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Language, Identity, and Power: The Needs of the Newcomer Korean English Language Learner

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More and more Korean high school students are coming to the United States by themselves to study or coming with only one parent, leaving the other parent at home, who usually acts in a financially supportive role (Lee, Falbo, Doh, & Park, 2001). It is predictable that these students' difficulties are tremendous given that they need to acquire a new language and construct or reconstruct their identity in the dominant culture. However, there is little research on Korean high school students' needs in the United States. As Lee (1996) pointed out, the stereotypical image of Asians as a "model minority" might overlook the Korean students' struggles and difficulties in the mainstream culture. Given that each ethnic group has its own different cultural and linguistic background, it is important to discuss how the language and literacy experiences of Korean students might affect their learning in a new country. Despite the importance, however, there has been a tendency in research literature to group Korean students in broad categories such as "Asians," which often fails to uncover immense differences among this specific group.

To expand an understanding of the Korean students, this study explored one newcomer student's high school experiences through

the method of case study (Yin, 2003). The study aims to provide American teachers with theoretical and practical perspectives on recently arrived immigrant Korean adolescents to help them better understand the students' needs and difficulties in the mainstream classroom. Three questions guided the case study: (1) What difficulties does the student encounter in the mainstream context?, (2) How do the student's schooling experiences in South Korea influence learning in the U.S?, and (3) How does the student's identity form or shift in a mainstream context? Through the Korean student's narratives, this paper reports her challenges with regard to language and literacy learning when she interacts with American teachers and peers in the mainstream culture.

Research on language, identity, and power

The study is grounded in the theoretical perspectives of language, identity, and power. The notion of identity has been represented in many various ways such as voice, the self, self-identity, social identity, and cultural identity (Davidson, 1996, 1997; Miller, 1999; Norton, 2000). Many scholars (Miller, 1999; Norton, 2000) agree that identity is a complicated concept which cannot be defined in one simple phrase.

Two relevant perspectives on identity are important here: essentialist and anti-essentialist (Hall, 1996). Essentialist perspectives focus on *who I am*, treating identity as a fixed concept. Anti-essentialist viewpoints focus on *who I become*, dealing with identity as a shifting notion. Anti-essentialist views follow the postmodern concept of identity, which avoids static notions and keeps the options for change open. Identity is a noun,

but it acts like a verb (Bauman, 1996); it is a constant becoming (Wenger, 1998).

This study takes the anti-essentialist stance because the stance provides a lens for viewing the Korean student's identity development. The student in the study shifted her emotional identities as powerful or powerless according to the contexts she was in, demonstrating that her identities are multiple and changing. Identity is not the presentation of *who I am* but *who I become* in a social matrix, which is continuously in the process of transformation through relationship to others (Greene, 1991).

Although identity is closely related to language and literacy learning, there has not been much literature about this issue. Because most second language acquisition (SLA) theories are concerned about students' language development focusing on oral or written proficiency, the relationship among identity, power, and learning has not been discussed widely.

However, several scholars' works are conspicuous in an attempt to include the issues in second language theories. For example, Norton (2000) argues that:

Because many SLA theorists have not addressed the experience of language learners with reference to inequitable relations of power between language learners and target language speakers, they have struggled to theorize the relationship between the individual language learner and the language learning context. (p. 3)

To explore her argument, Norton (2000) studied the experiences of five female participants for her case study. They were sometimes motivated, extroverted and confident and sometimes unmotivated, introverted and anxious. The participants

sometimes remained silent and sometimes spoke. Their different attitudes towards learning a second language were shown to vary according to different contexts such as when they were within the dominant culture or the subdominant culture. All of the participants had difficulty speaking under conditions of marginalization. If they felt inferior, they were hesitant when speaking. Norton's findings illustrate how individuals act and position themselves differently according to different contexts.

Another example of the significance of identity and power in relation to language learning is given by Walsh (1991). She conducted a study of Puerto Rican students in the United States, and found out that the students were differently positioned in relation to one another, the subject matter, and the teacher. Namely, according to the power that the students were aware of, they positioned themselves differently. This study illustrates that learning does not simply occur without any interrelationship of the social power involved. Through the study, Walsh argues that in an unequal society where power relations are continuously at work, participation and dialogue do not occur as freely among language learners.

