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FEATURE

**Language Learners and School Readiness:
A Case Study of Two Korean Boys**

Choo, Chung Ok

***Abstract:** Language learning and school readiness interact. Students who start first grade in a new language may be experience readiness differently from what native speaker children experience. Beginning language learners will act differently in social and school settings than more advanced language learners. This study pictures two small Korean boys studying in a summer school program, preparing for first grade in English. It compares the views of teachers, students, the boys, and their parents, about the process they are going through.*

In the 21st century, people need to cooperate globally in many situations. This world is rapidly exchanging knowledge through networking, and people are moving quickly from one nation to another thanks to high speed transportation. People can easily acquire imported products to satisfy domestic demands. They are gaining more information to think about their own future and also future generations. Many people are looking for a better environment in which to educate their children or themselves. They think about situations which could give them a better life. In these days, migrating or going abroad is one of the popular solutions to people's perceived needs. This has resulted in ever larger numbers of immigrants to countries seen to provide opportunities for improvement like the U.S. (La Belle & Ward, 1994, p. 35).

Whatever the reason for the increase in immigration, the school-age population of non-English speaking students has increased significantly in recent years in countries like the United States (Gersten, 1996). Nowadays, schools have many different races and ethnic groups of students who are minority populations (La Belle & Ward, 1994). In Asia, most students learn

English in school, and there is also an increasing business in travel for language-learning purposes.

Since immigration has become more common, a variety of concerns are appearing at school, such as “cultural conflict, usage of language, and family lifestyle” (Schall, 2000). Foreign students may have difficulty learning a second language with native speakers and they also frequently get confused about their own identity. Sometimes, because of poor language, immigrants are mis-labeled and treated as underachievers (Trueba, 1988), as having ADHD (Culatta, Tompkins, & Werts, 2003) or other communicative disorders (Mattes & Omark, 1984), or as disabled students (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1995).

Schools face difficulties in teaching and guiding non-English speaking students. Language learners are often the source of teacher anxiety in the area of discipline (Johns & Espinoza, 1996) and teachers' ethnic prejudice can give them low expectations for these students (Bennett, 1990). Teachers should become familiar with students' cultural backgrounds and understand their needs.

A culture contains not only language but also food, customs, lifestyle, holidays, traditions, etc. This culture helps children develop roots and an identity (Gordon & Browne, 2004, p.429). Culture does not appear suddenly. It shows the history of humanity, changes in lifestyle, the flow of languages, and differentiation of individuals. Hilliard (1980) suggests that a culture entails “world view, values, styles, and above all, language” (p.585). It contains such enormous meaning, not only in physical aspects, but also spiritually. “Educators must become aware of the degree of students' academic and behavioral responses caused by cultural differences versus the presence of a disability” (Waldron, 1996, p. 201).

Many teachers think that they are busy enough with their students that they cannot handle the added burden minority students may bring. But teachers need to expand their repertoire (Sugai, 1988) and the psychological environment (Johns & Espinoza, 1996) to assist the students with social difficulties.

Another concern for minority students is classroom isolation (Waldron, 1996) and peer acceptance: “Students who appear different by virtue of language, dress, or customs may find interactions with classmates difficult” (Lewis & Doorlag, 1991, p. 421). In the class, the teacher might not realize what misunderstandings could appear among pupils. According to Palincsar (1996), “schooling is about kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should acquire--all students, regardless of ethnicity, language of heritage or socioeconomic status” (p. 225). Therefore the teacher must work to increase competence in acceptable classroom behaviors (Haager & Klingner, 2005; Ysseldyke, 1995). Integrating culture and subject matter could also help the culturally different students to be successful in their classroom (Miller, 2002).

