Literate Identities among Korean Students Learning English in the USA

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This article illustrates the complicated process of language socialization and literacy development with identity reformulations that Korean students face while learning English in U.S. schools. With providing a detailed and broad picture of second language literacy development across time, the article presents two research-based studies conducted at the elementary and secondary levels respectively. Despite the constant growth of the Korean population in the USA for decades, few research studies have examined the ways that newly arrived Korean students engage in language learning and literacy practice along with changes in life, language, literacy, and culture. The presented studies employed ethnographic data gathering methods and utilized methods of constant comparison, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis. The first study focuses on literate identities of second grade Korean students in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The second study explores how Korean adolescents engage in school writing practice and how they negotiate their identities in and with writing through a case study.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language in use is not acquired by direct instruction, but acquired in the process of language socialization in which language learners construct shared understandings as a member of the communities (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). In addition, language socialization occurs through multilayered contexts in which learners formulate their multiple identities using the language in a social and cultural context (Ivanič, 1998; Norton, 1995). Recent discussions of identity in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research suggest that the
changes in learners’ subjective values, beliefs, affects, and attitudes to the target language and culture are often associated with the larger social process of language learning contexts (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

This article introduces two research-based studies that explored literate identities of Korean students who learn English in U.S. elementary and secondary schools respectively. Despite the constant growth of the Korean population in the USA for decades, few research studies have examined the ways that newly arrived Korean students engage in language learning and literacy practice along with changes in life, language, literacy, and culture. The presented qualitative and ethnographic studies have documented reading and writing practices of English as an additional language and identity formations of Korean students in U.S. schools. By presenting the studies conducted both at the elementary and secondary levels, the article attempts to provide a bigger picture of second language literacy development across time. The following questions have guided the studies:

1. Who are Korean students learning English in the USA?
2. What are the experiences of the Korean students with reading and writing in U.S. elementary and secondary schools?
3. What kinds of literacy practices are associated with literate identities of the participating Korean students?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Identity and Literacy Practice

Various theories of identity have been introduced to literacy studies (Gee, 2000; McCarthy & Moje, 2002), followed by empirical research studies that have examined how gender, language, culture, identity, and literacy are entangled and mutually constitutive. These studies have attempted to document how students represent their multiple identities as readers and writers in a variety of literacy practices (McCarthy, 2001), respond to situated identities in local discourses (Hall, 2002; McCarthy, 1998), and negotiate gendered identities in school (Anderson, 2002; Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003). By adopting a poststructuralist perspective on identity, the researchers of these studies have suggested an epistemological shift from inherently fixed and stabilized views on identity and have started to consider multiple identities in order to capture the complex aspects of socially and locally situated constructions of students’ identity.

Gee (2000) highlights the increasing attention to social identities, arguing that multiple identities are built within different social interactions. People are recognized as certain
kinds of people based on their performances in society rather than on their internal traits. In other words, people’s identities are tied to the formations of their social lives and the “workings of historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces” (p. 100). He suggests four avenues through which to explore identity: nature, institution, discourse, and affinity (Gee, 2000). The nature view on identity portrays a state of being which formation relies on nature and develops from forces in nature, such as being an “identical twin” (p. 101). The institutional perspective refers to a position of self in society constituted by a set of authorities such as institutions, laws, rules, traditions, or principles of various sorts, for instance, a “professor in a university” or “being learning disabled (LD)” (p. 102). The discursive perspective describes a self as recognized in the “discourse or dialogue of other people” (p. 103). He uses “being charismatic” as an example of an achieved characteristic constructed through social interactions. The affinity perspective focuses on social identities constructed in a set of distinctive practices of “affinity groups” in which people create group and cultural affiliations (pp. 103-104). These categories of identity show that a person holds and experiences multiple identities with the interactions of language, culture, and particular social contexts.

Gee’s conception of social identity is situated as it is enacted through language. When one talks and acts, the use of language creates “multiple or heteroglossic who-doing-what” in social contexts (Gee, 1999, p. 14). In other words, language in discourse enacts different identities at particular times in different settings with different styles of language, according to the tasks and participants of the talk. He claims that multiple social identities are constructed and consumed through sociocultural practices that enact a kind of identity in discourse communities, where people obtain memberships and legitimatize their literate practices (Gee, 1996, 2000).

Along with Gee’s (1999) argument on social identity, scholars who have studied identity construction in literacy practice claim that identities are always situated in relationships. People recognize who they are in relation to others’ perceptions of them. When one is exposed to multiple discourses and engages in different discourse communities, one is most likely at the border of self and other, defining oneself against what one is not—the other. As discussed by McCarthey and Moje (2002), people construct identities within particular social, cultural, and political relationships and carry their identities into different relations. These identity constructions are mostly unconscious, but some people may make a “strategic choice” (p. 233) to present who they are. The choice of identity representation is a matter of power in relations. It is an ability to take particular subject positions within a structure of relations and certain discursive practices.

