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# Learning English and Identity Construction of Korean Early Study Abroad Students

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The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between learning English and constructing identities by Korean early study abroad (ESA) students in US university contexts. Drawing on the poststructuralist notion of identity, the study attempts to depict ESA students learning English and their identity construction. Data were collected from interviews with six ESA students enrolled in US universities and analyzed to examine investment in learning English, communities of practice (CoP, Wenger, 1998), and conflicts between imagined and actual identities. The findings show that the participants had conflicts between their imagined identity of a perfect bilingual speaker and the current identity of an ambivalent speaker. Their sense of obligation to use more English was in conflict with peer pressure among Korean students. The results show that ESA students' investment to learn English is facilitated or constrained by sociocultural contexts and their identity is constructed through negotiating the conflicts between English-speaking and Korean-speaking communities. The findings suggest that learners should be aware of sociocultural constraints or opportunities in their learning context, and should be encouraged to set a reasonable goal, specific to their needs.

**[early study abroad/identity/communities of practice/imagined identity]**

## I. INTRODUCTION

As English is regarded as a crucial tool for communication and gaining a competitive edge in a job market, a great number of Korean students have chosen to study in the English-speaking countries prior to college education. This type of transnational movement is termed as *Joki yuhak*, which literally means early study abroad (ESA, hereafter), and it refers to a student's study abroad in their (pre-)teen or pre-college years (Song, 2010). It is regarded as a strategy to acquire bilingual or multilingual competence through gaining

access to English as a valuable linguistic resource. It is also a pursuit to become 'global elites' (Bae, 2013, p. 416) who have multilingual competence and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). *Joki yuhak* began to increase in the late 1990s due to the widespread dissatisfaction with the public education system and intense competition in and outside Korea (Lee & Koo, 2006; Lim, 2005; Moon, 2011; Park & Lo, 2012) and has become a distinctive educational and linguistic investment for upper- and middle-class Koreans (Bae, 2013). The ESA students are either accompanied by a parent (usually a mother) or stay with a guardian designated by their parents. They are differentiated from second-generation Koreans (*gyopo*, Korean Americans) who were born in the US, or those who immigrated in their pre-teen years with their family (*imminja*, immigrants) in that the primary purpose of the ESA students' mobility is to learn English or to go to a university in the US. The duration of their stay in the US depends on the legal status and job availability after graduating from college. Because of different purpose of immigration, the time of arrival, and the types of residence, the ESA may have different paths of learning English and different perceptions of themselves. Despite the different purpose of immigration and sociocultural contexts that the ESA students undergo, relatively little research has been conducted to investigate how they struggle to learn English and how they construct their identity especially after graduating from a secondary school.

Learning a second language does not simply mean gaining additional linguistic knowledge. It involves gaining a second language ego and forming a new identity. Hence, the second language learning process can be considered a struggle to gain new identities in a given linguistic community. As the relationship between second language learning and sociocultural environments has been an important issue in the field of applied linguistics, close attention has been paid to how learners resolve conflicts among different identities and reconstruct their identities while learning a second language.

The concept of learner identities has been explored mainly with English native speakers learning European languages (e.g. Kinginger, 2008) and only a few studies looked at Asian English learners in second language contexts (e.g., Gao, 2011; Kang, 2012; Song, 2012). Studies on Korean study abroad students reported that ESA is a strategic investment to gain global competence by experiencing an advanced education system and participating in diverse linguistic and cultural opportunities (Hong & Sung, 2011; Kim & Yoo, 2008; Lee, 2010). Yet, research with the ESA students also demonstrated they may experience emotional and financial problems, cultural maladjustment, and changes with family relationships (Song, Yoon, Lee, & Kim, 2011). While previous studies have shown general characteristics of Korean ESA students in terms of their psychological, emotional, and cultural experiences, they did not specifically focus on ESA students' identity and how it is related to their learning and use of English. In this regard, the present study draws attention to a growing number of Korean study immigrants and how they identify themselves in the

process of gaining a second language, addressing the issues of learner identity, L2 motivation, and sociocultural influence.

The poststructuralist notion of identity provides a useful tool to investigate the ESA students' language learning and identity construction process as it assumes second language learning and learner identity are closely interrelated. ESA students may experience different paths of adaptation to the L2 environments due to their different visa status, linguistic proficiency, and peer groups. It needs to be pointed out that the ESA experience does not only affect a student's linguistic and academic achievements but also influences one's future career, relationship with family and friends, and perception of oneself. Thus the ESA students' experience has to be viewed as a process of constructing their identities which involves tension and conflicts between their old and new identities (Kim & Okazaki, 2014; Lee, 2010). From this perspective, studies on learner identity have demonstrated how cultural and societal contexts facilitate or constrain learners' agency and participation in the CoP, and how second language learning is inextricably interrelated to identity construction. Taking the view that language learning is a fundamentally social, cultural, and temporal activity rather than just an individual, decontextualized, ahistorical, cognitive activity, the present study examines the ESA students' experience based on the notions of CoP and imagined identity (Norton, 2000). Considering the scarcity of the studies with Korean ESA students (e.g., Kang, 2012; Song, 2012) and the growing interest in sociocultural theory in applied linguistics, the study aims to illustrate Korean ESA students' English learning and identity construction processes. The specific research questions are as follows:

