Indeterminate Futures and Language Acquisition Practices among Temporary and Permanent Immigrant Families

Yeon Sun (Ellie) Ro
Independent Researcher and Consultant

Gregory Cheatham
University of Kansas

Jeonghee Choi
Arkansas State University
Indeterminate Futures and Language Acquisition Practices among Temporary and Permanent Immigrant Families

Challenges to immigrant children’s acquisition and retention of both home and second language and literacy in the U.S. have been well-documented (e.g., Crawford, 2000; Li, 2006; Shin, 2005; Tabors, 2008; Tabors & Snow, 2001). For example, studies illustrated the propensity for children to lose their home language as they acquire second language proficiency (e.g., McLaughlin, 2013; Tse, 2001; Wong-Fillmore, 1991a, 2000). With the rapid growth of permanent and temporary immigrants in the U.S., there are increasing numbers of Korean immigrant children who try to achieve and maintain linguistic proficiency in both Korean and English. The children of permanent immigrants who were born in the U.S. can be categorized as second generation Korean-Americans.

Children of temporary immigrants to the U.S. as a result of South Korean’s educational exodus (i.e., Koreans pursuing education abroad, primarily in the U.S. to achieve English language proficiency) can be called Early Study Abroad (ESA) students (Park & Abelmann, 2004; Park & Bae, 2008; Shin, 2008) and are a manifestation of “English fever” in South Korea (Park, 2009). South Koreans’ education fever especially for English acquisition as a world language has been apparent during last decade (Park, 2009). South Korea’s Globalization political agenda followed by changes to educational policy, particularly placing high regard on English language/literacy education led to an exodus of students from Korea who are acquiring English proficiency (Park, 2011). While many Korean families return home after completing their intended educational goals, other families ultimately choose to remain in the U.S. Consequently, the impact of these children’s and families’ residency (i.e., permanent versus
temporary immigrant status) on children’s biliteracy and bilingual development warrants more exploration by researchers.

In-depth investigation of permanent and temporary families’ daily educational activities in diverse settings—home and their communities (e.g., school, after-school, playground, heritage language school, church)—creates a picture of daily bilingual discourses, literacy practices, and socio-cultural influences. As a part of an ethnographic longitudinal seven-year study, the study presented in this paper focused on two immigrant families’ transnational biliteracy practices as they relate to identity transformation, linguistic ideology, and socio-cultural influences on home/heritage language/literacy retention and development.

These factors appear likely to impact heritage language acquisition and retention as they relate to U.S. immigrant families’ indeterminate residency futures. Thus, this study focused on socially-shaped and culturally-influenced bilingual and biliteracy development and the vector of residential indeterminacy related to the challenges of heritage language and literacy maintenance and development of two Korean immigrant children (i.e., one permanent immigrant Korean-American student and one temporary immigrant Korean student) and their families. We begin with a literature review and delineation of our theoretical framework. We then present qualitative case studies of two children and their families.

**Literature Review**

Because the US immigrant population is projected to make up one-third of the entire school population by 2050 (Tienda & Haskins, 2011), there are dramatically increasing numbers of second generation young learners, especially Korean-American children and *Early Study Abroad* students in the U.S. (Jung & Norton, 2002; Park, 2009; Park, 2011; Park & Abelmann, 2004; The New York Times, 2008). However, despite the recognition of the importance of home
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

language and literacy skills to children’s linguistic, cultural, and academic development for immigrant children and families (e.g., Cummins, 1996; Garcia, 2005; Wong-Fillmore, 1991a), few studies have investigated the processes by which the acquisition of these linguistic and literacy competencies occur related to residential choices and immigrant status (Kanno, 2003).

Literacy as Social Practice

In contrast to traditional, accountability-based views of young children’s literacy skills, the notion of “literacy as a social practice” focuses on holistic portrayals of multi-layered and interwoven socio-cultural and educational experiences in early biliteracy development (Christie, 2005; Gee, 2001, 2005; Li, 2002; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). Through interactions in daily lives in homes and communities, children are socialized, learn language and literacy, and are influenced by surrounding aspects of culture as they create their own ways of meaning-making, behaving, interacting, thinking, believing, and living (Heath, 1989; Gadsden, 2004; Gee, 2001).

Early Bilingualism and Immigration

Research in early bilingualism and heritage identity development has addressed the importance and impact on socio-cultural environments and academic supports on retention of heritage language and identity (Jimenez, Garcia & Pearson, 1995; Garcia & Godina, 2004; Shin, 2005; Ro & Cheatham, 2009; Tabors & Snow, 2008; Tinajero & Englander, 2011). However, despite the recently increasing population of temporary and permanent immigrants, little research has been conducted addressing family language and literacy choices related to the purpose of immigration and residential status and their changing environments due to residency in the US. While researchers have discussed language and literacy for some immigrant groups (Godina, 2004; Hornberger & Swinehart, 2012; Jimenez-Silva, 2011; Li, 2005; Lo, 2012; Shin, 2005), a
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

comparison of temporary and permanent immigrant families can address families’ complicated linguistic practices in homes, schools, and communities and points towards important pedagogical practices.

