

**One Size Does Not Fit All:  
Koreans and English Language  
Learners**

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Students of color. English Language Learners. Emergent Bilinguals. While the practice of teaching non-native students English has been transformed over the past decade, there are few standards in place that acknowledge the differences--some major--amongst learners of English, especially in the K-12 environment. In certain cities, New York being a prime example, there is an array of diversity within the ELL population, which can lead to a certain cultural awareness that guides one's teaching. For example, according to the NYCDOE Department of English Language Learners and Student Support 2013-14 Demographic Report, a substantial 43% of ALL students in the school system speak a language other than English at home. Although Spanish is by and large the predominant ELL home language, the list of languages spoken by New York City students range from Chinese (14.2%) to Punjabi (0.7%). Any amateur cultural anthropologist could illustrate why teaching English to a Chinese student requires different skills than teaching an Arabic-speaking pupil. In this paper, I will attempt to answer the question: How do cultural norms affect learning among Korean English Language Learners, and how can acknowledging these norms enhance teaching skills?

This particular question is important to me because, having taught in Korea for over four years and subsequently teaching in New York City, working with primarily Spanish speakers, I have noticed that techniques that were effective in Korea did not have the same desired effect in the Bronx. Moreover, the East Asian population in New York City is large, and growing. According to the 2011 American Community Survey, New York City has the largest population of Koreans outside of Korea. More pointedly, 2010 census data shows that the Asian (non-hispanic) population in New York City increased 31.8% between 2000-2010, more than any other ethnic group. There needs to be tools in place in city schools that acknowledge the

specialness of various ethnic groups and truly values teaching strategies that effectively reach our English Language Learners.

The first half of this paper will address some of the issues that Korean students face when attempting to learn English, issues that connect to the intricacies of Korean culture. The second half will concern itself with solutions on how to productively teach Korean English Language Learners, techniques that are generally applicable to other East Asian students, including those of Chinese and Japanese descent.

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There is a saying in Korea-- 21세기의 가장 가치 있는 천연자원은 두뇌이다, loosely translated to mean: In the 21st century, Korea's main natural resource is our brain. Shortly after Korea became one of the economic "Asian tigers", English language comprehension became true currency, and language centers sprouted up in virtually every city. In addition to a drive to learn English domestically, many parents understood that a true English education could only be truly experienced abroad, leading to an influx of Korean students in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Often accompanied with one parent (almost always the mother) and occasionally sent to live with relatives, these Korean students face an environment vastly different from their own.

In the study, *'Could You Calm Down More': Requests and Korean ESL Learners*, author Julie Kim addresses the issue of negative language transfer amongst Korean speaker, specifically in terms of the "request". Negative language transfer occurs when the speaker attempts to transfer linguistic structures from one language to another. In her experiment, Julie Kim focuses on how Korean students handle direct and non-direct requests. Although "request performance",

the process of effectively receiving and/or transmitting goods or information” is a major component of all language instruction, there is most definitely a cultural component that teachers of English should take care to understand. Per Kim, there is an overarching schema related to request performance. The motivation for said request, the requestive goal, is composed of *effectiveness* and *politeness*. For native English speakers, the interconnectedness between effectiveness and politeness can be propelled by adding a simple word: please. For a teacher, saying “Take out your notebook” is quite effective, and with the addition of “please”, the request enters the realm of courteousness. However, there are several cultural factors that make understanding “request performance” a difficult task for many Koreans.

The one factor I feel is most relevant to the ELL classroom, vis a vis teacher and student connection, is age, which Kim explains “may lead to [request performance] avoidance or affect its mode of performance.” In Korean culture, age is a highly important factor in the type of language used to communicate, based on centuries-old Confucianism. Simply, I would use a different set of “words” to request a banana from a friend than I would from a teacher, or my own grandmother. One component of Kim’s experiment, where she measured directness levels and external modification among 25 Korean English Language Learners and 15 native American English speakers, concerned itself with various “supportive moves”, including apology, disarmer, and promise of a reward. Kim discovered that the Korean subjects would buffer their request with phrases such as: “I was wondering if...”, or “Would it be possible...”. These phrases were not used by the American speakers. In addition, the Korean speakers used more apologies in their request than the native English speakers. In terms of age, though, if the requestee was younger (especially if they were a child), the Korean speaker would *not* mitigate their request

with a buffer. In fact, they would be more direct, lacking the “politeness factor” they expressed earlier, which corresponds to their native Korean language structure. Interestingly, while native English speakers did not use a buffer phrase, their politeness did not deviate between listeners; all ages received the same level of courtesy. I will discuss later how this particular quirk in oral discourse can affect English Language Learners of Korean descent.