Cooperation between teachers and parents will solve many problems in the school (Kendall, 1996). Unfortunately, some minority parents do not know what to do to assist their children's learning (Waldron, 1996). Schools need to cooperate with parents so they can “promote positive attitudes about learning and achievement” (Powell & Wood, 1999) for the children. Most parents have high expectations of their children in school but because of their cultural background, some may hesitate to come to school. So they do not have much connection or interaction with teachers, and that creates an undesirable learning situation for their children (Seefeldt & Barbour, 1998). Therefore, “teachers need to become knowledgeable about the cultures of their students' families and to work with parents to bring them into the home-school partnership” (Johns & Espinoza, 1996, p. 43).

The needs of LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students or non-English speaking students must be addressed in the educational setting. Many schools offer some sort of curriculum for LEP students such as ESL (Boschee, Beyer, Engelking & Boschee, 1997), Bilingual Education (Hernandez, 1989), Multicultural Education (Houlton, 1986) and/or summer school (Vanderhaar & Munoz, 2005), which can be an alternative instructional program for LEP students. Especially, first graders, who are supposed to be ready for school life, because of language differences, could face additional difficulties. Grade one students need to make many adjustments to succeed in the transition from home to school (Kats, 1991), so the curriculum for grade one LEP students should be meaningful for them to better understand and how to react as a student in a formal classroom.

This research focuses on non-English-speaking students' English learning experiences as first graders during summer school, which was in the preparatory period before they began grade one. Usually parents and the school consider a child's ability based on academic performance. So they often mis-identify non-English speaking students. If the child cannot speak English well, is he/she a failure in school? This study focuses on what it is like to be an LEP student preparing for first grade. How do their parents see the situation? How do they cope? What helps them most? How do their teachers understand their needs and try to help them? What are the expectations of parents for their child as an LEP student? These and similar questions will be explored through this study.

Methodology

This is a micro-ethnographic study, using observations and interviews to gather information about two non-English-speaking boys attending summer school before beginning first grade. The two students were observed on multiple occasions and interviews were conducted with parents, the children themselves, as well as their friends, and teachers. A total of nine interviews were conducted

in all. Students were observed in the classroom and on the playground. Classroom observations consisted of at least two hours per week during 5 weeks of the summer school period, from 10 AM to 12. Playground observation was carried out right after class.

The teacher was interviewed twice during summer school and 3 weeks later when the regular school year had begun. Parents were interviewed twice during the summer and again a month later after formal school had started. The two Korean boys who were the focus of this study were interviewed twice. One boy whose English name is Joshua had just arrived from Korea and the other boy whose English name is James had lived in the Philippines for a year. When I interviewed them, they were about to start their summer school classes. Three friends: one Korean friend, one classmate, and one who is from a different cultural background, were also interviewed. All the interviews were tape-recorded and the interviews that were conducted in Korean were translated to English.

Data was encoded and subsequently content analyzed electronically to identify themes and emergent patterns which were evidenced in the data. Themes and patterns will be presented in a narrative form, and discussion will follow.

Setting and Participants

The school in this study is situated in an Asian Country, and is an English-medium Elementary school. This data was collected during the summer of 2002. The summer school program was about five weeks long. This study ended in June, 2002, which was five weeks after the beginning of the regular school year. The first grade teacher during summer school and also during the regular school year has 17 years of experience teaching elementary school. During the summer, she was in charge of first and second grade.

James had lived one year in this English speaking country. When he first came to this country, he attended summer school under the same teacher that he had in this second summer, and he attended kindergarten in the same compound as the elementary school, so he was familiar with the setting. He is active, yet a little shy.

Joshua had only lived a month in an English speaking country and had attended kindergarten in his country. He is physically active, but sometimes a little passive, especially in an unfamiliar setting.

James' family came to this country to study. His father enrolled in a doctoral program. They plan to finish within three years or more. His mother gives musical instrument lessons and his younger sister attends kindergarten. They are living in an apartment on the campus.

Joshua's family came here to study, too. His father has enrolled in a Master's degree which will finish within about two years. His mother stays at home and takes care of her family. He has an older brother who is in third grade in the same school. Like James, they are living in an apartment on campus.