Many researchers assert that early bilingualism has linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural advantages (Baker, 2011; Corson, 2001; Goldstein & Bunta, 2011). Language/literacy proficiency in two languages refers to young bilinguals’ functional and communicative competence in both languages in any context (Bialystok, 2001). Biliteracy development reflects both the cognitive procedure of individuals and the involved family, community, and society, using two written language systems (Hornberger, 2003; Rodriguez-valls, 2009; Romaine, 1995). Bilingualism and biliteracy development are inherently sociocultural and sociolinguistic multimodalities, often involved in transnational identity negotiation and multicultural practices especially in the 21st Century (Hornberger; Hornberger & Swinehart, 2012).

**Home Language and Identity Loss**

Researchers (e.g., Tse, 2001) have illustrated that young immigrants have a sense of urgency to survive and to belong to new communities and environments with native English speaking peers, which may result in young students from diverse backgrounds adopting negative perspectives of their heritage culture, identity, and language (Corson, 2001; Crawford, 2000; Cummins, 1999; Fillmore, 1991a, 2000; Li, 2002; William & Snipper, 1990). In the U.S., socio-cultural and political environments can result in young bilinguals having low expectations about maintaining their home language and associated literacy. Consequently, these families and children tend to focus instead on survival in monolingual English schooling (Tabors & Snow, 2001; Tse, 2001). In the process, they typically lose their heritage identity and language (Crawford, 2000; Tabors, 2008), and their heritage language and identity loss can result in
cognitive, emotional, social, cultural, and educational disadvantages especially in young bilingual learners’ lives (Cheatham & Ro, 2010).

**South Koreans’ Glocalized Linguistic Ideology**

Researchers have begun to discuss clear differences in family biliteracy practices and educational goals between Korean immigrants who settled in the US and Korean sourjorners who visit the U.S. temporarily with specific purposes (Byun, 2008; Jung, 2008; Ro, 2008). Interviewing mothers, typically the educational decision makers in Korean families, illustrated the pursuit to glocalize English as a tool for class maintenance and escalation in the era of globalization in South Korea (Robertson, 1995). Cho, Chen and Shin (2010) also addressed recent issues in early childhood classrooms with new temporary immigrant children from transnational families who maintain close relationships with the home country. Cho and her colleagues suggested three reasons for these families’ immigration: pursuit of education, political reasons, and economic factors. These authors explained ways in which teachers can guide transnational families and children in early childhood settings. Further research can be explore daily linguistic discourses, language choices, and educational decision-making related to families’ residential and immigration status.

**Socio Economical Status (SES)**

Socio-economic status can facilitate or hinder heritage language loss or retention/development (Aram & Levin, 2001; D’Angliulli, Siegel, & Maggi, 2004). SES refers to components such as family social class, educational background, family history and income, and parents’ occupations. Children’s linguistic and academic performance is related in part to the quality and quantity of linguistic practices generated within families’ socio-economic context.
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

SES appears likely to also influence educational and residential choices that each family makes for their future.

Research Questions

Researchers have conceptualized language and literacy acquisition occurring within socio-culturally embedded contexts as well as communities of practice (Lave, & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Researchers have also documented students’ successful bilingual and biliteracy acquisition and development (e.g., Thomas, & Collier, 1996; 2002). Other studies (e.g., Kim, 2004; Shin, 2005) have qualitatively documented aspects of Korean-American children’s bilingual and biliteracy development. Longitudinal qualitative investigation of children and their families is important to reveal the complex relationships among the indeterminacy of family’s residency and educational goals, and transnational identities within particular settings in families’ daily lives, language ideology, literacy practices and development.

In this study we responded to the following research questions:

1. What are relationships between these two families’ residency indeterminacy and the focal children’s home/heritage language/literacy development, education, and daily practices?

2. What are the goals and beliefs and related practices of the two families regarding bilingual/biliteracy development? What acted as facilitators (e.g., parents, teachers, community supports) and what acted to hinder achievement of families’ goals?

Methodology

Theoretical Framework
As the theoretical framework for this study, Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice was referenced to investigate bilingual and biliteracy practices within and across diverse communities (i.e., compare daily bilingual and biliteracy practices between one permanent and one temporary immigrant Korean family). This approach allows for investigation of the nature of communities of practice for different types of Korean immigrants who have been influenced by residential status and reflective discourses within transnational spaces between the U. S. and South Korea.

Wenger (1998) theorized Communities of Practice as self-conceptualization, surrounding unofficial socio-cultural organizations generated by mutual human engagement. According to Wenger, everyone belongs to Communities of Practice as an integral part of daily life, which change over time and allow people to construct their concept of identity. Furthermore, human learning develops through the process of “fashioning identities of full participation” in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 43). Participants acquire official or unofficial membership in communities when they have common beliefs, values, activities, and discourses during their interaction as well as when they share resources like tools, symbols, and concepts (Wenger, 1998). For instance, blog/website users exchange and share information/opinions in virtual spaces based on similar interests in a topic or phenomenon. Thus, socio-cultural experiences involve members in multiple groups, which facilitate one’s cognitive and social learning as well as development.

