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Becoming Global Elites through Transnational Language Learning?: The Case of Korean Early Study Abroad in Singapore

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Since the late 1990s, early study abroad (ESA) in English-speaking countries has been a popular educational strategy for pre-university Korean students to acquire important language skills such as global English, which is imagined to help them prepare for the competition in global educational and occupational market. However, as ESA, commonly known as *jogi yuhak*, became a prominent educational strategy among middle class Koreans, the destination for Korean Study Abroad began to diversify, showing significant increase of Study Abroad in non-Western countries. For instance, Singapore has emerged as a new site for ESA, due to its multilingual environment which facilitates the learning of global language of English as well as additional languages such as Mandarin. What, then, are the implications of such diversification of ESA for the goals of and beliefs about study abroad? This paper aims to answer this question by examining the language learning practices and ideologies of three Korean ESA families in Singapore, based on participant observation and interview data drawn from a 2.5-year ethnographic study.

The parents we studied anticipated that the multilingual competence gained in Singapore, including that of English, Mandarin, and Korean, will lead their children to become truly global elites. For them, Singapore's multilingualism facilitates acquisition of linguistic resources valued in the global market, providing the children with global flexibility and enabling them to freely cross linguistic as well as national boundaries for further success. Yet, they also raised questions about the possibilities of achieving such global and flexible identities as they faced various material and social constraints in study abroad. We analyze such investments in language learning in terms of the shifting ways and tensions of how language is conceptualized in the global economy (Heller 2007), particularly how linguistic diversity comes to be understood as measurable value, rather than a socially grounded condition of language use (Urciuoli 2015). Based on this discussion, we consider how the diversification of ESA gets incorporated into discourses of symbolic and cultural capital accumulation despite the opportunities such diversification opens up for greater intercultural understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Through study abroad, students are exposed to other cultures and languages as they interact with people from different (ethnic and cultural) backgrounds. Cultural interactions and language learning experiences abroad carry much potential for transforming students' self-understanding and intercultural competence. Thus, a central interest for applied linguistic

research focused on study abroad has been the extent to which such transformation may affect learner identity, cultural subjectivity, and intercultural sensitivity (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012; Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2009, 2013). An important context for contemporary study abroad can be found in the neoliberal conditions of the global economy, in which multilingual competence is increasingly imagined as a valuable resource and a source of advantage for individuals competing in the local or global job market (Cameron, 2005, 2012; Heller, 2010; Park, 2010). As scholars of language actively question the notion of language learning as facilitating a liberal, democratically oriented sense of cosmopolitanism (Ives, 2010; May, 2014), it becomes crucial to also emphasize the political and economic conditions of study abroad in an effort to problematize its representation in popular imagination as a culturally transformative, yet politically neutral project. Indeed, we argue that the effects of study abroad on identity, subjectivity, and intercultural understanding can only be properly accounted for when we account for conditions of the political economy that shape study abroad trajectories.

These conditions become particularly salient when acquisition of a global language becomes the primary goal of study abroad. In Korea, for instance, study abroad is regarded as an educational strategy for gaining distinction in both the local and the global job market, which is becoming increasingly competitive and precarious. Korea's accelerated move towards globalization and neoliberalization after the Asian financial crisis in the 1990s led to a boom in English language learning that emphasized English language skills as an index of one's competitiveness, with Korean families heavily investing in their children's English education as a result. A consequence of this was the expansion of both the private English education market and the market for study abroad. In the late 1990s, early study abroad (ESA), commonly known as *jogi yuhak*, emerged as a popular educational strategy for the middle class, in which pre-university Korean students are sent to study abroad to acquire important language skills, such competence in English (Lo, Abelmann, Kwon, & Okazaki, 2015; Park & Bae, 2009). As English in Korea is widely recognized as a symbolic resource for advantageously positioning oneself in the job market, ESA is imagined to produce a competitive and confident worker for the neoliberal global economy. It is important to note that ESA does not focus solely on the acquisition of English. With the growing popularity of ESA, the destinations for Korean study abroad have also diversified, showing significant increases of Korean ESA in non-Western countries. For instance, Singapore has emerged as a new site for ESA due to its multilingual environment, which can facilitate the learning of (the global language of) English as well as Mandarin, another source of valuable linguistic capital due to the rising economic influence of China in the global market.

What, then, do Koreans' conceptualizations of study abroad, intimately shaped by the logic of the neoliberal job market as an arena for endless competition, tell us about the potential of study abroad as a transformative endeavor of cultural self-reflection? This paper aims to answer this question by examining the language learning practices and ideologies of three Korean ESA families in Singapore, drawing on participant observation and interview data from a 2.5-year ethnographic study. Addressing this question can be useful, as it can reveal the ways in which linguistic and cultural diversity experienced during study abroad may be interpreted and negotiated by students and their families. The parents we studied anticipated that multilingual competence in English, Mandarin, and Korean gained in Singapore would lead their children to become truly global elites whose multilingual competence and cultural flexibility would be highly valued in the job market. Yet, they also raised questions about the possibilities of achieving such global and flexible identities given

various material and social constraints that their children faced in study abroad. As a result, they emphasized a more essentialist sense of identity as important for their children's success in the global market—for instance, by presenting their Koreanness as an valuable resource for competition in the job market. We consider these cases as an illustration of how the political economic conditions that drive the trend of ESA become an important context for understanding the nature of study abroad as an intercultural encounter. That is, despite opportunities that ESA opens up for greater intercultural understanding, these cases highlight how cultural and linguistic diversity arising from contact abroad gets incorporated into discourses concerning the accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital.