The first grade classroom is in the middle part of the school building. There were only 12 students in summer school, so there were many empty desks, waiting to be used when the school year began. Joshua sat in the front, and James sat in the middle on the left side.

Through the interviews and observations, there are some components that appear to make non-English speaking first graders be confident in the learning circumstance during summer sessions. The four major components that were identified are: 1) readiness of students, 2) building a strong relationship with teacher, 3) acceptance among peers, and 4) understanding the expectations of their parents for their child's education.

Results and Discussion

1) Readiness of students

During the interview with the teacher, clear themes appeared in her experiences. She had strong beliefs about students' readiness before they start school.

*Children have to have a lot of readiness to start school. Sometimes we only see one aspect, which is how to read or how to add. That is also important but before they go to school their fine muscles should be developed because it is hard for them to write or draw. And another thing is emotional. Those should be ready before schooling. Children will mingle with others. If those are not ready, it will be a hard time for students. Those factors are very important before they come to school. Mentality is also important but all of those factors should be combined. It will really contribute to their school life success. Even though they can read well, if they have emotional problems, it will be hard for them.
(Grade 1 Teacher)*

There are many different kinds of readiness that first grade students need to have. No matter what language they use, children should be ready for the learning environment. Many parents think that if their child can read and add numbers, they are ready to be in school. But as the teacher said, academic skills are not everything. They also need to be prepared emotionally, physically, and socially.

The teacher had taught James the previous year in summer school because the parents wanted him to be in school the coming year. But he was not old

enough to be in first grade, so he attended the kindergarten which was on the same campus as the elementary school. The teacher taught first grade last summer, so she knew James quite well.

James is, personally, the way he behaves this year compared to last year has a lot of change. Last year he was very gentle and kind of a polite boy but this time, it became upside down. Being a gentle boy, he became a rough boy and he talks so much. Always attracting the attention of somebody else, that is the way I observed him. I think he is taking advantage now. He can speak English and so the problem is he is very talkative. He is just monopolizing like he wants to talk and talk all the time. If I will not really stop him, he does not stop. (Grade 1 Teacher)

When I observed the grade 1 class, I noticed that James wanted to show something to his classmate. He could not wait until his classmate was done thinking about the questions from the teacher, but had to show him immediately. He raised his hand to be chosen as a volunteer many times. He also liked to shout "Me first!" when he finished his worksheets. And he roamed around the classroom to show that he had really completed his work first. The teacher pointed out about his weaknesses in the classroom.

Of course he could not be still. Sit[sic] problems. Always he wanted to go outside so he is making excuses. He'll say "I'm thirsty" even though he is not. I knew because he came from water fountain just a while ago. I just let him stay but it is difficult for him to stay so he made alibis to go out. (Grade 1 Teacher)

The parents and the teacher understand differently about James' behaviors. Actually the parents did not realize how James acted at the school because James, most of time, told the things that he did well at school. But the teacher understood why he acted that way.

But playfulness is part of growing so he is trying to show off that he can do something better than his new friends. (Grade 1 Teacher)

James understands things and has already adjusted to an English speaking classroom so he is kind of bored in his class. However, he still needs to develop his emotional readiness which can help him be more polite to his classmates, and learn to obey his teacher.

The teacher did not mention much about Joshua because he was very careful about his behavior like James was last year. Joshua was shy when he was on the spot but he usually was following what the teacher asked him. He does not have very good handwriting, but he knew when he could go out and play. Even though his English ability was very low, he adjusted quite well in his class.

2) Relationship with the teacher

A teacher's good interpersonal relation skill is the best tool to give confidence to the mind of a child, especially for grade 1 students. The way a teacher acts can build a good relationship with each student. Students usually try to trust their teacher and to talk about problems that they face at school sometimes at home. When students cooperate with their teachers more, they can learn more about their school subjects. And the learning environment will be more fun and interesting. Also, the teacher tries to encourage students even though they make mistakes in the classroom.

