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### A beginning professor's linguistic and teaching identity

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## **Chapter 7: A Beginning Professor's Linguistic and Teaching Identity**

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I am a bilingual writer and teacher in both Korean and English languages. Having traveled to other countries and having lived in the United States while learning English has challenged and (re)shaped my cultural, linguistic, and teaching identities. In this chapter, I describe how I come to terms with who I am in two different linguistic and cultural worlds. I would like to describe my personal experiences of becoming a bilingual writer, speaker, and teacher in Korean and English over three different phases of my life: before, during, and after doctoral studies. My reflections will be enriched by attention to literature pertinent to second language learning and identity research. At the end, I explore what it means to be a novice scholar/professor in a department in which I received my Ph.D. degree.

### **Linguistic and Teaching Identities Prior to the Ph.D. Studies**

#### *Identity as a User and Teacher of the English Language*

Like many East Asian students, I was taught English through grammar and vocabulary instruction throughout my secondary schools in Korea (Cooper 2003). English by far was my favorite subject, so I diligently memorized English words taken out of context and completed grammar drills. I did not take any additional private English lessons like many Korean students do (Park 2012) and up until college I had not practiced speaking in English. My first and intensive English speaking practice took place during a work-abroad experience in my second year of college. Like most college students in Korea at that time, I had wanted to go abroad to improve my English and to learn about different cultures. Instead of joining a study abroad program, which would have been costly, I chose to volunteer at a communal agricultural community, called a *Kibbutz* in Israel. While working on the farm, I also travelled to adjacent Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt and Jordan. This experience of traveling and working abroad for

five months turned out to be a turning point in my life. During this period, I also realized the salience of the English language as an international communication medium. Meeting various people from all over the world, sharing thoughts about life, and witnessing different ways of life immensely influenced my English learning. From that point on, I began to approach English language study with several purposes, which were to communicate better with people from different nations, to expand my world view, and to better myself.

After that trip abroad to the Middle East and after developing a new sense of purpose, my continued English learning in Korea became meaningful. At the same time, however, it was continuously challenging my cultural identity in Korea. After returning from my trip, I started to dislike the way things were in my country and how I was positioned in the society. For instance, I disliked the fact that people would often judge others based on their family background and on the kind of college that one attends. Growing up, some peers of mine questioned my academic potential and abilities because of my poor, working class family background. I also experienced job opportunities being taken away from me just because the university I was attending was not a prestigious one. I associated learning English with liberating myself from the unpleasant circumstances. Learning English served as my psychological escape in Korea (Armour 2004). When I became increasingly unsatisfied with my situation and insecure about my future in Korea, learning English and exposing myself to its target culture through the media on a daily basis provided me with a great sense of relief. After all, I physically lived in Korea, but English took me to a psychologically different, perhaps a better space. At that time, I may have recognized that being proficient in English meant power and prestige as being proficient in English, such as obtaining higher scores in English tests meant a better college and a better job (Park 2012; Pennycook 1998).

Upon graduating from college, I came to the U.S. to look for something different in my life and in part to avoid an identity crisis in Korea (Gergen 1996). I was experiencing confusion, anomie, which Hugo Baetens Beardsmore (1986) described as, “the result of an inability to work out some solution to the conflicting demands imposed by the presence of two languages and cultures” (156). With my increased proficiency in English and growing favoritism toward Western values, such as individualism, while living in Korea, I resisted complying with Korean values. At the same time, I felt pressured to conform to the prescribed customs, values, and rules of the society. In fact, a recent study by Haesoon Park (2012) illustrates how English language learners in the Korean context are restricted by Korean sociocultural norms such as “modesty, consideration for close others, and appreciation of interdependent relationships” (243) although many desire to learn English and to be identified with the target culture.