WHAT LANGUAGE MEANS TO LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

In response to conditions of globalization, many scholars in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics increasingly problematize the traditional view of language as associated with a delimited speech community as well as the idealized notion of the native speaker. Such work underscores how diversity in languages and cultures, foregrounded through globalization, leads to new ways of thinking about language as a source of competitive advantage in the market whose careful management and investment can bring economic and social benefits to individuals (Cameron, 2005; Heller, 2007). This commodification of language is relevant not only for so-called global languages, such as English or Mandarin, but potentially for any language, given the right circumstances. For instance, in the context of heritage tourism, languages that have a distinctively local association can be an important economic resource for highlighting the authenticity of a tourist site (Heller, 2010).

Urciuoli (2008) sees commodification of communication, presented through skills discourse, as a vivid manifestation of the neoliberal ideology that seeks to subject language practices to the logic of the market. Carefully managed efforts to acquire communication skills, such as fluent multilingual competence, may be regarded as 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988; Urciuoli, 2008), as ways of being and acting that bring about desired outcomes or profits. Thus, multilingual competence is seen as a measurable and commensurable quality of the individual as a worker, which can be inculcated through careful and diligent investment of one's time, effort, and economic resources. In the same vein, in her discussion of commodification of language in the global market, Cameron (2002) links contemporary attitudes towards language to the culture of self-improvement, citing Giddens' (1991) argument that the individual self has become 'a reflexive project,' something that individuals have to work on rather than take for granted. Due to the widespread ideology of language commodification in the global economy, multilinguals who can freely move across the boundaries between languages and cultures are represented as ideal workers in the workplaces of neoliberal globalization.

In this sense, language learning as technology of the self is an important basis for what Ong (1999) calls flexible citizenship, or "the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (p. 6). Language learning becomes a part of such logic, as it is understood to enable the worker to freely move across space in search of better opportunities for education and work. In particular, if we focus on the more flexible ideological link between language and identity implied by the commodification of language, we may argue that flexible citizenship through language learning also constitutes flexible

identity. That is, in the process of acquiring language as a commodified skill, one also expects to become a different self—no longer bound and constrained by one’s cultural and social provenance. Instead, the transformed language learner can use newly acquired competence to smoothly fit in with and be recognized by another community, which offers privileged opportunities and choices. Such flexible identity is, in fact, the hallmark of global elites, the global recognizability of whose cultural and symbolic capital allows them to profit across markets on a transnational scale.

With the understanding of language as resource or commodity, the question remains whether evaluation of an individual’s linguistic competence can be free from ideological judgments, which are deeply embedded in social dimensions of identity, such as race, nationality, social class, or gender. While Heller (2007) draws attention to the way in which the expansion of the globalized economy dislodges traditional discourses of language as representative of national or ethnic identity, she also stresses that the older ideology of language as identity remains prevalent. Scholars such as Spotti (2011) and Blommaert and Backus (2012) likewise highlight that essentialist ideologies serve as a dominant discourse in contemporary language policies of nation states and international organizations, as well as in language testing regimes. The ideology that regards language as static linguistic structure, representative of one’s ethnic or cultural identity, is still persistent in some contexts, serving as a means to regulate one’s social participation or membership. Indeed, Ong (1999) notes that those “who are practicing strategies of flexible citizenship find greater social acceptance in certain countries than in others” (p. 18). This means that the emergence of the new ideology does not imply that older ideologies disappear; these conflicting ideologies co-exist and compete with one other, giving rise to newer modes of viewing the relationship between language and identity (Park & Lo, 2012). For this reason, the notion of a flexible identity, attained through the mobilization of various linguistic resources, may be contested by those who uphold an essentialist link between language and identity.

The tension between the two opposing ideologies becomes salient in the study abroad context, in which people and language continuously cross national and linguistic boundaries. Korean ESA families move across and, thus, remain simultaneously connected to, multiple social spaces. This also means that they have to deal with multiple, sometimes conflicting ideologies that might constrain their desire for securing a flexible identity as a global elite; for instance, essentialist ideologies that define Koreans as non-native speakers of English may undermine the value of linguistic capital acquired by an ESA student through a global itinerary. Thus, as families encounter multiple material and social constraints in their pursuit of a flexible identity, they need to continuously negotiate their children’s identity as future global elites. This means that the global identity that is attributed to the transnational study abroad student cannot be a natural outcome of some type of easy movement, but it should be understood as an outcome of active construction, in which conflicting meanings/values/interpretations of linguistic and cultural resources are contested and reinterpreted. Korean ESA, in this sense, provides an interesting case that can illuminate how the significance of study abroad as intercultural encounter may be reframed in the context of the flexible ideologies of language that motivate transnational movement.