During classroom observations, I could see some of the teaching strategies which can build the relationship that can give confidence to students in the learning situation. The teacher asked older grade students to come in and help some of those who lacked English ability. They sat separately from their original seats and gathered together. And these older helpers repeated things and explained ideas many times so the students would understand properly.

During Phonics time, if a student could not understand the question, the teacher quickly restated the question in a different way for another chance, so the student felt comfortable. The teacher used specific strategies to teach her summer school class.

I help them to develop communication skills through repeating poems and memorizing Bible verses, singing Adventist songs—every day the same songs. And by finding the songbook numbers they will be familiar with the numbers, and learn the sound of the letters.

The teacher tried to handle the two boys differently because they had different attitudes toward study habits and personality. Love and respect is another strong bond to build a good relationship. During summer school, she explained that she treated James like this:

What I have done with James is I have to talk personally and I tell him all the good possible things he has done to make his feelings good. I also point out when he does wrong things that are not accepted in the class. Of course I need to stop him his misbehaving problem. But in the morning I have to greet him and I'm trying to hold out arms for him so that he feels I love him. I don't hate him because he is just a naughty boy but I know it is also part of his growing. I just try to let him know the way that teacher likes this thing and teacher doesn't like those things.

The teacher showed love even James did not behave very well in the classroom. She understood about the attitude of an active child, which is very important for a teacher to understand. Teachers need to be aware of different

students' propensities so they can manage their class fluently. On the other hand, Joshua showed different attitudes than James in the class. Because of low self-confidence, he could not participate well. So the teacher needed to encourage him to do better.

I try to give the best love that I can give, so that he will not get discouraged. Especially when his handwriting is not nice, I have to hold his hand and I have to repeat and repeat all the time until he understands me. By just touching and acting, I need to appreciate what he has done so that I can show concern about him. (Grade 1 Teacher)

When I had my interview with Joshua, I asked about his class teacher. He expressed his feelings about the teacher like this:

She is so kind. She repeats many times and tells many Bible stories. When lunchtime finishes, she tells us a Bible story first and we start the class. I like Bible stories.

Showing love and respect is not easy if the students are not following the teacher. But that is also a part of learning to behave and obey. James' mother insisted how important it was to build a good relationship with the teacher and students.

I want the classroom teacher to be generous to those who do not know English and also to praise a student if the teacher could find even any tiny improvements. That way the teacher could build good relationships with the students. (James' Mother)

When they started the regular school year, I interviewed the teacher again. She described the two boys' improvement in English and behavior.

James has changed a lot. I mean, this boy is not quite serious when I give punishment such as staying back after class or bowing on the desk.

Joshua, until now, his coordination has not quite been built up yet, but the learning process is just normal. Association—he is getting along with his friends. Sometimes because of communication problems they misunderstand each other, and that causes a fight, but now he can understand what his classmate wants to say. He is doing fine. (Grade 1 Teacher)

Building a good relationship with the teacher and the students is a crucial point for non-English speaking students and also for grade 1. Having a good image of the teacher is a motivation to study.

3) Acceptance among Peers

Joshua and James have become best friends throughout this summer school. They are having fun with their friends. Relationships with their peer group are important for these ages. It is not easy, but through these experiences, children can learn social skills for later life. Joshua's mother explained about her son's good social adaptation:

Before he came here, he attended kindergarten in Korea. The school was a little far from home so many of his friends could not come to our home to play. But there was one friend who lived nearby. Usually, he was the one who came often. He wanted to go to his other friends' houses but as I have mentioned, the distance was not close enough to visit the other friends' houses. However, his big brother took him to go to his friends' houses so he could play with the older ones. He is very active so he likes to play outside rather than inside. And he likes to meet his friends. He likes people, too. So even though the age gap is wide, he doesn't mind playing. I think he is socially mature.

