CONSTRUCTING MEANING: FOUR ENGLISH–LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PORTRAYALS

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Introduction

Increasing English-language learner numbers in the United States have placed tremendous demands on schools while curricula have pedagogically challenged teachers. The records state that 10.5% of all K–12 students in the United States are English-language learners (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006). The literacy skill is one of the most important parts of second-language (L2) learners' academic success, empowering them to become active social beings in society (Cummins, 1992). Understanding English-language learner's (ELL) literacy acquisition facilitates the provision of curricula and effective teaching strategies.

This study is part of a larger study of the L2 literacy acquisition process. The purpose of this study is to investigate L2 literacy processes from a sociocultural constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) in order to understand how learning a second language can be improved, not only by interacting and dialoguing among learners, texts, and social contexts, but also by focusing on ELLs' L2 literacy acquisition in the language arts/literature classroom. There are two questions: *a*) How do ELLs move toward English as a second language (ESL) literacy in language arts? *b*) How do ELLs interact with their teachers and peers in acquiring literacy skills?

Literature Review

L2 literacy develops within the complexity of L2 acquisition (Baker. 1996; Fitzgerald, 1995), with even more complexity than does first-language literacy. Literature on L2 literacy acquisition in this study included schema theory, reader-response theory, and critical literacy (Carrell, 1987; Freire, 1970; Rosenblatt, 1978). The use of literacy can have a profound impact on whether a particular literacy event and its concomitant practice are valued. Literacy ability can not only influence ELLS' identity (Gee, 1996), which means being recognized by others, but also their empowerment (Cummins, 1992), extending to their academic success. L2 literacy learning is not a simple phenomenon; it is interwoven with various theories and multiple perspectives as a matrix (Fitzgerald, 1995).

L2 literacy is defined not just as the multifaceted act of reading, writing, and thinking, but as the construction of meaning from printed text within a sociocultural context (Gee, 1996). L2 literacy acquisition requires social practice and culture-specific ways of knowing. Learning to read and learning to write are constituted as acts of knowing, reflected as values, or situated as discourse within a given cultural and social context. L2 literacy is viewed in the context of social activities. and cultural and social norms in the environment are reflected in literacy practice (Perez, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Learners continue to build their identity and social presence through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986) both with others and alone.

Design

The purposive sample (Merriam, 1998) consisted of four participants — second and third graders from Korea. Japan, Mexico, and Sweden in a large city in the southwest United States. Participants had their own first language and culture, had learned English for no more than three years, and were enrolled in the selected language arts classroom. Qualitative research and ethnographic viewpoints incorporated influential factors with a holistic view. Themes emerged naturally (Lincoln and

Guba, 1985). The qualitative methodology encouraged the development of themes to describe the ELL's experiences, literacy-development processes, identity-formation phenomena, and their own stories.

This 15-month longitudinal research (Oct. 2003–Dec. 2004) demonstrates how the L2 literacy process occurs in the language arts/literature classroom. Combined research methods ensured trustworthiness of the study. Data collected in 2003/2004 was analyzed inductively from interviews with teachers, participants, and parents; observations in the classroom and home; and documents. As participant–observer (Merriam, 1998), I remained aware of my dual position as researcher and L2 learner.

The analysis was based on tacit knowledge and formative theories by creating taxonomies and by reconfirming themes and findings. Multiple sources of data, inductive analysis, member checking, and long-term observation confirmed emerging findings. Merriam's (1998) "keep on going" questioning aided awareness of positionality, discourse with research questions for triangulation, dialogue with the literature review, and deep interaction with participants throughout the study. I did peer debriefing and developed a reflexive journal (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), including results of the L2 literacy process and social interaction in their social world. Results were analyzed using a holistic view of the four cases: ELLs' literacy as social practice, ethnocentrism (Aboud and Doyle, 1993) of literacy practice, L2 acquisition process, and learning stages.