Davies and Harré (1990) brought attention to the concept of positioning, moving beyond the concept of role used in traditional social psychology. They recognized the force of discursive practices and theorized the ways in which the “individual’s ‘subjectivity’ is
generated through the learning and use of certain discourse practices” (p. 43). Multiple subject positions are possible in discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990), but the multiplicity of identity is constrained by the constitutive force of discursive practices in which subjects are an ongoing and changing product of social construction. Therefore, the term positioning facilitates the social analysis of selfhood in which one’s multiple identities are connected to the complexity of political and hegemonic relations among societal and cultural structures of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, culture, and religion.

Poststructuralist perspectives illustrate identities as “incoherent” and “contradictory” within power relations of self, discourse, and social structure. Individuals are produced through conflicting discourses and subject positions. Many feminist studies have recognized the constitutive force of discourse in gender identity. In particular, Davies’ (1993) study of gendered childhoods suggests that the subject status of children, women, and other marginalized groups is constrained by the rules and structures of the social world and constituted through particular socialization and discourse practice. Within this framework, subjects are multiply, sometimes contradictorily, positioned within different societal conditions of discourse.

There is an alternative perspective on the multiplicity of identity constructed through literacy practices; for instance, Hagood (2002) underlines a decentered self, stating that locations of self are never settled down in one place, but “continuously shifting and changing” (p. 255). In a critical literacy perspective, she describes a self as a “site of struggle for existence, knowledge, and power” (p. 255). A decentered self moves from space to space and relationship to relationship, animating identity as fluid and hybrid. This view explains that self is not only constructed with multiple and situated identities and constituted as the “subject” in discourse, but also actively constructs oneself as a “continuous, ever-shifting, and evolving self in process,” by using and negotiating social and material practices within the discourses (Hagood, 2002, p. 255). Her study proposes that subjects are in a continuous process of hybridity, organizing and re-organizing subjectivities in social contexts (Kamberelis, 2001). For instance, hybridity theorists have attended to the ways in which learners explore and challenge who they are, resist certain subjectivities in discourse, and reshape themselves in a transformative way (Bhabha, 1994; Kamberelis, 2001). Their epistemology develops from embracing contested aspects of changing subjects and puts a sense of human agency centrally in the studies of identity.

2. Identity in Second Language Learning

A poststructuralist perspective on identity, with its inclusion of social relations, creates a new construct for the study of second language learning and literacy practice (Norton &
Toohey, 2004). Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) experience a tremendous shift in social and cultural relations when they start learning a new language in English-speaking nations. The discovery of self to ESL students often occurs with others’ recognition of who they are (Norton, 1997). They need to (re)construct social lives, beliefs, and their cultural and literate identities in relation to others in new social settings. The presented studies aim to consider language learning and schooling in the USA as a site for the participating Korean students to exercise “balances within self and between self and other” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 165), where students build internal and external relations of the self to the world and to a new cultural context of learning. Norton (1995) represents this process as investment by challenging the psychological definition of motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) that ESL students would demonstrate toward the target language.

The studies of ESL students’ social identity have documented that identities shape the ways in which people make sense of the world and influence how they acquire the second language in a new social environment. McKay and Wong (1996) traced Chinese adolescent immigrant students’ negotiations of dynamic and multiple identities in school settings. Their findings illustrate the multiple identities of the ESL students and their renegotiation of social identity in socially regulated multiple discourses. This qualitative and ethnographic study has presented that the participating Chinese adolescent students’ lives are involved in complex tasks, such as building relationships with school staff, establishing ethnic and cultural identity as “being Chinese and recognized by other Chinese,” meeting parental demands, responding to gender expectations, and performing academically while learning a new language (p. 603). The analysis of data in this study focused on the Chinese adolescents’ language use both in Chinese and in English to examine their subject positions in multiple contexts of discourse. For instance, their Chinese and English writing samples illustrated how Chinese adolescents struggled to build up multiple social identities while negotiating subject positions imposed by socially regulated school discourses, such as being academically successful and getting out of the ESL program.

Similarly, Toohey’s (2000) longitudinal ethnographic study documented young children’s acquisition of new discourse structures in the ESL classroom. This research study provides a comprehensive description of classroom conventions in constructing identities, engaging in practices, utilizing resources among young ESL students. Literacy routines in the ESL classroom demonstrate that language learning is socially and historically constructed as discourse that influences language learners’ social identity. Drawing from a “community of practice” perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the study shows that kindergarten and first grade students in the ESL classrooms engage not only in acquiring new discourses, but in negotiating their identities and struggling with social and discursive access to participation in new literacy practices (Toohey, 2000).
3. Korean Students Learning English in the USA

This article focuses on Korean students learning English in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. The 2000 U.S. Census shows that Koreans living in the USA ranked fifth among the Asian and Pacific Islander populations. Besides the constant growth of the Korean population in the USA, there has been an increasing influx of highly educated Korean people—often with their families—coming to the USA to continue their education or to pursue a career (Shin, 2005). Children of these families would have limited or no knowledge of the English language when they arrive; if then, they are likely to receive specialized instruction of English as a second language. Recently, Korean parents have sent their children to the USA for an American education. This transnational split among family members in South Korea, so-called “Goose (or Geese) Family,” has rapidly increased in the last couple of decades (Ahn, 2009; Cho, 2004; Shon, 2005).

