

## **Korean ESL Students' Ambivalence: Desire to Have and Desire to Avoid Communication with American Friends**

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**Kang, Su-Ja. (2007). Korean ESL students' ambivalence: Desire to have and desire to avoid communication with American friends. *English Teaching*, 62(3), 101-124.**

This article reports on a qualitative case study exploring how Korean students studying ESL in an intensive language program in the US perceive American friends. The findings of this study reveals that the Korean ESL students tended to have ambivalence between (a) the desire to have American friends and communicate with them and (b) the desire to avoid communication with Americans. Drawing on cultural and educational contexts in Korea, I provide an in-depth interpretation of the first desire. As a way to understand the second desire, I present various aspects of the identities they enacted in their real or imagined communication and friendships with Americans: *being sensitive to age in friendships*, *being sexually conservative*, *being a benefit-taker*, *being an out-group member*, *being powerless*, and *being disrespected*. As these identities contrast with their desired self-images, they felt a sense of identity vulnerability, which appeared to make them develop the second desire and feel reluctant to approach Americans. I argue that their identities and these resulting consequences account for, at least in part, the discontentment of the first desire. Drawing on its potential to provide opportunities to practice the target language, I suggest that SLA researchers and ESL/EFL professionals should give more attention to intercultural friendships between ESL students and native speakers.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

As reflected in the following vignette, narrated by the voice of a participant in this study, foreigners, including English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, bring an expectation and desire to establish friendships with native speakers and to improve their English speaking skills.

I came here (America) to meet them (American friends) from far away. . . . I thought, if I study at a university in America, I would have lunch with my American friends, having conversations with them . . . to improve my English. It was my biggest expectation and desire. But soon after, I realized that it was my *illusion*, because it does not happen here.

The reason for this desire has been elucidated by research findings that illustrate an integral tie between the development of close friendships with speakers of a target language and foreigners' satisfaction, adjustment, and well-being in a foreign country (Locke, 1988; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991). Despite their desire, foreigners' intercultural relationships on US campuses often fall short of the ideal (Dodge, 1990; Paige, 1983). Furnham and Alibhai (1985) found that, like the participant in the vignette, foreign students are disappointed by their lack of American friends. As Hull (1978) stated, this lack of American friends is one of the strongest complaints foreign students have about their sojourn in the U.S. This discrepancy between the desire and the reality of establishing intercultural friendships stimulates a curiosity about why this mismatch occurs.

As the number of foreign students in the US increases, this issue of intercultural friendships becomes an important social issue. Given the assumption that intercultural friendships can provide foreign students with opportunities to practice language, intercultural friendship is a significant issue to be explored in the field of second language education. This study explores intercultural friendships between foreign students and Americans through the voices of Korean ESL students, one of the majority ethnic groups among foreign students in the US.

## II. BACKGROUND

### 1. Factors Affecting Intercultural Communication and Relationships

Intercultural studies have stated that establishing intercultural contact is not as easy as establishing intracultural relationships. Researchers have identified various factors affecting intercultural communication and relationships, such as proximity, cultural difference, cultural knowledge, similarity, communicative competence, linguistic proficiency, personality, anxiety, uncertainty, and identity (Althen, G., 1988; Collier, 1996, 1998; Gareis, 1995, 1999, 2000; Gudykunst, 1995, 1998; Kim, 1991; Lee & Boster, 1991; Paige, 1983; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990; Strom, 1988). While the majority of these researchers focused mainly on factors pertaining to foreigners, Bunz (1997) identified factors pertaining to Americans. Bunz argued that the lack of interaction

between American and international students can be attributed to the American tendency toward ethnocentrism, the habitual disposition to judge people from other cultures by standards and practices of one's own culture or ethnic group.

## 2. Identity Vulnerability in Intercultural Communication and Relationships

Ting-Toomey (1999) put forth identity negotiation theory, within which identity, especially the motif of identity security or vulnerability, is viewed as a mechanism explaining the intercultural communication process. According to Ting-Toomey, people form their reflective self-image via symbolic communication with others and these identities influence their thinking, emotions, and communication patterns when interacting with culturally dissimilar others. Ting-Toomey also assumed that individuals tend to experience identity vulnerability, which refers to a degree of stress or perceived threat, in a culturally unfamiliar environment. Another assumption of this theory is that individuals desire positive identities and have a basic motivational need for identity security, which refers to a sense of confidence or resourcefulness. Within this theory, the development of quality intergroup relationships is ultimately affected by the positive or negative consequences of the identity negotiation process, which depends on the extent to which communicators perceive that their desired identities have been mindfully bypassed, misunderstood, or insulted.