Portrayals of Four English Language Learners

Jae-min Sees Reading as Brainpower
Jae-min is an exemplary second grader with a positive attitude toward the teacher, his peers, and the subject matter. He is very sweet and has a big soft smile all the time. Korean is the main language in his household. His mother noted that "Jae-min feels that he is Korean." Jae-min, who is fluent in Korean and English, was born in United States but

learned English as a second language. Interestingly, he saw reading as: "...brainpower, feeding your brain more education. Education for more brain and you don't always have to read books — You don't always have to read books to get an education for your brain. You don't always have to do that. Well, you could do anything that you like".

He understood that reading and education were productive activities. He also used a feeding metaphor to explain reading. He implied that the meaning of education extended to other activities. His attitude and perceptions gave him a strict ideology of reading. His brainpower and feeding metaphors were well developed and showed his fundamental belief in the power of reading and literacy.

Jae-min's parents raised him as a Korean, providing rich Korean cultural materials and encouraging him to learn their social value system. His case illustrated how the ELL's belief system is based on family and culture, and how it affects literacy acquisition. Jae-min eagerly engaged in the Korean culture and Korean events. For example, he enjoyed reading *Woodcutter and Tiger Brother* (Rhee, 1988). This short Korean folk tale shows that *bong-yang* (faithfulness to one's parents) is a primary virtue of the Korean people. He liked reading about the idea of "being nice to old people" from the above mentioned book. Feng (1994) states: "... in many East Asian cultures, Confucian ideas, which include respect for elders, deferred gratification, and discipline, are a strong influence" (3).

Jae-min showed his *ethnocentric filter system* (Kim, 2005), through which he obtained new information and concepts, filtered through Korean sociocultural values, beliefs, and morals. He identified himself as Korean. Jae-min filtered the stories through his sociocultural value system to comprehend and evaluate them focused strongly on Korean culture and the Asian sociocultural value system.

Jae-min's mother addressed one significant issue during her interview. She wanted her children to be "100% Korean and 100% American", thus showing her strong beliefs and principles about education for her children. She said:

> Now we are going to live in the United States, so he has to learn English and the American culture, too. However, he is a Korean forever, wherever he lives. His skin color is different. I want him to be 100% Korean and at the same time 100% American. I want him to be a person that fits to both cultures. This is our expectation.

She felt that Jae-min needed to fit both societies. However, some challenges were noted. She was so focused on Korean culture that she expressed an unwillingness to learn about American culture, as evidenced by her limited English proficiency.

Kyle, Who Uses Strategies

Kyle, a Japanese American and a strategizer, enjoyed playing chess and was fascinated with creating new ideas. When Ms. Green, his teacher, taught a math problem on the board, Kyle would offer a new way of solving the problem that left the other kids and sometimes the teacher wondering how he did it.

Kyle and his family spoke only Japanese at home. He had twice been back and forth to Japan by the age of 6. His family went back to Japan after 1.5 years, and came back to the United States when Kyle was 6. Kyle was learning all subjects (Japanese language arts/literacy, math, and social science) to prepare for his future schooling in Japan. However, reading Kanji in Japanese books challenged him. He identified himself as Japanese while engaged in literacy events, demonstrating his special interests and enthusiasm while reading materials that showed Japanese culture and social values.

Kyle's mother believed that she was very open-minded and wanted to raise her child as a world person rather than as Japanese. She said: "No, we are really not square people [who adhere strictly to their own culture and social values], so we don't care. Children can choose, but he cries a lot when he remembers his friends sometimes. We don't make him [Japanese]...he is very Japanese".

However, apparently her discipline at home for Kyle was based on Japanese sociocultural values. In fact, she did not recognize any differ-

ences between the two cultures. To clarify the inquiry, I asked her several specific questions about possible behaviors that U.S. parents might consider normal behaviors. She found them offensive. She thought that she was raising Kyle in an "American style" but she disciplined him in the Japanese sociocultural value system influenced by Confucian ideas.