Ahn (2009) refers to the social phenomena of a family’s split as Korean middle class families’ transnational exodus to enhance educational human capital for upward societal mobility. The common patterns of the split family indicate that a father stays in Korea for financial reasons, namely financial support for the family as the head of the household, and sends his child(ren) and wife to the USA or other English-speaking nations (Cho, 2004; Shon, 2005). In this fashion, a mother stays with her elementary, middle, or high-school aged children abroad in order to take care of them. However, there has been a recent trend in which middle or high school-aged children have come to the USA without accompanying their parents, and the population of Korean adolescents in the USA is growing (Korea Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2007).

While a variety of contexts may signal the ways that Korean students learn a new language and culture, this article focuses on the process of second language acquisition primarily through school literacy practices. When Korean students start formal schooling in the USA, they not only learn a new language, but also acquire other ways of being, knowing, talking, thinking, valuing, acting, reading, and writing within new cultural environments (Gee, 1996). In addition, living in a new culture and acquiring a new language entail not only changes in life and language, but also changes in experiences of self to the “other” and the world (Gee, 1996). Therefore, it is important to explore how Korean students make sense of who they are and how they are seen by others while learning English in a specific social setting.
III. METHODOLOGY

The presented studies are a qualitative research effort incorporating two traditions of ethnography: discourse analysis and case study. They both employed ethnographic data gathering methods, such as participant observations, fieldnotes, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed data by utilizing methods of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), discourse analysis (Cazden, 2001), and narrative analysis (Wortham, 2001). Ethnographic research methods provided social, cultural, and institutional contexts of data and therefore support for the contextualized data analysis. Study 1 employed discourse analysis to interpret how the participating Korean elementary students negotiate their literate positions in the ESL classroom. On the other hand, Study 2 used narrative analysis to describe one’s lived literacy experiences in stories as it offers the complex and rich descriptions to past and present experiences from a holistic perspective.

1. Study 1

1) Participants and Site

The participants are six second grade students in the ESL classroom of a suburban public elementary school, called Greenville Elementary, in the Northeast of the USA. They are both ethnically and linguistically Korean; either or both of their parents are Korean and they speak Korean as their mother tongue. Mrs. Johnson, the ESL teacher, is a European, middle-class teacher certified by the state as an ESL teacher. All of the names used are pseudonyms. There are many Korean families living in this school district, including immigrants as well as temporary residents. Every year, approximately 10 to 15 Korean students enroll in this school for K through 5th grade. The majority of the participating students came from families of middle-class economic and educational backgrounds. Their families had been temporarily staying in the USA for academic and business purposes for the length of less than a year. However, at least two of the families planned to stay in the USA by continuing a business and getting a job after achieving a master’s degree at the university in town.

2) Data Collection and Analysis

The primary sources of data for this study are interview transcripts, audio and video transcripts of classroom discourse, field notes, and literacy materials of students such as school writing samples, drawings, journals and letters. The first author attended the target ESL classroom twice a week for one and half hours over the course of six months and
interviewed the participating students and significant people involved in the children’s literacy development: their parents and teachers. She kept field notes during observations and collected the students’ literacy materials. The verbal conversations held in the ESL classroom were audio-recorded. The total length of audio taping was about 40 hours by the end of the study. She also took field notes by keeping details of the contextual explanations of each classroom event and interaction. The collected data were reduced by using constant comparison. The transcribed data were analyzed and coded by themes reflecting students’ literate identities that emerged from language and literacy practices of the classroom.

2. Study 2

1) Participants and Site

The participants are five adolescents living in Syracuse, New York. They are ethnically and culturally Korean and recently arrived in the USA. The participants not only literally read and write in Korean and English at a certain level, but also experience biliteracy practices—reading and writing in both languages. Out of multi-case studies, one case study is presented in this article.

Sue-Jee (pseudonym) is a female, 16-year-old high school student. The length of her stay in the USA was less than two academic years at the time of the study. She came to the USA as an exchange student and stayed in Michigan for a year. Since her status was that of a foreigner, she had to go to a private school and chose Emma Academy, private high school in Syracuse. Sue-Jee stayed with an American host family, along with her older sister and her Korean classmate. Sue-Jee’s parents stay in Korea. Her father works in a research center and her mother is a traditional housewife. Based on the vocational experience and the educational degree of Sue-Jee’s father, her family is considered as a middle class.

2) Data Collection and Analysis

The second author employed multi-case studies to investigate the writing patterns, values, and transformations of Korean students while they learn sociocultural norms and expectations in American academia. Data collections include conducting semi-structured interviews and collecting the students’ writing. She interviewed the students twice in the

1 Foreign students who are not accompanied by the legal stay of their parents in the USA are not allowed to attend U.S. public schools. However, they are eligible to attend a private school.
beginning of and at the end of the study, and audiotaped the semi-structured interviews with the participants in their home, church or public library. The participants were asked to submit their writing samples. The students’ writing includes their journal entries, essays or writing drafts relating to school work or to their personal writing practice.

Recursive and narrative analysis were used to analyze the data. Wortham’s (2006) five types of cues played a catalytic role in recognizing the identity of students in both oral and written texts. The cues are reference and prediction, use of verbs, quotation, evaluative indexical, and god’s eye view in narratives. The cues were used to interpret the students’ writing practices as they are linked to their identity formulations; therefore, the second author only employed the five types of cues when the descriptions presented relevance to the cues.