- What are the trajectories of ESA students' learning and use of English?
- What are the critical influences in learning and using English?
- What is the relationship between their self-evaluation of English and their learner identity?
- How do they resolve the conflicts between language choice and social relationships?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Poststructuralist Concept of Identity

Since Firth and Wagner (1997) proposed their criticism on the narrow focus of predominantly-cognitively oriented approaches in the second language acquisition (SLA) field, SLA researchers have widely adopted sociocultural and poststructuralist approaches that take account of the societal, historical, and cultural contexts in explaining second language learning processes (Block, 2007; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Norton Peirce, 1995).

From the poststructuralist perspective, identity is framed as “fragmented and contested in nature,” not fixed for life (Block, 2007, p. 864). Hence, elucidating how people balance or negotiate such multi-faceted identities is a key issue in identity research. Research has also suggested that identity is not an act of exclusively individual agency but is constructed, maintained, and negotiated through participation in communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger’s (1998) notion of CoP emphasizes the interaction between individuals and social communities. The notion of CoP was further developed to imagined communities which can be constructed through learners’ imagination and enable them to invest in their imagined identities (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2000; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

The notion of imagined communities provides a theoretical framework in explaining female immigrants’ investment in learning English (Norton, 2000). Norton (2000) contested that the opportunities for immigrant women to practice English as a second language (ESL) are socially structured outside the classroom and the practices of environments constrain or facilitate the learner’s opportunities to practice their use of English. She also focused on how immigrant women respond to and act upon these social structures to create, use or resist opportunities to practice English whereby they choose to construct their imagined identity. She concluded that both context and agency are instrumental in forming and reforming one’s identities. Thus how different contextual environments, including interpersonal relationship and institutional structure, and how individuals act upon on the context, have been a key issue in identity research. In short, identity research has recognized the possibility of broadening a mostly cognitively-oriented explanation of second language learning to include more social and sociocultural perspectives by linking individuals’ concepts of identity with their sociocultural environments.

## 2. Studies on Korean ESA Students

Studies on Korean ESA students have mainly focused on their adaptation process and reported the problems and difficulties of home-stay family and school life. Kim and Okazaki (2014) interviewed ten Korean ESA students who stayed in the host country without their parents. They described that the students were vulnerable in a new context due to their lack of voluntary motivation and lack of preparedness for the study abroad. They were also shown to experience feelings of isolation and guilt, and struggled to achieve a sense of belongingness in the new culture. They also pointed out that the relationship between ESA students and the home-stay guardian is critical in helping students adapt to a new cultural environment. However, conflicts occur between students and home-stay guardians due to their different expectation of each other. Yu (2005) found

that ESA students experienced varying degrees of depression due to the language barrier and homesickness, which they usually tried to deal with by themselves. When they did not have a supporting system or someone to discuss their problems, they were more likely to experience a high degree of depression. As pointed out by Kim and Okazaki (2014), Yu's (2005) study also shows the importance of a reliable adult's presence around the ESA students, especially at the beginning stage of ESA. These studies show ESA students, particularly those without their parents in the host country, are vulnerable to emotional and linguistic difficulties and that they may lose a sense of who they are.

As these studies were conducted from a psychological perspective, they focused on the ESA students' psychological problems and needs, but did not provide details on how they perceive themselves and cope with the linguistic, academic, and cultural challenges in a new context. A few studies looked into the issues of learner identity and second language learning in ESL settings. Among those, Lee (2010), in her study with 22 undergraduate ESA students, described that between-ness between two cultures is the most characteristic feature of their identity. Their between-ness not only means their connections to Korea and America, but also the advantage of being transnational elites who can be potential critics or social activists in a wider society. Lee (2010) pointed out that ESA should not be simply viewed as learning English as a second language, but as a process that students develop social awareness in multilingual, multicultural contexts. On the same note, Shin (2012) observed the language learning paths of ESA students in Toronto high schools and showed that ESA students adopt the Korean language and culture to distinguish themselves from (white) Canadians and long-term Korean immigrants to claim a cosmopolitan identity, which is morally and culturally cool, and different from that of Asian nerds or FOBs (Fresh Off the Boat)[1]. Their identity is referred to as styling for Korean cool which is achieved by means of intraethnic othering (Lo & Kim, 2012). In an ethnographic study of three Korean families in Singapore, Bae (2013) shows that ESA families pursued multilingual competence that is assumed to be needed for their children to become global elite. Despite their investment to achieve the goal of multilingual competence, their pursuit only resulted in truncated multilingualism (English, Mandarin, and Korean). Their evaluation of the values and functions of each language led them to employ different strategies of linguistic investment.