However, when I entered an English speaking society where I could present only one English speaking identity, I felt as if I were a new person with a blank piece of paper to be filled with newly formed thoughts and experiences. In other words, I circumvented exploring my identities, which could have been uncomfortable, and placed my English identity at the forefront while pushing back my Korean identity. What accelerated this process was an increased level of self-confidence while obtaining a master’s degree in the U.S. When speaking

English in the U.S., I felt that I was outgoing, open-minded, positive, self-assured, and independent, which I had hoped for but did not achieve while in Korea. I recognize that developing such a favorable English language identity during my first year in the U.S. may not be common. In comparing my experiences with other scholars in the literature, my English learning experiences may have been due in part to my high English proficiency before entry to the U.S. In contrast, a Chinese scholar, Yali Zou (2000), who taught Chinese and learned English in the U.S. as an adult immigrant, revealed a sense of self-inferiority when learning and speaking English because of her lower fluency.

While obtaining a master's degree in Applied Linguistics at Georgia State University (GSU), I started teaching English grammar and spoken language at community centers. Due to my coming to the U.S. immediately upon completing a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Language in Korea, I had not had any teaching experiences except for tutoring children. Prior to this time, my negative perceptions about the teaching profession prohibited me from wanting to teach. I thought of teaching as boring and repetitious. I also thought that I would not be a good teacher, and I doubted that I had a strong enough charisma to manage a class. However, as I continued to teach English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes in a non-academic and relaxed environment, I enjoyed experimenting with new teaching methods I was acquiring in the program. I grew to be confident about my English proficiency as a second language learner and as a teacher who understood what students needed. While teaching English in the community setting, I designed lessons that were context based so that my lessons could be closely related to their life. I also found myself more relaxed and let students' talk dominate the class. I believed that a language should be learned within context, and lessons should be engaging enough to generate students' active participation. I felt confident and sure about myself because my new identity in the U.S. had been mostly influenced by positive experiences while I acknowledged that there were times when my non-nativeness was challenged. For instance, I was well aware of the negative discourse on non-native English teachers, and was self-conscious about my pronunciation, writing, and lack of deeper cultural knowledge. However, overall, my teaching experiences positively influenced my identity as an English language learner (ELL), and most importantly, I began to form a stronger teaching philosophy and a stronger teacher identity as an ESOL teacher.

### *Identity As a User and Teacher of the Korean Language*

In contrast to my experiences having a positive impact on my identity as an English language learner and teacher, my Korean speaking identity did not follow a similar development. Nichole Marx (2002) made a point that identity stays unexamined until a threat occurs. The threat that led me to question my identity was exposure to other countries and people from different nations by traveling. As my English proficiency increased, I substantially grew uncomfortable with my Korean speaking identity. There were times when I would purposefully avoid contact with Koreans in the U.S. just because of my prejudice that the ones who seek education in the U.S. would come from a prestigious position in Korea, thus I could not relate to them. Instead, I made many international and like-minded

U.S. friends who would not judge me based on my background in Korea, and who were shaping their identity as a second language learner like me. One of the reasons why I rather quickly welcomed my new identity and life in the U.S. could be explained by Wallace Lambert (1972) who described how people who have negative experiences in the first language (L1) culture might want to be identified with the new second language (L2) culture. This is a powerful illustration that languages, cultures, and identities are closely related, and learning a second language is closely related to shaping, altering, and forming one's identity.

Upon receiving a master's degree, I started teaching English at a community college and Korean at a university. Due to a scarcity of teaching positions in ESOL and the growth of the Korean program, I stopped teaching English and continued teaching my native language, Korean. Most students were Korean American heritage male speakers. Heritage speakers are defined as learners who are born into households where a language other than the English language is spoken (Chevalier 2004). I had not had any Korean teaching experience; therefore, I had difficulty figuring out what students needed to learn. When teaching ESOL, I could explicitly pinpoint areas in which students needed to focus since I am a second language learner like my students. However, I found teaching my native language challenging. I was not able to analyze my native language like I did my second language. Importantly, I lacked the understanding that heritage learners greatly differ from second language learners in a regular foreign language class (Valdes 2005). For instance, heritage language learners come to class with various levels of cultural and historical knowledge that could usefully be built on for further instruction. Furthermore, they are mostly more advanced in listening and speaking, but they have unique needs to improve their literacy skills and an accurate understanding of somewhat tacit grammatical knowledge. This is so because there is a lack of support for the development of additional languages other than English in schools (Lee and Oxelson 2006).