The second author transcribed all interview data and translated Korean-spoken interview transcriptions into English. For instance, Sue-Jee spoke in Korean in her interviews with the second author. To enhance the validity, the second author used verification procedures, such as member check and feedback from others (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). Then, she numbered episodes according to salient themes or events, and categorized the themes emerged across the interview and writing data. Due to the limited space, one case study will be presented in this article.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Literate Identities and Literacy Practices in the ESL Classroom

The participating Korean students build knowledge of literacy practices in a second language by being apprenticed into the target-language communities, such as the ESL classroom, their mainstream classrooms, and other school settings (McKay & Wong, 1996). In particular, literacy instruction of the ESL program at Greenville Elementary, such as guided reading and writing, read aloud, book discussion, and writer’s workshop, enhances the students’ engagement in language learning and literacy practice.

To be literate in a second language, the students are expected to become fluent in listening and speaking in that language. In other words, the students are learning how to be a reader and writer while they are learning how to be a listener and speaker of English. For this reason, progress in learning the English language is a powerful topic in the ESL classroom throughout the school year. The ESL teacher often confirmed the importance of improving English by saying prompts during class lessons, such as “The more you practice, the better your English will be,” and “The more you practice, the more it [reading or writing] makes sense.” The interview and ethnographic data show that students were well
aware that they came to the ESL classroom to improve their English. Students mentioned in interviews that their reading and writing in English would be better if they kept coming to the ESL classroom.

Throughout the school year, the students had an opportunity to engage in different forms of reading and writing lessons in the ESL classroom. They had to learn how to participate in a particular form of the lessons since some of the reading and writing lessons are completely or relatively new to the students. For example, during the teacher’s read-aloud, the students learned how to listen to the teacher and respond to her questions about the book she is reading. During guided reading, the students learned how to talk about a book while they took turns to read each page. Some of the reading and writing lessons in the ESL classroom were held as a collective activity in which the students read a book together or wrote a sentence together with support of the ESL teacher. Therefore, the characteristics of literacy lessons and the ESL teacher’s support influence the ways that the students experience themselves as a reader and/or writer.

Excerpt 1 shows a guided reading lesson in which the students read a picture book in a small group setting. It is an example of how the ESL teacher effectively uses IRE/F² sequences in a guided reading lesson to support the students who have limited English proficiency when they are reading a book together.

Excerpt 1

_The teacher held the picture book for students to see the words and illustrations of the book._

1  T: OK, what is the name of our story, Sam? Where... I
2  Sam: Where is my broom. R
3  T: OK. It is time to get up. Lizzie the…. E+I
4  DJ: uh…witch. R
5  T: witch, puts on her... E+I
6  all: =shirts. R
7  T: shirts, puts on her... E+I
8  all: =shoes. R
9  T: puts on her shoes. She puts on her… E+I
10 all: =hat. R
11 T: hat. Now, I need my… E+I
12 all: =broom. R

² IRE/F patterns (sequences): teacher’s Initiation, students’ Response, and the teacher’s immediate Evaluation or Feedback (Mehan, 1979)
In this excerpt, the teacher read the title of the book once, and then invited the students to read it again with her (line 1). This was the second time that they read the book, so the students were quite familiar with the story. The reading in a small group allowed them to see words and pictures in the book that the teacher was holding for them. The short pause after the teacher’s lead was an implicit invitation for the students to complete the IRE sequences that the teacher initiated. The teacher-initiated questions are repetitive. Thus, it became predictable for the students to know when to jump into the IRE sequence and respond to the teacher’s initiation or question. There is the teacher’s immediate evaluation followed by like in line 3—“OK.” The teacher repeats the students’ response as a form of evaluation in line 5—“witch.” This pattern of talk afforded the beginning level students the possibility to engage in literacy practices of the second language, since maximizing their engagement into a variety of literacy practices is important for these students to be a reader in the English language (Toohey, 2000).

Throughout the school year, the students were exposed to a variety of literacy lessons and expected to learn how to participate in specific reading and writing lessons, although they were not ready to do their own reading and writing independently. At the time of the study, the ESL teacher provided a lot of support in developing the students’ sense of being a reader and/or writer through various literacy lessons. In particular, she apprenticed the students into specific patterns of literacy practice. The next example presents how collective writing and the ESL teacher’s support afforded students’ multiple subject positions as a writer in the English language. It reveals the ways that the students are apprenticed into practices of English writing by learning how to make a summary of the story.

Excerpt 2

_After reading a book, the teacher suggests writing a summary together._

1 T: OK, what we’re going to do is…we’re gonna write a summary of the story together. You sit down on your chair. I know you’ve been practicing writing a summary in your classes.

2 Danny: But, I’m not doing.

3 T: Who can, raise your hands, tell me, what is a summary? I

4 Hana: You write the story with your own words. R

5 T: OK. So, are we going to just copy the words from the book? E+I

6 Students No=R
After reading a picture book, Mrs. Johnson suggested that they would write a summary of the story together. She chose this activity since the students were learning how to write a summary in their regular classes. In line 3, Mrs. Johnson started the lesson by reminding the students of what a summary is. By raising a hand as requested by the teacher, Hana got the floor to explain what a summary is and what it means, which she learned from her mainstream classroom (line 4). Mrs. Johnson emphasized what Hana just explained by seeking the students’ consent (lines 5-7). Mrs. Johnson continued to emphasize the importance of using one’s own words in making a summary. To do that, she suggested a method of collective writing for the students to practice what is expected when it comes to writing a summary (line 8).

