

The following is the full text of the interview that *The English Connection* conducted with Dr. David Kellogg, a featured speaker at the 2024 Korea TESOL International Conference. An abridged version of the interview appears in the Spring 2024 issue of *The English Connection* (Volume 28, Issue 1, pp. 10–12).

On Kellogg, Vygotsky, Halliday, and Shakespeare

An Interview with Dr. David Kellogg

TEC: Thank you, Dr. Kellogg, for allowing time for us to do this interview. To start off, would you tell us a little about your background, both before and in Korea, what fields your degrees are in, and your areas of specialization as well as special interests?

Dr. Kellogg: The pleasure – nay, the honor – is really my own, David. But first let me say something general and anodyne; otherwise I'm afraid that what might follow will make me seem utterly unhinged. I think that a lot of the big decisions we make in life look poorly motivated and inexplicable in hindsight. When we recollect all of the circumstances, we can usually see that they were reasonable enough at the time. It is only that what was essential turned out to be merely important, while what might have seemed trivial turned out to be essential.

So, for trivial reasons, I chose to study Oriental languages at the University of Chicago. It was mostly because I just didn't want to do Greek or Latin, and the common core at UC wanted us to start with classics. Then I dropped out and went to see the world instead of graduating.

In retrospect it seems like a crazy thing to do – I was on the dean's list and had only about a year left. But the choice was really between paying to learn languages badly in a classroom in Chicago and getting paid in order to learn them really well out where they were actually spoken. So I went.

And I never went back. I had studied Chinese, but I didn't think it was really possible to go live in China. Instead, I first spent about two years in the Middle East studying Arabic, writing and doing odd jobs, none of which had to do with teaching (translating, book reviewing, being a cinema extra). Somehow I got on the wrong side of a civil war in Syria in 1980, and it occurred to me while I was in prison and the police were trying to figure out if I was really as dumb as I looked, that I could have a stable job in a quiet place and avoid this sort of thing altogether if I only had some kind of English teaching qualification. Fortunately, the Syrian government did eventually arrive at the inescapable conclusion that sometimes appearances do not deceive. So I got out of prison, was deported from Syria, went back to Chicago, and got enough money working as a welder for the General Motors Company to go to London and do a teaching certificate: It was called the Royal Society of Arts diploma back then. Teaching didn't come naturally to me, and I think I just eked out a pass on the course.

At first I thought I would just go back to work in Algeria or Sudan, but hitch-hiking through Hungary, I learned from Orbusz, the travel agent that found you homes to sleep in at night, that I could go to China after all. All I needed was a Soviet student card, which they were happy to sell

me, along with a cheap ticket to Beijing on the Trans-Siberian railway. It cost me a little over eighty US dollars round trip, and when I sold the return ticket to an Australian backpacker in Beijing, I had enough money to live in China for a year.

As it happened, I stayed in China for twelve years, teaching, getting married, and writing my first book. The book was pretty forgettable: a runaway non-seller that bankrupted my small publisher. It was mostly letters home, with some translations of Chinese literature to entertain my mother, but it did get me into graduate school in England without ever finishing my first degree. That meant that my first real degree was an MA in applied linguistics from the University of Essex: I got a distinction, but more importantly, I got to study with people like Henry Widdowson and Keith Johnson (who were pioneers in communicative language teaching), and I heard talks by people like Peter Skehan on individual differences in language learning outcomes (he had just finished a big book on the topic).

I also had Keith Brown, who was an old-school Cambridge grammarian, and Andrew Radford, who was a hard-core Chomskyan who really couldn't see the forest for all the tree diagrams he drew. At the time, I was mostly interested in the applied side, not the linguistics: I considered myself first and foremost a communicative teacher – the whole communicative movement was still young and exciting. Even when Henry Widdowson and Keith Johnson invited me to do a PhD in applied linguistics, I declined and returned to China to teach instead.

But back in China, I discovered the work of Vygotsky and that of Halliday almost simultaneously. Peter Skehan had warned me against Vygotsky, and Widdowson had a strong dislike for Halliday, but that only made them all the more interesting to my perverse intellect. Soon I started to realize that I'd gone down the wrong path again.