Miller (2000) also discussed the issues of language, identity, and power by conducting studies of several Asian immigrant students who recently arrived in an Australian high school. The study illustrates how the students are positioned by the dominant Anglo-Australian teachers and peers. Some students mentioned that they did not like to speak because of their different accent which was not recognized as legitimate under the mainstream power. In other words, they were not recognized and accepted as legitimate group members by others (Gee, 1996). The Australian

classmates did not simply talk to the students. Fearing not to be accepted by the mainstream members, the students remained silent without challenging them. Repositioning did not occur in this context.

The findings of the studies above are well supported by the perspectives of the interactive positioning “in which what one person says positions another” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). How people construct a positive identity can be dependent on how they are positioned by others’ power. In this view, positioning someone in certain ways limits or extends what that person can say and do (Adams & Harré, 2001) and inhibits or provides the options of choice of speaking forms, actions, and thoughts—limiting or extending the right (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Positioning individuals as deficient may deny them the right to correct their cognitive performance (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003) and positioning them as intelligent may allow them the possibility to improve performance.

How do these characteristics of positioning relate to individuals’ identities? According to Taylor, Bougie, and Caouette (2003), the identity process operates from a perspective of positioning. Any positioning, including interpersonal and intergroup positioning, involves issues surrounding individuals’ identities (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). An individual’s identity is dynamically created and recreated through positioning, and it changes through positioning in social interactions. As people position each other, assignments such as rights, duties, and obligations are involved. How people construct a positive identity is largely dependent on how they are positioned by others. If people are positioned as powerful, the positioning helps people

form their identity as powerful. If people are positioned as powerless, the positioning does not assist in constructing their positive identity. Individuals' identity development can be closely related to how they are positioned.

Each of the examples cited indicates how language learning, identity, and power are related with each other. That is, they imply how the dominant power might affect English language learners' language and literacy learning.

Methodology

Data was collected in the form of in-depth interviews with Sarang (all names are pseudonyms) who came to the United States from South Korea alone for the purpose of study. She was in the ninth grade when I interviewed her and was attending a high school in western New York. The formal interviews were conducted four times for about two hours to three hours. The researcher interviewed her in Korean because she had difficulties in expressing herself in English and wanted to speak in Korean.

Interview memos describing Sarang's "illocutionary force" such as her gestures and tone, and research journal logs documenting the researcher's reflections soon after the interviews were brought up for data analysis. All of the formal interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded. The interview data in Korean was carefully translated into English. Since there is no exact relationship between the English and Korean languages (Brown, 1987), attempts were made to find equivalent words and nuances to match with English expressions.

In categorizing my data, I followed Spradley's (1980) seven steps of taxonomic analysis: (1) Select a domain for taxonomic analysis, (2) Look for similarities based on the same semantic relationship, (3) Look for additional included terms, (4) Search for larger, more inclusive domains, (5) Construct a tentative taxonomy, (6) Make focused observations to check out my analysis, and (7) Construct a completed taxonomy. More specifically, I first found general themes such as difficulties and identity shifts based on my research questions. Then, I looked for the possible factors which influence her challenges. Finally, I closely looked for the specific examples to support my arguments.

Findings and discussions

Based on my research questions, three main themes emerged while analyzing data: language obstacles, invisible outsider, and shifting identities.

Language obstacles

Sarang, who had been staying less than one year in the United States, kept mentioning her English language difficulties during the interviews. Although she has studied English since she was a third grader in Korea, she reported that her level of oral English proficiency is quite low because most English instruction in Korean schools focused on grammar for tests. Therefore, it is predictable that Sarang has much difficulty in listening to and speaking in English. The school that she was attending did not have ESL programs, so she had to receive instruction in the

mainstream classes. She was in a status to sink or swim in the classroom. Sarang narrated her language difficulties in mainstream classrooms:

At first I couldn't understand at all what American teachers and peers were talking about. Although it is much better now compared to the first semester, it is still hard to understand them. When teachers write on the board, then, I can understand, but when they simply say without writing on it, I rarely understand. They speak so fast. So fast. American peers can write down while teachers speak in the class, but I can't. I can write down some words, but I miss most of them.