The students’ senses of self as a reader and/or writer are not completely developed yet, but are in the process of emerging over time through various literacy lessons of the ESL classroom. At the time of the study, the students’ literate identities are primarily influenced by the forms of classroom discourse, especially IRE/F sequences and characteristics of literacy lessons. The ESL teacher’s support in literacy practice was a significant resource in developing the students’ senses of self as a reader and/or writer in a second language, but is expected to be minimized while the students’ independence in reading and writing increases. Therefore, the aspects of literate identities would be significantly changed over time as the students’ proficiency in English (listening and speaking) has improved.

The study’s observation data indicate that the participating students often distinguish themselves from the Korean students who speak in English more fluently than in Korean. For instance, Yen said, “Some [Korean] kids speak better in English.” During the interview with Hana, she described one of her classmates that she played with and talked in English as a Korean “who does not speak Korean very well.” Koreans who do not speak Korean at all or who barely speak Korean seemed to be a puzzle to all the participating students in the study since most of them felt more comfortable speaking in Korean than in English, except Hana, the most advanced student among the participants.

Being Korean is one of the most distinguishing, but taken-for-granted identity among the participants. However, what makes one Korean and what counts being Korean is rather implicitly assumed than explicitly discussed in the discourses of the ESL classroom. Moreover, students in the ESL classroom have experienced negotiating their linguistic and
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ethnic identity since they started to engage in a new language and culture. The following
excerpt reveals how the students negotiated their understanding of linguistic and ethnic
identity in a discursive context of social interactions with their peers. The following
dialogue (Excerpt 3) occurred during the ESL after-school program in which the students
did their homework, getting some help from Mrs. Johnson or other older students. The
students reconstructed their understanding of language and ethnicity through the
interactions with the other Korean students.

Excerpt 3

At ESL homework club, the first author helped Sam with his homework. Sam wrote
some Japanese words in his writing. As his family had lived in Japan, Sam spoke
Japanese and was able to read and write in Japanese.

1 DJ: I have to be Japanese... (to understand what Sam wrote).
2 Hong: He (Sam) can speak Japanese.
3 Mina: Sam is not really Korean.
4 Hong: Is he not Korean?
5 DJ: He’s half Japanese, half Korean... half.
6 Hong: Sam is half Japanese? Are you sure? (to DJ) Are you half Japanese? (to
   Sam)
7 Sam: .... (no response, keeps grinning and listening what other
   students are saying)
8 Mina: Hankookmaldo hago, japanydo haiyo. (“He speaks Korean as well as
   Japanese.”)
9 Hong: uh, huh.
10 Mina: Korean Japanese.
11 DJ: I know only one word China.

Then the topic of the conversation changed into speaking Chinese.

In this particular event, the first author was helping Sam with his homework in which he
wrote some Japanese words. DJ and Mina were sitting at the same table. DJ started a
conversation by saying “I have to be Japanese” while looking at a few Japanese words in
Sam’s writing. What he said implies that he has to be Japanese to understand what Sam
wrote in his writing in line 1. The first author told DJ that it was not surprising since Sam
could speak Japanese. Responding to what the first author said to DJ, Mina remarked,
“Sam is not really Korean” in line 3. The first author responded back to Mina in line 4.

3 The first author was part of this dialogue.
This time, DJ took a turn by saying “He’s half Japanese, half Korean… half” (line 5). The first author wanted to know what Sam would think of what he had heard so far, thus asked both DJ and Sam in line 6 in order to invite more reactions from them. Sam did not say a word, but just smiled. In line 8, Mina switched from English to Korean. What she said in Korean was that “Sam speaks Korean as well as Japanese.” By saying “Japany” in a Korean sentence, she meant Japanese, but omitted the ending consonant /z/. The first author agreed in line 9. Mina employed code switching again, this time back to English, “Korean Japanese” in line 10. After then, the students changed the topic of the conversation into speaking Chinese.

This instance represents an example of “hybrid discourse practice” (Kamberelis, 2001) that promotes multiple negotiations in the formations of self and others as a social practice. However, Sam did not take an important part in determining his identity since he did not say a word in this sequence. What he did was just listen and smile. He seemed to give it a try of “look and see,” how other students would think of him speaking two languages: Korean and Japanese.

To sum up, languages were a predominant topic in the ESL classroom in understanding who one is and how the person is identified by others. The students associate with the languages one speaks at a certain period of time, by which they understand who they are and determine their own and other people’s linguistic and ethnic identity. However, the formations of self are involved in a more complicated process of creating and recreating the relations of self to language, ethnicity, and culture across different social settings with different discourse conditions.

