

Identity in the global community: English learners in Jeju

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Abstract

The participants in this study recognized English as a global language and also felt obligation to make the Korean language and culture globalized in the future. Further empirical research into identity and EFL learning in Jeju will help to reveal how the increasingly important status of Korean and the Korean language might intertwine with the experience of Korean students who are learning English.

Key words :

English learners' identities, English learning experience, globalization, non-linguistic outcomes, Jeju free international city

Introduction

Jeju has become one of the most significant global education cities as well as international tourism centers in Korea after its designation as free international city in 2001. Jeju has attracted a lot of tourists from overseas and international meetings. Jeju has been changed into a place in which the use of English in everyday life is emphasized. Since English is really significant for globalization, Jeju has put a lot of effort into stimulating English education. It has already become an English education hub in Korea because of the successful implementation of Jeju global education city project.

Jeju has tried to find effective ways to enhance students' English proficiency, but it has paid little attention to nonlinguistic effects of learning English including self-identity changes during the process of English learning. A lot of studies (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Peirce, 1995) have demonstrated that L2 learning has a significant influence on learners' identities. Therefore, Jeju is an appropriate place for investigating the influence of English learning on learners' identities.

The identity construction of English learners in Jeju will be investigated in this study based on discourse theory (Fairclough, 2003; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Connolly, 2002).

Literature Review

The relationship between language learning and identity construction has been interests to many researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). There has been a shift in the field of SLA from psycholinguistic approach to sociological and cultural dimensions of language learning. That is, many researches focused on learners' learning style, motivations, and personalities in 1970s and 1980s, while a number of contemporary researches focus on learners' cultural, social, and historical contexts. For example, Norton's construct of investment (2013) is linked to identity and it complements theories of motivation in SLA. Investment is framed in a sociological framework, and seeks to make a connection between learners' desire to learn a language, and their identity, while motivation can be seen as a psychological construct.

Norton (1995, 2000) highlights how language learners take part in various learning contexts in which those learners position themselves and are positioned in different ways. A lot of researches have also investigated how identity categories including race, class, and gender could influence language learning process since Norton's conception of identity.

A number of studies (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Norton, 1995) have reported that L2 learning influences learners' identities. According to Block (2002, p. 4), 'prolonged contact with a L2 and a new and different cultural setting cause irreversible destabilization of the individual's sense of self' Fairclough maintains that discourse is an significant form of social practice that "produces and changes knowledge, identities, and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures" (1992, p. 65). Gardner (1985) maintains that self-identity changes occur after learning a new language.

According to the view of social constructivists of identity, identity is not fixed but fluid and it is culturally and socially specific. According to Luk and Lin (2007), a person's identities are not fixed but are "highly fluid, sometimes incoherent, fragmented, multiple, and conflicting" (p. 50).

Linguistic outcomes of learning English have drawn most attention to become a successful free international city while there are few studies conducted on nonlinguistic effects of language learning in Jeju. Therefore, Jeju is an appropriate place for investigating nonlinguistic effects of English such as self-identity changes during the language learning process.

Methodology

1. Participants

Sunmi and Mijung (all pseudonyms) are two participants in this study. They were undergraduate students in the Department of Tourism English in Jeju province. Sunmui, 27 years old and a sophomore, and Mijung, 20 years old and a freshman, were highly interested in English (Kim, 2016)

2. Data collection

2.1 Essay

The participants were provided three weeks to write about their reflections upon what they thought, felt, and did in English-related activities during their English learning process. (Kim, 2016)

Data Analysis

For the current data analysis procedures, Laclau and Mouffe's logic of equivalence (1985), Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (1992, 1993, 2003), and Connolly's ideas on identity and difference (2002) are used to understand the role

discourse plays in the process of learners' identity construction. (Kim, 2016)

Investigating research on the writer's strategies, narratives, and experiences shows the major theme in the establishment of writer identity. The major theme relating to the English learners' construction of identity was identified: (a) identity in the global community.