When I interviewed some of Joshua's classmates, they told me about Joshua:

When I saw him at first, he was not active so I was shy to talk. He just stayed with his brother and played with him. But since we knew each other, we have become good friends. I like to play with him at school and home. He is concerned about me. (Korean friend and classmate)

Joshua didn't talk at all but now I know why he said nothing. He was shy to speak English. But now I know he is kind and polite to others. We can be good friends next time. (Joshua's international classmate)

The interview showed Joshua's characteristics quite well. He is passive at first, but once he knows anything about others, he is no longer a shy boy. Also James' mother expressed her son's good adjustment with his friends:

He has many friends who are older than him but since summer school has started, he has many classmates. He felt that he wanted to protect his friends because some of his friends came here just recently. Once his friends are calling him to play, he will run to play no matter what he is doing. He has no complaint about his friends.

James has more international friends than Joshua because of he has lived a year more in an English-speaking environment.

James is playful and I like to play with him. He is kind too. He likes to invite me and other friends to his house. Sometimes we play at his house. (James' international friend)

Joshua wanted to say something about James:

He is active and powerful when we play outside. I like that. We have become best friends from summer school. We are classmates.

They have a common game, which is ice water. They use a small ball and if the person catches the ball and shouts “ice,” nobody can move. But if he shouts “water,” others can move and run away from the person who has the ball. They said that they like to play this game with their friends. Playing this game appears to be good for socialization. They set the rules and adjust them among themselves. It gives them a chance to develop social skills.

4) Expectations of Parents for their Child’s Education

Parents’ attitudes and expectations for their child are the most important aspects when they nurture them. Most of all, parents have a dream for their children. Doctor, lawyer, pianist, architect, or teacher are popular professions that are dreamed of. However, parents should be careful, since too many expectations for success might crush their children.

In intellectual, mental, and physical areas, youngsters are immature. If parents do not understand well about their child’s characteristics, it can be a barrier to nurturing him or her. One of the expectations of parents is that they should be nurturing good characteristics. Parents want their children to develop good character traits such as good manners, ambition, diligence, honesty, and responsibility.

Usually when a child strongly wants to have something such as toys or food, they show their behavior very clearly to try to get it. Through the reactions of the child, people estimate the child’s characteristics. Also James and Joshua have almost the same stubborn reaction with those kinds of behavior. When they react with temper, I was interested to know how the parents handled them. So I interviewed Joshua’s mother about how she treated him in such situations.

I just follow whatever he wants. He is still young so there are not many things to conflict with each other.

But James’ situation is different. He is the eldest among his siblings. So his parents do not concede to whenever or whatever he wants. It seems he has no advantage like Joshua who is the second child in his family.

I discuss enough and let him do whatever he wants but it is followed by the responsibility. And I need to negotiate with him but if not, I let him stand in front of the wall until decides to obey. But this is the last method that I use. (James’ Mother)

James's mother explains about his characteristics:

He is active but on the other hand very passive so he is sensitive. He is easily hurt by others. He wants me to solve many things related with his friends. He doesn't feel comfortable to solve things by himself.

James is quite dependent on his mother so his parents want him to be independent for many things especially decision-making problems. So his parents try to help him to decide.

To know a child's characteristics can help parents know how they can guide him/her about behavior at home, in the school, and for whole life. Another parental expectation which is for success includes getting a good education at home and in school. To make a balance at both places is the highest expectation for their child's education.

Joshua's parents expressed their focus for their son's education especially about English. They think positively about the importance of English education.