KOREAN EARLY STUDY ABROAD

Prior to the 1990s, study abroad among Koreans was primarily for higher education.

However, after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the age for study abroad became increasingly lower. According to the Korean Educational Development Institute (2009), there was a 19-fold increase in ESA students between 1998 and 2006, from 1,562 to 29,511. In particular, ESA increased suddenly since 2000, as Korea slowly began to recover from the economic and social shock of the Asian financial crisis, with the greatest escalation in the number of students occurring in the mid-2000s (i.e., with a 30% annual increase, from 10,498 in 2003 to 29,511 in 2006) (Kang & Abelmann, 2011). Various factors, including the growing aspiration for cosmopolitanism, economic, and social insecurity following the Asian financial crisis, dissatisfaction with public education, and maturation of neoliberal reform inside the Korean society (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; Kang & Abelmann, 2011; Lee & Koo 2006; Moon, 2011), contributed to this boom. The increase was especially explosive among primary school students, whose participation numbers grew nearly 40 fold between 1998 and 2008. The belief that early exposure to an English-speaking environment is necessary for successful English language acquisition (Park and Bae 2009) played a particularly important role in the growth of ESA among primary school learners.

However, since 2006, there has been a constant decrease in the number of Korean ESA students (i.e., 27,688 in 2007, 27,349 in 2008, 18,110 in 2009, 17,226 in 2010, 15,869 in 2011, 13,710 in 2012, 12,759 in 2013, 11,638 in 2014) (M. Kim, 2015). On the other hand, the number of students returning from ESA has been steadily increasing since 2004, reaching 23,698 in 2009 and, thus, exceeding the number of students who left for ESA. This reversed pattern in the number of ESA students departing and returning since 2009 can be interpreted as a reflection of Korean families' increasing recognition that ESA experience is not as advantageous as expected for competition in both the Korean and international job markets (M. Kim, 2015; Youm, Lee, Park, Chae, & Han, 2009). Media reports on the failure of ESA students and on the difficulties of returnee students in readjusting to the Korean educational and social system shake the belief of Korean families that ESA will guarantee participants' future success (Kang & Abelmann, 2011; S. Kim, 2015; Youm *et al.*, 2009).

However, such changes in views on the benefits offered by ESA are only one side of the story. As a matter of fact, decline in ESA in official statistics has also resulted from various social and educational factors inside Korea, such as the increase in diverse educational institutions that cater to families' desire for valuable resources, including English (e.g., special purpose secondary schools, international schools, private English language institutions, alternative schools). Thus, the decline in ESA does not necessarily mean that Koreans' desire for English or globalization has diminished. Instead, it is possible that the strategies to pursue the same goal have diversified in various sophisticated forms, among which study abroad is only one option. Considering the constant English frenzy and the flourishing private English educational market in Korea, the same ideologies underlying the ESA phenomenon remain strong. The pursuit of valuable linguistic resources is even more intensified with increasing emphasis on neoliberal competition and globalization in Korea.

This diversification is also reflected in the proliferation of ESA destinations. Initially, English-speaking Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, were popular destinations, as they were seen as providing prestigious forms of English and intensive exposure to the language in daily life. However, several Southeast Asian countries emerged as new centers for ESA during the late 2000s (Hong & Jung, 2009; Kang, 2012; Kim, 2010; Park & Bae, 2009). These alternative destinations are countries where English is used as a second or official language, or where relatively affordable English-medium educational institutions are available. Korean ESA families' choice of Southeast

Asian countries is often viewed as a realistic and practical decision, since these countries are sometimes perceived as more affordable locations compared to traditionally popular locations for ESA in Western states. Another change in Korean ESA is that families are increasingly seeking destinations that will facilitate the acquisition of languages in addition to English, which could give a greater advantage to the student. Most typically, this additional language is Mandarin, a reflection of an awareness of the rise of China as a new economic and political power in the region.

Among Southeast Asian countries, Singapore is often regarded as the most favorable choice, since it provides a number of advantages that are not available in other locations. These include the disciplined and competitive school system, which offers much continuity with the Korean educational system, the relative proximity of Singapore to Korea, and the image of Singapore as a global, modern city (Chew, 2010; Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Kang, 2012; Park & Bae, 2009). Additionally, multilingualism and multiculturalism are most frequently mentioned characteristics that make Singapore an ideal educational site. Singapore is a multilingual society in which English is used as an official language, and, at the same time, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil have an official presence as mother tongues of different ethnic groups. While English serves as the interethnic lingua franca and the medium of instruction for all Singaporean schools, one of the three mother tongues is taught as a school subject to all Singaporean students. English-medium public education makes Singapore's educational system accessible to international students, while also satisfying their need to attain linguistic resources valued in the global economy. This, along with the official presence of Mandarin, which is gaining recognition as an important regional, as well as future global language, heightens the value of Singapore as a desirable site for study abroad. Since Singapore's population is composed of more than 75% ethnic Chinese, it is often recognized as culturally Chinese, and Chinese languages are widely used in everyday interactions. Therefore, Korean ESA families in Singapore expect that this multilingual environment will facilitate effective acquisition of multilingual competence in English and Mandarin. Given the city-state's cosmopolitan image, with diverse languages and cultures and a highly developed capitalist economy, Singapore is also imagined to be the right place for developing the adaptability and flexibility that are understood as key features of the global elite.