2. Literate Identity as a Site of Struggle: Sue-Jee’s Story

Sue-Jee’s narratives below describe her multiple identities including the ethnic, negotiated and fragmented natures of identity. Additionally, her narratives demonstrate her positioning that she continuously negotiates and renegotiates with regard to her identity as a foreigner—international student and cultural knower—all of which are related to her writing practices:

Excerpt 4

1 I think people can figure out some person’s identity such as ethnicity or
2 characteristics by looking at their writing. Although I can’t recognize
3 whose writing is written by white or black people, for example, I am able
4 to figure out writing that was written by Asian people because there is are
5 no articles. I can’t use articles properly either. When we have peer
readings in class, my friends said that they were able to assume which
writing came from me because of the uses of articles. So, I think writing
can present a writer’s ethnicity. Also writing is varied according to a
writer’s ideologies. Each person sees an issue from a different perspective.
Some will be open-minded, others will not. Because everyone is different,
their ideology is different. Their observations are different, too, so they
can be positive or negative. … I am not comfortable sharing my writing
with others especially in here in the USA, because I dislike that
somebody reads and grades my writing. I feel like I am judged by my
writing. Because I am so stressed by the feelings of judgment, I do all my
best to write proper writings that fit into the right context and use correct
grammar, and writings that I think contain the right answer. Because
of this, I often don’t write my own thoughts but write to meet certain
expectations required. Although somebody lied about something in his or
her writing, I think the writing still presents his or her personality or
identity because even lying comes from his or her way of thinking and
their ideals. But it is not the truth. The only truth about that writing is the
fact that he or she wrote it.
(First Interview, 01/13/09)

The above passages (Excerpt 4) illustrate Sue-Jee’s negotiated, multi-layered identities
with regard to writing practices. Lines 1-5 suggest Sue-Jee’s social mark as Asian by
others because of her misusage of articles, which is considered as the most significant of
the grammatical errors made by East Asian students learning English. Lines 14-19 explain
that she disguised her identity in writing to meet the teachers’ expectations. It is worth
noting that she believed any writing she wrote could be attributed to her regardless of
whether or not she wrote factual truths (lines 19-23). She regarded her political disguises
in her writing as a part of herself (lines 19-22). The only truth in this case, however, is that
she wrote the piece. She thought that although she may feign a story or even lie to readers,
the stories still present her identities because of the fact that the stories are written by her
(lines 22-23). As numerous sociocultural theorists posit, Sue-Jee’s disguised identity
manifests the politically resituated and reconstructed identities that emerge according to
the sociocultural contexts of writing and literacy practice. In particular, her identity in
terms of a political identity kit focused on the points of views that belong to others,
especially focusing on the judgment of teachers about her writing performance (lines 12-15).
Excerpt 5

Actually, I am having a harder time with writing now than that year when I first came to Michigan, because I was able to say anything when I wrote that first year. If it turned out not so good, then my excuse was “I’m a foreigner, I am an exchange student.” Then I was excused because teachers knew I was new in the USA and that I was a foreigner. But now I am an international student who already has a year of writing experiences in Michigan. Honestly, when I was an exchange student, I didn’t have to work hard because I was going to go back to Korea in a year and the expectations of teachers was not high for me. Although I didn’t work so hard, I got all A’s! … But now all my situations are different. I noted that teachers expected from me to work more and I now know what to do and how to do it. When I did not do well in writing, I simply said, “I misunderstood the questions.” Then everything was okay in Michigan. But I can’t say this now because I have stayed here since last year and if I still don’t understand questions, I might be seen as having the some problems or needs and I will have to go to ESL classes. So, I feel more stressed. … I know teachers’ expectations, but meeting their expectations is far more difficult than just knowing them. I began to know things about writing, for instance, what to write and where to put it, as in organization. And I have to know these things because I have studied here for almost for two years. But I am not used to it yet. … Although I am learning English, how can I write well in English like I am do in Korean, which is my mother tongue? English never comes out naturally like Korean for me. It is the acid sorrow of the person like me whose mother tongue is not English. It is truly frustrating and crazy.

(Second Interview, 05/23/09)