Lilly, Who Wants to Say "No Quiero"

Lilly learned Spanish as a first language in Mexico. Lilly and her mother had lived in the United States for 10 months when this study began. While conducting the verbal protocol in *I Hate English* (a book of an ELL's journey of language learning and cultural adaptation; Levine, 1989), Lilly suddenly said "No quiero." Her meaning was clear from her impulsiveness. Lilly faced the double struggles of losing her first language (Spanish) and of her limited English proficiency.

Lilly's memory of Mexico and her Spanish skills were her main tools for understanding stories, and she made valuable connections with her cultural background. Lilly still missed her father and wanted to go back to Mexico.

Lilly's mother demonstrated Lilly's struggle with English including a mismatch between her prior Spanish knowledge and English structure and differences between the pronunciation and spelling in the two languages. Fortunately, her L1 knowledge supported her L2 — English — through language usage, knowledge of language structure, and rhetorical strategies. Lilly's mother said:

> Her own language knowledge — I mean how to use language. That's why she could learn to read, cause she already knew how to read— so I don't know. It's interesting. I was surprised cause I expected it to be —to come choppy. Mom, water —and it wasn't. It was. Mom, can I have a glass of water? Please.

Lilly's knowledge of her L1 helped her understand how to use language and how to read. She had a developed knowledge of language

structure and abstractions including the meaning–symbol relationship. During the last interview, Lilly suddenly produced complete sentences instead of short utterances that followed her *silent stage.*

Yanton, Elaborator

Yanton and his family came from Sweden in January 2004. When I first met him, he had been in the United States for 2 weeks. He barely said "Hi" to me and avoided eye contact. His eyes were frightened and he looked as if he would cry —strong indicators of his struggle with language and cultural adjustment. Yanton's case provided me with an opportunity to observe a total beginner ELL's literacy acquisition as a social practice.

While reading *I Hate English*, Yanton identified his experience through Mei Mei's feelings, her struggles, and her frustration, "Yeah. I know how she [Mei Mei] feels." He dialogued with Mei Mei and developed concrete community with her, interweaving his cultural experiences with Mei Mei's. He wanted his friends to read this story to understand him better. He understood Mei Mei's situation from his point of view, reflecting lived experience (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Yanton lived with his parents and a younger sister. His mother tried to use English at home, but the family mostly spoke Swedish. Yanton read both L1 and L2 books. Within a week of beginning school in the United States, Yanton was assigned to a third-grade classroom, but came to Ms. Green's language arts classroom as a pull-out student. Yanton had a very hard time adjusting to the new culture, language, and schooling. Opportunely, in his third-grade classroom, Yanton met Simon, who was also from Sweden and was able to help translate for the teacher.

Discussion

The four ELLs cases demonstrated meaning construction and literacy practice in social worlds. The two Asian American learners (AALs), Jae-min and Kyle, showed how their sociocultural background, beliefs,

and parents influenced their literacy practice, including ethnic identity in literacy practice and a gap between parents' beliefs and what they experienced. The other two learners, Lilly and Yanton, who were beginners in terms of English proficiency, showed L2 learning development with capable peer support.

Jae-min and Kyle's Case

The Asian American learners' ethnocentric filter system evaluated the question, "What is very meaningful?" The AALs, Jae-min and Kyle, indicated their awareness of themselves through the meaning-making process. They positioned themselves at the center while making meaning through literacy practice. They identified themselves based on ethnic identity, language use, and social identity in their social world. New knowledge and tasks were filtered by the AALs' ethnocentrism reading of *Mei Ping and the Silver Shoes* (Wade, 1985), an Asian version of the Cinderella story. They would accept or reject the task or information depending on the degree of their *ethnocentric filter system* (Kim, 2005) while engaging in the tasks. Some information failed to reach them if the information was extracted by this filter system. The AALs made meaning based on the discourse between their ethnocentrism and their cognition.