From a Communities of Practice perspective, bilingual children engaging in new linguistic, social, and cultural contexts as immigrants are necessarily involved in several different communities, such as homes, mainstream classrooms, peer groups, after-school activities, home language classes, and religious services and activities. As such, they build various identities
interrelated with socio-cultural characteristics. In this process, the complex procedure of self-negotiation of young children’s identity shifts and re-forms so that they can fit into the target socio-cultural ways of life. As a result, young bilinguals represent a total package of “nexus of multimembership” (Wenger, 1998, p. 158). Wenger also explained the process of forming multimembership further. For instance, without self-recognition of shifting hybrid identity formation, many young diverse learners construct and shape evolving identities as they engage in the process of reconciliation, which means finding ways to coexist across boundaries of multiple communities of practice. The transformation of multimembership into a personal identity, the unique and private work of reconciliation, is achieved through negotiating boundaries across many communities.

**Data Generation and Interpretation**

Via qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 2010) drawing from several data generation techniques (i.e., interviews, participant observations, and document review), two families’ language and literacy practices in the children’s daily lives were explored in relation to these families’ residency status. The longitudinal nature of the fieldwork allowed the first author to develop trusting relationships with the participants and to understand aspects of their lived experiences. This multiple-method, qualitative case study fosters readers’ comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural contexts regarding the two families’ bilingual and biliteracy events and practices. Furthermore, this method is characteristically “empathic” and emphasizes the “uniqueness of the situation” (Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991, p. 11). In the next section, data generation procedures (i.e., interviews, participant observation, and document review) are described.
Interviews. As “a construction site for knowledge,” the first author conducted interviews by building knowledge together with the family interviewees using a conversational method “as a professional interchange, and as a philosophical dialogue” in a comfortable setting (Kvale and Brinkman, 2008, p. 301). Individualized interview questions/prompts (e.g., To what extent has your decision about residency stabilized? What are your family’s future plans? Tell me about your children’s desires to stay in the U. S. and/or return to Korea. What percentage of your educational effort has been placed on heritage language maintenance and development? What are reasons for your educational effort? To what extent has your language education and focus on educational investment to your children has shifted?) were developed to help each interviewee respond to queries (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Seidman, 1998). The first author conducted semi-structured interviews every fall, once a year for four years with each mother in each household and two focal children, Kevin and Huber (discussed in detail, below). To document interviewees’ evolving perspectives, the first author also engaged in frequent informal conversational interviews. Interviews and other conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participant observation. To experience “being there” and to capture participants’ perspectives and behaviors (Richardson, 1994, p. 521), the first author conducted what Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2001) call descriptive and focused observation: observing everything as often as possible. The first author observed in the participants’ homes including special occasions, such as family dinners as well as family friends’ gatherings and community activities. Additionally, she observed in the children’s public school language arts classes as well as their Saturday Korean heritage language school. Descriptive field notes were completed and included what was heard, seen, experienced, and thought (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). While
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

conducting observations, the first author took roles of observer, teacher, parents’ guest, and researcher. Furthermore, being a longitudinal heritage language tutor with each family helped the first author to be more fully immersed in participants’ linguistic practices, daily discourses, educational concerns and issues, and their emotional and identity challenges.

**Document review.** The focal children’s written artifacts, writing samples, and other example literacy artifacts collectable in print were saved and filed in a portfolio. The children’s parents and classroom teachers agreed to allow access to their writing journals and diaries. Additionally, during each observation, the first author talked with teachers about their perspectives on the two focal children’s academic performance, bilingual behavior, literacy development, and signs of identity formation. Additionally, written samples were collected from a local Korean heritage language school and the children’s homes.

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) notion of *trustworthiness* played an important role in the first author’s four-year, longitudinal data collection from the focal families. The first author’s close relationship with these two families as a heritage language tutor and a family friend who shared the same background helped the trustworthiness of this study, because the first author spent considerable time across several years in close contact with the two families. In addition, the three authors/researchers who shared Korean heritage background or experience living in Korea and the U.S. cross-checked data sets and themes. Collected documents were matched with organized color-coded interview responses and observational field notes to confirm trustworthiness of the data. When differences of data interpretation occurred, the first researcher went back to the qualitative data and arranged casual interviews with participants to ensure trustworthy interpretations.

**Participants and Setting**
In this section, we present information about two families (Kevin’s and Huber’s family), which is critical to understanding home/family bilingual and biliteracy practices in relation to the families’ residency futures. Throughout this longitudinal study, both families resided in the same Midwestern university town. To respect each participant’s confidentiality, we use pseudonyms.

**Kevin’s family (permanent immigrants).** Kevin’s parents were voluntary, permanent immigrants and all three of their children were born in the U.S. Like many other immigrants, they thought fondly of and dreamed about returning to their home country. Because of many significant obstacles to returning to Korea (delineated below), they characterized themselves as “permanent immigrants” though when first arrived in the U.S., they did not consider themselves as such. The father was a well-paid professional, which could easily cover the family’s educational and leisure costs and they owned a large house in an expensive neighborhood.

Kevin’s parents were born in Korea. The father lived in an English-speaking Asian country with his parents for three years starting at age eleven years. Subsequently, his family moved to the U.S. and stayed for two years; his family then returned to Korea until moving to the U.S. for graduate study. By the end of this study, Kevin’s parents had lived in the U.S. fifteen years. They arrived in the U.S. to pursue the father’s doctorate degree after which he obtained a stable managerial position at a multinational company. Likely in part due to his five-year residency in two English-speaking countries as a child, he achieved native-like English proficiency.