As previously mentioned, cultural factors play a major role in English language learning. For ELLs of Korean descent, specifically those newly arrived to the United States, there can be dissonance between the two cultures, which often negatively affect language learning. According to professor H. Douglas Brown, acclimation of a new culture occurs in four stages, known as the Optimal Distance Model. Within this model, the third stage, or the slow recovery period, is the most productive time for language acquisition, where the learner is best able to...merge cultures. However, this merger is not always seamless for Korean students.

Jennifer Moon Ro, in *Identities of Young Korean English Language Learners at School: Imposed or Achieved?*, the reader is introduced to the idea that the “model minority myth”, the belief that Asians have the innate ability to achieve success in multiple spheres and as such should be seen as exemplars of the American Dream writ large, has led to a “[negative] influence in shaping the imposed identities created by the school community.” Moreover, these identities do not necessarily connect to the Asian ELL’s burgeoning academic performance.

I find the idea of the model minority myth to be intriguing, least of all that this “myth” is actually substantiated with sizable evidence. For example, according to Ro, “Asian American students hold the highest proportional representation in gifted programs.” Whether this overrepresentation is nature or nurture is not my main concern; I am curious as to whether or not

Korean ELLs are impacted by these ideals, and how I can best address these students needs as an educator.

Working within the identity construction framework, Ro seeks to understand which identity relationship (nature, institution, discourse, or affinity) is imposed or achieved by Korean English Language learners. Ro discovered that teachers relied on nature and institutional relationships quite often, expecting the Korean students to do well *simply because they are Korean*. “Such high regard for Asian students ‘natural’ abilities worked to shape the ways in which teachers decided to address (or not address) the ESL student’s acclimation into a new community.” In short, although the subject’s showed little improvement in their English ability, their “Asianness” allowed them to remain the gifted class. By constructing their own affinity-identity, in that the subjects strove to be seen as valued in their respective classes, understanding their role as a gifted student, they were able to...skim over their lack of English proficiency.

As previously mentioned, I found this study to be vital to my understanding of Korean ELLs. However, I do wish the author would have had a larger testing pool. Ro only studied two Korean boys, living in the Southeastern United States. Moreover, I would like to have seen more gender variation, having seen evidence that girls tend to advance quicker in language-based classes. Even with these shortcomings, however, I do believe this particular study could be easily replicated, and the imagined findings would not be too different from the original.

In the paper *Challenges Faced by Korean Transnational Students in the United States*, Jung, Nam, and Han analyze the psychosocial challenges that affect newly-arrived Korean students. Focusing on “educational migrants”--Korean students sent to the U.S. for the sole

purpose of receiving an English education, with or without both parents--the authors studied the rates of depression amongst these subjects and how they correlated to the student's GPA. According to the paper, "the primary motivation of Korean parents is to expose their children to an English speaking culture at an early age so that they can speak English as fluently as a native speaker." This push for English comprehension has led to 100,000 Korean children studying abroad as of 2012. Due to the lack of efficient private academies and the lack of diverse occupations in Korea, parents feel Western countries, mainly the U.S. and Canada, hold the key to life success for their children. With the amount of time and resources spent, these educational migrants, the authors show that "transnational students [face] identity problems, academic maladjustment, adverse relationships with peers and teachers, communication difficulties, and emotional and conduct problems from cultural adaption." This maintaining of dual cultures can have varying effects: if students become fluent in English, they risk losing their Korean language proficiency, or if they are unable to properly adjust to Western culture, they may be seen as terminally foreign. Teachers have to be cognizant of the fact that the American curriculum, with its emphasis on social studies and writing, may lead to a misreading of confusion as passiveness or, worse, incompetence. This period of non-talk (known as the "silent period") is often misconstrued in the American classroom.

In the study, Jung, Nam, and Han studied 109 Korean adolescents in Southern California, measuring their levels of depression (Child Depression Survey) and school/psychosocial adjustments (researcher-constructed questionnaire). The findings showed that "more than female students were in the high-depression group, while in the group of students with low depression, the ratio was reversed." While the paper does not illuminate the

reasoning behind the disparity, I would posit that males are under higher pressure due to the patriarchal structure in Korean culture. Concurrently, and somewhat obviously, the more depressed students tended to have lower GPAs. What is most enlightening about this study is that the “less depressed students seemed to have *higher ethnic identity* and higher self-esteem; they were satisfied with their lives, better adjusted into their societies, and behaved better at home and school than the more depressed students. East Asian students, especially those from Japan and Korea, tend to be socially reserved and quiet, which is a tenet of Korean culture. As an extension, deference to adults, especially teachers, including absolute obedience and moral obligation are woven into the fabric of Korean life, and acclimating to American culture, which decidedly does not hold the same values, can lead to severe culture shock.