These studies commonly showed that multiple and ambiguous identities of ESA students exist due to their fluid membership of participation in the communities. It is also notable that transnational, global, or cosmopolitan elitism is their imagined identity which often conflicts with their current identities. While previous research was usually conducted with

[1] FOB generally refers to the students who come to the US in their college years and this term is used to contrast with the term 'Twinkies' in the present study.

ESA students at pre-college level and focused on their linguistic and cultural adaption process, fewer studies were carried out with college-level ESA students, especially those who came without their parents. While previous research noted that the feelings of between-ness characterize the ESA students, how they position themselves in relation to other groups and how ESA students' evaluation of their English is related to their identity construction have not been closely explored. Considering the recent research interests in learner identity and the scarcity of studies on ESA, the study attempts to investigate how multiple and potentially conflicting identities are expressed in their stories of learning English and gaining a membership in a CoP.

## III. METHODS

### 1. Participants

The participants were part of the study that I conducted with the ESA students in Washington, D. C. Among fourteen interviewees, six interviewees were selected based on the criteria of those who came to the US without their parents and spent their secondary school years in an English-speaking country. I became acquainted with all of them in a Korean church that I attended during my sabbatical term in the US. I met them at church activities (services, community volunteering, excursions, etc.) and on campus before conducting the study. The profile of the participants is shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**

**The Profile of Participants**

| Partici-pant | Age | Time of Arrival | Legal Status | University Major |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Andy | 26 | 2nd year in middle school | Int'l student | Accounting |
| Beth | 24 | 1st year in high school | Int'l student | Journalism |
| Cathy | 24 | Middle school / 1st year in college* | Int'l student | International law |
| Dianna | 22 | 1st year in high school | Permanent Resident | Engineering |
| Esther | 22 | 6th grade in elementary school | US Citizen | Art history |
| Helen | 23 | 2nd year in middle school | US Citizen | Pre-medicine |

*Cathy first went to New Zealand when she was in middle school, and later came to the US.

Though similar, in that the participants shared the experience of being ESA students abroad, they differed in various aspects. Except Beth – whose ESA experience was the first

exposure to an English-speaking culture – the other participants had lived or spent some time in an English-speaking country. Andy had an earlier exposure to English programs in the US. Dianna and Helen had spent their childhood in the US due to their parents' stay for their academic careers. Cathy and Esther had experience of returning to Korea following an earlier ESA period in New Zealand and Canada, respectively.

In terms of legal status, Andy, Beth, and Cathy remained as international students while Dianna acquired permanent-resident status. Esther and Helen had US citizenship but they perceived themselves as Korean. In fact, none of the participants claimed their identity as American despite their long stay and desire to remain in the US. Esther and Dianna sometimes referred to themselves as Asian to distinguish themselves from Korean international students. The participants generally used more Korean than English in their daily life and this tendency appears to be related to their perceived competence in English and the level of comfort with the languages. Esther tried to use the same amount of Korean and English and felt that her English was better than her Korean. Helen used more Korean but felt her level of English was not lower than her Korean.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were the primary source of data to collect the ESA students' experiences, which were collected for a four-month period from November 2014 to February 2015. A list of questions about the participants' ESA experience (e.g. When and how did you decide to come to the US? What was it like to live with a host family or with students from other countries at the dormitory? How did you learn English? How did you choose the university? Which language do you use in your daily life? Who do you usually spend time with? How do you evaluate your English? What is your plan after graduation?) was prepared before the interview but the questions were used as prompts when needed to ask follow-up questions to elaborate on the participant's stories. I engaged in their stories as a sympathetic listener and encouraged them to talk about their experience as much as they wanted.

I obtained permission to contact the participants from the pastor of the church and sent out an email message to explain the purpose of the study. Upon receiving their permission to participate in the study, I met each participant for an interview. Each interview lasted for a minimum 90 minutes and it was conducted at a café or on campus. Because of the previous acquaintance at the church, I started the interview with church-related events or their study at the university. I told them to use either Korean or English for the interview and all of them chose to use Korean. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. After each interview, I wrote noticeable points made by the participants for analysis in my research journal.