## 3. Role of Contact and Interaction with Native Speakers in Language Learning

Researchers have suggested the importance of contact with speakers of the target language and opportunities to practice in language learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as a socially situated process by which newcomers gradually move towards fuller participation in a given community's activities by interacting with more experienced community members—a process called *legitimate peripheral participation*. In language learning, native speakers of the target language are believed to be the best candidates to be this more experienced community member. Lave and Wenger's view, therefore, can be interpreted as claiming the importance of interacting with native speakers in language learning. In the same vein, other researchers have suggested that social contact and access to social networks and opportunities to practice the language with target language speakers play an important role in language learning (Norton, 1997, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Peirce, 1995). Researchers have also found that nonnative speakers themselves believe that having conversational interactions with native speakers enhances their second language development (Duryee, Lanier, & Michel-Reyes, 1991; Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995). Echoing this view, Wong Fillmore (1991) emphasized that one of three conditions

essential to second language acquisition (SLA) is a social setting which brings learners and target language speakers into frequent enough contact to make language learning possible.

#### 4. Need for the Study

Given that native speakers play an important role in L2 learners' language learning, an important issue arises: How can L2 learners gain greater contact with native speakers and thus more opportunities to practice the target language? Pierce (1995) provided an answer to this question. She illustrated how immigrant women, who were first limited by their unbalanced power relationships with target language speakers in the workplace, were able to create opportunities to practice language by recreating their identities and claiming the right to speak. This finding provides a significant insight into how L2 learners who have contact with target language speakers (e.g., meet coworkers in their workplace everyday) can limit or increase their opportunities to practice with native speakers.

However, L2 learners who are studying ESL with other foreign classmates in a segregated setting do not have such easily available contact with native speakers as the immigrant women in Pierce's study had in their workplace. For such ESL learners, it is more critical to develop contact with native speakers outside the classroom. For this reason, an ESL learner's friendship with native speakers, which would provide contact and increase opportunities to practice the language, is an important issue that needs to be addressed. In spite of its importance, there has been a lack of research on intercultural friendships between Americans and ESL students, Korean ESL students in particular.

This study explored Korean ESL students' perceptions about interacting and developing friendships with Americans, focusing on two ambivalent desires and the motives behind the desires and consequences resulting from these desires. First, I will describe Korean ESL students' desire to have American friends and thus have opportunities for communication with native speakers. Second, I will illustrate that they also had a desire to avoid communicating with Americans. Third, as a way to understand their desire to avoid communication with Americans, I will portray the identities that they enacted in their real or imagined communication and friendships with Americans.

#### 5. Terms in this Study

In this study, the term *ESL students* refers to students who were studying ESL in an intensive language program in a university in the USA. Following Norton (2000), I use the term *identity* to refer to how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space, and how a person understands possibilities for the future. When the participants mentioned the term *American friends*,

they generally used the word *American* to refer to Americans who are native speakers of English and have the stereotypical appearance of Americans (i.e., Caucasians), excluding nonnative speakers and American citizens from other ethnic groups (e.g., Asian American and immigrants). Following the participants' lead, the term *American* will be used to refer to Americans classified on the basis of their native language and appearance.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted through a survey and interviews. First, a survey was conducted in English with 27 Korean ESL students in order to select the participants. In the survey, information regarding age, gender, place of residence, number of American friends, the language skill they want to improve most in the USA, and willingness to be interviewed was gathered. Among the 17 Korean ESL students who volunteered to be interviewed, 9 participants were selected on the basis of maximum variation in the sample (Merriam, 1998). The first criterion for the selection was whether or not they stated on the survey that they had any American friends. On the survey, only 4 out of the 27 students answered that they had American friends. In addition to the four students who asserted that they had American friends, five of those who answered that they did not were selected. The other selection criteria were gender, age, residence, and the length of stay in the USA, which I assumed could influence their communication and the formation of friendships with Americans.

After the survey, the nine selected participants were interviewed both formally and informally. Each participant had two formal interviews on an individual basis. The formal interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the interviewee's responses. In the interviews, the participants were asked semi-structured questions regarding their perceptions about and experiences with communicating and developing friendships with Americans. Several informal interviews were also conducted to collect additional information and confirm the analysis by doing member checking with the participants. Each informal interview lasted from 5 minutes to 40 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Korean because the participants could express themselves better in Korean than in English. The interviews were recorded on audiotapes, transcribed in Korean, and then translated into English.

The process of data collection and analysis was recursive, as recommended by Merriam (1998). To identify emerging themes, I created tentative categories and noted relations among them, as suggested by Milies and Huberman (1994). To ensure the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted with participants during the process of analysis

and interpretation.

## 2. Participants and Context

Nine Korean ESL students studying ESL in an intensive English language program in a university located in the northeastern part of the US participated in the interviews. Among the 9 participants, three were female and six were male. Their ages ranged from 22 to 33. Their length of stay in the USA varied from 2 to 10 months. Four lived off campus with family or other Korean students, and five lived in dormitories with other international roommates. All of them had limited contact with Americans, except for their ESL teachers and undergraduate students whom some of participants met in the conversation partner program once a week. Even the participants who lived in the dormitory rarely conversed with American students whom they encountered there, other than saying “hi.”

