

The Effect of Age on Children's Second Language Acquisition: Focusing on Family Influence

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This qualitative study investigates the effect of age on children's second language acquisition, based on a theoretical framework of Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation. A homogeneous network sampling methodology was used to recruit six Korean families. First, the author shows statistical data regarding early English education in Korea. Second, she reviews the literature on the CPH. Third, she investigates parents' perspectives on early English education and family influence on their children's SLA. Findings show that (1) Earlier is better for accent and fluency and (2) Early exposure to English and a long stay in the U.S. do not always bring benefits. This research concludes that the study results obtained regarding the effect of age on SLA should not be considered as a basis for rejection of CPH. Finally, this research implies a paradigm shift of ESL researchers and educators regarding L2 learners showing slow progress in language learning: from deficient learners to multi-competent language users.

I. INTRODUCTION

Before I came to the U.S., I had two strong beliefs regarding children's second language acquisition (SLA): (1) Children acquire a second language in the same way that they acquire their first language and (2) The earlier they are exposed to English, the more naturally and rapidly they acquire it. Based on my perspectives on children's SLA, I paid more attention to and exerted more efforts to improve my older son's English while in Korea, especially with regard to grammar. However, I paid little attention to my younger son's English except for the English alphabet. In 2004, when my two sons arrived in the U.S., I realized that they were exhibiting contrary results regarding their SLA. My older son showed successful academic achievement and quick adaptation to English overcoming

various linguistic constraints, although he experienced some emotional difficulties as an adolescent. However, it took almost a month for my younger son to say 'hi.' His silent period lasted much longer than that of other peers with similar background and experience in the U.S. His long silent period did not signify failure at school. In fact, he rarely displayed difficulty keeping up academically with his American peers, although his comprehension was initially unclear. These contrary results in my two sons' spoken English provoked my curiosity about how age affects children's SLA and whether there are other factors influencing it.

In Korea, the general public opinion regarding English is *the earlier, the better*. The issue of a critical period for L2 has long been discussed among parents and educators. Many surveys conducted to investigate answers to this issue have shown opposition to the CPH. Nagai (1997) argues that children's early exposure to English and rich environments for it do not always guarantee "native-like performance" (p. 7). Marshall (2000) points out that learning a foreign language in elementary school is not a magical tool for creating perfect second language speakers. Chipongian (2000) contends that timing can not explain everything regarding SLA. In spite of those arguments against CPH, Korean parents have a tendency to believe that studying overseas at an early age will work as a panacea, allowing their children to overcome various barriers regarding English and other difficulties typically encountered during the language learning process.

Based on my own experiences and considering socio-political situations in Korea regarding SLA, I discuss parental perspectives on early English education and their experiences with their children's SLA. I also explore the effect of age on SLA both at home and abroad. Finally, I connect the findings of the current study to Cook's (1996) concept of *multi-competent* regarding L2 learners in order to shift the perspectives of ESL/EFL researchers and educators regarding those who show slow progress and lack of fluency as L2 learners. I set up two research questions for the current study: (1) What beliefs and perspectives do Korean parents have regarding early English education? and (2) How does early English education in Korea affect children's SLA in the host country?

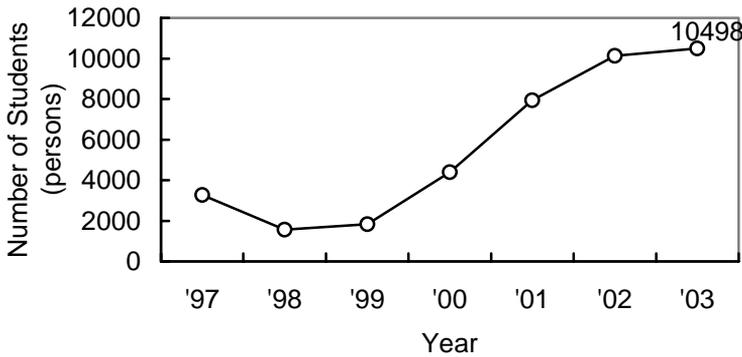
II. STATISTICS ON EARLY ENGLISH EDUCATION

1. The Number of Students Leaving Korea to Study Abroad

Various voices have called for regulations to restrict early study abroad because this trend has caused numerous problems for families and society. One issue involves the fact that children's early study abroad with their mothers has produced many single fathers called *orphan fathers* (men who are left behind in Korea financially supporting their wives

and children abroad). Yet another problem that has been identified involves a staggering education account deficit between Korea and the host countries. Figure 1 shows the dramatic increase in the number of Korean students studying abroad.

FIGURE 1
The Number of Students Leaving Korea to Study Abroad



Source: From the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI).
 The figure shows the numbers in elementary and secondary schools.

In spite of the Korean government’s efforts to reduce the increasing number of students studying abroad and encourage them to utilize Korean public education, the number of children who may be involved in family decisions to study abroad has recently reached its highest point in Korean history, doubling within a year from 2004 to 2005. Table 1 shows the number of elementary and secondary students in Seoul, who left Korea to study abroad in 2004 and 2005.