First of all, I really was a grammar nerd after all, and – even worse – I was systematically interested in education, sociology and psychology and not in just teaching one thing after another, one year after another. Secondly, Vygotsky and Halliday spoke to me with what sounded like a single voice: The story of human development is, in some really literal sense, language development, first as a historical phenomenon and then as a learning experience in every human life.

Vygotsky had died long before I was born, but Halliday was still alive, and eventually I got a grant to go off to Australia and do a PhD. Halliday himself was already retired, but I did get a chance to study with his students and colleagues and got to know his wife Ruqaiya Hasan, whose criticisms of Vygotsky were the topic of my PhD thesis.



Michael Halliday, Linguist

I taught myself enough Russian to translate Vygotsky (with help from Google Translate and my former grad students), and in the middle of the thesis, I discovered not only that I was starting to agree with Ruqaiya, but Vygotsky had agreed with a lot of these criticisms too, and he was doing something about it when he died.

I also got to know Halliday a little – I wrote a second book on Halliday, Vygotsky, and Shakespeare, and managed to give him a copy before he died. I still have a little note of

appreciation that he wrote by hand (he never really learned how to use a computer). The PhD won a vice-chancellor's award or something, but for me the real prize of my work in Australia was that hand-scrawled letter from the greatest linguist of the twentieth century.

TEC: What was it that was the impetus for you coming to Korea so many years ago?

Dr. Kellogg: Again, it all seems arbitrary and almost accidental, but that's really just because back then I didn't know what I was doing quite as well as I do now. My wife wanted to study, so we went back to England while she did Victorian literature *in situ*, at King's College in London; I just tagged along and followed her around, doing university jobs that didn't really pay very well.

When she got her degree, I didn't want to stay in England, but we couldn't go back to China. I did get hired at a few places but they got cold feet when they learned I was married to a Chinese woman: At the time "international marriages" were not really illegal but they certainly weren't a thing. I had had a number of Malaysian students when I worked at the University of Lincoln and Humberside, and I had had Korean students when I worked at the University of Warwick. So it looked like either Malaysia or Korea.

My Korean students had included members of the then illegal teachers' union, some of whom had been fired in the 1987 movement. They were all excited about the government plan to introduce English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools in 1997. Some were for it, because they thought it would slow the growth of private education (which was also illegal then) and some were strongly against it, because they thought it would tighten the grip of US imperialism on Korea. I thought I'd better come and have a look, before I made up my own mind. So I joined the EPIK program and came to Korea.

I guess I thought that after running ESL programs for grad students in England, I was going to be a big shot in research and development here in Korea. But EPIK thought – quite rightly too – that I should get some experience teaching children first, so they sent me to a middle school in a suburb of Daegu for my first real experience in teaching kids. I don't think the kids got much out of it, but I sure did.

Firstly, I learned that I wasn't much good at teaching children. This was frustrating and provoking, but it also intrigued me, the way that finding out any glaring weakness that you never noticed before always does. I'd been reading Vygotsky and Halliday, so I knew I had an awful lot to learn, and I knew it wasn't just a matter of not having my own kids to play with. Secondly, I learned that the kind of communicative teaching I'd learned in the UK really wasn't much good for kids or for Korea: It just wasn't a situation where English served any conceivable communicative purpose, and the attempts to make it do so (information gaps, games, and so on) were pathetically artificial and bathetically theatrical. Thirdly, I found out that, thanks to the IMF and the aforementioned grip of US imperialism, the value of my EPIK salary in British pounds would be less than half of what we'd counted on to pay off our debts. So we ended up staying here much longer than I'd planned, and by the time we had enough money to leave, we didn't want to any more.

So you see, sometimes what looks like dumb fate is just dead reckoning. Maybe, as they used to put it back in Chicago, if it wasn't for bad luck, we wouldn't have had no luck at all.

TEC: At a KOTESOL regional conference panel discussion last autumn, you mentioned that machine translation and AI chatbots such as ChatGPT may spell the end to English as a global language and that can be a good thing for EFL teachers. Could you expound on that?