The 9 participants had various backgrounds and different plans for the future. Sumi graduated from a university and had some work experiences in Korea. In the US, she was a housewife living with her husband, who was pursuing his Ph.D. She was planning to go back to Korea when her husband finished his degree. Four participants—Jiwoo, Sangwoo, Jangbae, and Changmin—were on leave from their universities in Korea in order to study ESL in the USA. They had different plans after completing their studies in the language program. While Jiwoo and Sangwoo wanted to continue their studies in their universities in Korea, Jangbae and Changmin wanted to transfer to universities in the US. Three participants—Hyundae, Sunghee, and Jaeho—had graduated from universities in Korea and were planning to pursue graduate studies in the US. Chelsoo was a dentist in Korea and wanted to do a residency in a dental school in the US.

Although 4 participants answered on the survey that they had American friends, 3 out of the 4 participants later confessed in the interviews that they did not have any close American friends. These three students explained that their answers on the survey were based on casual relationships with Americans who they knew well enough only to say “hi” to. Among the 4 participants, only Sumi said that she had an American friend both on the survey and in the interviews. She had developed a friendship with an American woman whom she met for Bible study once a week.

## IV. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The findings revealed that the Korean ESL students tended to have ambivalent desires: (a) the desire to have American friends and communicate with them and (b) the desire to avoid communication with Americans. In this section, the motives behind the desires and

consequences resulting from these desires as well as these two ambivalent desires will be presented. As a way to understand the second desire, various aspects of the identities they enacted in their real or imagined communication and friendships with Americans—*being sensitive to age in friendships, being sexually conservative, being a benefit-taker, being an out-group member, being powerless, and being disrespected*—will also be portrayed.

## 1. Desire to Have American Friends and Communicate with them

### 1) Desire to Improve Spoken English Skills by Conversing with American Friends

The Korean ESL students tended to have a desire to have American friends and improve their spoken English skills. All participants, except one, had a strong desire to have American friends. This is well reflected in Changmin's statement shown in the Vignette, "in order to see you (American friends), I came here (America) from far away." Chelsoo also expressed this sentiment:

I really would like to have an American friend. With Americans who I meet outside (e.g., at stores and restaurants), I only tend to exchange a short conversation. So I would like to have a long conversation. I think those long conversations with American friends would be very helpful for me. Even though we do not understand each other at one time, we can help each other understand when we meet again later.

As illustrated in the excerpt, the desire these Korean ESL students had for American friends mainly originated from their desire to improve their English-speaking skills. For this reason, the degree of desire for American friends varied in accordance with both the students' language proficiency and their desire to improve it. For example, Sunghee, who was more fluent than the others, did not have as strong a desire as the others. While all eight students who expressed a desire for American friends mentioned that their main motive was to improve their English speaking skills, only a few participants mentioned getting some useful information about everyday life in the US and learning about American culture. One participant explained why language learning was more urgent for him than cultural learning by saying "How can we learn culture when we cannot communicate?"

The Korean ESL students believed that they could improve their speaking skills most effectively if they had American friends for two reasons. First, they believed that their friendships with Americans would provide them with opportunities to communicate with native speakers. This is reflected in a participant's comment: "How can I talk to Americans whom we run across on the street? I think it would be really weird to do that. But if I have

an American friend, we would have on-going and deeper conversations.” Second, the Korean ESL students expected that they would feel more comfortable in conversations with American friends than Americans who are not friends. Many of the participants mentioned that they would feel less ashamed of making mistakes in front of their friends than in front of Americans whom they didn’t know well.

## 2) English as a Cultural Capital in Korea

The Korean students’ strong desire to improve English speaking skills can be better understood in relation to cultural and educational contexts. In Korean society, proficiency in English is considered a symbol of high status because it plays a significant role in helping someone enter a university, get a job, and be promoted. Even in workplaces where people do not need to speak English, English scores (e.g., TOEIC or TOEFL) and English communication skills tend to play a critical role in their chances of being hired and promoted. For this reason, English is considered to be *cultural capital*, which Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) defined as characterizing different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. Given its role as cultural capital, Koreans tend to have a strong desire to attain a high proficiency in English.

Koreans’ aspirations to improve their spoken English are escalating for several reasons. Koreans’ written English skills are generally much better than their spoken English skills because of the strong focus on reading and grammar in the Korean educational system. Many Koreans are disappointed and frustrated when they find that they cannot communicate with native speakers of English despite their high proficiency in reading and grammar. With the awareness of their lack of proficiency in spoken English, many Koreans have the desire to become fluent English speakers and invest their time, energy, and money in studying spoken English.

In current Korean society, spoken English proficiency is gaining greater and greater importance. The new format of the TOEFL test, which includes a section on spoken English skills, also contributes to Koreans’ aspiration to gain a high proficiency in spoken English. The fact that many companies currently consider spoken English skills, as well as written English scores, as a priority in the hiring process also increases the need to master spoken English. The fact that improving spoken English skills demands a significant economic investment (e.g., attending a private institute in Korea or studying in an English speaking country) also contributes to spoken English skills being seen as a high status signal. Because of this necessary investment, Korean children’s spoken English skills tend to reflect their parents’ social and economic status and to function as a criterion for designating social class.