Kevin’s mother had a bachelor’s degree from a prestigious Korean university. After getting married, she came to the U.S. with her husband where she also had lived fifteen years by the end of this study. She spoke English at a communicative level, and this ability likely originated in her middle/high school education in Korea and her own effort to learn the language
after arriving in the U.S. She was a busy homemaker who attempted to foster her children’s interest in both Korean and English with enthusiasm and commitment to the Korean community, which helped the children’s exposure to both languages.

Their oldest son, Kevin, was born in the U.S., a seven-year-old at the beginning of this study, and attended an all-English school throughout this longitudinal study. He was very active, social, and outgoing. His supports and personality appear to have helped him acquire various language skills to interact with others. He sometimes spoke to the first author in English and Korean. He seemed confident when he used English but had some difficulty forming grammatically-correct sentences in Korean. Hence, Kevin preferred using oral and written English even at home, especially at the end of the study.

The oldest daughter, Mary, was a four-year old at the beginning of this study; she was primarily using and exploring Korean language and literacy, especially at home until she entered all-English preschool. At the conclusion of this study, she was eight-years-old and attended an all-English elementary school. Her active and outgoing personality appeared to accelerate her literacy development and verbal skills in two languages. Although she could not produce perfectly grammatical expressions when speaking and writing Korean, she was confident about her communication throughout the study.

Shelly, the youngest child in the family, was a quiet kindergartener at the end of the study. She often quietly copied various kinds of literacy activities during her siblings’ Korean tutoring sessions. She liked to hear about stories and engaged in book reading with either her mother or older sister.

**Huber’s family (temporary immigrants).** The second family, that of Huber, considered themselves a temporary immigrant family, who came to the U.S. for the mother’s and children’s
education. This family was influenced by the English fever phenomenon in Korea. The mother not only wanted to pursue graduate school in the U.S. but also wanted Huber to acquire English while participating in a U.S. education. Huber’s mother indicated that she was not aware that her children may quickly lose Korean language and literacy abilities; she was surprised when she experienced communication difficulties with her children. Because they anticipated being in the U.S. at least five years, Huber’s mother approached the first author to tutor her children to maintain and develop Korean language and literacy.

Huber’s mother and her two children had lived in the U.S. for four years at the end of this study. Huber’s father was a university professor in Korea who visited the U.S. twice a year. Thus, Huber’s father can be characterized as a “wild goose father” (Park & Abelmann, 2004) (i.e., married father living alone in Korea while his wife and children live in another country) while Huber’s mother can be called a “wild goose mother” (Park, 2009), (i.e., mother stays alone overseas with children while husband remains in the Korea), Indeed, Huber’s family considered themselves temporary immigrants. The parents in this family were both highly educated. However, because university faculty in Korea are not highly paid, the mother was paying for her own U.S. education, and they incurred expenses associated with renting an apartment both in the U.S. and in Korea. Thus, the family did not have the financial ability to own a house in either country or afford extra travel. Consequently, though Huber’s family did not consider themselves as having a high socio-economic status, due to their high educational attainment, ability to rent two homes and maintain a solidly middle-class lifestyle while paying for a university education, they can be considered as having a high socio-economic background.

Huber, the youngest of two sons, was a seven-year-old boy at a local public elementary school at the beginning of the study, who liked to play computer games, soccer, and participate
in Cub Scouts. He was outgoing, active, adventurous, kind, and willing to learn about not only U.S. culture but also Korean language and culture. He excelled in mathematics as well as in English reading and writing. Huber’s brother Jim, who was two years older than Huber, was the most competent Korean-English bilingual/biliterate across the two families in this study. Jim maintained his oral proficiency in Korean, in part because the family tried to speak Korean at home; but likely more importantly, because he had established a strong academic and linguistic background in Korea prior to coming to the U.S.

Findings

Kevin’s Family (Permanent Immigrants)

**Residency history.** Kevin’s parents remained in the U.S. approximately ten years prior to the end of this study. Kevin’s parents initially wanted to return to Korea immediately after completion of the father’s doctoral degree. However, with three of their children born in the U.S., they decided that it would be better for their children’s education to stay in the U.S. The family became legal U.S. residents due to the father’s occupational position after he completed a doctorate. Thus, educational, social, cultural, and financial circumstances resulted in their decision to permanently reside in the U.S.

Though Kevin’s family made their residency decision before the current study began, there was some hesitancy regarding this decision. Through a pilot study with Kevin’s family, the first author captured examples of negotiations and applications of the family’s goals and their related language and literacy practices embedded in the contexts of their daily lives. Interestingly, the mother’s initial residency ambiguity was expressed during interviews in which she recognized herself as a permanent immigrant but also discussed the possibility of returning to Korea someday. Importantly, whenever she talked about returning to Korea, she also discussed
significant obstacles to leaving the U.S. In this way, she made it clear that returning to Korea was only a remote possibility. The following excerpts are the mother’s responses to interview questions from the post-study interview on the 5th year—

Has your decision about residency stabilized?

Yes, it has been for a while. It has been stable for ten years so far. However, it’s not easy to live here as immigrants. We are always outsiders and it seems we don’t get the right treatment. But I know we will be here by thinking about positive sides-only.

What are your family’s future plans? Do your children want to return to Korea?

Maybe, but not exactly. We might go back, but I’m not sure about anything at this moment. The greatest concern would be children’s re-adjustment in Korea. It would be really difficult for them to adjust to living in Korea.

Therefore, despite some expressed ambiguity, this family saw themselves as permanent immigrants.

