

# Parents' Perceptions, Decisions, & Influences Korean Immigrant Parents Look at Language Learning & Their Children's Identities

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## Introduction

We are seeing more and more children who come from an increasingly broad range of linguistic, cultural, religious, and academic backgrounds attending American schools. Many of these students are bilingual, and while some benefit from use of linguistic and social resources offered by their native community and by their American schools, others of them struggle because of miscommunication and cultural gaps that occur either at home or at school. The growing population of young English language learners (ELLs) in American schools creates an urgency for educators to understand, value, and support the wide array of students' native language practices as a way to support both the ELLs' first language and their native cultures and communities.

Considerable research shows the importance of first language (L1) education in the development of ELL identity (Norton, 2000). This includes access to community resources (Dinovitzer, Hagan, & Parker, 2003) and English language development (Gass & Selinker, 1992). Despite the importance of L1 education, the effort to support L1 education for ELLs is a challenge in most classrooms, particularly when the L1 is in the minority among the L1s spoken at any given school.

The reasons for such limited or nonexistent support of a student's L1 can vary. Teachers may not be aware of the value of L1 or may not believe that supporting a student's L1 is their job (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). Additionally, even when teachers believe in the importance of L1 educa-

tion, it may not be practical or possible to teach every student's L1 in the classroom. Because of this, L1 literacy education often depends on the language's native community and/or the student's parents as a source for support.

To support L1 education at home, parents first need to believe in the value of the L1 home language and its corresponding culture and then they must be informed about how to support it. Very few studies exist either on parents' beliefs about the role of their home language in their children's education, or on how to support such language learning at home. This study examines ELLs' parents' beliefs about L1 education and their home language literacy education practices. These beliefs and practices are then linked to the development of ELL identity and language skills and show how families are affected differently across households.

## *L1 as a Way to Assess Social Capital*

Home language is critical to ELLs. Their parents and communities act as a vital source of valuable social capital. Social capital is defined as the resources embedded in the networks of relationships among groups which may enhance an individual's productivity (Coleman, 1988). In the educational context, social capital can be understood as the ways in which students benefit by being members of social networks that provide them with positive role models, encouragement, support, and advice (White, Michael, & Garle, 1997).

Family structure and household resources, as well as parents' education level, their educational aspirations for, and interaction with their children are examples of social capital as it relates to education (Kao, 2004). Parents can provide social capital to their children by spending more time with them or by engaging in activities

that enhance education (Coleman, 1998).

In this context, being bilingual has been found to have a greater relationship to social capital than other variables such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Dinovitzer et al., 2003; Michael & Kaufman, 1997). The use of L1 can facilitate ELLs' access to the resources and opportunities within their ethnic communities, while their proficiency in English positions them to enjoy the resources offered in English through school activities. Being able to draw on social capital from their familial or ethnic networks may be more important for ELLs who are restricted from the social capital of L2 mainstream culture due to language barriers.

Moreover, bilingualism has been found to enhance ELLs' academic achievement only when ELLs can continue to communicate with their parents in L1 and access the social capital of their parents and the L1 community. In contrast, no measurable positive outcome of bilingualism on academic achievement has been found once ELLs' parents become proficient in English (Mouw & Xie, 1999). Thus, the maintenance of L1 in an ELL family is the crucial factor for ELLs to access enhanced social capital and higher degrees of parental supervision.

Unfortunately, most ELLs in America are not likely to have a chance to develop their L1 in a classroom setting. Therefore, L1 education at home is necessary for ELLs to take advantage of their L1 and native cultures. Despite the importance of the parents' role of in supporting ELLs' L1, parents' attitudes regarding L1 education and their views of themselves as social capital have not been widely studied.

Because parents significantly influence the development of their children's general attitudes and ideas (Oskamp, 1977), parental attitudes towards L1

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education likely affect their children's attitudes towards the family L1 as well as their regard for the social capital of their L1 community. Given that ELLs have multiple identities that determine their investments in learning English (Mckay & Wong, 1996), it is important to understand home literacy practices and parents' beliefs in home literacy in order to understand learners' specific needs and desires, and the negotiation of those which constitute students' lives.