When he gets older, he needs to study with original English books and to search the web. So experience wise, I motivated him to learn English. Conversation is more difficult for me to express what I feel and think than Korean. Maybe reading books and analyzing is not so difficult but conversation is a different thing for non-English speakers. When I came here, I could feel more about the difficulty of conversation. So I want my children to speak English fluently. I notice that even water delivery boy can speak English well. It makes me feel weird. So, I hope my children can speak English better than us. (Joshua's father)

Also their expectation about learning English was simple for Joshua:

I don't think that my boy needs grammar or any structure that English needs now. I want him to mingle with friends so he can learn practical English first without any hesitation. I want him to learn through chatting and discussion. I don't make any boundaries or any wall for learning. I just want him to learn English freely. Maybe an older boy can learn by just sitting but for this younger boy, I want him to learn through experiences and having good relationships with his classmates. I want him to learn English as life not by studying, so he can understand English as a daily meal.

And their expectation for schooling was also simple for him. They have no high expectation to gain good grades or knowledge; they just want him to at least talk and communicate with the others in English. They believe that Joshua has good social skills so they just let him mingle with English speakers. Then he can learn the language naturally.

James' parents are somehow similar with Joshua's with regards to their expectations of him as a first grader. But unfortunately, they faced a difficult experience last year.

When we arrived here last year, I sent him to a summer school in elementary but the class didn't make a good impression and it made him depressed because of his lack of English. It made him close his heart about English. So I couldn't even have a tutor for him so I sent him to kindergarten to relax from English study. Then he felt better.

James was a very shy boy last year so he could not accommodate the new environment which used English that was entirely new for him. He had a hard time adjusting to the class. His dependent and passive characteristics did not help him to fit in. Now, however, he is taking advantage of the fact that he knows English better than other new Koreans in the class.

The expectations of James' parents for learning English are slightly different than Joshua's because he already knows basic English. James' parents mentioned that they want James to develop more reading skills and comprehension ability.

I want him to master reading for first grade level. And with a tutor, he is focusing on reading and phonetics.

James' parents consider English to be a global language so they want him to learn a global culture to go with the language. They believe that English can make a global person.

Both sets of parents want their children to learn English freely. Actually parents were focused not only on academics but also on social skills and building relationships with the teacher. They expect their children to be balanced emotionally and socially.

I want him to learn socialization rather than just studying English. Actually, the basic is important but because he is still young, I want him to get a variety of experiences within different cultural people. I think his English is improving. There is only one thing that I want him to do: build a good relationship with the teacher. (Joshua's father)

Conclusion

Most people experience stress when adjusting to a new environment, whether it is positive or negative. Especially at the start of a new school year, many students are excited or frustrated to face new teachers, pupils and new class environments. First graders who start school in an unfamiliar place have fearful minds, which is a big concern for their family. What about the students

who cannot speak English at all or only very little? It is another concern for those families.

Historically, as Dunn (as cited in Shea & Bauer, 1994, p. 24) pointed out, students who have different cultural background are sometimes called “six hour mentally retarded children” in U.S schools. Even now in this 21st century, these students are sometimes misplaced (Benner, as cited in Friend & Bursuck, 2002). Our world is rapidly changing and educators are trying to deliver better education for our children’s future. But it is incorrect to see international students as disabled simply because of their different cultures, lifestyles, language, and expressions. For these students to get help before beginning formal schooling is a great opportunity for the students, and it makes it easier for the teachers, and the school, too. Summer school is not only a good period for students who are slow or disabled, but also for new students who need to prepare for the formal school year. Teachers need to cultivate good attitudes, discipline, and study skills to help those students be comfortable and ready to learn.

Teachers need to be aware of cultural diversity, create accepting environments, and provide discipline to achieve the purposes of education. Educators and parents should help to develop the skills of LEP students who struggle to express their knowledge in language and actions. Schools must carefully construct the kind of environment that will help all children, including LEP students, to grow in wisdom, tolerance, and thinking skills at the same time as they learn their new language. The goals of Christian education are not merely for native speakers. The standard White recommended years ago must still be our aim: “Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men strong to think and to act, men who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions” (1952, p. 18).

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*Choo Chung Ok, PhD Student
Department of Educational Studies, School of Graduate Studies
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
Silang, Cavite, Philippines*