What was more troublesome was that students' level of Korean proficiency greatly differed in one course. Because the Korean program was new and not yet regularized at the university, it lacked an effective system to place students appropriate to their levels. In addition, heritage learners' varying knowledge in Korean as Valdes (2005) explained added to the difficulty. As a result, in Intermediate Korean one class, I had a mix of students whose speaking and reading skills were equivalent to those of native speakers and of true beginning Korean learners. Thus, my lessons that targeted lower proficiency students did not motivate advanced learners in the course. At that time, coming from teaching ESOL adult evening classes, I could not accept the fact that what I was teaching was a boring repetition of what they already seemed to know (Valdes 2005).

When I started teaching Korean at the university, I recognized that my Korean identity, which had been intentionally suppressed, began to gradually reappear. Since I could only speak English to my new non-Korean friends and taught English until I began teaching Korean, there was no need to bring out my Korean identity in which I did not take pride. I was just happy with my English speaking identity. However, faced with my new career as a Korean language instructor, I had to not only speak Korean in class, but also had to represent myself and the Korean culture as a language instructor.

My first year of teaching my native language sharply contrasted with how Yali Zou (2000) described her Chinese teaching experience in the U.S. Since she felt that she was the authority in class in which she was competent about her cultural and linguistic knowledge in Chinese, she was confident and happy with the person she presented in class. However, when studying in the U.S. with limited English, she struggled with her new identity in English. Whereas I felt uncomfortable feeling Korean again, she welcomed her first language (L1) identity through teaching her native language in the U.S.

In my Korean language class, I started out implementing communicative language teaching methods as I did in my former ESOL classes. However, activities such as oral presentations, free discussions, and games did not seem to work. Students had problems with the class not having a structure and routine. As a result, my attempt to introduce a new method of teaching Korean subsided. Instead, I turned rapidly to traditional ways of teaching a second language that I had been taught in Korea. This process is described as ideological baggage by Kathleen Farber (1995). According to her, teachers tend to teach the way they were taught as students. I thought that was what the students expected me to teach. In other words, I believed that students expected me to perform as a true Korean person with traditional ways of teaching from Korea. Yet, according to Jinsook Lee (2002), my assumptions may have been wrong. Her work reported the characteristics of qualified Korean teachers in the U.S. Her informants suggested that bilingual Korean teachers who can understand Korean American culture are a best fit for their instructors of the Korean language in U.S. schools. Such instructors can make lessons relevant to issues of Korean American students rather than traditional Korean language materials published by the Korean government. Moreover, their bilingual competency allows them to teach effectively. However, my own doubts regarding my Korean identity prohibited me from drawing on the strengths I could have offered these students. Importantly, during my first year teaching Korean, I failed to develop a stronger teacher identity that I deemed to have when teaching ESOL.

### **Coming to Terms with My Identities during Doctoral Studies**

As a first year teacher of Korean, it was perplexing that I seemed to have two different sides of me. A positive English language learning experience had enabled me to feel liberated and had generated a favorable identity as a user and teacher of the English language (Lin et al. 2002). However, as a native Korean speaker and a teacher of the language, I did not feel comfortable and confident with who I was. As I continued teaching Korean at another institution while seeking doctoral studies, my advisor (Gertrude, one of the coeditors of this book) served as a teaching internship supervisor and mentor. It was also she who introduced me to a novel topic, "hybrid identities" while discussing professional challenges as a Korean teacher during my first year of doctoral studies. The concept, hybrid identities, helped me understand that an individual is likely to have multiple and sometimes conflicting identities due to constant interactions with others and one's multiple desires (Ricento 2005). It was a great relief and comfort to discover that my personal experiences related to language learning and teaching have been explored in my field of study. In addition, being around

international scholars in the Middle Secondary and Instructional Technology (MSIT) department with whom I could identify and assisting their collective identity work from its inception contributed to my in-depth understanding of identity matters. From my first year of doctoral studies at GSU, therefore, my identity inquiries had intensified and I began to find answers to the way I felt about myself and my teaching.

