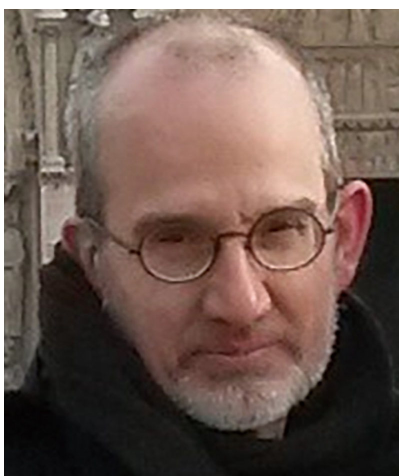
On Kellogg, Vygotsky, Halliday, and Shakespeare

Dr. David Kellogg, Sangmyung University

David Kellogg has spent a quarter century living, teaching, researching, writing, and translating in Korea. As a researcher at Sangmyung University, he is tirelessly translating the works of Lev Vygotsky. In his featured session at KOTESOL 2024, "Rote, Role, Rule: Halliday, Vygotsky, and Shakespeare on Play Development," Dr. Kellogg will deal with rote play, role play, and rule-based games. In his invited second session, he will be dealing with metaphor as language play and the different views on it by Shakespeare, Halliday, and Vygotsky. Below is a wide-ranging interview with Dr. Kellogg for which The English Connection *is quite grateful — Ed.*

***The English Connection* (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, Dave. 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.

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). Even when they invited me to do a PhD in applied linguistics, I declined and returned to China to teach instead.

▲ ***Michael Halliday, Linguist***

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.

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: 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 anymore.

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.

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.

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!

▲ ***Lev Vygotsky, Psychologist***

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 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.

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 economical 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: 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 measured 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?

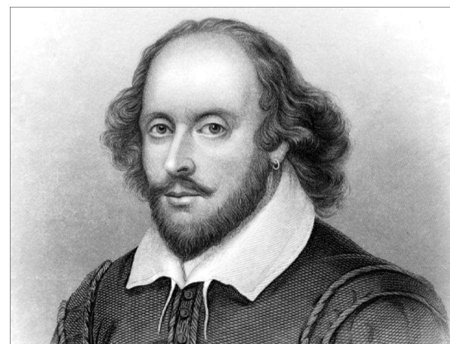
TEC: At our upcoming international conference, your featured session is entitled "Rote, Role, Rule: Halliday, Vygotsky, and Shakespeare on Play Development." Intriguing title, I must say, but I'm not quite sure of the relationship that the three "R"s have to the three luminaries? Could you unravel this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

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.



▲ ***William Shakespeare, Playwright***

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.

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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* For an extended version of this interview, go to Dr. Kellogg's invited speaker page on the KOTESOL 2024 International Conference website.