TABLE 1
The Development of Early Study Abroad

<i>School</i>	Students' Number (SN)	
	2004 (Year)	2005 (Year)
Elementary	1,103	2,453
Middle	1,013	3,478
High	1,672	2,023
Total	3,788	7,954

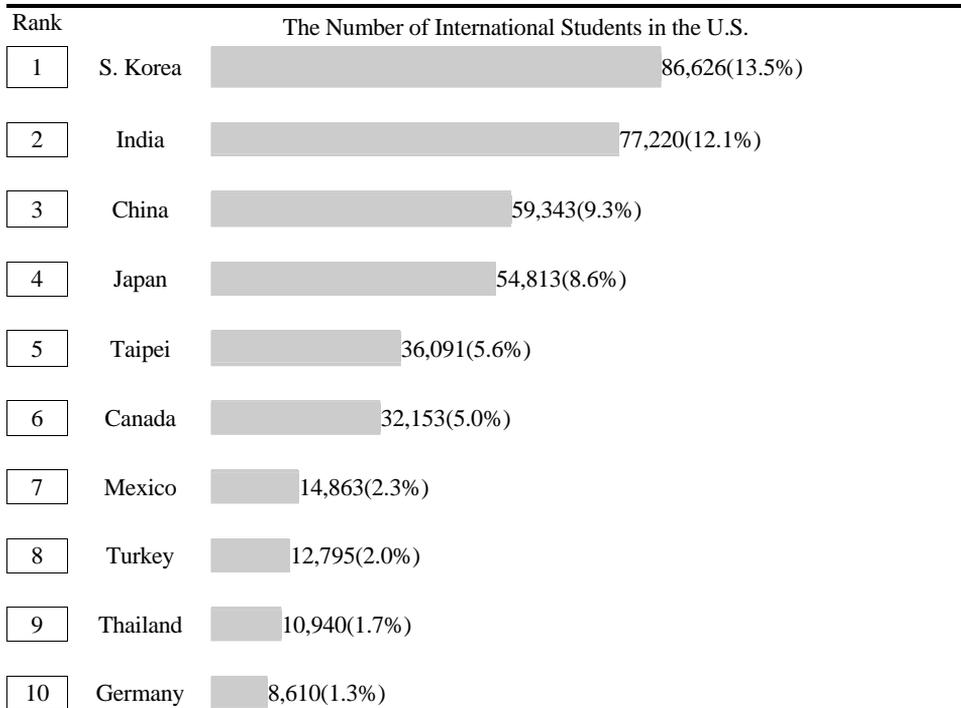
Source: Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education

2. The Number of International Students in the U.S.

Figure 2 indicates the number of students who enrolled in American universities as of

September, 2005. According to the statistics announced by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the number of Korean students studying in the U.S. was ranked first as of September, 2005. In the survey conducted at the end of December, 2004, the number of Korean students in the U.S. was 73,272, or 12.5 percent of the international student population. Within nine months, the number increased by 13,354 and the number of Korean students in the U.S. reached 86,626, 13.5 percent of the total. India, China, Japan, and Thailand followed Korea in top five countries ranking in the international student population in the U.S. in 2005. The special phenomenon among Korean students is that many of them are accompanied by their families (*Daily Economy*, 2001, April 27).

FIGURE 2
The Number of International Students in the U.S.



3. Rationale for the Sharp Increase in the Number of Korean Students in the U.S.

Many parents believe that their children cannot keep up with peers if they do not study English abroad. George Washington University professor Jae-Hoon Im studied the situation of Koreans with early experience in the U.S. He pointed out that among parents

who belong to the high or middle class in the Korean society, a mistaken “mass psychology” exists regarding the matter of early study overseas. It is a central belief within this psychology that, unless parents educate their children overseas, their children will lag behind (*Yonhap News*, 2005, May 25). According to his study, this obsession prevalent in Korean society makes parents who cannot provide their children with the opportunity to study overseas feel guilty or incompetent.

An editorial in the *Korea Herald* (2006, April 28) viewed the situation of *orphan fathers*, mentioned earlier, as very negative for Korean society. According to the author of this piece, the *orphan fathers*' situation has resulted from (1) excessive private education fees, (2) a decrease in the quality of education caused by the current egalitarian school system, and (3) distrust in public education.

III. STUDIES ON THE EFFECT OF AGE FOR SLA

With regard to SLA, the most controversial issue may be early English education, which reflects Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). According to Lenneberg (1967), “After puberty, the ability for self-organization and adjustment to the physiological demands of verbal behavior quickly declines...primary, basic skills not acquired by that time usually remain deficient for life” (p. 158).

In the Proceedings of the 2001 Conference of the Australian Linguistic Society under the title “The Critical Period Hypothesis Revisited,” Moskovsky (2001) states that the issue of a critical period for SLA is considerably less clear and still remains among the most hotly debated issues in SLA research. In the introduction to the book *Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*, Towell and Hawkins (1994) state that we human beings have the ability to learn one or two other languages in addition to our mother tongues, and that the potential for SLA lasts throughout our lifetime.

Much research supports the CPH: Oyama (1976) conducted a study of 60 Italian male immigrants and found that the earlier the exposure to English, the better one's accent will be. He claims that “sensitive periods are preceded and followed by less responsive periods” (Oyama, 1976, p. 88). Fathman (1975) also found that children who are exposed to English earlier have better pronunciation ratings than those exposed when older. Birdsong (1999) states that the evidence of the effect of age revealed in Johnson and Newport's study (1989) has been a cornerstone in the CPH for L2 learners. It is a widely accepted belief that “the earlier people start learning a second language, the more successful they will be” (Nagai, 1997, p. 1). Vergne (1982) argues that children's length of stay in the U.S. is correlated with school adjustment, self-esteem, children's attitude toward school, and home adjustment. While the findings obtained by the above researchers appear to be valid, their

studies did not consider the socio-political climate of learners' home countries or parental perspectives and efforts regarding their children's SLA.