### *Exploring Identity Studies in the Ph.D. Program*

I have been attracted to the inherent link between language learning/literacy practices and learner identities (Gee 2003) during my Ph.D. studies. English language learning has personally created different desires in me and in order to meet them, I have crafted different selves in various situations. For the first two years of my Ph.D. studies, I concentrated on reading about identity studies and autobiographical accounts of bi- and multi-lingual scholars to better understand my identities. For instance, my identity changes, which resulted from traveling and living in different linguistic and cultural contexts, are well reflected in the literature (Gergen 1996; Song 2010). I learned that it was unavoidable that I felt divided by my different identities. After all, individuals who live in this global world are challenged by differing identities (Lvovich 1997; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). Also, having contacts with people from different nations through international traveling, studying, media, and technology has reinforced rather than discouraged identity transformation (Siebers 2004).

According to Bonny Norton (2000), my understanding of myself and my relationship to the surroundings is inclined to change. Additionally, acknowledging the nature of identity's fluidity and flexibility (Ricento 2005; Siebers 2004; Trueba 2002), explained why the ways that I perceived myself and my country varied at different times of my life. Each of us has multiple identities, but a person can mistakenly believe that there is only one because these identities seem to be lumped all together (Siebers 2004). Furthermore, my English language learning identity may have been an inevitable product of an effort to adapt to a distinctively different linguistic and cultural context (Trueba 2002).

Identities studies enabled me to reflect on how I had struggled and negotiated between two identities since I started learning English. Having attempted to mistakenly assimilate myself to the mainstream in the U.S., at one point, by favoring my English identity over my Korean one, I argue that additional languages need to be taught and learned with the first language and culture being maintained and respected. I focused on improving my English to be native-like, listening to an American radio station in Korea and watching American sitcoms in the U.S. I liked the way I sounded in English and envisioned myself making friends just like the sitcom characters on TV. When I deliberately concentrated on learning English through exposure to its culture, it did not occur to me that I could hide my Korean identity and privilege my English identity. I did not even foresee that I could have dual linguistic and cultural identities (Ricento 2005).

The literature in literacy studies has also extensively demonstrated that as immigrant students bring their cultural backgrounds that might be at odds with that of school in America (Fu 1995), they may encounter intercultural or personal conflicts as I experienced as an adult. Children who are placed in American

classrooms without any L1 support are especially subject to devaluing their home language (Tse 2001; Wong Fillmore 2005). Most immigrant children want to fit in (Lee 2005), and as Laurie Olsen (1997) put it, they become “English preferers” (99).

#### *Working with International Scholars in the Ph.D. Program*

In addition to exploring identity studies in the fields of TESOL and literacy studies and actually conducting identity studies during my doctoral work in the MSIT department. I had a chance to work intensively with international scholars in expanding my understanding about identity construction. My department which consisted of multidisciplinary fields prided itself on hiring a number of international scholars who were originally from Poland, Kenya, India, the Bahamas, Guyana, Scotland, and China. Although international Ph.D. students were very few in the College of Education, encountering the international scholars in the hallways was comforting for me. The opportunity that made me become closer to them was when I started working closely with my advisor, who is also an international scholar during the beginning of my second year as a student. As she encouraged me to critically reflect on my own teaching and to craft papers on hybrid identities, she was also leading a project, *Critical Mass Project*, in which she attempted to collect a variety of voices and experiences of international and local scholars in the MSIT department. As her GRA, I transcribed an audio recording of a meeting in which the international scholars got together to begin to discuss the project. I could glance at the struggles that international scholars faced from having to present themselves as minorities, and how the initial ideas were formed about the project.