Due to their desire to learn English, especially spoken English, many Korean children

and ESL students come to America and other English-speaking countries. Their main motive is to become fluent English speakers by studying in an English-speaking country, which is somewhat different from that of Korean students who come to an English-speaking country in order to get higher degrees (i.e., undergraduate or graduate degree). Because of this motive, some Korean children are sent to live with relatives or a host family and thus separated from their parents or one of their parents in order to study in an English-speaking country. This creates a unique social phenomenon in Korea, called *Kireogi Appa* (a father of wild goose), which refers to the fathers who live alone in Korea after sending their wife and children abroad. Along with their increasing aspirations to have their children educated in an English-speaking country, the number of *Kireogi Appa*, who are reported to be experiencing financial and social problems, is increasing every year.

### 3) Desire to Develop Friendships with Stereotypical Americans

The Korean ESL students wanted to develop friendships with stereotypical Americans. Sometimes, they were confused about whether they wanted to develop a friendship with an American or just with anyone who was a native speaker of English. However, they had a greater preference for Americans who were totally American in terms of appearance, language and culture than for native speakers of English whose appearances were different from stereotypical Americans. They felt more excited about interacting with and speaking English to Caucasians or African Americans than Americans with other cultural backgrounds. They also preferred Caucasians to African Americans especially because they tended to have a hard time in understanding the speech of the latter. This was expressed by Sangwoo, "African Americans' English is hard to understand. . . I am not accustomed to their accent. So I wish to have white friends." In cases where Caucasians were unavailable, as a second choice they would settle for developing friendships with African Americans or Asian Americans. Jangbae said, "Having an African American or a Korean American friend is better than nothing (no American friends)."

### 4) Desire for Genuine Intimate Friendships, but at the Very Least, for Casual Friendships

Although the participants' desire to have American friends mainly came from their desire to improve their spoken English, this does not mean that they did not want to develop genuine intimate friendships with Americans. Jangbae expressed it this way, "I would like to chase *two rabbits*, improving my English speaking skills and making genuine friends at the same time . . . . If possible, I want to develop the same kind of genuine friendships with Americans as I have with my Korean friends."

Despite their desire for genuine intimate friendships, they did not have the confidence to

develop them. Accordingly, they wished for at least casual friendships with Americans. Hyundae said:

I realized that it's very difficult to have a close American friend, especially because of language difficulties. So I would be very happy if I have an American friend whom I know well enough to have their telephone number and have a cup of coffee together.

Drawing on their knowledge that Americans' friendships are more casual than Koreans', the intimacy that the Korean ESL students expected from relationships with American friends was not as deep as that with Korean friends. Changmin stated:

We (Koreans) usually do not call somebody a friend unless we develop very intimate relationships and know almost everything about them, such as their age, family, school, father's job, telephone number, and girlfriend. But here (America), I think I can call somebody my friend without knowing those things.

In the US, the Korean ESL students perceived *friends* more broadly, referring not only to intimate relationships, but also casual relationships, which can be mere acquaintanceships. This is also reflected in Jangbae's comment, "I know Americans call somebody who they meet in a club their friend. For Koreans, they are just an acquaintance, not a friend unless we develop a good friendship." The reason why they differentiated American friends from Korean friends can be found in the connotations of words referring to friends in Korean and English. *Chingoo*, the Korean word for friend, is used very limitedly, only referring to people with very intimate relationships and in the same age group.

##### 5) One Deviant Case Lacking Desire to Have American Friends

Unlike most participants, there was one participant who did not have a desire to have American friends:

I don't think that I definitely need to have an American friend. Other Korean friends frequently talk about it (having American friends), but I have never talked about it. I think it's because I don't have the desire to have one. . . . I don't have the desire to improve my English speaking skill either.

Jaeho's lack of desire for American friends was attributable to his lack of desire to

improve his English speaking skills. Jaeho also explained why he did not have the desire to improve his spoken English. First, he believed that he could not improve his English speaking skills in a short period of time even if he had an American friend and made an effort to improve. Second, Jaeho's future plans, studying physics for his MA and Ph. D. degrees in the US, also played a role in his lack of desire. Since he believed that studying physics does not require as much verbal interaction as other fields, he had a stronger desire to improve his reading skills, which he considered the most important skill for his studies, rather than speaking skills. Third, he also believed that his English speaking skills were fluent enough to enable him to live and study in the US.

#### 6) Pessimistic View of Future Possibilities for Having American Friends

Regretfully, the Korean ESL students believed that their desire for American friends, even casual friends, could not be achieved easily. It is well expressed in the vignette, "Soon after, I realized that it (having American friends) was my illusion, because it does not happen here (America)." This pessimistic view was developed based on their experiences failing to develop friendships with any Americans during their stays in the US. As a reason for her pessimistic view, Jiwoo stated her concerns about the possible negative consequences of interaction:

I think if I had an American friend now, there would be a gap between us since I cannot express myself and he or she doesn't understand me well. I don't want to have that kind of friendship. So I think I can make a real American friend only when I become more fluent than now.

