park 2020, Lee 2016). These findings suggest that parental dissatisfaction results from the interaction of the social situation parents are currently facing and their constructed beliefs about English education.

This study confirmed the common expectation that South Korean parents are more satisfied with in-person instruction than remote learning and with synchronous than asynchronous online learning methods. They consider in-person instruction and synchronous language learning as more effective and authentic than other types of language instruction because achieving meaningful English learning, according to many parents, requires face-to-face interactions and constant monitoring of students' English usage and their progress. Following heated public discourse surrounding the issue of teachers' refraining from using synchronous platforms (Gwak 2020, Mun 2021), the Ministry of Education has encouraged teachers to use video-conferencing tools more frequently (Ministry of Education 2021). However, in such a situation, the government cannot accommodate all requests from parents to mitigate their dissatisfaction as educational policies should align with other social and health policies.

This study invites us to think about how to address the issue of parental dissatisfaction effectively, as higher parental satisfaction contributes to school success (Friedman et al. 2007, Parkes and Ruth 2011, Sung 2020). The parents interviewed in this paper expressed concerns that emergency English education would exacerbate learning loss and disparities, worsening the English divide in South Korean society. They expected affluent parents to consume expensive private English education services, as it may compensate for the limitations of public English education lacking interactions and feedback. Though parental dissatisfaction may be seen as a somewhat “natural” response to the uncertainty and contingency of public education during COVID-19, it can function as a catalyst that leads to devaluation of public English education and increasing the dependence on private education.

In fact, the widening disparities in educational outcomes by distance or online learning during the pandemic have become a critical social issue. Reimers (2022) suggests that it is important to provide equitable education to all students in order to support their continued learning and mitigate the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on education. This study highlights the importance of providing students with quality distance and online learning opportunities in public English education so that all students regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds and parental support can engage in meaningful development of English competence.

This study has several limitations. We collected empirical data after the first wave of the outbreak made immediate and tremendous impacts on society and education. The changing pandemic situations and subsequent public health policies and social distancing protocols may continually affect school policies as well as parents’ beliefs, practices, and satisfaction. In addition, the variables relating to parents’ perceptions of their children’s English learning process and personalities should be considered in future research. Interestingly, interviewed parents believed that students with high levels of self-regulation and motivation were unaffected by such an emergency situation and distinctive learning methods. Additionally, this mixed-methods research project requires a longitudinal and in-depth qualitative investigation of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on various stakeholders to gain a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of their perceptions and practices related to English learning and teaching.

Despite these limitations, this project highlights the multidimensionality of parental satisfaction as it involves not only individual variables but also contingent public health and educational policies during a crisis. As parents play an important role in children’s academic success in contemporary school culture (Macledo et al. 2013, Olmedo and Wilkins 2017), it is important to understand the multidimensional and multi-layered aspects of parental satisfaction with public education in preparation of a post-pandemic society.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Primary, Secondary

Appendix

Excerpt from the questionnaire (questions used in this study)

I. Backgrounds

1. Gender

Female

Male

2. Education

High school

College

University

Graduate school

3. Type of income

Single

Dual

4. Monthly income level

less than 3M KRW

3 – 4M KRW

4 – 5M KRW

5 – 6M KRW

6 – 7M KRW

7 – 8M KRW

more than 8M KRW

5. Region

Seoul

Busan

Daegu

Incheon

Gwangju

Daejeon

Ulsan

Gyeonggi-do

Gangwon-do

Chungcheongbuk-do

Chungcheongnam-do

Jeollabuk-do

Jeollanam-do

Gyeongsangbuk-do

Gyeongsangnam-do

Jeju-do

Sejong

6. Grade of the oldest child

- Grade 3
- Grade 4
- Grade 5
- Grade 6
- Grade 7
- Grade 8
- Grade 9

II. Child's learning process characteristics

1. How often did your child attend in-person class every week after the school opened in the spring semester?

- 1 day
- 2 days
- 3 days
- 4 days
- everyday

2. What type of English class did your child take when it operated remotely (check all that apply)

- Realtime video-conferencing (using Zoom or Webex)
- Watching EBS video clips
- Watching video clips recorded by your child's school English teacher

III. Parents' satisfaction

How satisfied are you with emergency public English education at your child's school under COVID-19?

- 1 (very dissatisfied)
- 2 (somewhat dissatisfied)
- 3 (somewhat satisfied)
- 4 (very satisfied)