This study examines three aspects of the ELL's learning in relation to home literacy: (1) how ELL parents view the importance of L1, (2) whether they recognize L1 as social capital for their children, and (3) how they support L1 education at home. The following research questions are addressed:

- ◆ What are Korean mothers' opinions about L1 literacy education?
- ◆ How do different parental beliefs about L1 literacy relate to children's language skills?
- ◆ How do different parental beliefs about L1 literacy relate to children's identities in the United States?

**Research Methodology**

**Research Participants**

There were six primary participants in this qualitative study (see Table 1). All were from Korea and lived in Midwestern cities in the United States at the time of the interviews. Their time in the United States ranged from one to six years. Two participants, Lee and Gong,<sup>1</sup> held blue-collar jobs, while the families of the other participants were all middle class.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were collected by conducting three semi-structured interviews with the Korean mothers of the children in American schools. Interviews took place in

the Korean language, in the participant's homes, while their children were present and playing by themselves. All interviews lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. Interview questions consisted of three categories meant to elicit responses related to the research foci on ELLs' parents' attitudes and practices regarding native languages and cultures: (1) beliefs and practices regarding L1, (2) communication and parenting issues, and (3) children's experience in the United States.

In addition to the questions, follow-up informal exchanges and observation of families provided further data. All interviews and observed conversations were audio-taped and fully transcribed.

For data analysis, qualitative coding procedures were used, informed by grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The unit of analysis in this study was the episode. An episode is a series of turns that are related to the same topic (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). I looked for similarities and variations in the episodes. This analysis procedure led to the themes discussed in the findings.

**Findings**

**Speaking Practices at Home: Decisions and Dilemmas**

All participants agreed that speaking L1 was important. They hoped that their children could maintain their language ability in their L1. Each participant expressed different reasons for L1 education. These included retaining the children's identity as a Korean, using L1 as a tool for communication among family members, and enjoying the economic benefits of being bilingual.

The mothers' beliefs about the economic benefits of being bilingual are supported by research findings (Dinovitzer et al., 2003; Michael, et al., 1997), but none of the participants were aware that speaking Korean could result in benefits broader

than just an additional skill in a job search or the ability to speak to Korean relatives. The participants did not understand that speaking their native language could help their children access new social capital within their language community. Some participants even believed that learning Korean might hinder children's development in English.

Some participants believed that keeping their L1 was important for family ties or ethnic identity in general. This belief demonstrates the possibility that the Korean language could serve as a tool that participants' children can use to access socially valuable resources and opportunities from their parents. However, participants held low expectations for their children's Korean proficiency. Accordingly, it appears that their Korean skills were not likely to develop enough to access either the social capital of their family or of the Korean community.

Regardless of language choice at home, all families had experience with miscommunication among family members. In particular, participants whose primary language at home was English reported more miscommunication and cultural gaps both at home and at school. For instance, Lee's husband decided to use English at home to improve his English as well as their daughter's English because his poor English skills had been detrimental to him. He did not want English to become an obstacle in his daughter's life as it had been in his. As a result, Lee's daughter, Hee, could understand simple, but not long or complex sentences in Korean.

Their miscommunications happened both in English and Korean. Since Lee's husband could not speak English fluently, Hee sometimes could not understand her father's English. Miscommunication would become even worse when the two of them were emotional. If Hee's father was upset about something that Hee did and Hee felt that she could not clear up the misunderstanding in English, she tried to explain it in Korean to him. However, since Hee's Korean was very limited, her explanation in Korean led to yet further misunderstanding. This type of miscommunication increased in frequency as Hee was rapidly losing her proficiency in Korean at the same time her parents were not improving their English skills quickly enough.