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. I read the transcripts a couple of times to get a glimpse of the content of the interviews, and then segmented the parts for analysis. Instead of mechanically assigning a code to each line as suggested for line-by-line coding, I assigned a code to sentences that denoted the same meaning. While trying not to group multiple sentences together under one code, I also tried not to generate too many codes that are not directly useful. Using Nvivo 11, a computer-based qualitative data analysis tool, I followed the content analysis procedure (Glaser, 1998) to code the data. The initial codes were close to verbatim in order to stay close to the original meaning. In the next step, the codes were grouped together to find key themes. The important codes that provided the axis to construct the participants' stories were 'better English', 'better education', 'a perfect bilingual speaker', and 'peer pressure'. In order to verify the accuracy of the data, I sent the transcript to the participants and confirmed the content of the data. After the analysis, I invited the participants for member-checking to check the validity of my interpretation. Among the participants, Andy, Beth, Cathy, and Esther read a brief summary of my analysis and shared their opinion. While maintaining my analytical perspective as a researcher, I tried to see if my analysis was faithful to the ESA students' experience.

## IV. FINDINGS

### 1. Trajectories of ESA Students' English Learning

#### 1) Choosing ESA: Seeking Better English and Better Education

The participants had had prior exposure to English-speaking countries (Andy, Cathy, Esther, Dianna, Helen) except Beth who came to an English-speaking country for the first time. The participants' parents generally believed that English is an essential tool in the globalized society and shared the beliefs that their children should be educated in an English-speaking country to be part of competitive elite. Dianna and Helen spent some years in their childhood in the US due to their fathers' job, and it was natural for them to choose ESA. For Cathy and Esther, it was their parents' strong wish to send them abroad and they eventually came to the US after their first trial. While under firm parental influence to opt for ESA, Andy and Beth voluntarily chose ESA as they felt suffocated with exam-focused study and pressure for college entrance examination. Whether it was the parents or the participants themselves, their ESA was driven by the belief that they will receive better education in an English-speaking country. Andy stated his motivation to choose ESA as follows:

(1) Uh… I did well on my study, I was not bad. But I didn't go to a private institute or get a private tutoring like other students. I wanted to study on my own but I felt I reached my own limit… Because I lived in a local town. If you are not one of the top students in your school, you cannot get into a university like SKY.[2] I was frustrated because I had to be worried if I could get into one of those top universities…I wanted to do something other than just study. But I was not allowed to do any sports or play the musical instruments. I felt… how can I say? Suffocated, I think. (Andy, Interview on Nov 6, 2014)

Andy described the conflicts between his desire to balance studying and doing extracurricular activities, and the pressure that he should go to a good university. His feeling of being suffocated led to ESA as an alternative. His prior experience in summer camp programs in the US helped him choose ESA without much difficulty. Similarly, Beth wanted to pursue "a better direction in life" instead of studying just to get a good grade for university admission. The participants' desire for a better education coupled with their romanticized idea of better education in an English-speaking country and their parents' beliefs about English drove them to choose ESA. The participants' ESA experience can be divided into different phases according to their learning and use of English, and each phase will be illustrated in the following sections.

2) Phase I: Gaining Proficiency

At the beginning of ESA, the students' most urgent task was to pick up English so that they could adjust to a new academic and cultural environment. Though the participants had initial difficulty in using English, they soon reached a level of proficiency at which they felt comfortable in engaging in academic and social life. They did not feel much stress with study and found themselves academically successful despite their disadvantage of being a non-native English speaker. The participants purposefully tried to avoid using Korean with Korean students so that they would use more English. Andy, Beth and Helen chose to stay with an American host family after their initial stay with a Korean host family. Esther was the only participant who stayed with the same Korean host family, which encouraged her to use English at home. Cathy and Dianna stayed in a dormitory where they had to interact with multinational students.

The participants were actively involved in extracurricular activities in their high school years as this was mandatory for college admission. Esther did more than 400 hours of

[2] SKY is an abbreviated term referring to Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yeonsei University, which are the three top-ranked universities in Korea.

extracurricular activities and participated in diverse club activities including fund-raising events at high school. The participants' active involvement in extracurricular activities provided them opportunities to use and improve their English. Andy's comment that "I thought I was American" suggests the extent of English he was engaged in. He described himself as "snobbish" as he answered in English even when a Korean friend asked a question in Korean. Beth joined the newspaper club and wrote journal articles during her high school years. She described her effort in using English in Excerpt (2).

(2) I had only one or two Korean friends that I could talk to. Because, I didn't hate Koreans. But…When I came to Maryland, there were a couple of friends like me. We are Korean but we talk in English. We all know we want to use English and let's do it kind of. But if you use English, you cannot have deep friendship. (Beth, Interview on Jan 12, 2015)

Beth tried to stay away from Korean-speaking students and purposefully used English with Korean friends. She admitted that her insistence of using English cost her "deep friendship". Likewise, the participants commonly felt "desperate" to improve their English, and this drove them to make efforts to use English while trying to keep distance from the predominantly Korean-speaking students.