Numerous voices have also been raised contradicting the effect of age on second language acquisition. In *Raising Multilingual Children: Foreign Language Acquisition and Children*, Tokuhama-Espinosa (2001) argues that the language acquisition window opens at the age of eight and never closes. According to him, humans never lose the capacity to learn a foreign language as indicated through numerous studies, and "adolescent and adult learners are actually better than small children in grasping abstract concepts of syntax and grammar" (p. 20). Seliger (1978) proposes multiple critical or sensitive periods for different aspects of language and Singleton (1989) states that there is some supportive evidence but no actual counter one regarding CPH. Harris (1994) argues that there seems to be "a critical period for first language acquisition" and "the commonly-observed and widely-accepted generalization that learning gets harder as one gets older" (p. 2). He also states, "If there is any truth in the CPH, then there may be different critical periods for different language skills, different types of change at different age" (p. 4).

Johnson and Newport (1989) conducted a study of 46 native speakers of Korean and Chinese who had immigrated to the U.S. at different ages and tested their basic English grammar. They examined their morphosyntactic proficiency. The subjects, university faculty or students, arrived in the U.S. between the ages of 3 and 39 and spent a minimum of five years in residence. The grammaticality judgment test consisted of 276 sentences presented on an audiotape. The results showed that participants who arrived in the U.S. before the age of seven reached native-like performance on the test. However, arrivals after that age showed a linear decline in performance through puberty. And those who arrived after puberty performed more poorly than earlier arrivals.

There are several studies that reanalyzed Johnson and Newport's study on the CPH. Bialystok and Hakuta (1994) reanalyzed the data presented by Johnson and Newport and argued that there is no evidence for an abrupt change in language ability after puberty, only for a very gradual decline (Moskovsky, 2001; Bialystok, 1997). They criticized Lenneberg's analysis of the critical period and questioned Johnson and Newport's conclusion. Rather than arguing for an age effect, they attributed the difference between early and late learners in this task to those in vigilance based on age because the task was long, repetitive and demanded intense attention.

Flege, Yeni-Komshian, and Liu (1999) studied 240 Korean native speakers of English who arrived in the U.S. at different ages ranging from 1 to 24 and who had more than 15 years of residence in the U.S. Knowledge of morphosyntax was measured through a test consisting of 144 question items. The results showed that "the ceiling effect was observed among early arrivals and that a constant decline in performance was found among late arrivals" (as cited in Sim, 2006, p. 5) which seems to be contrasted with the randomness

shown in Johnson and Newport (1989).

Most recently Seol (2005) replicated Johnson and Newport's study and found evidence for the presence of a critical period in the domain of L2 syntax. The study was conducted under the presumption that speakers of Korean and Chinese cannot be categorized into a single linguistic group, although both languages are typologically distant from English. Since Korean and Chinese are marked by distinctive linguistic features, "categorizing the L1 speakers of both languages as a single linguistic group results in an examination of potential L1 effects problematic" (Seol, 2005, pp. 6-7). The author studied 34 Korean L2 learners, and the results provided some modest support for the existence of a critical period. For early arrivals, the correlation between time of arrival and performance was found to be significant. Contrary to Johnson and Newport's findings, which argued that heightened sensitivity drops off abruptly around puberty, there was a linear decline of performance in participants from 11 to 15 years of age in her research.

In the 1990s, several studies explored the effect of age in Korean L2 learners. Some researchers have presented a revised version of the critical period hypothesis. Rather than defining a critical period, they used more flexible terms such as sensitive period (Oyama, 1976) and multiple critical period (Seliger, 1978). With regard to the effect of age for SLA, the question seems to be whether L2 is acquired *only within* the definite span of age or *more easily within* the period. However, the study results obtained regarding the effect of age on SLA should not be considered as a basis for rejection of the CPH because "a positive effect of the critical period is hypothesized only for first-language acquisition" (Snow, 1979, p. 178). Romaine (1989) states that the recent studies on early bilingualism denote that the age at which L2 learners first encounter L2 is merely one of many determinants of the new language proficiency.

Singleton and Lengyel (1995) drew a clear conclusion on how the effect of age should be qualified regarding SLA. They made two observations regarding the notion of a critical period: (1) "the available empirical evidence cannot be taken to license the simplistic 'younger=better in all circumstances over any time scale' version" and (2) "the 'younger=better in the long run version of the CPH in respect of second-language learning needs to be seen in the perspective of a general tendency and not as an absolute, immutable law" (p. 4).

Birdsong (1999) points out that the positive arguments for the effect of age are "somewhat misleading" because "there is not single critical period of hypothesis" (p. 2). Rather, he argues for a "varied formulation" of it (p. 2). In *The Myth of the First Three Years*, Bruer (1999) states that a critical period does not seem to apply to L2 grammar learning. Rather, he claims that some maturational constraints affect L2 grammar learning. Chipongian (2000) suggests that Bruer's analogy of a reservoir that gradually evaporates should replace the notion of a window slamming shut regarding one's SLA ability.

Bialystok (1997) argues that the critical period as a descriptive generalization may be statistically correct, but one from which “nothing inevitable follows” (p. 117).

This section introduced various voices regarding CPH, which saw length of stay and time of arrival in the host country as starting points in determining the effect of age on SLA. Most studies have not viewed English learning environments or exposure to English in the home country as important factors for SLA. This paper investigates the effect of age on children’s SLA, putting its focal lens not only on the length of stay and time of arrival in the host country, but also on exposure to English in the home country.

IV. METHODOLOGY

1. Method of Subject Selection

This qualitative study employed homogeneous network sampling to identify prospective participants. I recruited subjects through personal contact with six Korean families who belonged to the Korean Student Association in the university in this town. In this process, I excluded families with children who speak English fluently with a native-like accent due to their infant exposure (two or three years old) to the host country. I also excluded families with children who had just arrived (within six months) in the U.S. regardless of their fluency of English, because it seemed hard for me to obtain rich information from them due to lack of rapport between the new families and me. Thus, the participants were among Korean families with children from K to 12 who had been in the U.S. for more than six months.