As in the case with Lee's family, when children lose their first language, not only can parents *not* communicate with their children, but children also lose access to the cultural and social resources that

Name	Social Class	Number of Children in Family	Dominant Languages at Home
Jung	Middle	2	Korean
Lee	Working	1	English
Min	Middle	2	Korean by parents, English by children
Moon	Middle	1	Korean
Choi	Middle	3	Korean by parents, English by children
Gong	Working	2	Korean

their parents could have given them. A parent's educational background does not guarantee the transfer of social capital to children unless they have a chance to share it. Therefore, "the potential social capital" and "the actualized social capital" in a household are different (Kao, 2004).

Moreover, additional cultural gaps were emerging between the ELL's parents and their children as they lost their L1 and native cultures. Lee, for example, shared an experience in which she noticed a cultural difference with her own daughter when giving her daughter a timeout in the Korean way:

I asked her to kneel and think about what she did wrong. Suddenly, she passed gas and said, "Excuse me." It was a very awkward moment. In American culture, you may say "Excuse me" when you pass gas. However, in Korean culture, you are not supposed to say anything when you are being punished. If you say things during punishment, it is a very rude and rebellious act toward your parents. If I were her, I would have been silent and felt ashamed. I did not know whether I should scold her for saying something or not. Is my daughter wrong or correct? Should she follow American manners or Korean manners?

Lee's story suggests that a cultural gap between ELLs and their parents is a common experience. As ELLs develop English and lose their L1, they become more used to L2 cultural norms than those of the L1 culture. Their parents then face a dilemma. They do not feel comfortable with their children losing their L1 culture, yet they support their children's L2 development. In particular, when the values of L1 culture and L2 culture conflict, parents are unsure which rules their children should be taught to follow.

#### ***Identities of Children in the United States***

Low proficiency in English was a primary concern for all participants for many reasons. In particular, low proficiency in English appeared to affect their children's identity and self-esteem. During his first month in the U.S., Jung's son came home from school and asked his mother if he was stupid. His mother told him every day that he was smart and reminded him that his classmates could speak English because they grew up in America, just as he could speak Korean better than his classmates.

As children experience different environments, they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they are related to society

(Norton, 2000). The process of identifying oneself in relation to society may not always be enjoyable or successful. Jung's daughter, Sohyun, expressed her confusion about identity by raising questions about her differences in appearance from that of others around her. She often asked her mother why she could not have curly hair like her American friends. According to Jung, Sohyun thought of herself as White and could not understand why her skin was not as White as others'. Sohyun's negative association with her native identity was well presented in an episode:

I arranged a carpool with my Japanese friend so we could take turns driving our kids to school every other day. One day, when my daughter arrived at school with her carpool friend, one of her classmates asked her if the carpool friend was her sister. You know ... both of them were Asian and came to school in the same car. It is not surprising that her classmate guessed they were sisters. However, my daughter was very upset that she was associated with another Asian, and told me that she didn't want to carpool with the friend anymore.

Sohyun's desire to belong to the "White" group led her to deny any association with Asians. Her self-ascribed identities and affiliations appear to conflict with the expectations ascribed to her by the dominant culture. Understanding Whiteness as a desirable norm of her society, she found her ethnic identity denigrated. When an ELL like Sohyun perceives that their native language and culture are not valued in the surrounding society, he or she may want to escape that negative association (Jalava, 1998). Thus, ELLs often experience conflicts of identity and are constantly changing, or seeking to possess multiple identities.

#### ***Am I a Bad Parent?***

When some ELLs in the United States are confused about their identities, parents often feel powerless to help. Min felt sorry for her son because she herself was unfamiliar with American culture, which meant that he had to learn it from school and peers without her assistance. When she was invited to a potluck party hosted by an American family, she encountered marshmallows for the first time. When Min picked up a marshmallow and ate it, her son rushed to her and said that she should first roast it and then eat it with a graham cracker as others did. Min describes how she felt at that moment:

I felt bad because I made my son embarrassed in front of his friends ... My son never takes the lead or begins anything before other American friends do. He waits until others do something so he can follow what others do. It is his strategy to survive in American culture. I sometimes feel that I am a bad mom because there is nothing I can do to help him in the United States.