Sarang's remarks illustrate her difficulties in understanding spoken English in particular. As a Korean student who had rarely been exposed to actual Americans in the old country and learned only through "official texts" (Gyo-gwa-su) distributed by the Korean Ministry of Education, it was hard for her to follow American teachers' rapid speech in English. Teachers in South Korea sometimes provide opportunities for students to listen to audiotapes of the dialogue section in the English texts during class, which are recorded by native English-speaking people. However, they usually speak slowly in the tape, not at normal speed. In addition, the dialogues in the text are often not authentic and out of context. Therefore, there is a huge gap between what she learned in Korea and what she is learning in the U.S.

Another example of her language difficulties is her English pronunciation. For example, she pronounces "topic" as /topic/ as it is spelled, "news" as /nus/, and "coffee" as sounding like "copy" because there is no /f/ sound in the Korean language. These

English words are so commonly used in everyday life in Korea and Korean people are not aware of whether these are Korean or English words. In other words, they are “borrowed words” (Duffy, 2003; Kim, 2006). In addition, there is no accent such as primary accent on words in Korean language. Korean is a quite flat language, unlike English which has various intonations. Therefore, it is hard for her to correct the accustomed pronunciation to pronounce just as American people do. Because she pronounces English words in her Korean way, it is hard for her to understand if American people do not pronounce words as she does. For example, in class, an English Language Arts teacher said, “Today’s topic is equity.” She did not understand what the teacher meant before she wrote down the words “topic” and “equity.” Later, after seeing those words on the board, Sarang said, “Aha, /topic/, /eqwuti/.”

To solve this pronunciation problem, Sarang uses her handy electric dictionary that she brought from Korea. She hears the sounds of words by pressing the keyboard of the electronic dictionary. Whenever she finds words that she is not sure of how to pronounce, she uses the electronic dictionary. For instance, when she has something to ask her American teachers such as a question about assignments, she always writes down the sentences of her question on the paper. After she closely checks grammar which she is good at, she practices the sentences several times by reading aloud with the help of the electronic dictionary. Then she goes to teachers to say what she practices. However, she notes that it is frustrating to see her teacher’s puzzled face when she utters the sentences. Sarang mentioned that she could not understand why American teachers did not understand her English. Her frustration

is shown by her remark, "I am afraid of saying in English in front of native English-speaking people."

These examples above illustrate how difficult it is for Sarang to be in the mainstream classrooms in which teachers speak fast and they do not even understand her English despite her attempts. It appears that her English experiences in her Korean school affect her current English difficulties. Incongruence between English learning in Korea and English learning in the United States is one of the main factors of her difficulties in the mainstream classroom. Sarang reported that most mainstream teachers do not take her language difficulties into consideration and do not try to adjust their speed in class. The findings suggest that it is Sarang's individual issue that she has to solve in her own way, rather than the teachers' role, which is modifying their instruction for the student's needs.

Invisible outsider

As shown in the findings, the most difficult issue in her school life is due to her inadequate English proficiency. However, the problem is not in the English language per se. It is related to mainstream teachers' and peers' treatment and attitudes towards her. To them, this recent immigrant Korean student, who does not understand what they say and usually sits quietly in the back of the classroom, might look like a "deficient" and "invisible" outsider. The following example illustrates mainstream teachers' treatment of this Korean girl.

Sarang: In class, a global teacher always calls me and Miso (her Korean friend) "ladies," instead of calling our

names individually although we changed our Korean names to English names, Kay and Jane, respectively. The first time, I thought he could not distinguish me and Miso because Asian people might look the same to him. But, it has been a few months and he still doesn't call us by our names [American names]. He remembers and calls the other students' [American peers] names exactly.

Researcher: How did you feel when you were being called "ladies"?

Sarang: I didn't feel good, of course. I wanted him to call me Kay.

Researcher: Then, did you ask him to call you, Kay, not "ladies"?

Sarang: No, I did not.

Researcher: Why not?

Sarang: 'Cause (long pause). I don't know. My English is not good. I am afraid of talking to him because he might not understand me.