2. Methods for Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the parents’ perspectives and strategies with regard to their children’s SLA. Older children were also interviewed to listen to their responses regarding early English education in Korea and the effect of background knowledge on academic achievement in the U.S.

Over ten observations were conducted at the participant children’s homes, at my home, and in the church to which the families belong. I also conducted informal observations when I saw the participant children in the library or at their houses, recording the behaviors and characteristics I saw as important for the current study by taking notes immediately afterward.

3. Participants and Settings

Six families were chosen for this study. Four families consisted of parents and two children, and the other two families were composed of a single mother and one child. All the parents of the families were affiliated with the university as M.A. or Ph.D. graduate students. Parents rarely used English at home and also spoke Korean when getting together in the Korean community. However, the children sometimes used English among peers. Especially the younger children, tended to code-switch mixing Korean and English when talking to each other. The participants included 10 parents and 10 children. I used an English pseudonym for each family to protect their privacy. I call each family using the first child's pseudonym such as Sun's family. The following paragraphs introduce these families. Table 2 summarizes the children's pseudonym in each family.

TABLE 2
Pseudonyms of the Participant Children in Each Family

Family	Sun's	Minsu's	John's	Jeny's	Sam's	Jung's
Older child	Sun	Minsu	John	Jeny	Sam	Jung
Younger child	None	Minhee	Mary	Jimmy	Tom	None

Sun was the only child in her family, the daughter of a woman enrolled in a doctoral program. Sun was a fifth grader. She had been in the U.S. for four and a half years since her exposure to the mainstream as a first grader. She spoke fluent English with a native-like accent. She was very social and active.

Minsu's family also included a son and a daughter. Minsu was a fifth grader, and his sister Minhee was a third grader. They had been in the U.S. for around two years. Minsu's father was a visiting scholar and his mother was in the doctoral program. Unlike other families, their father spent considerable time with his family, supporting his children's SLA. Minsu spoke English well and had excellent reading comprehension. Minhee had a native-like accent and was a fluent speaker of English.

John's family had a son and a daughter. John was a sixth grader like my younger son, and his sister Mary was a fifth grader. They had been in the U.S. for two years. They seemed to have little difficulty in speaking English. Contrary to his talkative and social sister, John did not seem outgoing or talkative, but he enjoyed talking with his parents and sister.

Jeny's family had a daughter and a son. Jeny was a tenth grader and Jimmy was a sixth grader. They had been in the U.S. for just a year. However, Jeny spoke the most fluent English with the most native-like accent of all students in the Korean community. Everybody was surprised at the fluency and accent she displayed as soon as she arrived in

the town. Local Koreans assumed that she must have lived in a foreign country when she was young. Her brother Jimmy was a very quiet boy, like my son. They became very close friends due to this similar characteristic—both boys tended to avoid speaking in public either in English or Korean.

Sam's family had two sons. Sam was a fifth grader and his brother Tom was a first grader. They had been in this community for one and a half years. Their English levels looked so low when they arrived in the U.S. However, when this study started, Sam had little difficulty with spoken English, and Tom had a native-like accent with little difficulty speaking or understanding English. They were very social, and the family enjoyed sports.

Jung's family had a son. He had been here for a year. However, he seemed to have little difficulty in speaking English with peers. When he played with other boys and girls who commanded native-like English, he spoke English without hesitation or difficulty. He seemed very outgoing and talkative.

4. Family Influence on Children's Literacy Building

1) Sun's Family

Sun was exposed to English by her mother since she was three months old in Korea. She was also exposed to intensive English education through her aunt's Spartan teaching methods for several months right after she arrived in the U.S. Regarding my question to what extent she feels that family influence toward Sun supported her SLA in the U.S., Sun's mother said that during the first few months, she could not see whether her reading for Sun in Korea was having a great influence on her SLA and schooling in the U.S., even though Sun's adaptation was very fast and she did not appear to have difficulty regarding English. However, Sun's mother did feel that her daughter's SLA and ability to solve problems regarding her studies increased almost one hundred percent after her aunt's direct instruction. She believes that students who are highly successful in English do better in other areas at school, since they can spend more time and energy on other areas, thanks to the time spared and the reduced stress regarding English. However, she emphasized that parental concern should go parallel with children's early exposure to English and other knowledge in order to get more desirable effects.

2) John's Family

John's parents argued for a positive relationship between knowledge acquired in Korea and SLA in the host country; they presented examples based on their experiences: (1) Their son began to have confidence in math after he felt confidence in English, seemingly because he

could apply his knowledge acquired in Korea to solve narrative math problems written in English, which would have been difficult when his English was not developed during the beginning stage of his stay in the U.S.; (2) Their children's knowledge of phonics seemed to reduce their rejection of English, working as a 'shock absorber' in the transition to school in the U.S. They believed this early training also helped facilitate their children's reading of books more than their speaking; and (3) Their prior knowledge of other fields such as science and history facilitated their understanding of those subjects in American schools.

I asked about the relationship between background knowledge of English acquired by family influence in Korea and SLA in the host country. John's mother said that their children's reading comprehension of some English books seemed to occur rapidly when they had read the translated version of the books in Korea. However, she confessed that she had no strong belief about the connection between L1 reading and L2 acquisition before they came to the U.S. Rather, she seemed only to possess a vague belief that consistently reading books to her children might provide the potential for SLA in the future. In addition to mother-child reading, John had obtained a considerable background in science, world history, and common sense through reading books in Korea. John's father argued that the knowledge they acquired in Korea must have had a great influence on their children's study and SLA in the host country.