As Min's story illustrates, all of the participants felt bad as parents because they could not see themselves as being of any help to their children in the United States. Because the parents could not speak English any better than their children and were not familiar with American culture, they believed that they were often obstacles to their children's success.

Participants did not consider their ability to speak their native language and their expertise in their native culture to be a resource. Accordingly, the social capital of the native community did not play an active role in the children's success. Differences in languages and culture between family and school often affects children's identity. Most participants wanted their kids to assimilate into American culture and language so they would not feel foreign in the classroom. Thus the parents refrained from explaining that cultural and linguistic differences among people are natural, or telling their children that they should be proud as Koreans. As a result, the gap in languages and cultures among family members grew, and all families experienced levels of miscommunication.

This finding offers new insight into understanding the complex situation of families of ELL students. While much research (Dinovitzer et al., 2003; Michael, et al., 1997) has supported bilingualism as a tool to gain access to social capital, parents' attitudes and beliefs have not been part of the consideration. In other words, bilingualism has been examined as one of several influential factors, but how being bilingual can allow students to access the social capital of their parents has been neglected. This study's findings suggest that parents' attitudes toward and knowledge about L1 and its role as an avenue to increased social capital are significant.

The ELLs' parents in this study, like most parents, want their children to succeed in school and society. To this end, they chose to practice English at home, help children with their assignments, and read books to them. Only indirectly did they allow their children to access their social capital as Koreans (Kao, 2004).

While all participants actively provided social capital to their children by helping with schoolwork, they were not aware of a further potential role in providing social capital drawn from preserving their native language, and the resulting access to the rich social capital of their native communities. Rather, they tended to blame themselves for their children's unsuccessful experiences in the United States.

The parents' lack of knowledge about American culture and low proficiency in English made them believe that their influence on their children should be minimized. As these parents regarded American culture as the norm to acquire, their children tended to experience a negative association with their native identity and a growing desire for solidarity of the mainstream group.

### Conclusion

Research has proclaimed the importance of L1 education for ELLs. In the same vein, ELLs' parents in this study showed positive beliefs regarding L1 education. Driven by different sets of beliefs about L1, the parents engaged in L1 literacy education for their children every day. However, their efforts for L1 literacy education often led to frustration, doubt, and ineffective results because of the lack of relevant information regarding the importance of L1.

The findings indicate that parents are one of the best resources for L1 education, but that they were not informed about the research evidence on the benefits of preserving L1. None of the participants were aware that literacy in their native language could provide a good foundation that could be applied to the development of literacy in the majority language, English. L1 was not perceived as a tool to access social capital because they did not accept their differences as being a valued part of diversity in this society.

When they see themselves as a hindrance to their children's success, the parents' useful knowledge and information are denigrated along with the social capital that ethnic social networks can offer. When parents themselves do not feel proud of their culture and language, they cannot teach their children to be confident despite

differences from the mainstream in their appearance, language, or culture.

Bilingualism has been emphasized by many researchers as critical for accessing the social capital of the native community (Mouw & Xie, 1999). However, much research has neglected the role of parents' beliefs and their influence on L1 education. Instead it has been assumed that every ELL's parent would play an active role in sharing the rich social capital which students could access if they maintained L1. The findings of this study call that assumption into question.

This study offers a new perspective for understanding how ELLs can access the social capital of their parents. Parents will likely choose to make decisions and efforts towards L1 education when they are informed of evidence that supports the important role of L1 and the resulting access to social capital gained by maintaining L1. This information may help parents see themselves as valuable social capital and therefore be better able to provide their children with guidance, support, advice, and information.

This study urges us to recognize the need for dissemination of research results on the benefits of preserving L1 and its culture in an L2 setting. It is recommended that further studies explore ways to empower ELL parents by reinforcing the value of L1 and their native culture. Although dialogue between the parents and the school may not be new, the results of this study indicate that the needed dialogue for certain groups of ELL parents is not yet adequately present in terms of supporting L1 and their native culture. This information is necessary and should be provided for both schools and parents.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

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