

**Reflections on my Experiences as an Immigrant Child, and a Personal Recollection of the
Stages of English Language Acquisition – a Narrative**

Lived Experience Paper Assignment

Social and Cultural Context of Education (EDUC5005G) Course

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In today's increasingly globalized world, immigrating to another country does not necessarily mean that an individual would be required to learn a new language. It is generally expected that an individual would have the language skills necessary in the "host culture" upon arrival (Lee, 2000, p. 55). In fact, one of the new policies of the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (2012) is that an adult applicant would be required "to provide objective evidence of their language ability with their citizenship application;" and to immigrate under the Canadian Experience Class, an applicant would be required to submit their results of an English/French language assessment test that meets the minimum language requirement. As an immigrant child (just turning 12 years old a few days after my arrival in Canada), I was not required to meet any language assessment test requirements when I immigrated to Canada with my parents over 35 years ago, and this would still apply today for the children of new immigrants. Through the process of writing and remembering in this lived experience paper, I would like to begin from when I arrived in Canada with my parents and reflect on my experiences as a child immigrant during the first 5-6 years I lived in Canada. Also, this paper will reflect my experiences in acquiring English language skills during this period of time.

Having immigrated to Canada with my parents and with my three siblings during the first week in November, 1975, most of my life experiences have been formed in Canada. However, my recollection of the experiences and images of South Korea is still vivid. I was fluent in the Korean language at the time of my arrival in Canada, but still, I was pressured to attend a Korean language course to continue learning the Korean language shortly after arriving in Canada, which I attended for a few years and disliked the experience intensely. I cannot recall the reason for this intense negative feeling, but despite this, as an adult, I'm somewhat grateful that I had the opportunity to learn. Just before arriving in Canada, I was attending 6th grade in South Korea, where the academic year began in March. I read children's literature in Korean extensively

while in Korea and still have some of the books which were brought from Korea at the time, including the Korean translation of C.S. Lewis' novel, "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." However, my current Korean vocabulary is very limited in comparison to my English vocabulary, which becomes prominent when I read a Korean adult fiction novel, or newspaper. For this reason, I have become more comfortable reading in English due to the reduced amount of words that would need to be looked up in the dictionary. Korean was the only language that I knew when I arrived in Canada. My parents felt that if I learned English in South Korea, I would pick up incorrect pronunciation. Before arriving in Canada, I didn't meet any non-Koreans in South Korea, so my first experiences in Canada also included meeting people, who not only did not speak Korean, but also appeared very different from what I was accustomed to. Reflecting back, I realize how homogenized South Korea was at the time, especially since I lived in the capital city, Seoul.

English Language acquisition seemed to be the single most dominating factor since arriving in Canada. I was placed in grade 5 and attended an ESL class for most of the day with the exception of some Math and Arts related courses in my home room class. I can recall the name of my first ESL teacher and the ESL classroom in the school that was bright and spacious with many colourful items to aid in teaching and learning. I also recall some of the ways that I tried to make sense of the English alphabet. In the elementary school that I attended with my siblings, we were the only Koreans in the entire school. All four of us were in the same ESL class with a few other students. After about a year of attending the classes, I was called in to the Principal's office to help with English translation for another newcomer Korean family. At the time, most people didn't know that South Korea was a country; however, they knew of China and Japan, and tried to fit us into one of the two known Asian countries in their mind. For some reason, it was very difficult trying to convince people that a country called South Korea existed,

and that it was different from China or Japan even after showing them where the country was on the world map. These people that I'm referring to are from outside of the education profession. Perhaps the fact that I was a child, and I did not have a good command of the English language had made it difficult for other students and adults to take me seriously. In retrospect, it is partly understandable since the new information was introduced by someone who did not speak the native language, leading the information to be accepted with skepticism. At best, most people considered South Korea as an extension of either China, or Japan. Other than a very limited interaction with the students in my home room class, most of my association was within the ESL class at the time.

The process of reading in English and being able to put the letters together to make sounds became much easier when I went through the activity of matching up each letter in the alphabet with Korean sounds that I can relate to. I can still recall my Korean writing above each of the English letters of the alphabet on a piece of paper describing the phonetic sound(s) of each letter or a combination of letters. This process helped me to connect the two languages, Korean and English. I would refer to this sheet of paper frequently until it became familiar. However, I do recall writing this connection exercise a number of times, perhaps because I didn't have the paper with me at the time, or maybe I had misplaced the sheet of paper, or just needed to refresh my mind on the concept. Without a doubt, this exercise was an important cognitive process for building my own framework for learning the English language. As Dixon et al. (2012) mentioned in terms of sociocultural approach to L2 learning, I was finding my "own effective ways of communicating" (p. 35).