Sarang's long pause indicates her concern about whether she should confront the problem or not. As a Korean student unused to confronting teachers who are seen as authority figures, and as a student who cannot express herself clearly because of the language barrier, she could not face the problem. Rather, she remained silent. Even though Sarang knows that it is not appropriate to be addressed as "ladies" when all the other students are called by their individual names, she could not confront the problem and exercise her right to be called by her name. The teacher treated her and her friend Miso as a categorized Asian group and not as individual agents. By treating them differently from the other American

students, he marginalized and positioned Sarang and her Korean friend Miso as outsiders. In this context, Sarang does not belong to the community in class.

Some teachers appear to be somewhat oblivious to her language difficulties. For example, Sarang asked a biology teacher about the assignments that she missed because of her absence the previous day. The teacher spoke fast about the assignments. Sarang asked her to repeat the instructions "one more time." Then, the seemingly irritated teacher simply said, "Never mind, you don't have to do that." Instead of explaining again, the teacher simply ignored Sarang and treated her as a bothersome student.

Not only did teachers treat Sarang as an outsider, but also American peers in the classroom. For example, Sarang was in the same group with her friend Miso in the science class. At that time, one boy in the same group looked at them and said to a boy in another group next to him, "Our team is bad," implying that Sarang and Miso are not good enough to contribute to his group. He treated Sarang as an invisible person. In his mind, Sarang is portrayed as a deficient student who is mostly silent because of difficulties in expressing herself in English.

This is not the only case in which Sarang encountered discrimination from her American peers. Some students also talked behind her back. Even though Sarang did not understand exactly what was being said, she could "sense" whether they talked about her or not. One day, when she turned around, a boy who was talking behind her said to his friend, "That's OK, she does not understand English, anyway."

The examples above illustrate how the recent immigrant student is struggling in the mainstream classroom. Language is a

major obstacle to recent immigrant students. The findings suggest that the problem is not only in English itself, but the treatment by the dominant group who view language minority students as deficient. The mainstream teachers do not realize that the students are fluent in their primary language and intellectual thinkers. Under the English language power in the mainstream culture, which is a single official language in the United States, language minority students might feel powerless and act passively towards mistreatment by mainstream teachers and peers. As Tan and Moghdam (1999) pointed out, if the subordinate group does not challenge the privileged power, it is like acknowledging the dominant group's power and giving it even more power.

Shifting identities

Sarang shows her strong desire to assimilate into the mainstream culture. However, it is not an easy task to do so. It appears that her identity as Korean precludes her from achieving her desire. Her identity shifts between the home culture and the target culture. For example, Sarang always has lunch together at a cafeteria with other Korean students. In that way, she admitted that they formed a lunch group. There are only three other Korean students in her school -- Miso and two boys who are a tenth grader and an eleventh grader, respectively. Sarang disclosed that she wanted to have lunch with her American peers:

I do not like to have lunch together because of Kyung's (eleventh grader) attitude. He thinks he is something. He boasts that he has much money, I mean, his parents are rich. But he is stingy. He never spent money for

us (Korean friends) although I bought him snacks.... I want to have lunch with Sandy's group (American friends). I think it is helpful for me to be with them because I can learn English while they talk. But I can't because we already formed a lunch group. Also I am hesitant to join Sandy's group because I am concerned that I might feel stupid when sitting with American friends and keeping silent while they are talking (because of my problem of understanding English).

Sometimes Sarang stayed longer in the library or the computer room to avoid having lunchtime with the Korean group. Sarang's narration illustrates her identity conflict. She does not feel comfortable in either group. It is as though her mind is with the American group, but her body is with the Korean group. She did not want to be in the Korean lunch group because of a Korean boy who she felt uncomfortable being with. However, she did not join the American lunch group, either. Her desire to learn authentic English from the American group was strong. However, she did not join them, feeling afraid of appearing stupid to her native English-speaking peers.

Sarang chose to stay in the Korean group despite her uneasiness. What caused her ambivalence? Korean culture appears to be embedded in her identity. Generally speaking, Korean people are very conscious of other people's eyes and opinions. They do not want to hurt other people's feeling by refusing or rejecting them. Therefore, even though they do not like to do something, they simply follow what the group wants. This is a very collective society's characteristic (Gudykunst, 1998). Other people's eyes are indicators of individuals' actions. It is likely that Sarang's

conflicting identity is due to her primary culture which is embedded in her minds.

Another example of Sarang's desire to fit into American culture is shown in her remarks:

Sarang: I really want to get close to American peers. If I can speak English well later, I will act and play like American peers do, not thinking myself as Asian who cannot speak English well.