However, simply because Singapore is not located in the inner circle of the English-speaking West, the decision to undertake ESA there is often viewed not as the ideal, but as the second best option. In this sense, Singapore is sometimes treated as a convenient trial site for short-term ESA: many families don't consider remaining in Singapore permanently but use it as a springboard for transferring to Western countries for higher education. In contrast, locations in Western states are considered sites for more long-term migration, which could be extended to college education (Kang, 2012; Park & Bae, 2015; Park & Lo, 2012).

Part of the concern over the choice of Singapore as an educational site has to do with the influence of local language varieties. The presence of local varieties of English is one of the main factors that causes negative evaluation of Singapore as a site of language learning, resulting in much anxiety and regret among parents. The main local variety of English, often called Singlish, has evolved from contact with languages in the region, including varieties of Malay and Chinese, and is often celebrated as an important emblem of local Singaporean identity (Lim, 2004). Yet, Singlish is also denigrated in official government discourse as being non-standard, a sentiment that is often shared by ESA parents. Particularly in the case of

students who enroll in Singapore government schools,¹ which are more strongly associated with the use of Singlish than international schools, parents worry that Singlish may have a contaminating influence on the children's English acquisition, and this causes substantial anxiety among the families about the legitimacy of the linguistic resources attained abroad. Since the acquisition of Singlish is regarded as unnecessary and even detrimental to the children's competitiveness in other spaces (e.g., Korea or Western countries), some parents regret their choice of Singapore and Singaporean schools. In the words of the mother of an ESA student in our study: "Singlish is cheap English ... If my child uses Singlish in the U.S., he will be laughed at." However, families' attitudes towards Singlish also change over time as they engage in multilingual interactions in the Singaporean educational system and social context. In particular, Korean ESA students actively adopted Singlish as they came to recognize its value in their local context (Bae, 2015).

As we show below, Singapore as an ESA site does not always serve as a straightforward space for acquiring and enacting a cosmopolitan identity. The complex network of older and newer ideologies of language and identity constrains Korean ESA families' desires and plans for future trajectories, leading them to constantly renegotiate the meaning of their experience in Singapore. We trace the families' (process of) renegotiation of identity as an illustration of how the market-oriented logic of ESA may work to reframe engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity involved in study abroad.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participant families of this study were chosen among those who had long-term plans for their children's study abroad. In particular, the participants were selected from families who sent their children to local Singaporean schools, which provide an intense Mandarin learning environment and significant exposure to local varieties of English, in order to highlight the influence of Singapore's multilingual learning context. All three of the families in this study—Minsu's family, Jaemin's family, and Juni's family²—were relatively affluent, middle class Koreans, and the parents were well educated. All of them lived in expensive, rented condominiums and had an average monthly expenditure of S\$7,000-10,000 (US\$ 5,600-8,000). The fathers all possessed international work experience, either at multinational corporations or international branch offices of Korean corporations, and were working as mid-level managers at the time of the study. Additionally, they had some educational experience in the U.S. or Canada through personal language training programs or staff training programs offered by their companies. The mothers were full-time housewives and were more directly engaged in the management of their children's education. See Table 1 for more background information about the families.

The families' middle class position and affluent economic background served as the

¹ ESA families in Singapore have two school options: Singapore government schools and international schools (Park & Bae, 2015). The term 'government school' refers to various types of schools funded mainly by the Singaporean government, such as 'government-aided schools,' 'autonomous schools,' and 'independent schools,' each of which has a varying degree of autonomy from direct state control. In general, the private sector plays only a limited role in primary and secondary education in Singapore, and public education dominates the educational landscape of the nation. Government schools are open to foreign students, though priority is given to Singaporean citizens or permanent residents. International schools, on the other hand, almost exclusively cater to foreign students.

² All personal names are pseudonyms.

material basis for their study abroad strategies. In addition to the middle class position of the families, the linguistic and cultural capital of the fathers as part of the global elite provided them with an advantage in ESA. The three fathers shared international work experience of more than 15 years, leading a cosmopolitan life in terms of their jobs and lifestyles. The cultural and linguistic capital that they had accumulated through their extensive work experiences in global workplaces enabled the families to make faster and more confident decisions concerning the children's study abroad than other families. The fathers' active engagement in international competition at their global workplaces put them in a position to lead a transnational life. They perceived their competence in English as the most important skill enabling them to work and succeed in their endeavors. Their awareness of the importance of multilingualism in global competition led them to look for more privileged opportunities to support the children's language education.

This study adopts qualitative research methodology, which includes participant observation and informal qualitative interviews with each family. One of the authors (Bae) carried out participant observation of the families' lives between August 2010 and December 2012, through regular visits to their homes; occasional attendance at various school activities and events, play dates with Korean or Singaporean friends, and private gatherings of the participant families with other families; and informal interaction with the families.