Excerpt 5 above demonstrates the struggles and conflicts that Sue-Jee had to face due to the chasm between her knowledge on writing and her lack of experience in writing practice. While Sue-Jee became more aware of the expectations in writing practice, she felt more challenged because her writing could not meet the expectations of her teachers (line 1-21). When she was an exchange student in Michigan over a year ago, teachers expected less from her (lines 1-5). However, she changed her status to an international student and planned on continuing her study in the USA (lines 6-12). Because of her over-a-year experience of schooling in the USA, her teachers might assume that she would know what to write and how to write. She was concerned about the evaluations of her
work made by the teachers, and she was concerned about failing to understand the
directions or having many grammatical issues in her writing; she was also concerned about
having unorganized writing patterns (lines 10-21). She was afraid of taking ESL classes,
since taking these classes signified that her academic achievements and English
competency were not developed (lines 14-17).
While she was aware of the teachers’ expectations, she was frustrated by having to
fulfill their expectations (lines 17-18). She wrestled with the chasm between writing and
cultural awareness, as well as writing performance. Her uses of predications and evaluative
indexicals to describe her feelings and experiences with writing practices are even painful
(lines 21-25): “But I am not used to it yet. ... Although I am learning English, how can I
write well in English like I am doing in Korean, which is my mother tongue? English never
comes out naturally like Korean for me. It is the acid sorrow of the person like me whose
mother tongue is not English. It is truly frustrating and crazy.” These lines of her
descriptions illustrate that writing and literacy practices have a great impact on Sue-Jee’s
identity reconstruction, wherein she desired to fulfill a certain level of writing performance.
In other words, while engaging in writing practice and becoming a cultural knower in the
U.S. school, she was re-negotiating her identity in English literacy practices.
On the other hand, there were mutual agreements in positioning each other between
Sue-Jee and her teachers. They did not expect her to have command of “perfect English”
and Sue-Jee accepted this while maintaining her self-positioning as a foreigner. There was
an additional reciprocal agreement that the teachers expected Sue-Jee to stay on topic and
use resonating voices. When Sue-Jee failed to execute this agenda, the teachers’ comments
about her writing were helpful but harsh for her, since she did all her best. Getting a lower
grade than she expected discourages her from staying in the USA in order to pursue her
goals and careers. Recall the statement “So,” my teacher said to me, ”your writing doesn’t
have any clear outline, and I don’t know what you are trying to say.” What the teacher
said really hurt me, like the edge of the sharpest sword that stings to the very center of my
heart, but I know that this is what I have to keep in mind (Second Interview, 05/23/09). She
was astonished and hurt with the teacher’s comments, but accepted the reality. These
writing experiences affect her emotional disruption whenever she was about to write and
she became “blocked out and freaked out!” She continued:

Excerpt 6

1 I am freaking out and I become panicked with writing. Whenever I am
2 about to write, I freak out. Although I freak out, of course, I complete all
3 homework, writing, and check it over and over again. This is my habit and
4 I am always conscious of my work. As soon as I arrived home, I did my
5 homework and previewed for the next class and slept very little. … I am
not sure about my major yet, but want to go a prestigious university. I am so stressed out by the pressure of having to go to a good university because my sister went to a good college and my parents sacrifice a lot for me now. Now I receive good grades in general. I need to keep going like this to get into a good college. … But when I received the feedback from my teachers that I misunderstood directions and got off topic and that I was not clear, thus receiving a lower degree than I expected, I felt empty and I don’t know what to do. Since then, I have done all of the best work possible. I came here is to study English and in English and to become a competent person to go a prestigious university, but when I didn’t get a good score in writing, I went into desperate despair. I feel like I am gonna die. … the reason I am here, so far from my family and other loved people. I came here to learn English and to study in English in order to pursue my dream and to have a better opportunity for my future.

(Second Interview, 05/23/09)

In Excerpt 6, her feeling of “freaking out” (lines 1-2) and discomfort in sharing her writing with others caused her pressure whenever she had to write. Her struggles with writing can be found in her experiences of failing to receive a good grade and the comments of her teachers about her writing. She was a studious and good student, but she was suffering with writing skills. Although she put forth her best efforts, she did not receive a good grade and was given negative feedback (lines 10-12): “But when I received the feedback from my teachers that I misunderstood directions and got off topic and that I was not clear, thus receiving a lower degree than I expected.” The more she understood the importance of writing in academia, the more she felt anguished and became depressed (line, 1-10). This is because, as she mentioned, “I am so stressed out by the pressure of having to go to a good university because my sister went to a good college and my parents sacrifice a lot for me now” (lines 6-9), and she came “here far from my family and other loved people. I came here to learn English and to study in English to pursue my dream and have a better opportunity for my future” (lines 17-19).

Her desires and conflicts presented in the above two excerpts provide a good example of Norton’s (1997) concept of identity as “a site of struggle” for literacy development of students from other cultures. The excerpts also explain why writing as a sociocultural norm affects one’s identity formation. Sue-Jee’s struggles were rooted not only in her desire to meet the expectations of her teachers in the USA, but also in her desire to fulfill the expectations of her parents in Korea. Within her writing practices, she continuously negotiated her identities and struggled to reform herself.
V. DISCUSSION

1. Literate Identities in the Elementary ESL Classroom

The findings of Study 1 documented that the participating students negotiated their identities in varied discourse practices of language learning, rather than simply accepting the dominant meanings of self prevalent in the ESL classroom discourse. In particular, discursive data of the study suggest that the discourse forms of classroom talk available for the learners of English with limited proficiency, such as IRE/F sequences and drill-based language instruction, play a significant role for students to perform being a student, reader, and/or writer when they engage in literacy practices of the second language.

Other discursive example in the findings shows that the students negotiated their senses of self with regard to language and ethnicity by engaging in dialogical conversations with peers and adults in various kinds of classroom talk. The dialogical conversations afford them a space to create multiple subject positions as a speaker of one language and another as well as being ethnically related to the language(s). However, the students’ understanding of themselves as linguistic and ethnic self becomes complicated, as the formations of self are a complex process of creating and recreating the relations of self to language, ethnicity, and culture across different social settings with different discourse conditions.

The ESL classroom of the study was a site where students created and recreated their multiple identities while learning the second language through a variety of social interactions with peers and adults. As newcomers, students are socialized into the norms, values, and behaviors appropriate in a community that they newly belong to. As language learning is a process of becoming a member of a sociocultural group, the participating students’ acculturation and language learning was related to the nature of classroom interactions.

