Korean Heritage Learners’ Affect and Performance

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This study was conducted with Korean heritage learners to examine how their affect is related to their performance in the Korean course. Questionnaires that measure the students’ foreign language classroom anxiety and achievement goals were administered to 18 college students enrolled in the second-year Korean writing course. The study first examined the effects of anxiety on the students’ performance and found that those who experienced lower levels of anxiety performed better. A correlation analysis also confirmed the finding, i.e., the students’ anxiety was highly correlated with their performance in the course. Furthermore, it was found from the multiple regression analysis that both anxiety and functional goals explained the variance of the students’ performance. In other words, those two variables were found to predict learner performance.

I. Introduction

According to Yildiz (2008), nearly one in five people in the US speaks a language other than English. Silva (2007), citing the finding from US Census Bureau (2003), reports that Korean is ranked as the 8th among the foreign languages with its users estimated as 894,063. This increased interest in learning Korean may be partially due to the practical and functional value associated with Korean as the Korean economy
and culture has expanded to the global society (Silva, 2007). Another possible reason may be that from the Korean heritage learners’ perspectives, learning Korean is one of the ways to find their cultural root and strengthen their identification with their heritage culture (Cho, Cho, & Tse, 1997; Cho, 2000; Kim, Sawdey & Meihoefer, 1980; Tse, 1997).

The development of heritage language (HL) has positive effects for ethnic minorities, including cognitive, social, and cultural benefits (Garcia, 1985; Krashen, 1998). As Cho (2000) claims, HL development has a number of beneficial effects, such as facilitating identity formation, fostering knowledge of cultural values, ethics and manners, and enhancing their interaction with HL speakers.

It is important to note, however, that their second language learning process can become a threat to their ego or identity (Brown, 2000; Horwitz, 2008). The fact that they are highly proficient in English but have limited proficiency in their HL may threaten their second language ego and induce inhibition or self-defense mechanism. This in turn is likely to raise anxiety and lower learning motivation, which will eventually affect learning outcomes.

The dynamic and nonlinear relationship between learner affect and performance deserves attention from researchers and teachers. Particularly considering the rapidly growing number of Korean learners in the world, it is lamentable that little empirical information is available on their affective experiences, such as anxiety and motivation specifically related to Korean language learning. Another problem is that most previous research studies on foreign language anxiety and motivation have centered on foreign languages other than Korean, namely, English, Spanish, French, Russian, and Japanese (Aydin, 1999; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Coulombe, 2000; Donley, 1997; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Kim, 2009; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999; Sellers, 2000). Thus, this study set out to present a unique outlook on heritage learners’ affect by describing the relationship between their anxiety and motivation. The present study will examine if there are differences in learner performance.