She also conducted informal qualitative interviews with each family, in order to elicit more explicit articulations of the families' linguistic and educational choices and to gain deeper insight into the language ideologies behind their choices. Initial interviews with each family were conducted during the beginning phase of research in August 2010 to collect information about their motivation for educational migration, rationale in choosing Singapore and Singaporean schools, socioeconomic background, and transnational migratory trajectories. More interviews were carried out during the researcher's regular visits to participants' homes when a detailed explanation or clarification of issues noted through participant observation was needed.

The researcher tried out various positionings in interactions with the participants. She shifted her roles between different positions, for example, taking on the role of their friend, a peer Korean parent with intense interest in children's education, a language tutor for young learners, an educational consultant for the children, and a researcher. In exploring the participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings in their everyday life, it was necessary to build a very intimate and supportive relationship and to create a comfortable interactional environment in which the families could feel sufficiently comfortable to discuss their desires, fears, worries, frustrations and, joys. The varying positionality of the researcher was helpful in analyzing the families' ESA practices from diverse angles with a less biased point of view.

The interviews were conducted in Korean, at cafes or at the homes of either the participants or the researcher. They were audio-recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis. Interview questions were broad and open-ended, designed to elicit accounts of the families' living experience and language learning during their study abroad. Conversations usually focused on the educational strategies chosen by each family and the processes through which the families negotiated the significance of language learning, the difficulties they experienced in their lives overseas, and their future plans. The interview topics also included the children's language learning process, the parents' assessment of the children's linguistic competence achieved through study abroad in Singapore, and parents' perception of their children's transnational identity as well as factors that affect it.

Table 1
Background Information for Participant Families

Families	Minsu's family	Juni's family	Jaemin's family
Father's occupation, workplace	IT specialist, multinational company	international salesperson, multinational company	banker, Korean bank, international business department
Mother's occupation	housewife	housewife	housewife
Child's grade, age in 2012	3 rd , 9 years old	3 rd , 9 years old	11 th , 17 years old
Family members in Singapore	mother, Minsu, younger brother	father, mother, Juni, younger sister	mother, Jaemin
Sibling's grade, age	kindergarten, 5 years old	1 st , 7 years old	N/A
Overseas experience prior to Singapore, length of stay (year(s))	Canada, 1 year (2003) Singapore/ 1 year (2005)	N/A	Hong Kong, 1.5 years (2007-2008)
Arrival in Singapore	December 2009	February 2008	May 2008
Schools attended by child, length of attendance	English language kindergarten in Korea, 2 years Chinese language kindergarten in Korea, 6 months Singapore government primary school, 3 years	Korean heritage Kindergarten in Singapore, 6 months International school in Singapore, 1.5 years Singapore government primary school, 3 years	International school in Hong Kong/1 year International school in Singapore/ 2 years Singapore government high school (for gifted students in math and science), 1.5 years

ANALYSIS

Linguistic Diversity as Marketable Value

All three families actively pursued the acquisition of multilingual competence through investment in English, Mandarin, and Korean. Since Singapore's multilingual context was one of the features that led families to select it as their ESA destination, they were eager to acquire high level of competence in all three languages. However, the families' investment in these languages was differentiated according to the profit that they could expect to reap from that investment, as well as the material constraints in the local educational context. For instance, most time and effort was invested in English, and the prioritization of progress in this language reduced the families' investment in Mandarin and Korean (Park & Bae, 2009). In fact, the families tended to decrease their investment in the latter two languages over the years as their children faced increasing pressure in the Singaporean schools' competitive environment; as school instruction was conducted mainly in English, it was impossible to do well in school without continuously developing more sophisticated skills in academic English. More importantly, even though Mandarin was regarded as another important language for the children's future success, the families still did not see the value of Mandarin as surpassing that of English, either in the global economy or in the local context.

Korean was the most neglected language in the children's language learning during ESA in Singapore, in terms of explicit effort invested in developing the language. This was due to the lack of immediate need and motivation for studying Korean amidst competitive school assessments conducted in English and Mandarin at Singaporean schools. The Korean language was viewed as the least valuable linguistic resource, with relatively low value in Singaporeans schools as well as in the global job market. This resulted in the families' relative neglect of Korean during their ESA (Bae, 2013); usually, no particular effort was made to develop the children's Korean linguistic competence other than using Korean at home. This suggests that the families' linguistic investments were largely conditioned by the instrumental value that each language commanded.

In fact, the families often explicitly presented language as associated with economic value that contributed to the children's competitiveness in the global economy, and they downplayed the importance of ethnolinguistic identity. This view is most explicitly expressed in the following excerpt from an interview with Jaemin's mother:

Investing in my son's language education is similar to investing in capital stocks. Just like I would invest most of my money in blue-chip stocks such as *Samsung* or *LG* which guarantee a sure profit, I invest the most in English, the language which would be most helpful for Jaemin's future success. And to gain more profits, you need to invest in not only blue-chip stocks but also glamor stocks which have the potential to grow. Mandarin is something like glamor stocks to me. It is not as important as English for now but it has the potential to be another important language like English in the near future. Thus, we also have to invest in Mandarin to be prepared for the changing future. Korean is like employee stock ownership. It may not bring a good profit to me but it is something I feel obliged to possess. In addition, it is related to matters of identity. (November 2010)³

³ All the interviews with the families were conducted in Korean and translated into English by the authors.