Shortly afterwards in the same year, I was invited to attend a two-day regional conference, Georgia Association of Teacher Educators (GATE) for which we drove about three hours and stayed together during my second year of my Ph.D. program. As a member of the audience, I appreciated their group presentation in which each professor shared personal narratives about their experiences as international scholars. In this academic trip, I also had a chance to see a different and more personal side of each professor. Prior to this trip, much of their work seemed to be done in isolation in their own disciplines, but I realized that we all had personal stories to share as international scholars. Their collaboration and support for one another on a professional and scholarly level was uplifting for an international student. More importantly, their collective effort to weave personal stories as international scholars empowered me, validated my sincere inquiries about identities, and motivated me to continuously seek my identities on a personal as well as scholarly level.

#### *Developing Stronger Teacher Identity in the Ph.D. Program*

What also helped me come to terms with my identity was various professional development activities through which I grew to be a more competent teacher. In the academic conference trip with the international scholars at the GATE conference, I presented my work for the first time in a supportive environment (Choi 2005). This experience gave me the motivation and confidence to present



my research and teaching practices at other conferences throughout my studies. The very first conference made me fall in love with teaching and research. Attending conferences gave me a true realization that professional development is key to success in teaching, and every teacher should be a researcher or have the potential to be a scholar.

Furthermore, as I have become more experienced with teaching my native language, I have become comfortable with who I am in Korean and in English settings. My continued teaching of Korean allowed me to accumulate knowledge about Korean language and culture. As a Korean language teacher, I was continuously asked to represent Korean culture to students. This has offered a fresh look at my own culture and revealed that I knew very little about my own culture and language. My struggles in teaching Korean first year may have been due in part to my lack of experience in teaching my native language. In other words, the first year challenges may have been inevitable as William Armour (2004) illustrated his informant's first year struggles of teaching Japanese even though she had been a skilled French and German teacher. Overall, over the last six years of teaching English and Korean, I have started to form a stronger teacher identity regardless of which language I teach.

### **Beginning a New Chapter after the Ph.D. Studies**

As I am starting a new chapter in my career in a department where I received my Ph.D. education, I am excited about my journey to grow as a scholar, professor, researcher, and teacher educator. It is a special place for me as it provided me with the opportunity to develop my personal, reflective accounts about my linguistic and teaching identity into something valuable and researchable. I believe that my personal accounts as well as research and teaching experiences related to identity and second language learning will benefit many secondary students with diverse backgrounds and their teachers. Given that the student population in the classrooms has significantly diversified, my research that examines second and heritage language learners' literacy learning and identity will be meaningful. In addition, as a firm believer that every teacher is a researcher and scholar, I may be able to bring out the potential in every teacher I work with to keep seeking knowledge, to being adventurous and experiment with new methodologies and theories in their classrooms, and to help them recognize the true value of attending conferences and conducting their own research.

Although it was inspiring to have many international scholars in the department, as an international Ph.D. student, I could not help but think that I was not invited to contribute to discussions, especially about the American education system. Coming from a master's program where linguistic diversity and international students were much of a norm, in my first semester of a Ph.D. program, I remember feeling isolated in the College of Education as most of the class discussions centered around American classrooms and American public education. I recognize that the college is now more interested in international exchanges and increasing international presence. I certainly welcome this change and would like to be part of it. As other countries have been proactive about learning from educational systems in other countries, the US education system could benefit from ongoing dialogues and collaborations with educational

institutions in other countries. As an international scholar, I would like to promote awareness or discussions about teaching and learning from an international perspective. I would like to pay attention to literacy research and practice beyond the U.S. setting. In particular, as a faculty member who coordinates an online ESOL/Reading program, I could contribute to expanding the program more internationally possibly by recruiting international ESOL teachers in various EFL settings to the program and by selecting texts which describe various teaching learning contexts. This way, inservice ESOL teachers in this online program will have an international perspective of understanding ELLs in order to better serve them.

In this chapter, I have written about how I used to have conflicting linguistic and teacher identities and how I have come to terms with these. It has been four years since I obtained a Ph.D., and I am no longer a bilingual speaker and teacher but an aspiring multilingual, academic writer, researcher, and professor. I understand that my identities will continue to transform, and I look forward to exploring ways that my identities guide and inform my research and teaching.

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