3) Minsu's Family

When Minsu's family came to the U.S., their older son's English level was similar to that of my younger son. In contrast with Minsu and Minhee, who are fluent in English and participate in various activities at school and in the community, my younger son still feels uncomfortable when speaking English. I cannot conclude that my younger son's long silent period is due to non-exposure to English in Korea or to a lack of background knowledge in English. Then, what could have caused the big difference? I explored the differences between the two children based on their family influence toward children's literacy building.

Minsu's mother confessed that her children seemed to stay silent for 6 months, and she assumed from their statements that they could not understand what their teachers and peers said for the first six months. She connected their problems with their possible weakness in background knowledge in English and other areas. As soon as Minsu's parents noticed their children's difficulty in their studies, their father decided to become involved in their studies and SLA. He continued his direct instruction of English grammar, reading, and writing for a year during which time, according to Minsu's mother, the children acquired considerable knowledge of English. She believes strongly that her children's background knowledge acquired through their father's direct instruction in the U.S., has been of great help to support their children's academics at school. She also believes that when their

children acquired a certain level of English knowledge with the help of their father's direct instruction and the exposure to the mainstream, their background knowledge acquired by reading books began to function as a facilitator for their understanding of the texts and teacher's instruction, having a synergistic effect. Basically, they see a mutually reinforcing relationship between language development and progress in academic studies.

4) Jeny's Family

Recall that Jeny is the child who has the most knowledge of English and fluency in speaking among the students in the local Korean community. Her native-like accent and fluency surprised the Korean community, and even impressed her American peers and teachers. When asked what perspectives Jeny's parents have regarding the relationship between knowledge of English and other fields acquired by family influence and formal school education in Korea and SLA in the U.S, Jeny's mother said:

In the early stage of SLA in the U.S., I was not quite sure that her early English education in Korea had much influence on her SLA in America. It seems that she had some difficulties for a month, not due to language, but due to the shifts in culture and environment. It took a month for her to adapt to the new culture, school, and friends rather than to English. She had no difficulty in doing her projects and assignments, to say nothing of her studies while at school.

Her knowledge of English and other areas, acquired through early exposure to English and consistent reading, began to positively influence her academics once she adapted to the American school system and culture. In contrast with Jeny's quick adaptation and academic success, Jimmy made slow progress regarding English and cultural adaptation. Their mother attributed Jimmy's slow adaptation to late and inconsistent exposure to English in Korea. She confessed:

His lack of English knowledge made it hard for him for the first six months. He did not seem to understand anything regarding English in class, which made him unable to use his background knowledge to assist him in other areas.

After watching his son's struggle for the first six months, Jimmy's father decided to become involved in his English acquisition. He used a Spartan teaching method to help Jimmy improve his English during the summer vacation. Jimmy's mother revealed that her husband's intensive teaching of English grammar and his attention to his son's vocabulary at home helped Jimmy increase his knowledge of grammar, which somewhat reduced his

resistance to English. She also considers exposure to the mainstream as a major factor that helped with her son's improvement regarding English.

However, she responded rather negatively regarding English as a formal subject in Korean public schools. She said that formal English education at school starts in the third grade in Korea, but the school did not provide any special program for the children who were very advanced in English like her daughter. She argued that a child's personality and characteristics are more important than language itself in children's SLA. She believes that active, sociable children can easily adapt to the new environment, make new friends, and learn English quickly.

5) Sam's Family

Sam's mother believes that knowledge of English acquired in Korea facilitates children's adaptation to the new culture and environment, reducing culture shock and the child's resistance to English itself. She also believes that her son's contact with foreign teachers for two years in the private language institute helped to reduce his awkwardness and preconceptions when he encountered his American peers and teachers in the U.S.

When asked if English knowledge obtained through family help had an influence on SLA or schooling in the U.S., she was very cautious in responding because their children did not obtain much knowledge of English through their parents' help in Korea. This is because they are boys who preferred outgoing activities, and they were young before they came to the U.S.

6) Jung's Family

When asked if her child's academic achievement and general knowledge acquired by family influence in Korea affected his SLA, Jung's mother was very cautious because her son came to the U.S. after only three months of exposure to the Korean elementary school and her son was not exposed to much English other than through movies or cartoons. Rather she assumed that her support through mother-child reading of books in Korea and in the U.S. has helped her son's English reading comprehension in the U.S.:

I read to him for 30 minutes to an hour before bed. I began to read Korean language books when he was four months old, and I still do that now. I read him famous, popular Western books which were translated into the Korean language in Korea. In addition, I made him listen to audio-tapes of both Korean language stories and English language stories for over a year before we came to the U.S. In the U.S., I make it a rule to read 2 to 4 books a day right before bedtime. I read those books aloud regardless of his comprehension.

It seemed that she was paying more attention to Jung’s English reading of books in the U.S. than in Korea. She argued that reading awakens interest in English and promotes children’s motivation, and knowledge accrued through various types of family support can be a strong basis for children’s academic success and SLA in the U.S., as it provides background knowledge in various subjects at school and facilitates their understanding.

Table 3 summarizes the data regarding each family’s reported efforts to help their children accrue background knowledge for L1 and L2 literacy.