Jaemin's mother compares the value of languages to the value of capital stocks, applying the rules of the stock market to the market of language learning. Language is stratified into different categories of resources with high or low investment values according to the practical profits they are expected to bring to language learners. Jaemin's mother clearly places economic calculations at the heart of the families' linguistic investment; their strategies of linguistic investment are dependent on the economic or social value of each linguistic resource.

This account illustrates how all of the families oriented to the ideology of language as economic resource. In contrast to more essentialist ideologies of language and identity, in which language is considered an essential part of identity, the families' formulation of language as an attainable resource distinct from one's identity represents a more flexible view on the relationship between language and identity. While Jaemin's mother does explicitly articulate the ideological connection that the Korean language has to their ethnic identity ("it is related to matters of identity"), she suggests that such implications are only of secondary importance—it is merely an 'obligation' to maintain the Korean language. It is worth noting, however, that the metaphor of 'employee stock ownership' still foregrounds the economic value of language; it may not be an efficient investment choice, but it nonetheless serves as a form of capital.

In this sense, we could say that the families regarded language learning as an economic activity in which investment in profitable resources can maximize learners' access to "hitherto unattainable resources" (Norton, 1995, p. 17). The value of linguistic resources is calculated simplistically in terms of the profit that language learners can reap from linguistic investment, such as practical benefits in the educational (e.g., entrance to prestigious Western universities) or job (e.g., better employment) market. These observations show how the political economic context of Korean ESA—that is, the neoliberal climate of the Korean educational and job market—conditioned the way the families made sense of the diversity of languages they encountered in their life abroad.

“Where are you from?”: Persistent Questions of Membership

Our discussion in the previous section should not imply, however, that the families simply expected to gain the desired benefits from language learning, as if they existed within a completely free market of languages. In fact, the families noted multiple social and material constraints that restricted their access to various benefits or privileges in Singapore. For instance, even though the children developed proficient levels of linguistic competence through ESA, especially in English, they often found themselves relegated to the margin during social interactions in Singaporean schools. The families came to realize that the value of students' linguistic competence was closely tied to their social positioning, which could delimit participation in communicative and social interaction.

For instance, Minsu's mother complained that Korean students, who were top students at her son's school, were never recommended by teachers for student representative positions. She felt that opportunities for leadership training in Singaporean schools were exclusively given to Singaporean students. She also thought that it was difficult for foreign students to join leadership groups, such as the student council or the student monitor group, even though they demonstrated excellent academic performance and good interpersonal skills. Jaemin's father explained the disadvantage experienced by foreign students at

Singaporean schools in the following way:

I think Jaemin is excluded from many things at school. Singaporean students hang out among themselves and Korean students hang out with Korean or other foreign students. Since he has very limited relations with Singaporean students and teachers, he is excluded from social networks at school, having difficulty in joining activities or groups. If he were in a Korean school, he could participate much more actively in school activities such as study groups or social clubs, having a real fun school life. But in this Singaporean school, even when there are important events or competitions at school which might be helpful for university admission, he can't participate because he can't get enough information about them. And I guess Singaporean teachers would give priority to Singaporean students rather than foreign students because it is a Singaporean school not an international school. In those things, he is disadvantaged and excluded. (June 2011)

In other words, though the families rarely encountered overt discrimination in Singapore, they experienced various degrees of covert social exclusion, which they attributed to the fact that they were foreigners. In turn, this led them to recognize the contradiction that underlies the ideology of language as economic resource. For instance, Jaemin's father does not make explicit reference to language in his statement above, however, he recognizes that patterns of social interaction at the Singaporean school constrain not only his son's relationship with peers, but also his access to opportunities that can have implications for university admission. In this way, he clearly implies that not everyone who acquires valuable competence in English will be able to reap the material benefits of linguistic competence, as the families had once expected.

Indeed, the parents came to reconsider their belief that English could serve as a transparent economic resource and could be translated into valuable future opportunities for work and study in the West. For example, with regard to his son's English, Jaemin's father also commented, "however good his English would be, he would always be seen as a Korean who speaks good English. Because of [his] skin color, he will be forever an outsider or minority in the U.S., [he] cannot be mainstream." In other words, he believed that, in competition with white Americans, his son's competence in English might have only limited value because of his ethnic provenance.

An additional tension led the families to orient to more essentialist ideologies of language: while the parents consistently emphasized the importance of English and Mandarin for their children's future, they also reported anxiety over the potential loss of a Korean social and linguistic identity.

In the children's daily life, Korean was the language for communication within the family, not a subject of their study or the focus of their linguistic investment. As a result, all three families confessed that it was difficult for their children to maintain Korean as their sojourns abroad extended. One of the participant children, Juni, said, "I speak Korean to the Koreans who cannot speak English. But if that Korean can speak English, I speak English." Juni spoke mainly in English to her younger sister and sometimes even to her father. The people with whom she spoke Korean were usually her mother and mother's friends who could not understand English. While the participant children continued to develop sophisticated skills and higher proficiency in English and Mandarin through school education, they used Korean only in interaction with their parents at home, which resulted in attrition of their mother

tongue. Despite the parents' consternation in light of this observation, they find that it is not possible to make serious investment in Korean since the children are under pressure to achieve good competence in English and Mandarin, both of which are crucial for academic achievement at school.