Picture books with the repetitive use of action words were also very helpful, and the images of "Jack and Jill" carrying a pail, or running, or walking are still vivid in my memory. I suppose that after a year of learning English, I was coherent enough for the school administrators

to feel that I would be of some help in translation with a newcomer. Well, most likely the choice was to have me translate, or no translation at all. I don't recall much of what was discussed at the time, but it was an opportunity to meet another Korean family at the school. A small community of Koreans were living in Toronto connected through various church groups at the time. My family's Roman Catholic background affiliated us with a small shared church in downtown Toronto, where we were able to attend Mass in Korean each Sunday. My parents also formed friendships with a group of Korean families, who were not of the same religious affiliation. Growing up in Toronto, we shared many dinners, trips and holidays with these Korean families although we did not live in close proximity to each other. Interestingly, the friendships were only limited to the parent group, and the children of these families did not form close bonds as the adults did. Other than these associations, my exposure to the Korean language was mostly with my family at home. In all other ways, I was immersed in the English language and culture.

Music was an important influence in my English language acquisition process. A few simple folk songs for children were introduced in the ESL class that I attended in the public elementary school during the first two years, and the songs really resonated with me that I still retain them. One of the songs began with "If I were a (cowboy, pilot, etc.)..., I would (ride on my horse, fly, etc.) ..., but wishing just won't make it so. If we want to be what we'll not, we'll never be happy as it seems ... we all want to live in our own dreams." It was a simple melody sang by a male singer strumming a guitar. I felt I understood the words at the time, and they seem to have a different meaning recalling them now, but it's interesting that the lyrics have been retained through the years. Another song that one of my elementary male teachers enjoyed playing was "Hotel California" by the Eagles, and I didn't understand the lyrics, but I can still remember some of the words. It seemed that music had a way of tapping into my memory easily

and pleasantly. There were many pop songs at the time that I enjoyed listening to with my younger siblings - two brothers and a sister. We still share a laugh about how we interpreted or pronounced/ mispronounced some of the lyrics to the popular music of the time.

In contrast, I recall struggling through having to memorize a poem for a grade 8 English course. Before describing the details, I should explain a transition that took place after completing grade 6. I was transferred to a public middle school in grade 7 (the public elementary school that I attended only went up to grade 6 level), and then shortly afterwards, when my parents moved, I was transferred again, but this time, to a separate school, and both the public middle school before the move and the separate school after the move did not offer a specialized ESL class. I was required to complete assignments and recite poetry for the class just like everyone else in grade 8, a poem written by William Wordsworth entitled, "Daffodils." It was an excruciatingly difficult exercise memorizing the stanzas of the poem. I had so much trouble that I decided to make it fun by getting my younger siblings to pretend to be my pupils while I played the role of the teacher teaching them the poem. All three of my siblings remember fragments of the first stanza of the poem today. To this day, I can recall the first stanza and ever since then, associated this particular poem with the difficulties that I had while trying to memorize it. Being the oldest among my siblings, I had quite a bit of power and influence, given the Korean tradition of respecting the older person and obeying reasonable requests. It is now difficult for me to imagine my siblings listening to me passively and doing what I ask them to do. My siblings have gradually outgrown their Korean cultural dispositions with their language acquisition during their high school years. Culture is an important aspect of language acquisition motivation. Dixon et al (2012) indicated that 9% of variation in the motivation of language learner is affected by five "aspects of motivation: integrativeness, instrumentality, perceived vitality of the L2 community, attitudes toward L2 speakers and

interest in the L2 culture (p. 40). I can relate to all “five aspects of motivation” as mentioned above for me and my siblings. However, despite of having the positive motivation, learning a new language required much effort and discipline, and a willingness to persist through the difficulties encountered.

Although memorizing a few stanzas of a poem in my 8th grade was very difficult, writing them was not, which contributed to my interest in poetry and the arts during the early days in Canada. When writing poems, I wasn't as conscious about the usage of correct grammar and sentence structure, and to some extent, I felt free to express myself without the hindrance of the barriers I faced with the English language structure. I enjoyed writing poems and drawing pictures to further express the words in my poems. However, there was one particular poem that I wrote in grade 7, for which the teacher, Mr. Heimler, asked me to rewrite the words in large print and to redraw the picture in a much larger form on a construction sheet for the grade 8 graduation ceremony and the dance afterwards. After the event, one of my classmates asked if she could keep the large wall-sized work, and I was thrilled to be able to give it away because this individual really liked and wanted what I had created. Mr. Heimler felt that I had a special talent for the arts and connected me with a summer program specifically focused on the arts, which I attended and enjoyed learning about the various mediums for the fine arts expressions. However, I did not pursue arts further in my high school education. For there were other courses such as Latin and French that I wanted to take, and also, I wanted to fast-track through high school (Completing OAC level in 4 years instead of 5) since I was placed a year behind when I began my studies in Canada. Moreover, I was a year, or two older than most of my peers at the time, and it mattered during my sensitive teen years.