Researcher: What do you mean by acting and playing like American peers?

Sarang: Like, speaking English fluently with no accent and hanging around with each other. I will be just like an American.

Her narration about "acting" like and "playing" like American peers indicate that she honestly wishes to assimilate into the mainstream culture. She wants to forget her outsider identity as Asian and assimilate into American culture. Her noticeable remark, "not thinking myself as Asian" reveals that her identity as Korean shifts to Asian. According to her remarks, it is clear that Sarang perceives that Asian people have a different accent compared to "standard" American people. To her, an Asian is not readily accepted as a legitimate person in the American society. She wants to be recognized as an assimilated American person. She believed that once she overcame the barrier, she would be "just like an American." Her identity shifts to American this time according to the contexts. As Lee (1996) claimed, identity is flexible, not stable.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, one recent immigrant Korean student's high school experiences were discussed with a focus on her challenges in the mainstream culture. As shown in the findings, Sarang's difficulties are caused by diverse factors including her English language proficiency and mainstream power. Given that English is her new language, this finding appears to be predictable. However, the important finding is that Sarang's language difficulties are related to her English learning experiences in her Korean schooling. As she reported, English education in South Korea heavily focuses on reading and writing skills for test preparations, but not on the individual's communicative purposes through speaking and listening practices. The lack of opportunities to develop her speaking and listening skills from her Korean schools might affect her difficulties in understanding what American teachers and peers say in class and in communicating with them, as shown in her examples in the American classroom. The study suggests that the students' learning experiences in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context is not necessarily supportive of their learning in the English as a second language (ESL) context.

In addition, her struggles in English are not simply due to her schooling experiences in Korea. They are related to her American teachers' and peers' attitudes and treatment towards her English. In other words, her difficulties do not merely reside in her language learning experiences in Korea, they are also largely related to the dominant group's power. The mainstream teachers and peers did not treat her as an intellectual thinker, but ignored her presence in class, which made her feel isolated and powerless. By treating her

as an outsider who could not be accepted as a legitimate person in a mainstream context, the mainstream teachers and students positioned themselves as legitimate individuals. Accordingly, they positioned the recent immigrant Korean girl as a marginalized outsider. Because there was no challenge by the girl who felt “oppressed” (Freire, 1970) by the power of the dominant group, repositioning did not occur.

This study supports Norton’s (2000) perspectives that language learning is greatly related to identity and power. It depends on how students perceive themselves. It depends on how language minority students are positioned by the dominant group. Language minority students are often hesitant to talk in the mainstream classrooms and remain silent. It is not because of their lack of English proficiency, but because of their perceptions of the power of the mainstream teachers and peers who do not respect “accented” English (Pappamihel, 2002).

In summary, the finding suggests that the Korean student’s difficulties in language and literacy learning are related to her English learning experiences in her native country which focuses on reading and writing for test preparations. The other main finding is that her challenges are associated with the dominant group’s hidden power in the mainstream classroom. Although this research focused on only one Korean student, the findings are useful for teachers working with students from other countries as well. The findings of the study extend our understanding of ELLs, and provide several salient suggestions as follows. These suggestions are particularly aimed at regular classroom teachers and ESL teachers who work with ELLs. First, teachers need to examine language minority students’ previous schooling

experiences in their native country before they assist the students for their second language development. As shown in the case of Sarang, the language and literacy experiences in her country affected her learning in the mainstream culture. Along with the information about the students' previous schooling experiences, teachers' knowledge about the differences between the students' native languages and the English language, including the sentence structure and word pronunciations, is essential. Teachers' close examination of the differences of the languages will help them predict ELLs' difficulties in their learning of a new language and modify their instruction to support the students' learning.

The other important implication of the study is that teachers need to take time to think about how the non-ELLs in their classroom position the ELLs. As illustrated in the findings of the study, there was a "power" agenda in the mainstream context, and mainstream students did not treat Sarang as a legitimate member. It is important for teachers to observe whether non-ELLs accept ELLs as their learning partners in the classroom and attempt to implement classroom activities that can promote active interaction between the groups. In the mainstream context where ELLs construct and reconstruct their identity as learners, it is important for teachers to empower the students and to help them participate in language and literacy learning in a more active way.

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