All the parents in this study perceived attrition of the children's competence in Korean as a serious problem, not only with regard to diminishing multilingual competence, but, more significantly, as a loss of Korean identity. For instance, Juni's mother felt uneasy when she saw her daughter sing the national anthem of Singapore at school:

The other day I went to a school event at Juni's school. There I saw her sing the national anthem of Singapore, so fluently and so proudly. Then it suddenly struck me that maybe she is not Korean anymore. She doesn't even know the national anthem of Korea, [and she] rarely has any chance to hear it. Though I've made a decision to raise her abroad, not returning to Korea, that scene made me strangely sad, making me think that I've raised my child in a wrong way. (February 2012)

While Juni's mother was proud of her daughter's fluent English and her adjustment to the Singaporean school, she became concerned about the future of the family's Korean identity. Juni's successful adjustment to the Singaporean school and acquisition of other cultures and languages was in part viewed as diluting her Korean identity. In this way, the parents admitted that ethnic/national identity was something they could not deny or completely ignore; they still highly valued maintaining their ethnic identity since they were recognized as Koreans. What is worth noting here is that the insecurity that the parents expressed about the 'uprootedness' of their children's identity seemingly contradicts with their desire for the fluidity and flexibility implied in the development of truly global subjectivity. This shows that the parents still oriented to essentialist links between language, identity, and ethnicity, even as they strategically pursued the children's global flexibility through the acquisition of multilingualism.

The parents' insecurity about the children's Korean identity affected the young learners' attitudes towards their own identity; though the children didn't feel that the Korean language or Korea were an important part of their identity, the parents' concern about the children's attrition of Korean and weakening Korean identity continuously directed the children to develop more attachment to the Korean language and culture. The children were aware of Koreanness as an inherent part of their identity, as they often encountered categorization of themselves as Koreans and they were repeatedly reminded of 'Korean ways of thinking and acting' by their parents at home. For instance, though Jaemin said that he regarded Korea as no more than the place where he was born, he mentioned that he could not help but feel obliged to defend Koreans against racial criticism or discrimination when he encountered any negative evaluation or stereotyping of his ethnic group; international sports matches in which Korea participated, for example, made Jaemin realize how deeply he felt attached to a Korean identity. As a result, the children also came to have contradictory attitudes towards their own identity; they began to recognize Koreanness as an essential part of their identity, even though they showed flexible attitudes toward their social belongings.

The discussion above shows that various conditions of their study abroad experience led the families to realize that belonging to everywhere often means belonging to nowhere; that is, the truly flexible identity that they pursued through multilingualism is impossible in the sense that the students will always be categorized in certain ways—by non-Koreans and

Koreans alike. This highlights how identity is not simply a matter of self-choice, but needs to be reified and accepted by others across a variety of social sites, which are “structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different subject positions” (Norton, 2000, p. 127).

In other words, there was a fundamental contradiction in the families’ ideologies about language and identity that emerged through their experience of study abroad. On the one hand, the families’ attempt to attain global flexibility through acquisition of multilingualism demonstrated how they mobilized language as a resource for constructing and asserting flexible identity. On the other hand, the families oriented to the essentialist ideology that views language as the core of ethnic identity and social membership, naturalizing the link between competence and legitimacy through an understanding linguistic competence as “an effective resource for the (re)production of social distinctions as well as rationalization of social positions and interests supported by such distinctions” (Park, 2010, p. 24). It is this contradiction between two opposing ideologies of language that pressed the families to reflect on their project of ESA and to reevaluate the significance they attributed to the multiple languages that they accumulated abroad.

Finding a Safe Zone: Global Elite in Korea

The tension between the two ideologies that we saw in the previous section led all three families to seek to negotiate a very specific social position that would maximize flexibility within the constraints of social structure. For the fathers, this position was emblematically represented by a highly specific figure: an expatriate worker at the Korean regional headquarters of a prestigious American or European multinational corporation. For example, Jaemin’s father said:

The best scenario for Jaemin’s future I think now is for him to work as an expatriate of a big multinational corporation at a branch office in Korea. Frankly speaking, if he works in an American company in the U.S., it is realistically difficult for him to succeed because of skin color. If he works in a Korean company in Korea, the salary is much lower than foreign companies and the corporate culture is very authoritarian and collectivistic. But if he works at a Korean branch office of a multinational corporation, with an expatriate package and not as a local employee, it’s like living with a foreigner status in your mother country. It means that he can enjoy the privileges of foreign expatriates in Korea, higher social and economic status than other Koreans in Korea but he doesn’t have to go through the same inequality or discrimination as in the U.S. ... If my son works at a branch office in his own country, he has better competitiveness than other American workers in an American company since he is the specialist of this region with better advantage of smooth communication and interaction with local Koreans and also with better knowledge about Korean culture and society. This is the way to heighten his value as a Korean in the global workplace, competing with Americans or people from other countries. (June 2011)

Similar to Jaemin’s father, Juni’s and Minsu’s fathers also described achieving an expatriate position at a Korean branch of a multinational corporation as a “triumphant and glorious return to home country” or “global success on home ground” that guarantees comfortable and glamorous life as a member of the global elite in Korea. It seems that the common

background of the three fathers—their extensive experience in the global workplace—led to this common ideal for the future employment for their children. Many Koreans in global workplaces (e.g., non-Korean multinational corporations) face limitations and disadvantages in entering into the ranks of higher-level managers, often owing to issues in communicative skills, though other complex issues of social relations and power are also relevant (Park, 2013). Since the three fathers had either faced constraints in pursuing their elite status in global context in the past or were still experiencing similar limitations and had contemplated ways to gain distinction in global competition, they reached a very similar goal for their children. Specifically, they imagined that the Korean market would be a strategic location in which the children could be better positioned than both Americans and other Koreans.