As stated in the excerpt, the Korean ESL students' presumed difficulties were mainly related to their lack of confidence in their spoken English.

## 2. Desire to Avoid Communication with Americans

### 1) Conflicting Desire to Avoid communication with Americans

Contrary to their desire to have communication with Americans, more specifically with American friends, the Korean ESL students had another desire to avoid communication with Americans. Hyundai expressed the tension between his desire to communicate and his desire to avoid communication:

Although I want to make American friends and interact with them, at the same time I also want to avoid conversation with Americans. . . . Many times I don't

feel like interacting with them. It's because I feel uncomfortable and become tense. . . . Many times I am tempted to stay away from a conversational situation, due to anticipated discomfort.

As a reason for his desire for avoiding conversations with Americans, Hyundae and other participants often articulated "being uncomfortable," or "being afraid," which expressed their anxiety (e.g., feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive). This finding supports Gudykunst's (1995, 1998) statement that anxiety exists during initial intercultural communication. The participants also spoke about "hurting or losing self-confidence." Sangwoo stated, for example, "I hurt my self-confidence whenever I interact with native speakers . . . especially when they don't understand me." These expressions can be understood as expressing their identity vulnerability, which is defined as the degree of stress or perceived threat individuals experience in an unfamiliar situation (Ting-Toomey, 1999). For this reason, identity vulnerability, as well as anxiety, is considered to contribute to their desire to avoid communication with Americans, which can play a negative role in establishing friendships.

## 2) Temptation to Avoid Communications with Americans

The Korean ESL students were tempted to avoid communications with Americans, rather than make an effort to fulfill their constant desire to have communication with American friends. When they had two conflicting desires, they were more likely to follow the desire of avoiding communication with American friends than the desire to achieve it. Hyundae also expressed how he dealt with the ambivalence between these two desires:

Even though there is a desire to communicate with American friends, we tend to deal with situations that we confront now. When we have communication, we tend to confront language problems and lose self-confidence. That's why I am more tempted to avoid conversations with Americans. . . . The desire not to communicate overcomes the desire to communicate with Americans, which always stays in my mind. The desire to avoid communication is immediate, while the desire to have American friends is constant. When confronting the conflict, the immediate desire seems to win over the other.

Hyundae explained that he was more tempted to deal with an immediate situation than to make the effort to achieve his constant desire. This temptation appears to be due to his motivation to save face, which is a universal desire, in the immediate situation.

### 3) Reluctance to Approach Americans

The Korean ESL students felt reluctant about approaching their potential American friends, as Changmin related:

I realized that we cannot make American friends as naturally as we do with other Koreans. I know I need to make an effort to approach Americans I run across in the dorm. But I am a little uncomfortable about approaching them . . . . When I need to borrow a light for my cigarette outside of the dorm, I go to a foreign student, not to an American.

This reluctance appeared to come from their temptation not to get involved in a situation in which they expect to feel identity vulnerability and/or anxiety and lose face. Given that it is not easy for ESL learners to develop friendships with Americans without taking an active approach, their reluctance appeared, at least in part, to contribute to their lack of American friends. It was also likely that their lack of American friends as well as the lack of interaction with Americans influenced their reluctance to approach Americans.

## 3. Identities Enacted about Interacting or Developing Friendships with Americans

In this section, I present identities the Korean ESL students enacted about interacting and developing friendships with Americans. I also argue that these identities contributed to their feeling of identity vulnerability and their resulting desire to avoid communication with Americans.

### 1) Being Sensitive to Age Difference in Friendships

In Korean culture, age plays an important role in building friendships and a friendship is usually established between members of the same age group. Koreans generally do not call anybody who is even one year older or younger a friend. The Korean ESL students knew that age does not matter for Americans in developing friendships and people can be friends across ages. Because the cultural value stayed with them, however, most of the participants felt uncomfortable about developing friendships with Americans who were younger than them. A 32-year-old student, Cheolsoo, strongly believed that it was impossible for him to become friends with Americans who were much younger than him. Sunhee also expressed her reluctance to have younger people as friends:

Undergraduate students are too young to be friends of mine. I know that in America age does not matter in a friendship relationship, but I cannot get over

the age gap in a friendship. I feel that I am still Korean in America and still have a Korean's way of thinking. Americans who are living in the dorms are usually freshmen or sophomores. I feel that American students whom I meet in the dorms are childish. I feel like I am watching the movie "American Pie." I think they need to be more mature.

Like Sunghee and Chelsoo, most of the Korean ESL students were reluctant to develop friendships with American undergraduates, who were generally younger than them, since it violates their cultural norm with regard to age sensitivity in friendships. The reason why age is important in friendships among Koreans may be due to the fact that age is one of the factors that build a hierarchy. In cultures influenced by Confucianism, there is a sense of hierarchy at work in every area of peoples' lives. Because age functions as an important criterion for the hierarchy, in Korean culture, older people are generally well respected by younger people. As a symbol of respect, for example, younger people are required to use honorific forms with older people. For this reason, having younger friends can be considered degrading to someone's social status. The Korean ESL students were not as reluctant to develop friendships with older Americans as they were with younger Americans. This may be due to the fact that having a friend who is older than him or her does not degrade their place in the hierarchy.