While I found this study affirmed my previous beliefs on teaching English to Koreans, especially from the psychosocial perspective, there were some limitations to its overall effectiveness. Because the sample was drawn exclusively from Southern California, I am not sure that the results may be applicable to all environments. Also, there was no distinguishing between schools, mainly in terms of student population. I can imagine that a school where there is a low Asian population may be more alienating to a Korean student compared to a population that has a greater level of diversity. Lastly, a follow-up inquiry into whether attitudes amongst the subjects had changed would have been welcome; how one feels at fifteen may differ when one is eighteen.

The final cultural-specific paper I analyzed was *Parents' Perceptions, Decisions, and Influences: Korean Immigrant Parents Look at Language Learning and Their Children's Identities* by Hye Yeong Kim. In this paper, Kim seeks to understand how a strong L1 education



is critical to success in learning English and adapting to a new culture. This type of pride in one's home language can naturally lead to a bilingualism, which Kim notes to "having been found to have a greater relationship to social capital than other variables such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity." Importantly, the effect of bilingualism positively affects ELLs academic achievement, but only "when ELLs can continue to communicate with their parents in L1."

In her study, Kim desired to understand how ELL parents view the importance of L1 and how they support L1 education at home. Focusing on six participants, all from Korea but living in the United States, she found that each of her subjects found speaking L1 was vital. Indeed, they hoped their children would continue their language proficiency in L1. However, the rationale for their beliefs varied, with many feeling bilingualism was a gateway to economic success. However, none of the mothers felt *Korean* was of any value, and instead learning English was the true marker of "having made it". And while the Korean mothers theoretically understood why learning English was important, "additional cultural gaps were emerging between the ELLs parents and their children as they lost their L1 and native cultures." Whether these gaps were a cause of concern was not mentioned, which is disheartening. The resulting miscommunication that occurs when the 2nd generation becomes bilingual while the parents speak solely L1 is briefly mentioned as a source of embarrassment and shame, which can surely affect ELLs motivation to learn.

As with previous studies, I wish the author would have expanded their pool of subjects. Additionally, I would have liked to have the father's perspective on their child's burgeoning bilingualism, and if they felt the same sort of grief as the mothers. Moreover, the study did not present specific findings in regard to what success meant to either the mother or the child. This

lack of clarity, while not diminishing the nuggets of information I gathered, does elicit more questions than answers.

Whereas a general understanding of diverse cultures should be a prerequisite for teaching English Language Learners, I wanted to obtain a more concrete understanding of the fundamentals of language learning and how they apply to Korean students. Juhee Lee and Diane Schallert's paper, *Literate Actions, Reading Attitudes, and Reading Achievement: Interconnections Across Languages for Adolescent Learners of English in Korea*, "investigates relations among L1 and L2 reading attitudes, the relative contributions of reading attitude and language proficiency to reading achievement, and various factors that shape L2 reading attitude." Relying on the Reasoned Action Theory, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen, Lee and Schallert studied 289 Korean middle school students in hopes of discovering if and how reading attitudes of English Language Learners toward their native and target languages "relate to and affect each other". Focusing on "reading attitude", composed of cognitive, affective, and conative factors, the authors discovered that these factors connect directly to Fishbein/Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action framework, whereby there is a relationship between one's beliefs, attitudes, and actions. First delving into gender difference in L1 reading attitudes (girls had more positive attitudes than boys), the authors then details the tie between L1 and L2 reading attitudes, finding that L1 reading amount, experiences abroad, and the instructional setting predicted L2 reading attitudes." The study procedure included administering five language test over the span of three weeks, followed by an attitude questionnaire. The results showed that L2 proficiency, L2 reading frequency, teacher encouragement, and availability of English books majorly contributed to L2 reading attitudes. Moreover, the length of L2 instruction had no effect on reading attitudes

(although, funnily enough, private English education correlated with a negative L2 reading attitude). L2 reading and linguistic knowledge have been studied with great frequency, and it is refreshing to find that there are non-linguistic variables that can explain the attitudes English Language Learners face when it comes to reading. I do wish, however, the authors delved more into the gender disparity in L1 and L2 reading attitudes; this gap seems to exist in Western culture as well.

Beyond reading strategies, I wanted to find out the relevancy of testing in determining English proficiency. In *Korean Students' Language Learning Strategies and Years of Studying English as Predictors of Proficiency in English*, Carlo Magno aims to “determine what specific learning strategies would be effective and are commonly used to help Koreans learn English.” In my own work with Korean English Language Learners, I have found the longer the student studies English in a *formal* learning environment, the better their English comprehension. I was curious to see if research would support my hypothesis.

