

Children Negotiating Korean American Ethnic Identity Through Their Heritage Language

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Abstract

This preliminary study provides an interpretive reading of focus group interviews of four Korean American children in the Phoenix metropolitan area. It examines how these Korean American children are negotiating their ethnic identity as Korean Americans while learning Korean as a heritage language. It shows that maintaining heritage language is important to Korean American children in terms of helping them have a positive ethnic identity. This study provides a viewpoint on learning heritage language and ethnic identity from the perspectives of young Korean Americans.

Introduction

My interest regarding heritage language learning and ethnic identity development began and grew during my experience as a teacher and principal in a Korean community school in Phoenix, Arizona. I noticed that many Korean American parents were interested in the ability of their children to maintain their heritage language. In spite of their parents' desires, some children were not fully motivated to learn about the Korean language and culture. This could be because many are forced, by their parents, to attend Korean community schools throughout secondary school. When they are young, there is less resistance but by the time they are in junior high or high school, they tend to quit attending Korean community schools and begin to struggle with their ethnic identity as Korean Americans. Ironically, many of these children later end up feeling guilty about their inability to speak Korean.

In an effort to motivate students to learn the Korean heritage language and help them develop a positive ethnic identity, in September 2003, I invited Professor Terrence Wiley to speak on heritage language and language policy issues. I reasoned that if students believed maintaining Korean heritage

language and culture was important, they would be more willing to make an effort to learn about the language and cultural traditions. Professor Wiley spoke to both parents and children about the current situation of heritage languages in the United States, including Korean, and the importance of preserving heritage languages. After his presentation, I believe some of my students began to consider that there was value in learning about the Korean language and culture. I also heard many other teachers mention that they felt that students became more willing to learn about the Korean language and culture in class.

This study is a preliminary investigation of young Korean American children's thoughts and attitudes about learning and maintaining their heritage language and culture. It also examines their ethnic identity as Korean Americans. In order to examine these topics, I interviewed four Korean American children who were born in the United States. Because they attended my school, I could observe their behaviors and attitudes during both class and play time. This study also aims to provide a foundation for a subsequent study that will examine how Korean Americans deal with their identity as members of an ethnic minority group in American society and research into larger issues of why preserving heritage language and culture is critical for young Korean Americans.

Korean Community Schools in Phoenix

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are now 9,123 Korean Americans who reside in Arizona. This number presents an increase of nearly 56% since 1990 and implies that the number of people who speak the Korean language has grown.

The first Korean community school in Arizona, *Se-jong* Korean School, was founded in 1975, but closed in 1992 (Arizona Korean Community Directory, 2003–2004). The oldest and largest Korean community school in Arizona, *Sa-rang* Korean School (pseudonym), was founded in Phoenix, and in 1985, other four Korean community schools, in Phoenix, were founded less than 10 years ago. It should be noted that Korean community churches operate four out of the five Korean community schools in Phoenix.

In the spring of 2004, there were five Korean community schools in the Phoenix metropolitan area and one Korean community school in Tucson. During the spring semester of 2004, I personally contacted each school's principals or persons who were in charge of the schools in the Phoenix area, and found out that the schools had a total of four principals, 38 teachers, and had about 180 students who attended these Korean community schools.

Unlike other Asian minority-language groups who operate heritage language schools in community centers or temples in the United States, many Korean community schools are run by Korean Protestant churches. Min (2000)

estimates that about 75% of Korean immigrants in the United States were affiliated with Korean immigrant churches, and claimed that Korean community churches help maintain Korean culture and traditions by providing Korean language and other cultural programs for children.

Enrollment figures for Korean community schools in Arizona are relatively small, however, they have steadily increased as more and more Korean Americans move to Arizona. For example, *Sa-rang* Korean School had 38 students and 4 teachers in 1985, but in the spring semester of 2004, it had 93 students, 1 principal, 1 head teacher, 8 teachers, and 7 assistant teachers. Although it is a slow growth, I believe that the number of Korean community schools in Arizona and the enrollment at each school will continue to increase in the future.

Ethnic Identity and Heritage Language

According to Tomlinson-Clarke (2001), in the United States, the influence of changing racial-ethnic demographics has brought ethnic identity to the forefront. Noels, Pon, and Clément (1996) define ethnic identity as “a subjective feeling of belongingness to a particular ethnic group” (p. 246). Concepts of ethnic identity, however, vary “according to the underlying theory embraced by researchers’ and scholars’ intent on resolving its conceptual meanings” (Trimble & Dickson, in press, p. 1). In this study, I limit the concept of ethnic identity to the more conventional definition, which is, “the sameness of a band or nation of people who share common customs, traditions, historical experiences, and in some instances geographical residence” (Trimble & Dickson, p. 1).