Compared to other participants, two students were less sensitive to age differences in developing friendships with Americans. Sumi, who had developed a friendship with a 73-year-old American lady, called this lady her friend without hesitation and believed that friendships could be built regardless of age. Jongbae also expressed his willingness to have younger American friends. He frequently interacted with younger Korean Americans at his church, although he did not develop any friendships with them. In the case of these two participants, their age sensitivity appeared to be diminished by actually interacting with people across ages.

## 2) Being Conservative Sexually

The Korean ESL students' self images with regard to remaining conservative about sexuality was another factor that created identity vulnerability for them. The female Korean ESL students, especially unmarried ones, enacted this identity more strongly than the male Korean ESL students. In Korean culture, most of the moral norms are stricter for females than for males. For instance, females are expected not to have premarital sexual relationships, although this expectation does not apply strictly to males. As a result, a history of premarital sexual relationships can be a big obstacle to a Korean woman's marriage. Although this cultural value is changing, it is still alive and well in Korean

culture.

Influenced by mass media, Koreans tend to believe that Americans have loose sexual habits, that is, they easily have sexual relationships. Due to this belief, both of the unmarried female participants were afraid that they might violate their sexual morals if they interacted with American males. The following quote illustrates Jiwoo's strong desire not to have male American friends due to her sexual inhibition:

I have heard that I should not have male American friends. . . . Having male friends can cause a big problem for me. I have heard that America is totally different from Korea, especially regarding sexual culture. . . . American sexual discipline is loose. I mean, men and women can sleep together without a serious thought. . . . I was shocked when I saw that condoms were given as free samples in a public place, at a table in the Student Union on campus, and that students picked them up without any shame. It made me more scared of American men. . . . I promised my mom and aunt that I would not have male American friends.

Sunghee's negative attitude toward American males, created by believing that they are sexually promiscuous, limited her chance of having American male friends:

It may be my preconception, but if an American guy approaches me, I tend to consider him a strange guy who intends to chase an Asian girl. . . . I wanted to maintain a friendship relationship, and nothing more, with a male American conversation partner last semester. However, he wanted to develop a closer relationship than friendship. So I stopped the relationship.

Since there are some individual variations in someone's sexual discipline and conservativeness, other female Korean ESL students may not have the same reluctance as these two students. This reluctance may not hold in the future for young Korean women because young Korean generations are rapidly changing their attitudes towards sexual discipline.

Unlike the female Korean ESL students, the male Korean ESL students were not afraid of violating their sexual morals in their relationships with American females for several reasons. One reason stems from the fact that sexual promiscuity was not a problem for them because moral values regarding premarital relationships are not as strict for males as for females in Korean culture. Another reason can be attributed to the fact that Korean males tend to think they are not likely to have dating relationships with American females. This pessimistic view was well expressed in Changmin's comment: "In movies and here

(America), I have seen Korean girls date American guys, but I have never seen any Korean guys with American girls. . . . It is not likely to happen.” One of the reasons why Korean males tend not to imagine the possibility of having American girlfriends can be found in the fact that they are less likely to play their expected gender role of being more powerful than females, especially because of their lack of English proficiency.

### 3) Benefit-Taker Identity

The Korean ESL students recognized that they were benefit-takers in their communication and friendship relationships with Americans. This identity was based on the participants’ perception that the advantages they would get from friendship with Americans was greater than any they could provide back to Americans. Chanyoung stated:

Americans are in a position in which they can offer us something. Language, culture . . . We can get some useful information from them. . . . Most of all, we can learn English from them. In contrast, we cannot give them anything. . . . I want to pay them back somehow, but I do not know what I can give to them. . . . I know it’s not fair. So I am a little uncomfortable about approaching them.

Their perception of one-sided benefit came mainly from their beliefs that they could improve their English speaking skills while interacting with Americans. Especially in Korean culture, sincerity in friendship is highly valued. In accordance with this value, people who want to use their friends for purposes beyond friendship itself are considered insincere. Based on this cultural value, they felt uncomfortable about making a friend for the sake of the ulterior motive of improving their English speaking skills.

In contrast to other participants, Sumi, who had an American friend, expressed a relatively lower level of benefit-taker identity than other participants. Sumi said:

She teaches me about the Bible and English. But I help her too. Because she lives by herself, there are many things we can do to help her. My husband changes lights and fixes things in her house. . . . When we buy a large quantity of fruits, we bring some to her. When I make some special Korean food, we invite her.

This excerpt illustrates that Sumi could lessen her perception of being a benefit-taker by paying her friend back for the benefits she received.