Composed of 302 Korean students studying abroad, ranging in age from 14-18, the study used two instruments, the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) and the English Ability Test. The SILL is a global test used for students or second languages, including memory, compensation, metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social strategies. The results of the study confirmed by own previous idea, that “months of studying formal English...significantly related to English ability in a positive manner. The time spent in an English-only setting is essential to solidifying English competence. According to Magno, “it requires four to nine years to develop academic language skills and about two years for communicative skills using the target language.” While this may be scientifically solid, as a practical manner, I have concerns as an

ENL teacher. How do we account for age of arrival? Are Korean students who arrive in the U.S. at the age of fifteen destined to lack proper English proficiency? Moreover, the SILL assessment did not prove conclusively English mastery in all areas. For example, affective strategies--learning strategies that deal with managing emotions, negative and positive, may actually slow down language comprehension. Especially concerning Korean students, whose culture does not place an emphasis on public emotive displays, they may not even be able to classify their feelings concerning English learning.

Having tackled cultural barriers, reading attitudes, and SILL, I wanted to explore writing strategies for Korean English Language Learners. *Integrated Reading and Writing: a Case of Korean English Language Learners*, written by Hyunsuk Cho and Janina Brutt-Griffler, investigates not only how integrating reading and writing may help to improve comprehension in each, but also “delineates teacher’s challenges faced during the instruction.” Traditionally, reading has been the primary mode of English instruction in Korea. But, over the past decade or so, writing skills have become a key factor in instruction, leading to a more streamlined “integrated writing”, a trend that has become part of the Common Core, standards used in New York City public schools. I want to know what the particular needs are for Korean ELLs, specifically concerning reading and writing. This study helps to answer that question, along with providing effective teaching strategies.

One such strategy, which covers the bulk of the study, is summarization. While there are popular models concerning the reading-writing connection (the interactive model, the reading-to-writing model, and the writing-to-reading model to name a few), summarization is one of the most important skills for students to grasp. However, for ELLs, it is quite difficult to

master these skills. According to Cho and Brutt-Griffler, “managing these skills in L2 is more challenging for ELLs not only because ELL summarizers need lexical and syntactic knowledge of L2 to comprehend the given text...but also because in their academic contexts they have few chances to summarize written texts in L2. Measuring 93 middle school Korean students over a period of three weeks, subjects had to read an English biography, followed by writing a summary and reflection, using a “thinksheet” and “questionsheet” in the process. The subjects were further divided into three categories: low, intermediate, and advanced.

The results of the study showed that by focusing on summarizing as a learning strategy, the intermediate and advanced students improved on both their reading and writing comprehension. However, they still fell short on paraphrasing, typically copying word for word from the text. On the other hand, the low level did not show any marked improvement on either reading or writing, offering evidence that students need to have a firm grasp on both separately before they can be taught together.

As a teacher, this paper does provide concrete strategies to assist my Korean ELLs. But, there were some limitations, mainly that the study was conducted at only one school. Moreover, because the authors only focused on a specific grade range (middle school), we cannot know for certain if integrated writing is beneficial for all students. Lastly, because the study only lasted for ten weeks, one cannot be sure that, given more time, students, even the low-level category, would not show marked improvement.

In conclusion, having parsed an array of studies touching on the cultural and practical aspects of teaching Korean English Language Learners, I find myself left with more questions. I purposely narrowed my research question, focusing only on Koreans, mainly due to my own

personal interest. However, by limiting myself to such a tight area, I am not completely sure if the findings can be expanded to include a larger variety of ELLs. To be sure, while Korea has a strong, singular culture, there are remnants of Japanese and (especially) Chinese influence that I feel allow me to apply these studies to those particular groups. On the other hand, the model minority myth and high success rate of East Asians does not apply to all Asians, specifically Southeast Asians, such as the Hmong and Filipino people.

Patriarchy and respect play a huge role in East Asian culture, and as a teacher of ELLs, it is necessary for me to be aware of the importance of my role in the classroom. Especially, my role as a teacher is not only limited to my students, but the parents as well. Many ELLs face complex family situations, and much of the ELL literature does not address the issue of parent knowledge and attitude about L2, and even L1 learning. I would like to have analyzed a study that measured mothers *and* fathers belief about their own L1 and the benefit (or drawback) of maintaining both L1 and L2. As a teacher, I would like to communicate to parents the value of L1 and how supporting this language can actually enhance the understanding of English.

This embrace of both languages (and cultures) has shown to be beneficial not only as a theory, but also as a practice. As shown, attitudes about L1 reading greatly correlate to L2 reading attitudes. Thus, as a teacher, I need to make sure my classroom has culturally-aware material, celebrating the great diversity that I see everyday. This drive to promote diversity will lead to a higher level of intrinsic motivation, which tends to pale in comparison to the extrinsic motivation shown by many Korean ELLs. By allowing students to see the beauty in their native culture, they will hopefully gain the social capital necessary to become citizens of the world, instead of simply English Language Learners.

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