Educational beliefs and practices. The mother of this family asserted that she was not a typical Korean mother who placed significant effort on her children’s better/higher education. In the course of this study, both parents did not appear excessively anxious about their children’s education compared to other Korean families with similar social and economic resources. As a Korean private tutor for this family, the first author witnessed the parents’ increasing and decreasing emphasis and effort on their children’s heritage language/literacy education. Therefore, the first author asked about the mother’s value of Korean language, literacy, and identity during an interview.

Why do you put so much effort and time for your children to maintain/develop Korean language and literacy? Is it because your family might go back to Korea?
Because they are Koreans. Although my children, all of them were born here, we can’t be the same as Americans and even Kevin has begun to realize that lately. And he said he wanted to be fluent in Korean language and literacy, because he is Korean and that’s how he looks.

What percentage of your educational effort has been placed on Korean language maintenance and development?

It has been varied time to time even though I’ve known its importance all along. There were times that I had to give it up and the situation made me want to let it go. You know, I’m really busy with three children. On the other hand, there are times that I really feel it’s time to start again. Then I try again and again, and that’s been possible with your [Korean tutoring] support.

Thus, the reasons for this family’s emphasis on Korean did not include a desire to use Korean if they returned to Korea. Indeed, this permanent immigrant family saw the value of Korean to the children’s Korean ethnic identity. Despite this, the parents’ practices and even beliefs about teaching their children Korean language and literacy were variable over time.

**Bilingual/biliteracy practices in daily lives.** To best represent the longitudinal applications and practices of bilingual/biliteracy usage and education, the first author requested that the mother provide quantitative percentages of daily language/literacy usage at home. This self-identification greatly impacted this study, because the mother consciously tried to engage her children in language/literacy events to improve the bilingual and biliterate practices in her home by having opportunities for self-recognition and reminders. Each parent of the family agreed to the figures in the data below.
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Stage 1 (Years 1-2): 90% Korean dominant discourse. At the beginning of this study, Korean was clearly the dominant language in Kevin’s home although the father, who was competent in Korean, also became rapidly proficient in English. Kevin and his father sometimes code-switched Korean and English, Kevin (a first grader at that time) was fluent in Korean and English, and also code-switched with his father but spoke with his mother in Korean. In terms of daily bilingual and biliteracy practices the parents, particularly the mother, often read Korean books to the children, suggested that they watch Korean cartoons on television, strongly encouraged them to write Korean short diaries, and most of the children’s daily errands were arranged in Korean. Moreover, the children were encouraged to learn to read and write in Korean (e.g., via a Korean language/literacy tutor).

As permanent immigrants, this family rarely talked about returning to Korea at this stage; nevertheless, the parents’ strong Korean identity helped this family focus on Korean oral language and literacy maintenance and development. Furthermore, the parents intentionally facilitated friendships with Korean peers, and encouraged the children to attend many Korean community events to foster their Korean identity. For example, the parents were happy that Kevin’s best friend was a Korean-American boy who attended the same kindergarten and grade school. Both boys’ parents hoped the boys would mainly communicate in Korean. Nonetheless, Kevin increasingly preferred to speak English as he spent more time in school and built friendships with English-speaking peers. The older he became, the more English was his preferred language.

Stage 2 (Years 3-4): Decreasing from 90% to 30% dominant in Korean. This period was a turning point for this family in terms of language use at home. Kevin had been exposed to all-English school for three years and Mary (Kevin’s younger sister) had become a dominant-
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

English-speaking kindergartener in part because of her year-long preschool participation. Interviews and observations indicated that Kevin had come to believe that English language and literacy was far easier than Korean. For instance, during an interview (in the fourth year of this study) conducted in Korean, the first author asked Kevin about his language preference. He insisted on using English. When asked the reason, he replied, “English is just easier.”

Subsequently, the interview continued in English:

Researcher: In what language do you feel more comfortable?
Kevin: English. Starting a long time ago [meaning from second grade]. It’s easier than Korean.
Researcher: Was it always the same or have you changed from one language to another?
Kevin: I liked Korean many years ago, but it is so difficult when I write.
Researcher: Is Korean more difficult? Why?
Kevin: It’s easy to write in English and I can just write. But it is difficult when the sounds and words are different in Korean. And I don’t know many words in Korean so I have to ask…

To this point, Kevin’s mother said the following:

Kevin liked both languages until kindergarten but started to prefer using English when he was in first grade. This came from peers, schooling, and television, I think. His environment consists of English except for his family, but we also started to speak English more than ever. So Kevin feels English is much more comfortable and easy.

Although Kevin’s parents supported their children’s Korean language and identity, their length of stay in the U.S. along with their immigration status were important: As permanent U.S. residents, Kevin’s parents’ energetic pursuit of Korean identity for their children weakened. The
the first author observed that Kevin’s parents less frequently emphasized maintaining Korean identity and linguistic proficiency. Thus, Kevin’s mother was asked the reason during an interview in Year 4 of this study. The mother said the following:

Now, the situation is changed. [My children] don’t like to communicate in Korean any more. What struck me was Kevin’s sudden changes! I was sure that we [parents] could help Kevin at least to be a full bilingual, because he had a difficult time to speak English as a kindergartener, because he was exposed to so much Korean at home.