Ethnic identity is closely related to a heritage language (Baker, 2001; Cho, 2000). Baker claimed, “A language’s symbolic status is also important in language vitality. A heritage language may be an important symbol of ethnic identity...” (p. 69). In other words, one of the main markers of belonging to a particular ethnic group is language; that is, “through language, ethnic identity may be expressed, enacted and symbolized” (Baker & Jones, 1998, p. 113). Tse (1998) remarked that many ethnic minorities regret not having learned their heritage language and believe that proficiency in their language would help them gain access to their own ethnic group. Cho argued that Korean Americans who have developed their heritage language hold a strong ethnic identity and have a greater understanding and knowledge of cultural values, ethics, and manners. Kim (1992) believed that Korean American adults are interested in helping their children develop and maintain the Korean language and traditions because they believe this will help their children develop positive ethnic identities as Korean Americans.

The Model of Ethnic Identity Development

To understand how some Korean American children develop and negotiate their ethnic identity, I adopted Tse's (1998) ethnic identity development model. This model is "based on the experiences of racial minorities that focuses on attitudes toward the heritage and majority languages" (p. 15). Tse's model of ethnic identity development has four stages: Stage 1, Unawareness; Stage 2, Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion; Stage 3, Ethnic Emergence; and Stage 4, Ethnic Identity Incorporation.

The first stage, Unawareness, includes a relatively short period when ethnic minorities are not conscious of their minority status. This stage normally lasts until minority children go to school and leave their ethnic enclave. In the next stage, Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion, minority children may feel ambivalent or have negative feelings or attitudes toward their ethnic culture, and this may happen while they prefer to be identified with members of the main society. This stage may, however, evolve over a comparatively long period (e.g., childhood through adolescence or even adulthood). The third stage, Ethnic Emergence, is a period when ethnic minorities realize that they belong to their minority ethnic group and begin to explore their ethnic heritage. In this stage, ethnic minorities have some conflicts because they accept their ethnic heritage but also favor the dominant group. Finally, in the fourth stage, Ethnic Identity Incorporation, ethnic minorities strongly identify with and join their ethnic minority groups and are able to resolve many of their ethnic identity conflicts. During this stage, ethnic minorities embrace themselves as members of their ethnic group and become proud of their ethnic identity.

Data Collection

On October 24, 2003, I visited *Na-mu* classroom at *Sa-rang* Korean School in Phoenix, Arizona, where I was able to interview a group of four students. I used a focus group format for interviewing purpose. In *Good Guys Don't Wear Hats*, Tobin (2000) stated, "By choosing to use focus groups, as opposed, for instance, to conducting one-on-one interviews or listening in on children's conversations, I created a specific context that played a key role in the course of the conversations" (p. 141). I thought the focus group format was an effective way to explore children's feelings and attitudes toward learning their heritage language and developing their ethnic identity.

My focus group consisted of four female children who were born in the United States. All names used here are pseudonyms: Jane (third grade), Lily (third grade), Laura (fourth grade), and Kathy (eighth grade). All the conversations were recorded during the interviews, and later transcribed. The semi-structured interview consisted of questions about learning the Korean language and understanding Korean culture (i.e., "Why do you want to learn

Korean?"; "What do your parents think about your learning Korean?"; "Do you know any Korean singers?"; and "In the future do you want to continue to learn the Korean language?" and on ethnic identity (i.e., "Are you Korean or American?"; "In the 2002 World Cup, the Korean National Soccer Team was matched against the American National Soccer Team. For which team did you cheer?"; and "Do you like Korean singers more or American singers?").

Findings

The children actively participated in the focus group interview and expressed their feelings and thoughts about learning the Korean language and being Korean American children. When I asked, "Why do you want to learn Korean?" Lily, who is polite and pleasant, answered, "I wanna learn Korean because my mom said I should speak Korean. . . . So she just wants me to go to the Korean class." Through this statement, Lily expressed the pressure she felt from her mother to learn Korean. I was well aware through occasional conversations with Lily's mother that she was very interested in her children learning Korean. She was involved in our school activities as she helped regularly as a volunteer. Like Lily's mother, Korean American parents tend to have a strong desire for their children to retain Korean culture and language and enthusiastically involve themselves in the maintenance and development of their heritage language (Cho, 2000). Because few Korean courses are offered as a foreign language in public schools, Korean American communities have made an effort to teach and maintain the Korean language and culture and have founded many Korean community schools in the United States. The number of Korean community schools, who are members of the National Association for Korean Schools (NAKS) and the Korean School Association in America (KSAA), nationwide is around 1,244 (The National Association for Korean School, 2004). However, the actual number of these schools is probably much larger because there are many small Korean schools that are not officially registered in these two organizations.