3) Phase II: Using More Korean and Less English at the University

The choice of college was a critical decision that the participants had to make. Unlike their idealized image of a freer educational atmosphere in the US, they were under pressure to enter a highly-reputed university. Their financial conditions, scholarship availability, and visa status were factors that influenced their decision. They generally shared feelings of disappointment and obligation, and felt a need to prove themselves worthy of their parents' investment in their ESA. The pressure to achieve academic excellence and good job prospects forged a sense of bond among the ESA students, and the Korean church provided any emotional support they needed. The participants' involvement in the Korean church naturally increased their use of Korean. Though both Korean and English usage were mixed at the church, Korean was considered as the main medium of service and church activities.

Contrary to their supposition that university-life would provide more opportunities to mingle with multilingual and multicultural students, the participants turned out to spend more time with Koreans. Andy and Dianna explained why they had to use Korean as follows:

(3) In the department, even in class, there's an assumption that we, Koreans work together for the project even without saying to each other. We're in the business school and have a lot of projects. That's why we keep hang out with Koreans and naturally we do not use English. (Andy, Interview on Nov 6, 2014)

(4) There has to be place to use English. But I can't just stop hanging out people that I used to just to use more English. (Dianna, Interview on Dec 4, 2014)

After rejecting the prospect of joining intramural sports clubs or study groups, Andy did not find a group with which he could use English on a daily basis. As described in Excerpt (3), he felt obligated to socialize with Korean students in the department and to use Korean when among with them. Living with 1.5-generation Korean roommates, Dianna felt that she should use more English. However, she was torn between her relationship with Koreans and the need to use English. Esther and Helen used to feel more comfortable with English but they felt obligated to use Korean when conversing with Korean students at the university.

While the participants lived in a small town, they found a limited number of Koreans; they moved to a bigger city where they could have easy access to Korean communities and more frequent contacts with Koreans. In addition, the participants found the university segregated by ethnic groups. Andy referred to such tendency as "Koreans together with Koreans, Whites together with Whites" implying the difficulty in gaining membership in other ethnic groups. The close-knit membership in the same ethnic group limited the opportunities to use English and increased their use of Korean.

Having more contact with Korean students not only increased the participants' use of Korean but it also made them follow the norm expected by Koreans. The participants stated than they never volunteered to answer or ask questions in class. They preferred to be quiet unless classroom participation was mandatory for grades. They felt more comfortable in a lecture-based (larger) class in which their interaction was not necessarily expected. Helen, for example, would ask questions only when she had to give the impression that she still remained focused.

(5) I am not 100% confident in English. And you know how Koreans are. I went to elementary and middle school in Korea. Kids never volunteer unless they were pointed out. I was never a student who raise a hand to ask or answer a question in Korea. I kind of avoided presentations. In the US my English is not perfect so I feel like I have to get noticed. I have to show my efforts. That's why I do presentations. I never enjoy presentations. I say things in class just to show that I stay focused. I think it's important to show the professor that I'm making efforts

otherwise I won't do it. (Helen, Interview on Feb 12, 2015)

Helen was born and spent her early childhood in the US, and yet she was rather reserved in class. She attributed this high degree of reservedness to her imperfect English and to her previous schooling in Korea. The other participants also stated that they would not volunteer to participate in class unless they had to. They would force themselves to participate if their participation counted towards grades. In addition to their lack of confidence in English, the participants' reluctant participation was often attributed to the unsaid agreement that you should not stand out. As students from different ethnic backgrounds rarely mingled to work together, the ESA students did not want to be excluded from the Korean group, which made them act more Korean – being quiet, and not speaking unless you are pointed out. It was shown that the implicit peer pressure from the Korean students constrained interaction with non-Korean users and use of English among Korean students.

4) Phase III: Keeping the Status Quo

Ironically, the participants tended to use less English at the university due to more frequent contacts with Koreans on campus. Besides, the participants believed that had already reached the level at which their proficiency would not greatly fluctuate. They strove to create opportunities to use English and even separate themselves from the Korean community. The pattern was reversed at the university. They felt less need to improve their English and tended to stay together with Koreans. Though they had a sense of obligation to keep improving English in order to be part of the mainstream English-speaking community, they did not actively seek opportunities until they had an immediate need or pressure. Andy, for example, believed that he had no problem in communicating in English until he faced a job interview. He realized that he could not act in the way that American students act in spontaneous conversation situations, which, he assumed, might affect his chances in the job market. Though admitting the need to use English more, he justified his using Korean on the basis of his "good enough" English. Esther stated that her English was at the level at which it does not fluctuate much, even after a dominant use of Korean.

The participants' dominant use of Korean became an obstacle to further developing their English and interacting with non-Koreans. However, with their sense that they had reached a sufficient level of proficiency, they fell back on the emotional need for support, which drew them to the Korean community. The conflict between the need for improving English and having emotional support was difficult for the participants to resolve. If they tried to use more English, they might be criticized for standing out and not be accepted as members of the Korean CoP. On the other hand, if they keep using Korean, they might lose

a competitive edge in the academic community or in the job market.