Likely due to in part to their permanent immigrant status, the daily environment and practices of the family did not match their stated importance of Korean and their educational goal, which was having their children develop into full-bilinguals/biliterates/biculturals. During typical daily communication at home, Kevin often made mistakes in Korean, and his parents and siblings often lovingly laughed at his funny mistakes as well. Kevin’s stress may have risen leading to increasingly less use and practice speaking Korean. Because the parents thought that they would remain in the U.S., this was not viewed as terribly problematic.

Within two years (years 3-4), the children’s daily Korean literacy practices had nearly disappeared. Consequently, whenever the first author visited this family, all of the children’s “fun Korean time” had changed to English literacy practices. Mary often read English storybooks, Shelly sometimes drew princesses and wrote a few English alphabet letters, and Kevin did his homework in English. The children started to resist learning Korean literacy, so the mother decided to stop sending them to the local Korean heritage language school. Later, she characterized this time as a “kind of giving up period” regarding Korean language and literacy. In addition to this family’s own situation, the first author had to reduce her Korean tutoring for this family for one year in year 3 from weekly to monthly tutoring, and the family did not pursue
Korean language learning with another tutor. Thus, the children had fewer Korean tutoring sessions during this period as well.

For Kevin’s family, Korean language and literacy practices were not consistent across this longitudinal study given all of the changes within this family. For parents to provide strong (but occasional) language/literacy input for their children, reading Korean books, (e.g., bed-time stories); encouraging children to mail/email extended family members living in Korea; providing ample Korean resources (e.g., Korean language books); asking children to write Korean stories; and watching Korean television programs together after dinner were important and could have fit easily within family routines. In the reality, however, by the end of this study all three children had lost their motivation and interest in Korean literacy maintenance. Moreover, the parents had priorities other than providing consistent opportunities for meaningful cultural engagement in Korean language and literacy. Thus, no one in this family felt urgency to maintain and develop Korean language and literacy, although they recognized that their ethnic roots were Korean. Furthermore, the parents tried to reconcile the fact that their children had lost much of their home language loss, because they were to remain in the U.S. as permanent immigrants.

**Huber’s Family (Temporary Immigrants)**

Unlike Kevin’s family, Huber’s family viewed themselves as temporary immigrants until very near the end of this four-year study. This self-identification appeared to impact decisions about their children’s education and language/literacy priorities within their daily routines. Huber’s family was certain to return to Korea immediately after the mother obtained her doctorate. The following discussion is from the initial interview.

*Do you plan to go back to Korea right after the completion of your doctoral program?*
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Oh, yeah. I always wanted to go back and we will have a more difficult life [in the U.S.] because we are yellow minority. We were settled in Korea, and I always want to go back with my children. And even my husband is there. I believe that my children will do well in the U.S., but I also know that they’ll be a minority forever [in the U.S.]. No matter what they do, they will need to put more effort into being successful in the U.S., because they weren’t born here, and they don’t look like the majority people here.

**Educational beliefs and practices.** Until the end of study, this family placed great emphasis on maintaining and developing their children’s Korean and English linguistic proficiency. Because this family’s residency plan was firmly set from the beginning of their move to the U.S., the parents’ educational beliefs and practices were consistent for many years until their later change in future residency plans. More specifically, this family identified themselves as temporary immigrants, a self-recognition that appeared to have important impacts on their educational beliefs and practices. The following excerpt is from an interview in year 4 of this study in which the mother expressed sentiments that remained consistent from the time when they first moved to the U.S.

*What are the reasons why you put so much effort for the children to maintain Korean? Is it because they will go back to Korea soon?*

Of course, that’s one of the reasons. However, no matter where they are, they should learn Korean because they are Korean. But…it’s possible that their daily practices will be a little different here. For example, they often want to get along with American peers and become quite American here. Although I want them to be “Korean-Koreans,” who are successful in school and maintain Korean language and identity at the same time, they seem to have become quite American. I can’t change that. I know. But they might feel
regret later [about not knowing Korean and having less Korean identity]. That’s why I feel I should do as much as we can now in order for us to tell them we have tried our best…

Because the mother was certain to return to Korea upon the completion of her doctorate as well as her strong belief on maintenance of Korean identity, she expressed the importance of preserving heritage language proficiency as a minority in the U. S. Furthermore, because this family was influenced by Koreans’ English Fever, she presented her willingness for her children to be academically competent in two different linguistic spaces between the U.S. and Korea.

**Bilingual/biliteracy practices in daily lives.** To best represent the bilingual/biliteracy practices of Huber’s family, who stayed in the U. S. four years by the end of this study, the family’s linguistic practices in chronological order from past to present are presented in the following section. Like Kevin’s permanent immigrant family in the previous section, Huber’s mother was also asked to specify percentages representing daily Korean language/literacy usage at home over time.

*Stage 1 (Years 1-2): 70-80% speaking Korean at home and 20-30% Korean literacy usage.*

At this stage, the family demonstrated a strong emphasis on heritage language/literacy retention. However, when the first author initially observed this family, they devoted little time for reading Korean literature/books or any Korean literacy though oral language maintenance occurred through daily Korean conversation at home. Interviews and observations suggested that the parents typically were busy managing each family member’s school obligations, such as doing homework, contacting school personnel, emailing, and tutoring the children in other school subjects. Therefore, the mother hired the first author as a tutor to ensure that her children
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

received regular Korean input and interaction, especially to improve their Korean academic literacy.