This is one illustration of how the tension between the two ideologies about language and identity led to a renegotiated and compromised goal for the families' project of ESA. The families eagerly desired the privileges of the global elite and sought such advantage by adopting the ideology of language as economic resource, which posits a flexible link between language and identity; yet, as they become aware of social and political constraints that compromised such a promise, they attempted to deal with such constraints by identifying a safe zone where their children's identity as Korean could be transformed into a valuable resource. In other words, their goal for the children attempts to maximize cultural and social flexibility while maintaining a stable mooring in Koreanness, which the parents realize will always be treated as an essential part of family identity. This, indeed, represents a highly sophisticated and technical balancing between flexibility and stability that renegotiates the specific goal that the families hoped to attain through ESA.

What we want to highlight here is that it is ultimately the neoliberal logic of language as economic resource that permeates the families' rationalization of their ESA project. Even though the families responded to the constraints they experienced by orienting to essentialist views of language and identity, such ideologies—which posit a fundamental connection between Korean identity, language, and the space of Korea—eventually served to justify the families' focus on maximizing the value of the children's human capital. That is, the persistent identification of the ESA student as Korean is turned on its head as the families' ideal destination shifts from that of Western English-speaking countries to that of a Korean branch of a non-Korean multinational corporation—a space that simultaneously indexes the identity of a global elite and recognizes Koreanness as valuable. By designing their children's future in such a specific way, the families renegotiated undervalued competence in Korean and their Korean roots as valuable. At the same time, their children maintained a sense of distinction resulting from competence in global languages, such as English and Mandarin, acquired through ESA. In other words, the emblematic position of the expatriate worker at the Korean branch of a prestigious multinational corporation is imagined to be a strategic space in which to maximize flexibility within the constraints of markets. This position thus indexes an alignment with the neoliberal ideology of language as economic resource, rather than a critical response to the false promises that the ideology puts forward.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we outlined how the political and economic context of Korean ESA—with its grounding in the spirit of endless competition that characterizes neoliberal Korean society—shapes families' understanding of their study abroad experience. The diversity of languages and cultures that participant families encountered through their life abroad was mainly

understood in terms of economic value, or how experiences would contribute to the future socioeconomic positioning of the study abroad student. Even though the ideology of language as an economic resource was problematized by the various social constraints that they experienced in Singapore, the families nonetheless adhered to that ideology as a fundamental perspective for planning the future trajectory of the student. Specifically, they reimagined Koreanness and the Korean language as another resource that can be appropriately managed to bring material benefits to the child. In this way, the families' project of ESA was firmly reestablished as serving the goal of symbolic and cultural capital accumulation, a means of reproducing their social class position.

The Korean case of ESA can have important implications for research on study abroad. In our discussion, we considered how social constraints that contradict the ideology of language as an economic resource were turned around to provide further justification for the niche position that the Korean ESA student may occupy as a global elite: the emblematic figure employed at a Korean branch office of a global corporation. This underlines how the linguistic and cultural diversity that the study abroad student encounters is not necessarily understood in terms of its potential for self-reflection or intercultural understanding. Indeed, instead of being recognized as a socially grounded condition of language use, and therefore serving as a basis for deeper reflection on the positioning of the self, diversity can easily be reframed under neoliberalism as another economic resource that enhances the marketable potential of individuals or institutions (Urciuoli, 2015). The analysis of the three families' understanding of their experience abroad highlights how the liberal, cosmopolitan vision of study abroad can be subsumed under the logic of the market, obstructing possibilities of challenging that logic.

The point here is not that the three ESA families did not acquire any greater intercultural sensitivity or deeper self-reflection. For instance, the students and parents in this study did learn to appreciate the local significance of Singlish, evidence of at least one way in which they critically reflected on variation in linguistic practice and their own position as learners and speakers of English (Bae, 2013). The point, instead, is that the development and transformation of cultural sensitivity should not be understood purely in terms of an individual's cognitive and social development, but as situated within conditions of political economy. If we recognize that study abroad is unambiguously a "class-inflected activity, involving class-related aspirations" and "also a commodity marketed specifically in response to those aspirations" (Kinginger, 2013, p. 354), then it is important to actively take into account the shifting conditions of the neoliberal market that increasingly considers language learning and transnational movement as elements of a project of human capital development. A closer analysis of the ways in which the logic of the market insinuates itself into students' understanding of their own study abroad experience can help us critique and problematize such processes.

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