## 2. Evaluation of English

The participants evaluated that their English seemed to plateau at the university. Their English was at its peak when they became involved in the many activities necessary to enter the university. The participants can be divided into three groups depending on their level of comfort with English and the amount of language use. Table 2 shows the details:

**TABLE 2**

**The Participants' Comfort and Use of Languages**

| | Andy, Dianna | Beth, Cathy | Esther, Helen |
|---|---|---|---|
| Level of comfort | Korean > English | Korean > English | Korean = English |
| Amount of use | Korean > English | Korean = English | Korean ≥ English |

Andy found his two-year military training period was detrimental to his English and felt that his proficiency never recovered to the level he perceived at high school. He never felt comfortable with English and attributed this lack of ease to his later arrival in middle school. His active participation in the church activities was a main reason for his dominant use of Korean. He described his English as far better than those who can barely graduate from the college but not natural enough to engage in casual conversations with American students. Dianna also expressed difficulty in presenting herself in a professional manner. She felt she could not "sell herself" at a job interview because of her "not 100% nativelike English".

On other hand, Beth found that her English was not greatly fluctuating but using Korean extensively affected her response rate in English. She evaluated her English during presentations as being less natural and having longer hesitations. That was why she avoided situations in which she had to exclusively use Korean. She took a very critical stance toward the Korean students who criticized her for hanging out with American students and using English. Wishing to be an international lawyer, Cathy found her academic English was sufficient enough to compete with American students but she felt she needed to extend vocabulary to the native-speaker level. She found it better to use Korean when speaking to Koreans because she could not fully express her personal, deep thoughts in English. While Beth and Cathy tried to balance their use of English and Korean by limiting socialization with Koreans, Esther and Helen used slightly more Korean when they came to the university as they felt they should socialize with Koreans.

Spending childhood in the English-speaking environment, Esther and Helen did not have much linguistic difficulty but they still found that their English was not nativelike.

Helen explained her lack of confidence as follows:

(6) In an everyday conversation, I am considered a 2nd-generation Korean. But when I speak unfamiliar words, I speak with Korean accent. In the science field, there are a lot of unfamiliar words and I have hard time pronouncing them. I feel self-conscious when I read them…I found the cultural gap is greater than the linguistic gap. When I talk with my American friends, they talk about TV shows, movies, or actors they know from elementary or middle school. They are new to me. I can't share what they talk about. When they talk about those, conversations break down. I don't know the American history that well, and conversation topics are always limited. I feel that I don't have anything to talk about. (Helen, Interview on Feb 12, 2015)

Helen found her pronunciation still carried a Korean accent and considered it as a marker of being less than nativelike. In addition, she found the cultural gap was a strong indicator that distinguished her from her American friends. Like her, the other participants also stated that they often ran out of topics because they could not find the common interests or cultural experiences to talk about. The cultural gap explains the awkwardness that the participants expressed in casual conversations and the lack of socialization with American students.

The findings show that the participants set their goal of learning English to be a nativelike or perfect bilingual. Although being nativelike is not a realistic or necessary goal, they evaluated their English in terms of nativelikeness. Thus the participants felt that they were not 100% native speakers, and indicated their lack of satisfaction with their level of English. Though not completely satisfied, they still evaluated their English proficiency as being far better than other groups of Korean students. In fact, they categorized Korean student groups based on perceived English proficiency. Compared to native speakers, they placed a hierarchical order of Twinkies or Korean Americans (1.5-generation or 2nd-generation Koreans) which is followed by ESA students at universities of higher reputation, ESA students at universities of less reputation, and FOB students.[3]

The participants' perceived competence in English seemed to be related to their amount of English use rather than the arrival time. The more dominantly they used Korean, the less confident they felt about English. The participants evaluated their English as good enough to do academic studies while they felt different degrees of awkwardness using English for

[3] A Twinkie is an American snack cake, marketed as a 'Golden Sponge Cake with Creamy Filling.' This term is used to refer to a student who appears like an Asian but who is actually American deep inside. It is often used to describe Asian-Americans in the US who identify themselves as American, not Asian.

socialization purposes. Though residing in the US for an extended period of time, the ESA participants still felt the cultural gap and found it difficult to use English to create a meaningful sense of bond.