Dr. Kellogg: Let me start with the moral of the story once again. If you are a linguist, you understand how different ways of speaking invariably mean different ways of thinking. So if you believe in intellectual diversity – and I do – then you have to conclude that a global language is a terrible idea: It's really like promoting ideological monoculture or depending on a single cultural hydrocarbon as our sole source of energy. Of course, you can argue that a "global language" doesn't have to imply universal monolingualism. But that ignores the real choice that speakers of other languages have.

I think there's a good reason that immigrants to English-speaking countries want their kids to put English first, even at the cost of becoming monolinguals. There's a good reason why a whole generation of Korean kids were exported, sometimes with one parent and sometimes without, to Canada, the USA, Australia, or New Zealand, where they grew up with impoverished Korean culture, without a Korean education and sometimes entirely without the Korean language. And there's a good reason why the number of human languages seems to be steadily dwindling. Some of it is simply genocide, but some of it is the steady rise of global language.

Suppose you ignore all of this and try instead to choose the worst possible global language, from a Korean point of view – the one that is antipodal to Korea in phonology, in lexicogrammar, and even in the way abstract concepts are formed – you would have to choose English. But it doesn't really matter which one you choose: the whole idea of a global language is gate-keeping. It's not, after all, the global language of farmers or even fishermen. It's not even the most widely spoken mother tongue – that would be Chinese. It's just the lingo of jet-setting businessmen and government officials. So all global languages – Greek; Latin; literary Chinese; in the eighteenth century, French; and in the late nineteenth century, German – have been gratuitously hard to learn: Difficulty isn't a bug, it's a feature. And as a result of this gratuitous gate-keeping difficulty, all global languages have supported language-teaching industries like our own. It's one of the few working-class globe-trotting jobs left, besides fishing; that's how I got into it, and I imagine the same thing is true for a lot of KOTESOL folks.

It seems to me that there are two sides to this job, a sunny side and a rather shady one. The sun-lit side is teaching. As Goethe said, and as Vygotsky never tired of repeating in all nine different languages he knew, you don't really know your own language until you have tried to learn another one. It's only foreign language learning that makes the medium of language perceptible translucent and viscous, so we become conscious of it and appreciate the role of language in thinking for the first time. It can't be a coincidence that the most advanced science concepts and literary ideas always seem to come into a language from some foreign language. Teaching is just enlightenment, on a scale that we can all handle.

But the shady side is testing. Of course, it's good to know where you stand and how far you have to go, just as it was good for me to find out I wasn't good at teaching children. But the purpose of testing isn't that: It's gate-keeping. So a researcher who does testing for a living eventually loses the will to teach and sometimes even the will to live. A linguist has to be appalled by how arbitrary and yet life-changing testing is, how atomistic and alienating the "discrete items" we produce in item response theory really are. A teacher who has to mark a big stack of compositions at the end of the term knows how this can drag you down into the most

demoralizing and dehumanizing pedantry. When you see how your students treasure every little “A+” and dread every mere “A,” you can’t help but feel a bit of a fraud.

Now, just suppose we had a device that magically removed all of the pedantry and fraud, just the way that typing eradicated the pedantic teaching of handwriting, just the way that spell checker eliminated the teaching of those fraudulent spelling “rules” (e.g., “l” before “e” except after “c,” which doesn’t even explain *their* or *kiddies*, or “When two vowels go walking the first one does the talking,” according to which *does* should rhyme with *lose*). Imagine that, instead of OMR tests and five-paragraph essays, where students can simply summon AI assistance, we had to bring in face-to-face interactions in intimate settings, unmediated by technology. It goes without saying that we’d have to hire a lot more teachers, and that would mean – first of all – doing something about the scandalously low professor-to-student ratio here in Korea. Then we could surgically remove MOOCs and cyber universities, which spread like viruses during the pandemic – “universities” where you never even see your “classmates” (i.e., your fellow fee-paying students’ mugs). We’d have to replace them with smaller, more intimate classes where everybody knows everybody else’s name and people can really learn from each other.