Findings

1. Identity in the global community

Mijung and Sunmi developed a stronger sense of being Korean. They tried to value the unique characteristics of being Korean, of Korean culture and history in establishing an identity within the global community.

I have been living in a globalized world. I came to the conclusion that English is absolutely necessary, and I've been interested in foreign cultures. I needed to study hard to get good scores and I couldn't approach the language in various ways when I was in high school. Now, I'm so happy that I can do that and learn about foreign country's cultures and history through several books, the You Tube, other web sites and so on. However, I have to know more about Korean culture and history because a young person like me is likely to be influenced by them... In the past, people in the Korean Peninsula had been influenced and invaded a lot by foreign nations. I believe we Koreans who are living in the present have to establish our independence. I don't want to see that the same mistakes are repeated. I want all the people to remember we are Koreans. I think we have to do our best in order to survive this rapidly changing global era. We should try to know and protect us now. We should review the past for useful lessons. We should plan for a better future. That way isn't easy, but it's for the next generation as well as us. I'll not forget I am a Korean as well, and do everything I can do to make my country proud. (Original in English)

Mijung set up a dichotomy between what Korean and English meant to her: Korean language and culture represented her national identity, while English was a tool for globalization. She reflected her wish to defend her constructed identity against the perceived threat of English. She appeared to draw on her cultural identity as Korean and her identity as an English user to position herself in the global community. Her pride in Korean culture and language pushed her to make a commitment to do everything for developing her country. Her strong affinity with this necessity was shown in the use of "have to" and "should" as in the following examples, "I have to know more about Korean culture and

history", "I believe we Koreans who are living in the present have to establish our independence", "we have to do our best in order to survive this rapidly changing global era", and "we should try to know and protect us now. We should review the past for useful lessons. We should plan for a better future." Her solidarity with Korean language and culture was shown by using "we Koreans" and a dichotomy between Korean and foreigners was established. She set up oppositions between Korean and English languages and cultures through contrast and comparison. She appeared to strive to position herself in the global community as a Korean with a strong sense of national identity and appreciation of her cultural and historic roots by using "should try to know and protect us", "should review the past", and "I'll not forget I am a Korean as well, and do everything I can do to make my country proud." She thinks that even though English will be important in the future, the Korean language, her mother tongue, should be neither deserted nor badly influenced by English.

These days, the Korean wave is sweeping over the world. The Korean culture goes international, and the number of foreigners who understand and care about it has gradually increased. I think my country has a golden opportunity that can make it widespread and we shouldn't miss it. I've heard experts on the news who say that lyrics of K-pop need to be made of English. In my opinion, the work will endanger it. We shouldn't forget that people who are so excited about it have been fascinated by something Korean. They are surprised by something special they've never seen before. We shouldn't neglect that a language dominates the way that people think and express ideas. Korean singers can't be free to express what they are thinking and feeling if they don't use Korean words. I want to insist that we Koreans have to discuss how we can keep and develop our language and culture in today's age of globalization. (Original in English)

Mijung emphasized the importance of sustaining the Korean language and culture to be globalized. Surprisingly, she sensed the influential role of the Korean language and culture in the world accompanying widespread of K-pop and its potential to become a central world power. K-pop's rapid development gave her confidence in Korean becoming a powerful language, in contrast to the dominant status of English. Mijung's strong affinity with Korean language and culture was shown in the use of "shouldn't miss", "shouldn't forget", "shouldn't neglect", and "have to" as in the following examples, "I think my country has a golden opportunity that can make it widespread and we shouldn't miss it", "We shouldn't forget that people who are so excited about it have been fascinated by something Korean", "We shouldn't neglect that

a language dominates the way that people think and express ideas”, and “we Koreans have to discuss how we can keep and develop our culture in today’s age of globalization.” In the final sentence, Mijung used “we Koreans” to indicate her solidarity with Korea and to establish a dichotomy between Koreans and foreigners and to show her sense of national identity. In contrast to the construction of opposing identities between herself and people in Jeju, Mijung constructed an ‘us’ community among Korean people. Her shifting, multiple, and conflicted identities were discursively constructed in the texts. She indicated the importance of sustaining the Korean language and culture in order to achieve a legitimate position in the world.