## 3. The Relationship between Perceived Proficiency and Identity

The participants' perceived English proficiency had changed over time. This appeared to be related to their engagement in a CoP. At the initial stage of ESA, they used more English, aiming to be a nativelike or a perfect bilingual speaker and they distanced themselves from Koreans who used Korean. At the university, however, their use of English decreased due to their socialization with Koreans. They were in conflict between their sense of obligation to increase English use and to maintain their ties to the Korean student community. Their conflicts can be summarized as those between the ideal identity as a perfect bilingual speaker and an ambivalent Korean resident in the US as in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**

**Conflicts between the Actual and Imagined CoPs**

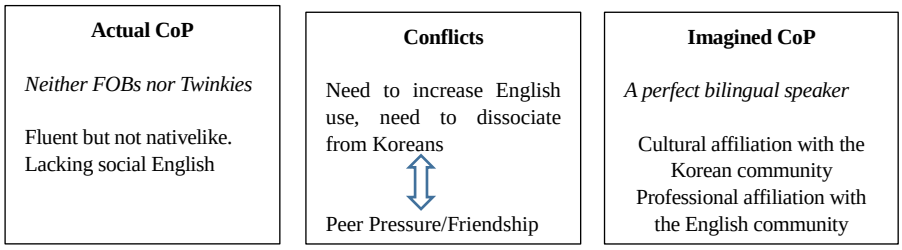


Figure 1 illustrates the discrepancy between the ESA students' actual and imagined CoPs and the conflicts between their different needs. The participants' ambivalent membership as neither FOBs nor Twinkies clashes with their imagined identity of being a perfect bilingual speaker. They wished to be culturally affiliated with the Korean community but professionally with the mainstream English-speaking community. This created conflicts between the languages they had to choose. They recognized the need to increase their use of English, and yet their affordances of English use were constrained by peer pressure and fear of losing friendship. They felt obligated to act like Koreans, as if in observance of the Korean proverb "The nail that sticks out gets hammered in." They equally emphasized their need to use more English in and out of the class but they also shared the fear of being different from other Koreans. It is a deeply rooted cultural belief that promotes conformity among group members. Being different or acting differently can be considered a sign of resistance or dishonor the norms of the community.

Their ambivalent membership as neither FOB nor Twinkies, and the conflicts between the actual and imagined CoPs had to be negotiated to ease the tension. The participants used othering strategy to justify their ambivalence of identities. They did not identify themselves with FOBs or Twinkies and it led them to being in limbo. Esther showed her desire for belongingness and tried to explain the conflicts between the different language communities in Excerpt (7):

(7) Esther: Then when I went to the university, I was in dilemma. I felt like I had to hang out with Koreans, and also had to hang out with foreigners. I did not want to hang out with Koreans all the time though. They are not wrong but they are different. The ways we think and live are very different, so we cannot get along. Not everybody is like that but most of them are.
Researcher: You mean those who finished high school in Korea?
Esther: Yes, those students. And even those who have studied here for a long time, there are students who want to hang out only with Korean students. For example, those who are from LA. I know everybody doesn't like me if I say this. But everybody knows that I am right. You know, the reason that they came to the US is to learn English. Even when you can speak English totally fluently, that's not it. You can't hang out with 2nd-generation Koreans. I don't seem to be able to getting along with 2nd-generation Koreans either. Then I am confused. I'm not an international student, not a yuhaksaeng, who just came from Korea, not a 1.5-generation those who have lived here for a long time, not a 2nd-generation not an American. Who am I? (Interview on Nov 27, 2014)

Esther referred to different immigrant groups in the US and explained why it was difficult to associate with those groups. She did not want to identify herself with those who just came from Korea because of the different ways of thinking and living. She also distanced herself from those "who are from LA" that represent the Korean students who just hang out with Koreans despite their long stay in the US. She further added that there had to be more than linguistic fluency to gain access to 1.5- or 2nd-generation Korean groups. Her reasoning led to the question of who she really is and her question most succinctly summarizes the ESA students' conflicts. The findings also indicate that being an ESA student is not a single category but it has multiple layers of differentiation based on linguistic and academic competence, and cultural capital associated with different groups of Koreans.

## V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study aimed to examine the ESA students' English learning and their identity construction process. The participants' decision to choose the ESA was based on their idealized image of American education as a better educational environment in which they could become a bilingual speaker with a degree at a distinguished university. That is, the ESA process is driven by the desire for better English and better education and the participants' investment in English is indeed an investment in their imagined identity as a perfect bilingual speaker. Their imagined identity is, however, in conflict with their actual identity of being less than bilingual or bicultural. The participants identify themselves as neither FOBs nor Twinkies; such ambivalent identity places them in constant dilemma in choosing both a language and a CoP. The conflicts arise from their sense of obligation and need for emotional support, as well as peer pressure. The ambivalence of identities and the conflicts between the actual and imagined identities were features of ESA students' identity construction.

