Korean heritage students and language literacy: A qualitative approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a qualitative study of the experiences of Korean heritage language learners (KHLLs) with literacy (reading and writing), particularly before they enter the college-level heritage language classroom. Previous research, both qualitative and quantitative, has addressed the overall language background of KHLLs, including oral and aural proficiency and writing and reading ability, as well as demographic information (such as when the student immigrated to the United States) in relation to language test scores. This study addresses KHLL experiences in the following six areas as they relate to student perceptions and attitudes toward their own heritage language literacy: language proficiency, motivation for learning, academic preparedness, cultural connectedness, emotional factors, and social factors. Fourteen undergraduate students at a university in the western United States participated in a convenience sample by responding to a 10-question survey. Trends in responses indicated that KHLLs entered the classroom with high integrational motivation and experienced great satisfaction with perceived progress in literacy, but students also expressed regret for having missed childhood learning experiences that would likely have resulted in higher proficiency. These experiences include informal and formal instruction in the home and formal instruction outside of the home.

Key Words
Korean literacy, heritage language literacy, Korean heritage language learners
Introduction

Following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act banning immigration quotas, the number of immigrants from countries around the world to the United States, especially those from East Asia, increased dramatically. Koreans are among the top five largest immigrant populations in the United States. In 2000, the United States population included approximately 1.41 million Korean Americans. According to a 2005 United States Census Bureau survey, over 430,000 of the ethnic Koreans living in the United States were born in this country; another 970,000 were foreign born. Recent increases in enrollment by heritage learners in university Korean language classes are believed to result, at least in part, from the passage of this 1965 legislation (Lee and Kim, 2008, p. 160).

Successfully learning and maintaining their heritage language is a concern for many Korean Americans. Community-based Korean language weekend schools for heritage learners outnumber similar schools for Chinese or Japanese; according to one report, more than 1,000 Korean heritage language (HL) schools exist in the United States, compared to more than 600 Chinese schools and 50 Japanese schools (Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2008, p. 4). Korean heritage language learners (KHLL) also make up the majority of students in most college-level Korean language programs (E. J. Kim, 2006). Despite these facts, as Lee and Kim (2008) point out, “second generation Korean Americans have been found to have one of the lowest rates of HL proficiency in comparison to other Asian American groups in the United States” (p. 160). This is perhaps due, in part, to the low degree of second-language transfer that occurs between such syntactically and grammatically different languages as English and Korean. How to address the needs and goals of these heritage learners is and will continue to be of interest to business organizations and government agencies with international foci, Korean and other heritage language educators, and heritage learners themselves.