There was a gap between the parents' beliefs and actions. Jae-min's and Kyle's mothers wanted their children to grow up as a "100% Korean and 100% American" and a "world person." There is a discrepancy between what they seek and what they prepare for their children. Jae-min's and Kyle's mothers focused more strongly on their cultural concepts and traditions than on U.S. traditions, and they were not ready to support their children in developing U.S. cultural concepts, because they did not have enough knowledge of U.S. culture or enough English proficiency. I perceived a large gap between their viewpoint and their goals: between what they believed and what they knew. They wanted to raise their children as a world person, but they did not realize the differences and similarities between the two different cultures: they

hardly understood the world vision. They simply provided them with their own cultural concepts and social value systems.

Lilly and Yanton's Case

The two beginner English learners' cases demonstrated how English language learners not only acquire the second language in their social world, but also develop their oral language development. L2 development can be understood based on the sociocultural theory.

Second-language acquisition was facilitated by the support of more capable peers. Lilly and Yanton's mothers pointed out that there was a period of the peer language support for the newcomer in the class. Four periods clearly emerged from the study: 1) In the *dependent period,* ELLs benefited from the support of other capable peers who could speak their first language; 2) In the *preindependent period,* they benefited from being separated from the language support of the capable peer by physical distance. However, the capable peer's presence provided a safer environment; 3) In the *independent period,* they became independent in the learning context, working on assigned tasks successfully without any support from the capable peers; 4) In the *cooperative period,* they became capable peers and offered their support to mainstream students.

L1 competence impacted L2 literacy practice in oral language development: Lilly and Yanton's mothers said that their children began speaking English in complete sentences rather than in choppy words. Their L2 learning development could be highlighted in three development stages: 1) The *babying stage,* 2) The *silent stage,* and 3) The *full-sentence stage*:

Concerning the *babying stage,* Lilly showed the regression caused by her low English proficiency. Lilly's regressive behaviors began after she began to attend the new school in the United States. Interestingly, other girls responded to her by treating her like a baby. However, Yanton did not show this stage in his L2 literacy development, perhaps because he was a boy and a third grader in a second-grade classroom.

Concurrent with Igoa's (1995) theory, in their *silent stage*, Lilly and Yanton may have felt hopeless about catching up in subject matter or belonging to the classroom. These ELLs' first-language literacy skills made the single-word phase more difficult because they already understood the basic structure of language. Consequently Yanton afraid to speak incorrectly and aware of peers' responses, declined to speak English until he could get it right.

Concerning the *full-sentence stage*, the teacher commented, "It was just like overnight, she [Lilly] just—it was just like, boom." Lilly and Yanton waited until they were confident enough to speak English. They knew the difference between "Water" and "May I have glass of water?" Their cognitive and metacognitive knowledge stopped them from speaking single words. They spoke full sentences after the silent period.

Conclusion

This research aids understanding of ELL's L2 literacy process while engaging in meaningful tasks in the social context. The ELLs from East Asia were ethnocentric. They comprehended and evaluated their readings based on their *ethnocentric filter system* (Kim, 2005) and, as a result, sometimes failed to comprehend the story. To reduce their ethnocentric filter system, curriculum and teaching methods should stimulate critical-thinking skills (Freire, 2000), preparing them to accept other cultures and ethnicities, and supporting them to have a global perspective. Educators can position themselves well to create critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) for all students.

Although parents assumed the ELLs were already aware of ethnocentric issues, the study showed a huge gap between parents' viewpoints and upbringing based on not only misconceptions about U.S. culture, but also limited conceptual and methodological knowledge to support them. Educators should encourage more parental involvement as well as informal multicultural education for ELLs' parents. As the ELLs talked, interacted, wrote, and dialogued with others and texts

in the social context, their identities shifted and they grew and changed and were recognized by others. Interaction with peers and teachers supplied comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and the ELLs scaffolded their knowledge with capable-peer support. Cooperative learning environments are required to support ELLs' growth into cooperative partners. Family, peers, and teachers can help instill an appreciation of various languages, cultures, and cultural value systems. Identities are transforming processes of what we might become and how we represent ourselves (Hall, 1996). Educators should guide ELLs to share their cultural strengths with others in the mainstream classroom. This will help the ELLs read words and be world readers and critical thinkers.

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