#### 4) Out-Group Identity

The Korean ESL students enacted an out-group identity in relation to their potential American friends. Many participants expressed the belief that they had nothing in common with American students. First, they stated that cultural difference was a crucial factor differentiating them from people from other countries. Second, they mentioned the difference in language proficiency between themselves and Americans, between nonnative and native speakers of English. Jiwoo said, "We (nonnative speakers) cannot be the same as long as our first languages are different. . . . We are disabled, but they (native speakers) are normal people." Third, students' status contributed to out-group identity formation. Most participants appeared to regret that their status was different from that of American students. Changmin stated that he felt bad about studying just ESL, while regular students studied content areas. Unlike the other participants, Sumi commented:

We study Bible together and talk about God all the time. This makes me feel that we have the same goals and motives. . . . The fact that both of us are Christians makes me feel that we are not that different from each other. Thus, I feel closer to her.

This excerpt shows that Sumi could reduce some degree of her out-group identity on the basis of a religious tie. This implies that foreigners' out-group identity can be lessened as they find some commonalities with Americans.

#### 5) Powerless Identity

The Korean ESL students developed an identity of powerlessness although there were differences in the degree to which they felt powerless. Their powerless identity was primarily attributable to their status as non-fluent nonnative speakers of English. Cheolsoo, who was a dentist in Korea, commented:

I feel powerless especially when I cannot express what I want to say to Americans. Only because of English, I feel that way. Other than English, I don't think I am inferior to them (Americans) in any way. . . . Whenever I talk to Americans, I become passive.

Reflecting the linkage between a powerless identity and language fluency, Sunghee, whose fluency was much higher than that of the other participants, expressed a relatively lower degree of powerlessness. Their student status in school also influenced the

participants' powerless identity. Many participants expressed that their enrollment in an ESL program was a factor that made them feel powerless. This was because their ESL status was likely to reveal that their English proficiency was not good enough to be admitted into or to study in a regular program. This inferiority was especially revealed by students who were trying to receive a passing TOEFL score good enough to be admitted to the undergraduate program. However, two students who had already been admitted to the graduate program and Sumi, who was a housewife, did not feel as bad about their ESL student status as the other students. A factor that seemed to maximize the power distance between the Korean ESL students and Americans was that the students tended to feel that the native speakers who they interacted with were like teachers, who have a more powerful position than their students.

#### 6) Disrespected Identity

The Korean ESL students believed that they were disrespected by Americans although there were differences in the degree of feeling disrespected. Jangbae expressed:

Americans seem to be annoyed by nonnative speakers' speech . . . At stores, in the case of miscommunication, Americans get angry with us and show a hysterical attitude toward us. They don't seem to try to understand foreigners. I really feel disrespected by them.

As illustrated in this excerpt, all the participants expressed the feeling that they were disrespected by Americans and received discriminatory treatment from them. With respect to Americans' disrespectful treatment, however, Sumi felt somewhat different from the other participants. Through her own experience with her American friend, she came to believe that not all Americans disrespected her and thus enacted a relatively lower degree of disrespected identity.

Although the participants admitted that, to some degree, their ethnic and national backgrounds were factors influencing Americans' disrespectful treatment, these backgrounds did not play a role as crucial as their lack of language proficiency. They believed such neglectful treatment was primarily due to their lack of fluency in English because they felt disrespected when they tried to communicate and thus revealed their lack of proficiency. Drawing on this belief, they strongly assumed that Americans tended not to disrespect other foreigners who were very fluent English speakers as much as they neglected foreigners like themselves who did not speak English well. It appears that until Korean ESL students get over communication problems caused by their lack of proficiency, they will be unable to strongly perceive other problematic factors (e.g., ethnic and national

backgrounds).

So far, I have addressed various identities the Korean ESL students enacted in relation to their communication and friendships with Americans. Their self-images within these identities contrast with the norms or values of friendships, such as *openness, homogeneity, equality, respect, and reward*, presented by scholars (Fehr, 1996; Rubin, 1980). Due to this contradiction, these negative identities kept the Korean ESL students from projecting their desired self-images, which appeared to give them a sense of identity vulnerability in relation to interacting and developing friendships with Americans. Based on their expectations that they would experience a sense of identity vulnerability in their communication and friendships with Americans, they appeared to develop a desire to avoid communication with Americans.

Although all participants tended to enact each identity, there were variations in the degree of enactment, resulting in differences in identity vulnerability. The most observable difference occurred between Sumi, who had successfully maintained a relationship with her American friend, and all the other participants who did not have American friends. Sumi, who regularly met her American friend for Bible studies, had a much lower degree of the negative identities, resulting in a lower degree of identity vulnerability than other participants. Another factor minimizing their negative identities was a higher degree of language proficiency. These variations imply that their identities can change, at least in terms of degree, once they actually make a friend and/or improve their spoken English skills.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated how Korean ESL students in an intensive English language program in the US perceived their communication and friendships with Americans, focusing on two ambivalent desires. The Korean ESL students tended to have a strong desire to have American friends in order to improve their English speaking skills by interacting with native speakers of English. Contradictory to this desire, they also had a desire to avoid communication with Americans, which appeared to play an inhibiting role in developing friendships with Americans. This desire to avoid Americans was attributable to their identities enacted in their real or imagined relationships with Americans. Because these negative identities prevented them from projecting their desired image, they felt a sense of identity vulnerability, which appeared to contribute to their desire to avoid communication with Americans and the concomitant reluctance to approach Americans. Based on these findings, it can be argued that their identities and these resulting consequences account for, at least in part, the discontentment of the desire of having

American friends. The findings of this study provide an in-depth understanding of the Korean ESL students' contradictory desires and of some obstacles keeping them from developing intercultural friendships with Americans.