Lily also seemed concerned about her lack of fluency when trying to speak Korean. At one point in the interview, she commented, "It ought to be too embarrassing for you if you don't know Korean," and "Sometimes whenever I think it's so silly that I don't know Korean, I want to learn the language of Korean. I feel sorry that I don't know Korean." These expressions of guilt about not knowing Korean, I assumed, were tied to Lily's lack of confidence and her inability to speak Korean well.

Lily added, "I wish I would go there [Korea]. . . . I've never been to Korea before, but . . . but . . . umm I think next summer when I go to Korea, that is why I came here, because I want to understand Korean like cousin Sarah." This shows that her wish to visit Korea is related to her motivation to learn Korean. For the other girls as well, visiting Korea and communicating with Korean

people seems to play an important role in motivating them to learn their heritage language. Laura stated, "I want to learn Korean because if I go to Korea." Jane added, "If you don't know Korean, [Korean] people can't understand you." Kathy added, "I miss Korea. I miss over there [Korea]. . . . Yeah, I have not been there in 2 years. . . . So, we can talk to like Korean relatives that can't speak English."

There were 10 bi-ethnic children attending *Sa-rang* Korean School. Kathy was one of them. Unlike the other bi-ethnic children, Kathy and her two brothers were indistinguishable from most Korean American children because both parents are Asian Americans. Her father is Vietnamese, and her mother is Korean. Her mother sent them to *Sa-rang* Korean School for 1 year. These children had attended other Korean community schools before they came to *Sa-rang* Korean School.

When I asked Kathy, "You are here in this classroom to learn Korean, right? Why? Why do you want to learn Korean?" Kathy replied without hesitation, "Because I can use Korean in the future. Because I am a Korean girl and yeah, it will be good if I know another language." She stated, "If you are a Korean, you should know Korean," and "You should be proud of being Korean." Kathy's statement appeared to be very straightforward and she seemed to have a good reason to learn Korean. It also appeared that Kathy has a positive ethnic identity on being Korean American. Based on Tse's ethnic identity development model, Kathy seemed to be in either the third stage, Ethnic Emergence, or possibly the fourth stage, Ethnic Identity Incorporation.

Like the other children, however, Kathy also seemed to be struggling due to her lack of confidence in her ability to speak Korean fluently. Her comments indicated that she might also be in the second stage, Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion, of Tse's model:

You know what? Actually, actually, I am part Korean and part Vietnamese. And when I was little, *hal-meo-ni* ("grandmother" in Korean) and *hal-a-beo-ji* ("grandfather" in Korean) sleep with us. So, I knew Korean. But when they were back to Korea, and when we lived with dad's side of the family, which is all Vietnamese. So. Yeah. I started figuring out Korean and learned a little bit Vietnamese. But, now I forgot both. I don't know.

Kathy mentioned that her father is Vietnamese American but only speaks English. On the other hand, her mother sometimes speaks Korean at home and several times she has sent Kathy to visit relatives in Korea. Kathy's remark gives us insight into factors that affect children's attitudes toward their heritage language. First, it shows that parents' attitude toward native language and its use is very important to their children's heritage language maintenance (Stern, 1967). Another aspect that might be considered is the access to the parent's

language. For example, while there are five Korean community schools in Phoenix currently, no Vietnamese community school has been established. Although Kathy has attended Korean community schools for several years, she has not had the opportunity to attend a Vietnamese community school.

In order to examine the children's knowledge and attitudes about current Korean popular culture, I asked them, "Do you know any Korean singers?" All the children except Jane were able to name several popular Korean singers and groups such as Boa, Seven, NRG, and *Shin-whoa*. This indicates that they have some knowledge of Korean entertainers and Korean popular culture. I also noticed that many Korean Americans, regardless of their generation, listen to and enjoy Korean popular music. Many Korean American parents rent movies from Korean or Asian video shops where they are also able to buy Korean magazines. Watching Korean videos and reading Korean magazines is one of the ways they stay connected with Korea while living in American society. Many Korean American families also have satellite dishes and Internet access, and these devices may contribute to the maintenance of Korean language and culture among Korean Americans. In this regard, Carreira and Armengol (2001) noted:

Recent advances in communication technology have given satellite and cable companies the capacity to add international channels to their menus, thereby increasing their subscriptions among foreign language speakers in the United States. In 1999, more than 350 cable systems across the country launched foreign language channels targeting various subgroups of America's immigrant population. (p. 117)

In order to further probe the children's connection to Korean culture and events and investigate their attitudes toward Korean national identity and American national identity, I asked, "You know the World Cup, right? And, the last time the Korean National Soccer Team was matched against the American National Soccer Team. For which team did you cheer?" Kathy responded with "*Dae-han-min-kuk*," which means "Republic of Korea" in Korean, instead of the Korean National Soccer Team or the American National Soccer Team. That caused the other children to laugh. Next, Jane mentioned, "Sometimes people wanted to be the Reds." Finally, Lily clapped five times.