Of course, traditional EFL wouldn’t give up without a fight. There would be – that is, there will be – a long and pointless struggle to enforce arbitrary rules against the new tech in our classrooms, just as we had long, pointless struggles to keep out cellphones. We saw a good example of how self-defeating those struggles are at the Regional KOTESOL Conference in Gwangju, where our otherwise sane presenter taught us how to use ChatGPT to design questions – in which the use of ChatGPT was very strictly forbidden to students! And of course, the new tech will inevitably eliminate a lot of those testing jobs that in the end boil down to slamming doors in people’s faces. Good riddance!

In return, we get to focus where we should have focused all along – teaching foreign languages as if learning them was just the next logical step in learning your own language and being able to uncover it for others. Then English will really open eyes without threatening egos, it will make way for high science without stamping on the low arts of everyday speech, and it will ultimately teach kids how at home they really are in Korean, not just in the way they talk but even in the way they feel and think. Learning Korean after studying English will be just like coming home after a long trip abroad. And that will make what we do far more indispensable to Korean education than any “global language” can.



Lev Vygotsky, Psychologist

Besides, Google Translate, all by itself, has eliminated the threat to diversity of having a global language and made it possible for you to read reams of stuff that is simply not economic to translate. That includes most of Vygotsky. So what’s not to like?

TEC: You have done a lot of reading, writing, and research on Vygotsky and his ZPD (zone of proximal development), and translation of his works as well. What is it that keeps you so laser-focused on Vygotsky’s work?

Dr. Kellogg: “Laser-focused” is a good way to put it. On the one hand – yes, we’re working on our fifteenth volume of Vygotsky in Korean (Sallim Publishing), and with my dear friend Nikolai

Veresov, we've got four of them out in English now (Springer). That does suggest a narrow bandwidth, a single wavelength pointed in a single direction. But on the other hand, when something is widely cited and even quoted, it starts getting fuzzy and faded, bent out of shape and blurred at the edges, and a lot of the work has had to do with trying to restore the original sharpness and clarity of the light he sheds on things.

Back in the early years of this century, Ms. Kwon Minsuk and I wrote a piece called "Teacher Talk as a Game of Catch," and in it, we rather casually remarked that Vygotsky believed in group zones of proximal development, and we wondered whether a class represented a single zone or several clashing ones. We submitted it to the *Canadian Modern Language Review*, which was edited by Sharon Lapkin and Merrill Swain at that time. But the reviewers rejected it, on the grounds that a collective zone was simply impossible, and that everybody knew Vygotsky had individual zones in mind: that was, after all, how teachers scaffold children one by one by one. I went off and did some homework and discovered that Vygotsky has a great deal to say about the group ZPD and how it maps onto whole classes of kids, but absolutely nothing to say about individualized scaffolding. So Merrill Swain, who was an ardent Vygotskyan, told me not to take "no" for an answer, and we eventually got it published in 2005.

That was really just the beginning. CMLR published our piece as practitioner work rather than serious research, and it was widely ignored, or written off as being dogmatic and boring. But even the most widely circulated Vygotsky quotes show that he measures that ZPD in years, not in minutes or moments or even months. Besides, if he's just talking about minutes, moments, or months, why does the "D" stand for "development"? Why not just call it a zone of proximal learning? Vygotsky distinguishes between a zone of actual development, which is what individuals do alone, and a zone of proximal development that can only be shown in collaboration: If a child really can do unassisted tomorrow what the child has to have assistance to do today, doesn't that just mean that the task you've just given the child is really part of the actual and not part of the proximal zone of development? Finally, if you define the zone by the same means you use to measure it, that just means that the child is ready to learn whatever the child can learn next. That doesn't seem like a particularly useful insight for teachers, does it?

It's taken us seventy or eighty articles (*Applied Linguistics*, *Modern Language Journal*, *Language Teaching Research*, *Language and Education*, *Linguistics and Education*, *Culture and Education*, *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, and *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, just to name a few) to even broach some of these problems in print. Ultimately, I suspect, to solve them we are going to need to resurrect the dead sciences that Vygotsky worked in while he was alive: pedology (which was the Soviet version of child development), defectology (which was their equivalent of special education), and psychotechnics (which was something like human resources management, but without a labor market).