TABLE 3
Summary of Data Description for Family Support for Children’s L2 Literacy

Family	Sun	John	Minsu	Jeny	Sam	Jung
Reading Korean books (RKB)	Regularly since 3 months old	Regularly since 2 or 3 years old	Regularly since 2 or 3 years old	Regularly since infancy Inconsistently since 3 years old	Occasionally	Regularly from 2 or 3 years old to 1 st grade
Reading English books (REB)	Regularly since 3 months old	Occasionally	Regularly since 5 years old	Regularly since 18 months old Occasionally since 1 st grade	Occasionally	Regularly from 1 st grade
Private tutoring (PT)	No	For 2 months in Korea for EC	No	Regularly from 6 th grade to 7 th grade for G & SE No	No	No
Private language institute (PLI)	No	Regularly from 1 st to 2 nd Regularly during 1 st grade	No	Regularly from 1 st grade to 6 th grade for G Regularly during 4 th grade for G & EC	Regularly from 1 st grade to 3 rd grade for EC No	No
English worksheets (EWS)	No	Regularly from 1 st grade to 3 rd grade for phonics. Regularly from 1 st grade to 2 nd grade for phonics.	No	Regularly from 1 st grade to 8 th grade for phonics and reading Inconsistently from 2 nd grade to 3 rd grade	No	No
Audio-visual tools (AVT)	Regularly for fun	Occasionally for fun	Occasionally for sounds	Regularly since infancy Occasionally for fun	Occasionally for fun Regularly for fun	Regularly for fun and education
Direct instruction by family (DIF)	For 6 months in the U.S. by aunt	For 2 or 3 years in Korea	Both: For a year in the U.S. by father	No For a year in the U.S. by father	No	No

Note. Background Knowledge (BK), Korea (K), Grammar (G), English Conversation (EC), School English (SE), Vocabulary (V), Reading Comprehension (RC), Quick Adaptation (QA), Academic English (AE)

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Parents' Perspectives on Early English Education

Regarding the influence of age on SLA in Korea, all the parents felt skeptical about the success of their efforts because there was no way to measure or confirm their children's progress and development of English in Korea. Of course, there were standardized English tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC, but they thought their children were too young to take those tests and they did not see them as necessary. Instead, most parents vaguely believed that their effort toward their children's early English education in Korea would increase their children's potential for later SLA in a host country. Some believed that early exposure to English in Korea or in the U.S. played an important role in their children's SLA. Without any effort toward SLA in Korea, children such as Minhee, Tom, and Jung spoke English as if they were native speakers in spite of only one or two years' stay in the U.S. because they were exposed to the American education from Head Start (preschool program for children of low-income families) to the first grade at elementary school. Their parents were convinced of the effect of early exposure to a host country on SLA, especially in terms of spoken English and a native-like accent.

Regarding the children who were exposed to English early in Korea and also immersed into the mainstream in the U.S., the effect of age on SLA was most influential. Sun was exposed to English the earliest in Korea and came to the U.S. as a first grader. She spoke English most fluently with a native-like accent. However, regarding writing and reading comprehension, Sun could not keep up with Jeny who came to the U.S. as a 9th grader and had been exposed to English since infancy in Korea until she came to the U.S. Jeny acquired English grammar as well as considerable knowledge in various fields through consistent reading of Korean books and school education in Korea, which made her more organized, coherent, and knowledgeable in her English speaking and writing than the child with the same fluency and a native-like accent. Contrary to the fixed view on English accent for older L2 learners in host countries (the younger, the better the accent), Jeny had a native-like accent and fluency, probably due to her early exposure to English sounds in Korea.

Regarding English accent, John's, Jeny's, and Sam's parents agreed that earlier exposure is better regardless of the educational settings of English (EFL or ESL). Sun's and Jung's parents agreed that earlier is generally better for all areas of English learning. Sun's mother pointed out that earlier exposure to English should go along with parental concern. Jung's mother argued that the earlier exposure to English in Korea can also produce the similar result if the same conditions and environments as in a host country are given to children. However, Minsu's mother's view on early English education was different from that of the

other parents. She argued that there is a proper time for children to be exposed to English, and it is after the acquisition of their mother tongue and native culture, or after puberty. If children are exposed to English at their early age, their identity and their mother tongue may be negatively influenced. In addition, children who are exposed to English in a host country at puberty or as adolescents without parents or with a single parent may experience severe psychological problems caused by their fluctuating and unstable emotional status, which adds to language barriers and cultural shock, making SLA and adaptation more difficult.

2. Earlier is Better for Accent and Fluency

Sun and Jeny spoke the most native-like and fluent English among all participant children due to their early exposure to English through semiotic and audio-visual tools. Their adaptation was much quicker and their culture shock was much less than other participant children. Jeny, in particular, surpassed her American peers at study thanks to knowledge obtained from constant reading of English and Korean book. John's mother also argued that her children's early and long exposure to English sounds (phonics) made them quickly adapt to reading English books by reducing resistance to English sounds rather than improving spoken English.

The term *earlier* should be more specifically distinguished depending on settings where children are exposed to English: earlier exposure in Korea (an EFL setting) and earlier exposure in the U.S. (an ESL setting). The children who were exposed to English at an early age in Korea did not show remarkable development regarding English in the U.S. For example, John, Minsu, Jimmy, and Sam had similar difficulties for the first six or more months in the U.S. struggling with listening and speaking, although they had been exposed to English for at least one to two years in Korea. Meanwhile, Tom and Jung spoke native-like and fluent English without any exposure to English in Korea because they permeated the mainstream at the youngest age of all participant children (Sam into Head Start and Jung into the first grade).

In conclusion, earlier exposure indeed produces better results in two cases: (1) when the children are exposed to English on a daily basis from infancy on in Korea or (2) when the children are exposed to a host country before or right after entering elementary school. Without these conditions, children tend to show similar responses to English, struggling with listening and speaking for the first six months or one year regardless of their exposure to English in Korea, unless that exposure was constant over several years on a daily basis.