Lin (1994) recognized that the language of the classroom is a “socially and interactionally constituted system of discourse and social actions constructed through the actions and interactions of teacher and students” (pp. 370-371). Therefore, the acquisition of a second language and the development of literacy in the second language is a result of constructing multiple identities in and through the interactional routines embedded in the communicative events of the classroom, which Willett (1995) defines as a “predictable sequence of exchanges with a limited set of appropriate utterances, responses, and strategies” (p. 476). For example, in order to be a speaker of the second language in the classroom, the participating students needed to utilize discursive forms and language resources available to them within the conditions of discourse practice in a particular social setting.

During second language learning in school setting, the Korean students in Study 1
explore multiple meanings of self and self-other relationships in changing conditions of discourse and identity. Their language learning and identity construction occur as an investment, a product of negotiating multiple senses of self across different contexts of social settings while using the target language (Norton, 1995). In particular, language learners participate in discourse practice of the target language by engaging in the most dominant and accessible forms and using resources available to them in a particular discourse context. It is a process of building internal and external relations of the self to the world and keeping balances within self and between self and other within the changing conditions of language, literacy, and culture. Therefore, the formations of self in the process of second language learning and literacy practice are significantly associated with the nature of various discursive, social, and cultural practices that the language learners engage in.

2. Identity and Writing for a Korean Adolescent

Learning language and becoming biliterate is not simply a skill, but it is a complex social practice that involves multi-layered identities and literacy practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Norton, 1997). Ivanič (1998), and William (2006) have theorized that a writer’s identity is intertwined with a student’s writing and his or her writing reflects his or her identity. Williams (2006) discusses that all writing presents identity. Clark and Ivanič (1997) articulate that writing always presents the writer’s identity, at least partially.

Meanwhile, Prior (1998) enlightens the partial relations between writer and writer’s identity. Adhering to these authors’ theoretical elaborations, Study 2 investigated the interrelations between identity and literacy practices as the adolescent ESL students become cultural knowers in the second language. For instance, Sue-Jee mitigates her ideas and expressions because of the language limitation and her position as a foreigner. She also reconciles her voice in writing since she did not want to appear negative or too critical toward American people and society. At the beginning of her stay in the USA, she chose a simple topic rather than a complicated one on which to argue due to her language limitation.

Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of legitimate discourse (or language) and Gee’s (2000) discourse theory help to explain why Sue-Jee did not understand primary norms in writing and why there was miscommunication between Sue-Jee and her teachers about her writing. Bourdieu asserts that a person’s speech cannot be understood apart from a larger map of social relations. This notion is also echoed in Gee’s discourse theory that literacy practices are never neutral but always political in ways that favor a cultural knower. With this in mind, although Sue-Jee literally knew how to write in English and developed grammar
skills, she was still in a process of learning and acquiring means of communicating with the use of legitimate semiotic and sociocultural rules and forms in the second language. Through this process, she felt nostalgic for the past, especially for her parents and her own identification as a good student in Korea and in Michigan while she felt conflicted with her present situation. However, although Sue-Jee struggled with academic literacy practices like when she said “I feel like I am gonna die,” she had a strong desire to pursue her dreams described as a “better opportunity for my future.” Based on Norton’s articulations (1997), the notion of identity as a site of struggle, Sue-Jee’s biliterate identity does not harm her; rather, it empowers her in a way that incites her persistence in re-negotiating her position to the world.

In conclusion, the participating Korean adolescents would recognize cultural differences in the USA as they become more aware of the essential criteria in the society. Cultural awareness, therefore, plays a critical role in learning language and becoming literate in English. As their growing awareness in literacy and culture continues, they are better able to discern primary norms, values, and behaviors, and constantly resituate their identity between the two worlds of language, literacy, and culture (Bhabha, 1994).

3. Implications

The presented studies have several implications for further research on Korean students learning English as in ESL or in EFL settings: their identity formation and biliteracy practice. First, the studies used qualitative and ethnographic methods to better understand Korean students’ multiple and situated identities in the multilayered social interactions and discourses associated with literacy practice. The findings suggest that these methods provide a methodological possibility for examining a configuration of identity and literacy within the particular social and material conditions of discourse and literacy practice.

Second, few studies have examined the language and literacy development of Korean learners of English in schools of English-speaking nations with attention to literacy and identity, considering the larger discursive and social contexts of language socialization in their methodology. This article attempts to illustrate the complicated process of language socialization and literacy development by presenting the studies done at the elementary and secondary levels respectively; therefore, it provides a detailed view of the Korean learners of English and their literacy experiences in U.S. schools.

Third, the article indicates that Korean newcomers to U.S. schools would face challenging experiences of identity and literacy. With a better understanding of others and otherness in culture, educators and practitioners need to consider what to teach and how to teach second language literacy for students from other cultures. There are different ways of being, reading, and writing, which are implicit and cause conflicts and misunderstandings.
between language learners and teachers. Second language and literacy instruction depends on teachers and students’ mutual investment in understanding one another.

Finally, the article suggests that educational communities in Korea consider the importance of identity, language socialization, and cultural understanding when it comes to learning and teaching another language, since language is closely related to who one is, how one is seen by others, and how one is associated with others.

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Literate Identities among Korean Students Learning English in the USA


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