We will also have to cull some of the branches of science we now have. One of the lessons of the decline and fall of applied linguistics – the now widely acknowledged and irremediable split into a business-oriented TESOL and an academically oriented pure linguistics that Guy Cook wrote about – is that my generation really drew disciplinary boundaries in the wrong places. "Applied linguistics" really implies that there must be some other kind of linguistics that has no real world application, and "sociolinguistics" implies that there is some kind of linguistics that ignores society. Can anyone explain to me the difference between "cognitive linguistics" and "psycholinguistics"? None of that seems tenable to me, and none of it was thinkable for Vygotsky – or for that matter, Halliday.

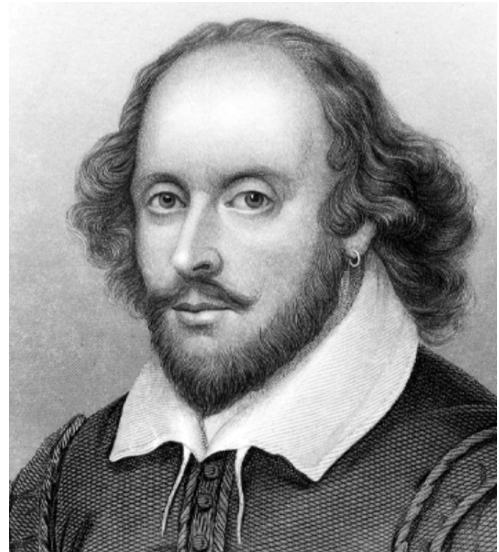
TEC: At our upcoming international conference, your featured session is entitled "Rote, Role, Rule: Halliday, Vygotsky, and Shakespeare on Play Development." Intriguing title, I must say, but I'm not quite sure of the relationship that the three "R"s have to the three luminaries? Could you unravel this teasing title a bit and give us a peek preview of this talk?

Dr. Kellogg: "Rote, Role, Rule" was the title of an article that Guy Cook helped us publish in 2009. Guy had just done a whole book on Language Play for Oxford, and he wanted to do a special issue of *Applied Linguistics*. Dr. Kim Yongho and I wrote a piece on how language play seems to conflate three very different things: repeating the speech and the speaker in chants and songs, varying the speech and the speaker in role play, and repeating patterns of speech and speaker in rule-based games. These three different kinds of play represent three different stages of development – and not just child development. They also represent different stages of literary history, culminating in the emergence of modern novels with all the rule-based language play you can find in Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (which, you guessed it, my wife is now teaching!).

TEC: And also teasingly titled is your other invited session: "METAPHOR IS WAR: Forming and Forgetting Science Concepts Through Language Play." I get the first part that's in all caps: It's a conceptual metaphor – at least it's formatted as one. The second part is fascinating: language play and scientific concepts? Could you elucidate on this as a presentation preview?

Dr. Kellogg: Yes, the all-caps indicates conceptual metaphor, although my presentation as a whole is quite critical of Lakoff and Johnson and the conceptual metaphor framework (in fact, I am presenting it partly because it was rejected for a seminar in which Mark Johnson was taking part!).

I just don't think that conceptual metaphor handles the most important kind of serious language play: grammatical metaphor. That's when adolescents manage to turn processes into participants, like when you turn *to grow up* into a thing, *growth*, that can be measured, classified, and – crucially – defined as a scientific concept.



William Shakespeare, Playwright

This happens slowly because metaphor is a tug-of-war between the child and the teacher: The former is tugging the metaphor in the direction of a concrete image (i.e., an everyday concept), while the latter, if she's worth her salt, knows how to tug the metaphor in the direction of an abstract, academic concept. To take a highly seasonal example, the child thinks of an "examination" as an actual piece of paper with ink on it, but the teacher has to conceptualize it as a form of evaluation. The child thinks of Christmas as presents, while the adult thinks of expenses, bonuses, end-of-the-year balances and new year's resolutions, sometimes even sentimental feelings and/or religious concepts.