3. A Long Stay does not Always Bring Beneficial Effects

When English itself is put on a measuring scale, the participant parents seemed to agree with the concept that earlier is better. However, their perspectives on early English education were more specific and varied

Earlier exposure to a host country for SLA should have a very positive effect on a child's English. However, parents worried about the loss of Korean identity as well as Korean language destruction, as indicated in the current study. Children who have been exposed to English for long periods in the host country show the phenomenon of destruction of the mother tongue along with second language fluency because they were immersed into the mainstream before their mother tongue's language system was cognitively imprinted.

Among the participant children, Sun indicated the most destruction of her mother tongue due to her long stay in the U.S. (about five years, since first grade). She was more familiar with American cultures and customs than with those of Korea. Her exposure to the local Korean community, where Korean language was used and Korean food was eaten, was not sufficient for her to recover her wavering identity and missing language because the amount of exposure to American culture far exceeded her exposure to Korean language and culture.

According to some parents, children in puberty become very sensitive in many ways, and they become self-conscious in front of others, feeling guilty and ashamed when they make mistakes. They also observed that the children of single mothers or those living in dormitories or with host families must feel severe isolation and emotional difficulty originating from the difference in culture, difference in language, and the separation from close friends and family. Regarding psychological conflicts during adolescence, they stated that if children at puberty or adolescent age cannot get any psychological advice from their parents, close friends, or relatives speaking the same language, it is more likely that they will suffer severe psychological confusion and disorder. Father's influence is very important, especially for boys, because fathers can give a great deal of help and advice to their adolescent children based on their own experiences as men. Puberty is the time when children establish their beliefs and philosophies of life. Living abroad without a parent, especially at that age, can lead such children to develop a very extreme, negative, or sometimes distorted perspective about life and other people.

I came to the U.S. for my doctoral degree with my two sons and without their father, because he had to support us with his work in Korea—my older son was 14 and his younger brother was nine years old at that time. If someone asks me what was most difficult about studying abroad with my sons as a single mother, without hesitation I would say that witnessing my adolescent child's psychological confusion and conflict was the hardest of all. Life with an adolescent son struggling with emotional turmoil can lead to a

similar degree of emotional conflict for a single mother when the child is isolated from his peers and adults of his own gender.

Some parents clearly distinguished spoken English from academic English. They believed that fluency in spoken English does not always predict success at school, though they agreed that a long stay in the host country improves children's fluency and early exposure brings a native-like accent. Minsu's and Jeny's fathers immediately intervened to assist in their children's SLA when they found that their children were struggling with English, which they believed might negatively affect their academic success. They realized that their children could not solve their own problems in acquiring English due to their lack of motivation and their lack of skill in the language. They judged that their children's long stay might not produce a good result without parental interference at an early stage of SLA in the host country.

VI. DISCUSSION

1. How Does Age at Exposure to a Host Country Influence Children's SLA?

Until recently, much research has been conducted to investigate the relationship between exposure age and duration of stay in a host country and SLA. However, most research tends to dismiss exposure age/duration in the home country of the L2 learners. In addition, most researchers have exerted efforts to find solutions regarding SLA depending on L1 theories built on epistemologies from Western perspectives. Thus, L2 learners' exposure to English in the home country has been ignored, and family support for it has also been neglected in the research for SLA. I also did not believe that exposure to English in Korea would have a great influence on children's SLA in the host country before my own experiences with my two sons in the U.S. as a mother and as a scholar in the field of TESOL.

Based on my experience, early exposure to English in a host country seems to have a definite influence on a child's accents. However, my experience with my two sons taught me that a native-like accent does not always mean fluency or accuracy in English. For some children, age produces a positive effect on accent and fluency in verbal English, but for others like my younger son, various other factors may affect their SLA. My own experience, along with data collected in individual interviews and participant observation, taught me that for age to produce a good result regarding SLA in the U.S., various factors such as the child's personality, language learning aptitude, family support, background knowledge, and more should be considered as well as with exposure age. Among those factors in the current research, background knowledge in English and other fields obtained

through family influence was recognized as the most effective factor influencing children's SLA, especially for older children.

For example, although Jimmy is five years younger than his sister, Jeny, he lagged behind her regarding SLA in the U.S. due to his lack of background in English grammar and other academic fields, as my younger son lagged behind his older brother. Jeny and my older son could overcome the language barrier due to prior experiences with English and academic success in their home country. However, younger children like Tom, Jung, and Minhee indicated a very positive relationship between age and verbal English because they were the youngest in the study. They could speak English fluently with a native-like accent within a year in the U.S.

In conclusion, for younger children in first grade or less, exposure age to the host country strongly affects their accent and fluency because their life is play- and activity-centered. For older elementary school children in third grade and above, personality and knowledge of English should be considered along with exposure age as factors influencing SLA because their school life involves both activities and academic study. For quiet children in their early teens, age can work negatively regarding SLA because adolescent self-consciousness may prolong the silent period. However, for secondary school children, their school life is more challenging, which means that new arrivals will have a difficult adjustment at school without background knowledge in English and other fields acquired in advance. Thus, a major factor influencing secondary school children's academic success in a host country is prior knowledge in English and other fields, which can serve as a basis to narrow the language gap between them and their native-speaking peers.

2. How Should the L2 Learners be Perceived by TESOL Scholars and Educators as well as by the Learners Themselves?

Until recently, great efforts have been exerted to identify causes and effects of L2 learning regarding SLA in a host country. The lack of a theoretical framework in the field of SLA led researchers to evaluate L2 learners depending on the theories created for L1 learners from a Western perspective. What is worse, little effort has been made to understand or evaluate L2 learners based on their own social, cultural, educational, or family background, their individual differences, or their academic achievement. In such a situation, L2 learners might well be labeled as deficient or handicapped when they do not demonstrate the same linguistic and academic development as their peers in a host country. With regard to L2 learners who show rapid development in language and academics, their success has been attributed to the educational systems and ESL environments of the host country, disregarding how these L2 learners may have been educated in and out of public schools regarding English, what kinds of strategies and environments have been provided

by their families in their home countries, and how the society and its people in the home country have responded to issues regarding English.