English is a way for me to access the world. I’ve always been thinking that I don’t want to be a frog in the well since high school. I’ve always had a dream to go abroad and explore the world. That’s one of the reasons that I study English. I’ve been to a few other countries, and everywhere I go, I speak English. We all are from different countries and speak different languages, but English is the only way we can communicate with each other. It can be questioned “Why does it have to be English?”, “Why can’t Korean be the world official language?”, but this is our reality. Korea is not strong enough in the world, so Korean is not going to be the official language. We have to learn English to participate in the global community. Also we can think we learn English to let the world know about Korea, so maybe next generation, who knows Korean might be the official language of the world? (Original in English)

In “everywhere I go, I speak English” and “English is the only way we can communicate with each other”, Sunmi indicated that the dominance of English is only because of globalization. She was aware of the importance of English and the need for the common use of English in the global age in consideration of the status of English as an international language. As she indicated in an interview that English in the international age may be a tool either to bring her more benefits or to make her advance in Jeju society. This fact proves the power of English in the tendency of internationalization. Further, she compared the current position of Korean and English and pointed out the political ideologies embedded in language learning. She realized the reality that Korean is not powerful enough to become an official language in the world yet, but potential recognition of the Korean language and culture by people all around the world gave her confidence in Korean becoming a powerful language, in contrast to the dominant status of English in the global community. In “maybe next generation, who knows Korean might be the official language of the world?”, Sunmi indicated

her uncertainty about Korean becoming the official language of the world by using “maybe” and “might” which express a lower degree of affinity with the truth of her claim. Her national identity appeared to serve as a source for her to imagine communicating with people in Korean.

Interpretation and Discussion

Diverse discursive strategies to gain a legitimate position in the global community are used by the English learners in this study.

At the level of global community, while Mijung and Sunmi recognized the necessity of acquiring English proficiency to be globalized, they were also trying to emphasize the importance of Korean language, culture, and history. This result shows that they consider English as an international language and also indicates that they are conservative. In other words, they think that even though English is definitely indispensable to be globalized, their mother tongue, the Korean language, should be neither ignored nor badly influenced by English. Mijung and Sunmi seemed to position themselves as Koreans for their cultural identity and as English users in the global community. In “These days, the Korean wave is sweeping over the world. The Korean culture goes international, and the number of foreigners who understand and care about it has gradually increased. I think my country has a golden opportunity that can make it widespread and we shouldn’t miss it”, Mijung discovered a greater awareness and appreciation of Korean culture and felt it is our obligation to internationalize Korean culture. It is interesting to find out that Mijung constructed an ‘us’ community among Korean people at the level of global community in contrast to the construction of opposing identities between herself and people in Jeju society (Kim, 2016). As shown in Weedon’s (1997) work on three defining characteristics of subjectivity, Mijung’s multiple, shifting, and conflicted identities were discursively constructed in the texts. The findings in this study indicate that the participants recognized English as a global language and also felt obligation to make the Korean language and culture globalized in the future in spite of establishing oppositions between the Korean and English language and cultures through differences and contrast.

Conclusion

This study indicates that it is important to consider the influence of language learning on learners’ identities in EFL contexts. The changes of learners’ identities might be related to the modernization

or globalization process their countries are experiencing. The learners' common linguistic and cultural background in global community do not lead to a similar L2 identity construction.

Issues of identity are related not only to language learners, but to language teachers and researchers. English educators should pay attention to the influence of language learning on learners' identities because identity changes can occur through language learning.

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