I think this is really true of the way our scientific concepts develop out of everyday, concrete experiences – and of course, Vygotsky says that every foreign language concept is a scientific concept, even though it's at the same time some other person's everyday concept. Take, for example, "solar wind," something my father has published a lot about recently. The child thinks of "solar wind" as an actual wind, and even adults are hard put to explain how there can be solar wind in space. Similarly, the child thinks of "plasma waves" as actual waves, and can't really tell us how there can be water waves in space.

This turns out to be partly the fault of our science books, which stress rather sensational concrete images rather than verbal or mathematical meanings. It turns out that even the most sensational image doesn't stick in the memory as well as verbal or mathematical meanings; they are not self-reinforcing the way that systems of concepts are, or the way that a good rule-based game is. Take the "blocks" game Vygotsky used to study concept formation, or the "measure of generality" that he developed to show how conceptual hierarchies are organized. We can use these games to show how "air wind" and "solar wind" are related to some higher concept, like "stream of particles," and *plasma* makes sense, first as a kind of language game (in the Wittgenstein sense) and then as part and parcel of a larger understanding – actually, solid, liquid, and gas account for only a very small part of our universe, the vast bulk of which is made up of different kinds of plasma.

TEC: Parental pressure is a strong phenomenon in public schools and private academies in Korea for both the teachers and administrators. Is it better to heed or push back more on this pressure?

Dr. Kellogg: That's an easy one to answer! I'm still – wholeheartedly – with those progressive Korean teachers at Warwick who brought me here nearly twenty-five years ago, and who still form the vast majority of the teachers who read our Vygotsky books. Suicide, of course, is not a tactic, but striking is, and I wholeheartedly support strikes in favor of the right to provide guidance to students in class. Without guaranteeing the right to guidance in life, there is no way to guarantee a zone of proximal development. Pushing back against parents who would deny this to teachers is simply pushing back against the way social progress lags behind the zone of proximal child development in a country like Korea. It's the right thing to do, any way you look at it.

TEC: Somewhat related to the previous question: If teachers are so influential in shaping the upcoming generation, why is there such a gap between their salaries and, say, those of businessmen?

Dr. Kellogg: We don't usually think of teachers as workers, but they are. Not in the sense that my more Marxist friends insist on, that is, because teachers use tools. I think tools are a rather trivial aspect of teaching.

Teachers are workers in the good old sense that Marx himself had in mind: They produce a very important commodity. The important commodity that we are producing as teachers is skilled labor, and it has the amazing property of being able to produce more and more commodities and more and more productive labor.

That places teaching dangerously close to the beating heart of all forms of production, but it also means we have incredible social power to bring about change. Teachers have the job of

producing more producers; they are the actual producers of production potential. More than that, they have the potential to change the very way production is organized.

Right now, production is not organized in the interest of any actual producers; on the contrary, we are taught to organize the minds of our future producers in the interests of production. If you just think a moment how the government has been treating the construction workers and their organizations – undermining the closed shop, banning union activities at construction sites, and locking their leaders up as North Korean spies – and you compare it to the way the same government has been treating the real estate cartels, I think you will see what I mean.

But construction work doesn't necessarily involve teaching workers to be critical about the way construction work is organized; teaching really does. Construction work doesn't involve learning how to build your own edifices; teaching, in a very real sense, always does. I think the amazing thing is not that teachers are paid less than businessmen, it's that businessmen tolerate teaching at all. I guess that shows how indispensable we are to them.

The feeling, by the way, is by no means mutual; I came to Korea and took part in compulsory elementary English education hoping to see English education without businessmen in it. That's an unfinished project, if there ever was one!

TEC: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to add to conclude this interview?

Dr. Kellogg: Just this: I expect quite an earful at KOTESOL, and I very much look forward to it. See you there!

TEC: Yes, we'll see you at the conference on April 27 and 28 at Sookmyung Women's University. Thank you for your time for this interview.

Interviewed by David Shaffer.

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