Before conducting this research, I strongly believed that L2 learners, especially those who are young, would acquire English quickly and easily once exposed to the mainstream. I also thought that slow learners must be deficient or delayed in other fields as well as in SLA. However, my own experiences with my two sons in the U.S. caused me to shift my fixed perspectives. Compared with other L2 learners who were exposed to the mainstream at the same time, my younger son showed a relatively slow progress regarding spoken English and reading comprehension, although he showed high achievement in math, art, reading, and computer skills. I patiently waited for him to speak confidently with peers and teachers, still wondering about the cause of his relatively long silent period. However, he has not shown any much progress in spoken English, even after two more years in the U.S.

After conducting this research, I came to believe that some responsibility for his long silence and lack of fluency rested with me. The data collected from interviews with parents was enough to explain why my son has shown such slow progress compared with other participant children for the current research. As many other researchers have done, I made the same mistake of measuring his progress in English with his initial exposure to the mainstream as a starting point. With this perspective, L2 learners who make slow progress are likely to be considered deficient or handicapped as language learners. Accordingly, without a shift in perspective to include exposure to English in the home country, we cannot accurately evaluate L2 learners regarding their linguistic or academic progress in the host country.

According to the data collected for the current research, children who have been exposed to English in both the home country and the host country by family members (especially parents) showed different rates of progress regarding language acquisition and academic achievement. Most participant children at my younger son's age had been exposed to English for a year, or at most three or four years in Korea. They were exposed to English through reading for several years, they had taken English conversation classes in private language institutes taught by native speakers, or they had used English worksheets for phonics for two or three years. Furthermore, some had taken private English instruction from their fathers in the U.S. This type of experience with English in Korea and parental support in the U.S. appear to be major factors facilitating their adaptation to language and culture in the host country.

This research shifted my understanding and preconceptions regarding slow L2 learners. They should not be considered as having problems regarding SLA. They should be understood and considered within the context of their cultures and families. Their lack of English knowledge and slow progress are not their own doing. They are not delayed, deficient, or handicapped regarding SLA. They are normal achievers. If there are problems,

the problems should be attributed to educational systems because education systems in the host country do not cover L2 learners at varied levels of achievement. The problem should be referred to L2 learners' parents because they determine their level of concern and interaction regarding L2 literacy in their home country. Finally, the problem should be investigated through L2 research, where researchers and educators have erroneous perspectives regarding those slow L2 learners, in that they have ignored L2 learners' socio-cultural contexts at the home country as well as in family contexts.

VII. CONCLUSION

The current qualitative multi-case study was conducted to explore the issues regarding the effect of age on children's SLA, and to investigate parents' beliefs and perspectives regarding early English education.

Most parents argued that age affects achievement of a native-like accent and fluency. They observed that children who were exposed to the U.S. prior to the age of seven could speak fluent English and easily change or code-switch mixing languages depending on the situation. Children exposed to the mainstream as third graders could also speak English fluently, depending on personality and early English education provided in Korea. However, children who were never exposed to English in Korea and had shy or quiet personalities showed relatively slow progress in spoken English, but they did not show any difference from their more fluent peers regarding academic progress. For older children with considerable knowledge of English and other fields acquired through reading and schooling in Korea, parents argued that late exposure to a host country did not necessarily produce a negative effect on their SLA and academic success. The findings of the current study revealed that those older children were academically far more successful to say nothing of fluency in spoken English, when compared to younger children. However, children at an adolescent age showed two different responses to English and American culture. Regardless of their academic success, those who were social and active showed a tendency to enjoy the language and culture, while those who were introspective and less social showed resistance in both areas.

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APPENDIX A

Questions for Individual Interviews

1. What do you think makes the difference among children regarding Second Language Acquisition (SLA)?
2. What characteristics do your children have? Do you think their characteristics affect their SLA? If so, how?
3. Do you think your children's academic achievement and general knowledge as acquired in Korea affects their SLA?
4. Do you think your children's individual personalities and characteristics influence their second language learning?
5. What individual personalities do you think help or facilitate your child's SLA?
6. What personal characteristics do you think block or slow your child's SLA?
7. What efforts did you make for your children's SLA in the family in Korea before you came to the U.S.?
8. Did you have experience in teaching English grammar or English communication to your child at home?
9. In addition to the strategies discussed in the previous questions, what other efforts did you make for your children's SLA in the family?
10. Did your child receive private tutoring by non-family members in your house?
11. What kinds of private tutoring did your child receive? For example, grammar, conversation, writing, reading tutoring, etc.
12. Would you tell me anything else with regard to the question #11?
13. What kind of strategies did you use for your children's SLA outside the family?
14. Among various strategies to foster children's SLA, which way do you think is the most beneficial and fit for your child?
15. Would you tell me the reason why you think a certain strategy is of help for your child SLA?
16. To what extent do you feel that your strategies regarding English are successful?
17. Do you think the English knowledge obtained through family help have an influence on SLA or schooling in the U.S.?

18. Would you tell me anything else with regard to the question #17?
19. How old did your child first meet English?
20. If the child was exposed to English at his/her early age, ask this question. Why did you have your child exposed to English at that early age? Tell me your beliefs and perspectives regarding your child's English education.
21. Early English education has been a hot issue in Korea. Would you tell me your perspectives regarding early English education?
22. Would you tell me a story or episode involved in early English education around you?

Applicable levels: primary and secondary

Key words: critical period, family influence, the effect of age, parental perspectives

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