Kathy's response "*Dae-han-min-kuk*" may sound misplaced, but it makes sense to Kathy because as an insider she understands one of the aspects of Korean modern culture. Generally, Korean people do not use the term "*Dae-han-min-kuk*." This word is reserved for when they cheer for the Korean National Soccer Team. In Korea, soccer is the national sport and also the most popular sport. There is a special cheering group for the Korean National Soccer Team called *Red Devils*. The members of the Red Devils always wear red shirts. The style of their cheering is simple. First, they cry out "*Dae-han-*

min-kuk,” then they clap five times to the rhythm. Most Koreans know this simple rule and follow it. During the 2002 FIFA World Cup, many Koreans wore bright red shirts and enthusiastically cheered for the Korean National Soccer Team according to the cheering rule. This is the reason why Jane stated, “Sometimes people wanted to be the Reds,” and when Kathy uttered “*Dae-han-min-kuk*” all the children laughed by understanding its meaning. These comments may indicate that they identify themselves as having more Korean national identity than American national identity.

Discussion

Using Tse’s framework, I reasoned that the children who participated in this study were between Stage 2 and Stage 3. The four Korean American children appeared to be Stage 2 because they expressed that they were struggling to learn Korean as their heritage language. Occasionally they appeared ambivalent and even negative toward their ethnic identity. They also often demonstrated Stage 3. They seemed to be exploring and embracing their heritage language and culture. In particular, in the focus group interviews, they showed positive attitudes toward learning and maintaining their heritage language and positive ethnic identity. These findings might suggest that the guest speaker’s presentation, which took place about 1 month earlier, influenced the children’s attitudes toward learning Korean and their ethnic identities about being Korean American children. I believe that heritage language schools need to organize various heritage-language promotion seminars to evoke students’ motivation to learn and maintain their heritage language and to help students develop a positive ethnic identity, as shown in the case of Kathy.

In this focus group interview, it was difficult for me to identify if a child was at Stage 2 or 3. Tse (1998) admits that not all ethnic minorities who enter the developmental process experience all four stages of the model. Not all the ethnic identity formations are linear processes. She claims, “This model was developed to represent the experiences of ethnic minorities described in an emerging literature” (p. 29). Ethnic minority students’ identities have multiple framework references. Tse’s model, however, is helpful in speculating on how these Korean American children are developing and negotiating their ethnic identity.

Final Thoughts

This preliminary study has examined some of the issues Korean American children in Phoenix face when they attend a Korean community school within the current anti-bilingual context. Given that this research was based on an analysis of one small focus group of young Korean Americans, it would be a

mistake to generalize the findings to other Korean families or Korean schooling contexts. Nevertheless, this study offers some insights into these children's candid voices and attitudes about learning their heritage language and developing their ethnic identities. It presents snapshots of how four Korean American children negotiated their ethnic identity as they learned the Korean language and culture.

I believe that preserving heritage language is worthwhile not only in terms of helping children become fluent bilinguals, but also helping them promote a positive ethnic identity. Many Korean American children growing up in the United States are struggling with their inability to speak Korean fluently and with their identity as Korean Americans. To help language-minority children develop and maintain their heritage language through adulthood, there should be more opportunities for children to learn their heritage language.

Korean community schools play an important role in helping children maintain their heritage language and culture. In order for these schools to be more effective, Shin (2005) suggests that teachers in Korean community schools should promote interesting and creative classes instead of tedious and unproductive ones. In addition, there should be more qualified, and experienced teachers available. Two national organizations (NAKS and KSAA) have provided some Korean teacher training seminars, however, more teacher training and development programs are needed to prepare teachers to work effectively with Korean American children.

American society is composed of diverse cultures that have a multitude of ethnic and language groups. It has been shown that when children identify positively with their own ethnic group and language, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups (Shibata, 2000). Accordingly, fostering a heritage language is beneficial not only to building each minority group's positive ethnic identity, but also to forming a harmony in this multilingual and multicultural society.

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