Furthermore, the actual numbers of Korean books in the house were few. Thus, the first author encouraged this family to borrow Korean books from Korean schools, libraries, or neighbors to foster the children’s joy of reading Korean books. Soon afterward, the older sibling Jim was observed reading biographies in Korean—although his mother chose these books—and Huber read simple Korean comic books. Unfortunately, this fun Korean reading time did not last long, because of the boys’ many after-school activities. Jim, who maintained Korean proficiency and experienced schooling in Korea, perceived Korean reading time as a parent-established daily obligation. Similarly, Huber did not enjoy reading Korean literature except for comic books. The mother did not appear satisfied about Huber’s book choices, so she occasionally scolded him and ordered him to read other kinds of Korean books.

During year 2 of this study, the first author observed more natural and productive ways of involvement in Korean literacy activities at home for this family. In her tutoring sessions, the textbook she used sometimes had interesting narrative stories, which Huber enjoyed. In addition, within Korean diaries or journals, Huber expressed his feelings and thoughts in writing though he struggled in Korean due to lack of overall Korean oral language proficiency. Thus, learning Korean reading and writing was not always easy; however, Huber’s reading and writing improved as he was tutored in Korean with authentic heritage language and literacy instruction.

Moreover, during this period, Huber’s mother was quite slow in learning English and she told the first author that her lack of English proficiency helped her children speak Korean more at home. The two children knew that if they spoke English too quickly or with advanced vocabulary, their mother might not understand. In addition, strong daily messages from both
mother and father of “speaking only Korean at home” were strictly enforced; consequently, Jim sometimes ordered Huber to change from English to Korean while they were in verbal arguments. Therefore, even during these emotional times, Jim thought about Huber’s heritage language retention, and was the reward of the parents’ strong effort toward the maintenance of Korean oral and written proficiency.

At the end of year 2 and early year 3 of this study, Jim received many educational textbooks from his father to study for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL; Educational Testing Service) and Korean college entrance exams. His parents believed that he should begin to prepare for the higher education system in Korea by reading academic Korean textbooks and educational literature rather than novels. Jim’s mother was heard to give regular orders for him to study: “Jim! Read Korean textbooks and turn off the computer!” Jim would reply, “I was reading a Korean article on the web!” The first author saw many Korean bibliographies and academic books on his desk, which was different from Huber, who only read Korean comics or simple storybooks.

Stage 2 (year 3-4): Sudden changes in every educational practice (40% usage of oral Korean and 10% Korean literacy practices). In the middle of year 3, Huber’s mother had a serious health problem. As a consequence, her doctoral program was progressing more slowly than expected. She also expressed her worries about her children’s higher education and the potential for their difficult re-adjustment if they return to Korea. The mother made an important decision: the family would temporarily remain in the U.S. longer than they initially planned. Thus, Jim joined a study group for Korean students who wanted to attend U.S. universities. In this group, the students prepared for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (S.A.T.), so Jim would no longer have time to study Korean at home. Huber’s mother asked the first author to teach Korean
only to Huber. Korean literacy was no longer a high priority for Jim. During post-study interview, Huber’s mother illustrated her conviction to stay longer in the U.S. and her accompanying changes to her perspective on her children’s Korean language and literacy ability:

*Do you plan to go back to Korea soon or in a few years? Is there any possibility that the entire family will remain in the U.S. forever?*

We thought that we were going back [to Korea] right away after three years [had passed in the U.S.]. Three years is the maximum time that Korean parents believe about the possible re-adjustment timeline when [young students] go back to Korea. After three years [in the U.S.], these temporary sojourners cannot adjust well in school and in Korean culture. So I thought that I could finish [my doctorate preliminary exams] in three years and write a dissertation with them back in Korea—that was the perfect plan.

*How does this factor affect your children’s language and literacy education?*

Because we have stayed here long enough now, I don’t feel too stressed about them losing Korean proficiency like I did before. And with your help, they achieved quite stable proficiency in Korean literacy. I also understand that it would be convenient and comfortable for my children to communicate only in English. I know. But I was quite stressed out about that before. Actually, I was sad to see them losing Korean proficiency along with their [Korean] identity. Especially for Jim, he sometimes couldn’t remember the correct words [in Korean]. On the phone with his father, Jim failed to remember simple Korean phrases such as “이발하다” (i.e., “get a haircut”) so Jim asked me, “Mom, how can I say ‘getting a hair cut’ in Korean?” Isn’t it sad?

Obviously, the mother’s educational attention/focus changed to her children’s higher education in the U.S. rather than their retention and development of Korean oral language and literacy.
INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

proficiency. Jim’s mother often said that she was not the kind of Korean mother who put all of her effort and resources into her children’s education; however, Jim already went to the famous summer science camp in the suburbs of a nearby city to ensure that he could obtain the best educational opportunities.

Regarding Huber, he became a candidate for student president in his school. The mother strongly supported his candidacy, because it was what her son wanted and because it would have a positive impact on his future. She seemed proud of all of his activities and accomplishments in school, which were comparable to his American peers. The mother also said that she wanted to see her children’s success in school, with a hope that they would have more academic success than their American peers. She indicated that she would need to pay a price for the boys’ success in school, which might be a loss of their Korean identity and heritage language/literacy proficiency. Although a significant loss, she also emphasized that there were greater priorities than Korean oral language and literacy.