The findings should be understood within the specific context in which the participants were studying ESL in an intensive language program in the US and had lived in the US for a relatively short period of time, from 2 to 10 months. Korean students in different contexts, such as those who are undergraduate or graduate students or who have lived a longer period of time in the US, may have different perspectives from the participants in this study. It should also be emphasized that there were some variations among the participants. Along with differences in their characteristics (e.g., language proficiency and experiences interacting with Americans), their desires and negative identities also varied, at least in terms of degree. For example, unlike other participants, Jaeho did not have the desire to have American friends, mainly because he did not have the desire to improve his English speaking skills. Sunghee, who had a higher level of English fluency than the other participants, enacted lower levels of powerless and disrespected identities. Through her positive experiences with her American friend, Sumi was able to decrease the negative identities, such as out-group, benefit-taker, and disrespected identities. These differences suggest that the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Korean ESL students.

Nevertheless, the findings provide some insight into how to help Korean ESL students achieve their desire to have American friends. The findings suggest that if ESL students minimize the negative factors contributing to their identity vulnerability and concomitant reluctance, they can increase their possibility of developing friendships with Americans. The possibility of changing identities provides ESL educators with an optimistic view of educational interventions. Drawing on the findings, there are some possible ways to lessen the degree of negative identities and enhance some positive identities. For example, if ESL educators help Korean ESL students recognize that they can provide some benefits to native speakers, Korean ESL students are likely to feel a reduced degree of shame at being benefit-takers. ESL educators should also make an effort to decrease Korean ESL students' sense of out-group identity by helping them identify some commonalities between themselves and Americans. Given that their identity as disabled nonnative speakers and non-fluent English speakers played a critical role in shaping their negative identities, ESL teachers need to help Korean ESL learners perceive their identity as nonnative speakers in a positive way. Encouraging them to be aware of the advantages of their multilingual identity, rather than focus on their disabled nonnative identity, is a good way to reduce their negative identities.

Intensive English language programs and ESL teachers should make efforts to provide ESL students with more opportunities to meet native speakers naturally by organizing some classes or cooperative activities in which both ESL students and native-English-

speaking students can participate on the basis of mutual exchange. In so doing, they would provide ESL students with proximity to Americans, an integral factor for intercultural friendships, and decrease ESL students' benefit-taker identity. Encouraging Korean ESL students to join club activities on campus would be one of the best ways to provide them with opportunities to mix with Americans. Additionally, in these club activities, they would have opportunities to identify some commonalities between themselves and other members and realize that they can offer something to American members, which can also contribute to decreasing their out-group identity and benefit-taker identity respectively.

Korean ESL students should also overcome their reluctance to approach Americans, an obstacle to the development of friendships with Americans. ESL teachers can help their students reduce their reluctance to approach Americans by assigning homework that requires them to interact with Americans. Like ESL teachers, EFL teachers should teach their students how to deal with the potential negative factors affecting their intercultural communication and friendships with Americans as well as cultural knowledge in language classrooms in Korea. In so doing, they can help their students develop intercultural friendships with Americans and increase opportunities to practice language with native speakers of English.

To provide more in-depth understanding of the issue of intercultural friendships, future studies are needed in the following areas. Drawing on the changeability of identity, future studies should investigate how ESL learners' identities change over time. As a way to understand Korean ESL students' intercultural friendships with Americans, I have presented their two contradictory desires. However, it appears that the possibility and quality of cross-cultural friendships can also depend on underlying factors. It can be assumed that cross-cultural friendships are subject to other factors (e.g., personality, course load, and economics). Exploring these other factors can be another direction of future studies. Due to the mutuality involved in friendships, future studies should also explore the issue of intercultural relationships from Americans' perspectives in order to shed light on it from the other side.

In conclusion, given that researchers have suggested that intercultural friendships (with host nationals) can play an important role in foreigners' well-being and satisfaction in foreign countries, more attention should be given to this issue. SLA researchers and ESL professionals are especially encouraged to take an interest in the issue of intercultural friendships, which can provide or increase opportunities to practice the target language with native speakers and contribute to language learning.

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Applicable Levels: College/Adult

Key words: intercultural friendship/communication, Koreans ESL students, American friends, identities, desires, opportunities to practice language, language learning

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Received in May, 2007

Reviewed in June, 2007

Revised version received in August, 2007