The findings show that English learning motivation is not solely driven by individuals' desire but it is rather shaped by socially constructed discourse about English. English is regarded as a critical tool by which one can gain access to better education opportunities. Accordingly, English symbolizes cultural capital that helps learners acquire a more competitive edge within and outside Korea. Thus each participant's decision to be an ESA student is a social one. Their trajectories of ESA experience exhibit the influence of social discourse on idealized identity of being part of translational elite. Though different in terms of social and economic capital, the participants were similar to a Tongan immigrant, Sela as described by Barkhuizen (2009). He showed how the immigrant's English learning was related to her pursuit of a better life and construction of teacher identity. The reason why it is important for Sela to be a teacher is informed by the socially constructed discourse of what is valuable. Similarly, the ESA students were physically located in the US but they were not free from the equation of a 'Good student = Good university = Good life', which is deeply embedded in the social discourse surrounding education in Korea.

The results suggest that learning English is a process highly influenced by the social discourse about the importance of English and individuals' affordances to comply with such a discourse. The constant emphasis of English as an international language in the globalized society drives people to invest in English. ESA is a costly activity and requires economic and cultural capital to make it happen. The parents' financial and social capabilities are what made the ESA mobility, and thus the participants' exposure to English possible. Besides, the opportunities to use English are contextually determined. The different residential environment at the initial stage of ESA and the ethnically separated groupings at the university influenced the participants' affordances of using English.

Harklau (2000) pointed out that pre-college immigrant students had a sense of superiority and resisted being conflated with late arrivals at the college. A similar tendency was observed with the ESA students in this study; they distinguished themselves from the other groups of Korean students based on their hierarchical evaluation of linguistic and academic competence. By alienating themselves from FOBS and Twinkies, the participants exhibited their feelings of being in-between FOBs and Twinkies – essentially, they felt in limbo as shown with immigrant students in universities in the US and South Africa (Catalano, Fox, & Vandeyar, 2016). It is noticeable that the alienation or othering was not necessarily caused by the majority group but by the immigrant students themselves. The participants chose to position themselves as immigrants who had more cultural capital than late arrivals. Though they wished to have more access to the English-speaking community and felt obligated to use more English, the participants' dominant language was Korean for peer pressure and for the fear of losing friendship. Lee (2010) described that Korean immigrant students felt conflicts between being Korean and being American, and such in-between-ness was characteristic of immigrant students' identity. The present study, however, noted that the ESA students felt more conflicts between English-users and non-English users among Koreans. Thus, peer pressure was found to play a critical role in the participants' decision to choose their primary language and CoP. The university environment does not necessarily provide more opportunities to use English, though it is a linguistically and culturally more diverse community. There is a strong tendency for the students to gather together by their own ethnic groups. Such a group solidarity made it difficult for the ESA students to socialize with students from other groups and thus had less opportunities to use English. The ESA students needed a CoP and the Korean church played a central role in solidifying their Korean group membership. The participants had an ambivalent relationship toward the Korean church as a CoP as it is a place where the ESA students' use of Korean is legitimized and even encouraged.

The findings of this study elucidate the need to demystify the belief that one can acquire nativelike proficiency in the ESL context; second language learning does not happen naturally and learners should make agentive efforts to gain linguistic proficiency no matter where they are located. The study also points out the blind belief that young learners can naturally pick up a new language without conflicts once they are immersed in the second language environment. The trajectories of ESA students showed they had to make tremendous efforts to adapt to new linguistic and social environments. It is a daunting or even risky task for young learners to manage their own emotional and academic challenges in a new linguistic and cultural environment.

It should be also noted that immersion environment does not guarantee an ideal bilingual. The participants reached the level of proficiency that distinguishes them from FOBs (or even those in less privileged immigrants) but they did not identify themselves as being

bilingual or bicultural. They found themselves less than bilingual due to their emotional and cultural affiliation with the Korean group. Even though the host country itself has a better opportunity to provide a language-rich experience, the local context that defines the access to interaction is far more critical in terms of language use and degrees of improvement. The participants went through the trajectory of rejection and belonging to the Korean community as their need for English improvement changed over time. Thus their investment in English was socially facilitated (through interaction with non-Koreans) or constrained (through using Korean with Koreans).

Setting the goal of obtaining nativelike proficiency and being a perfect bilingual frustrated the ESA students. Thus, they constantly compared their English with that of native speakers in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and sociolinguistic levels. It raises the question of what an optimal goal of learning English is. Aiming to acquire nativelike proficiency is not only unrealistic but also unnecessary though it is often regarded as an ideal goal. Learners should be encouraged to set a reasonable goal, specific to their needs without following a native speaker fallacy.

While the findings contributed to helping ESA students' voices being heard, the study has methodological limitations that need to be considered in future research. Because of limited availability of ESA students and time constraints, interviews were conducted with each participant for a single time and it is a primary source of data. In order to get a richer picture of ESA students and validate their experiences, the data sources need to include journal writing or observation for an extended period of time. The six participants do not represent all ESA students, and their stories provide only a plausible picture of ESA experience. ESA students in different contexts may undergo different experiences, which need to be fully investigated in future research.

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**Examples in: English**
**Applicable Language: English**
**Applicable level: Tertiary**

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