My communication with my two brothers and my sister gradually changed from Korean to almost entirely to English by the time I graduated from high school. During this transition

phase, my siblings were also starting to call me by my English name, Theresa, instead of referring to me as “noona” (for boys) and “onnie” (for a girl) as an older female sibling. My parents objected, but shortly thereafter, they realized that it was a losing battle, and instead, toned it down to “It would be so nice if you can respectfully call each other in the good Korean manner.” My parents’ English communication skills did not improve as quickly, and whenever we communicated, it was entirely in Korean. Often, they would ask one of us to translate for them when there were issues with understanding English. They also worked shift hours and were rarely home to spend much time together during the week. Unfortunately, learning English, although it was important, wasn’t something that they had the luxury of time for. Basically, the English skills that they learned in Korea, and the lessons that they attended during the first few months after their arrival in Toronto were all that they had. Sometimes, they would make an effort by trying to learn a word or two every few days, but usually this didn’t last, and it may not have been effective.

I realized that the change in the way my siblings and I addressed each other resulted in a shift in our culture. The reduction in the power and the respect that was attributed to an older person with the use of the Korean language was felt (psychologically, or socially, or perhaps linguistically in the tone of voice) when my younger siblings and I started exclusively speaking in English. It was most likely liberating for my younger siblings to “talk down” to their “bossy” older sibling. At first I resisted, and demanded that they called me properly in Korean using the appropriate Korean words. However, it did sound “strange” when we were in public. We compromised by using it when our parents were around, or when we were among other Koreans, and we did get compliments from some of my parents’ generation that we were still using the honorific title, “What good kids (we were)”, they would say. My sister also used it when she wanted to wheedle something from me, or wanted some younger sisterly attention. My parents

felt that because the English language did not differentiate older people and did not show special respect for an older person, it was a “common” language. They considered Korean as a superior language when compared to English, and that Korean had more cultural significance, history, and meaning. I’m sure this type of attitude didn’t help with their language acquisition, nor did it help with their communication/ interaction with non-Koreans. As mentioned in Lee’s (2010) article, my parents would have been in the “high-low configuration” rejecting the “host” culture which affected their adaptation and intercultural effectiveness, which in turn created high stress levels (p. 59).

Unlike my parents, my siblings and I were so immersed in the “Canadian culture” that we all wanted to be “Canadian.” Soon enough, we were all Canadian citizens in the early 80’s through our parents who studied the Canadian legal and political system and passed the citizenship test. Through their accomplishments and hard work, my siblings and I sailed through as Canadian citizens simply because we were their children. Officially becoming a Canadian citizen changed each member of my family in subtle ways. We had to consider what it meant to be a Canadian citizen, and how this affects being a Korean. I remember asking my parents numerous questions at the time, especially on the concept of if, or when we go back to Korea for a visit or to live, what were the consequences? It almost felt like finalizing an idea, or a thought. In retrospect, we were all going through the process of constructing our identities, adding another dimension to who we were. As Norquay (1998) mentions in her article entitled, *Family Immigration (Hi)stories and the Construction of Identity*, we were part of the fluid and resilient “identity and identity formation” process (p. 188).

Recalling my life’s journey during the early days of arrival in Canada has helped me to view my experiences more clearly and has provided me with an additional perspective in the way I associate and connect with diverse groups of people in my personal and professional

environments. From reconstructing the language learning experiences, I realized that a total of approximately two years were spent in the ESL classes. Unlike the “good kids to the worst kids” mentioned in Harklau’s (2000, p. 35) article, I was fortunate enough to adapt to a “normal” non-ESL classroom setting after having attended the two years of ESL classes. Although it seemed difficult adjusting at the time, it was within my ability to manage. Perhaps some of the factors that contributed to my quick adjustment to Canada were: the age that I arrived, my parents’ decision to enroll me in a level lower than my actual grade, my younger siblings’ influence when practicing and learning English, and the quality of ESL instruction. It may also be a combination of all of these factors and more. From these opportunities and experiences, I have grown to adapt, learn and adjust quickly to new environments and situations. I’m very grateful for the set of circumstances and for the people, who helped me along the way.

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