As a result of no longer seeing themselves as short-term temporary immigrants, Huber’s mother stopped putting extra effort, time, and money into her children’s Korean oral and written language and literacy development. She also had two other reasons: First, from her consistent emphasis on heritage language retention and development for the first two years (year 1-2 of this study), the mother believed her children had already acquired stable Korean oral language and literacy proficiency. Second, sending her children to a privileged, well-known university in the U.S. had become the priority. The mother reasoned that she would be able to put extra effort on Korean language retention and development later. In addition, she suffered from health problems so she started minimizing her children’s educational activities; unfortunately, Korean language/literacy education and heritage cultural activity was the first activity to be eliminated from their
daily activities. Therefore, Huber’s mother indicated that Korean lessons for the children were no longer necessary, and it was evident that indeterminate decision-making regarding immigration clearly affected the family’s educational goal, daily discourse and related educational practices.

Discussion

Previous research investigating early bilingualism suggests that young children in the U.S. can be considered “at-risk bilinguals” (Gonzalez, 2012; Tabor & Snow, 2001) because as they acquire a second language, they typically lose their first language (Crawford, 2000; Tabor, 2008; Tse, 2001; Wong-Fillmore, 1991b, 2000). However, many studies did not directly address families’ residency patterns as potential impacts on children’s bilingual/biliteracy outcomes. In this study, the families’ immigrant status played a prominent role in children’s bilingual and biliteracy outcomes and daily practices and educational activities.

As young diverse learners constantly engaged, enacted, and adopted situated multiple communities of linguistic ideology, as they were absorbed in surrounding contexts, the theoretical framework of Communities of Practices (Wenger, 1998) grounded on social-constructivism played an important to shape a strong ground for the study. Two students, Kevin (permanent resident) and Huber (temporary resident) and their families continually negotiated their language choices as they were involved more in English-dominant social circles including classroom, peer groups, extra activities, churches and social media that they encounter everyday.

Complicated and dynamic socio-cultural and educational situations among the Korean population in the U.S. in-part led to similarities and differences in the two families in the current study. Although both families resided in the same Midwestern university town, their bilingual and biliteracy applications and practices in daily lives were at times unstable during the course of this longitudinal study. Both families certainly believed in and to some extent supported the
maintenance and development of their children’s Korean oral language and literacy (based on their ethnic identity) whether they identified the children as “Korean-Americans” (a person who was born in the US to the first generation Korean immigrants) or “Korean-Koreans.” (i.e., a person who was born in Korea and tightly adheres to Korean culture and customs) However, short- or long-term educational goals and beliefs were directly related to daily language/literacy practices based on each family’s decision about future residency (i.e., as permanent and temporary immigrants).

Kevin’s (permanent immigrant) family often compromised their children’s Korean oral language and literacy competencies, because they did not intend to return to Korea. In terms of Korean identity however, the parents consistently emphasized and instructed their children that they were “Koreans.” The parents were first generation Korean immigrants, who strongly wanted their children to retain Korean identity, preferably with Korean oral language and literacy proficiency. On the other hand, Huber’s (temporary immigrant) family put extra effort and resources on Korean language/literacy retention and development, because their children were expected to re-adjust to the Korean educational system within a few years of arriving in the U.S. Once Huber’s family changed their residency plan to stay in the U. S. longer, nearly all of their Korean practices and education were put on hold until an undetermined time in the future when they were expected to emphasize Korean again.

Scholars and educators need to be informed about diverse permanent and temporary immigrant families’ educational goals and beliefs, decision-making procedures, and their impact on daily bilingual/biliteracy practices and education in relation to indeterminate futures of their lives in the U.S. There are many studies that portray linguistic ideology among immigrants from South Korea (Choi, Godina & Ro, 2013; Jung, 2008; Lo, 2012; Park, 2009); however, studies
about these students and their educational managers (usually their Korean mothers) including an
investigation of the relationships between families’ indeterminate futures and related impacts on
bilingual/biliteracy practices are scarce. With the rapidly growing population of multi-lingual
and -cultural learners and their families in the U.S., researchers and educators need to take extra
steps to learn diverse families’ unique immigration background and story, motivations and hopes,
challenges and changes, and future agenda as well as immediate and distant goals in terms of
immigration status as they all directly related to their young learners’ language and literacy
practices.

While researchers disseminate new findings about different ethnic groups’ immigration
patterns and related bilingual/biliteracy daily practices, educators can ask questions to parents
and guardians about their unique linguistic goals and residency. Families would likely appreciate
educators’ genuine interest on their child(ren) which may be one step in facilitating family-
professionals partnerships. Two groups, young diverse learners’ families and their educators,
may regularly meet (e.g., during parent-teacher conferences) to set common linguistic goals for
the child(ren), mapping the realistic action/achievement plans, and exchanging progress notes.
Moreover, educators are in a unique position to help families understand the importance of their
home language as well as academic expectations in US schools and means to accomplish both
within the context of both permanent and temporary immigration status.

Limitations

The primary goal of this study was to investigate ways in which the family participants
negotiated their goals and language practices for their children’s biliteracy development. The
data for this study was originally from a total of seven (including one year of pilot study with
Kevin’s family) years of longitudinal data from two families. Given the copious amounts of data,
to focus on only one factor (i.e., family residency status) was challenging. In addition, lack of previous research studies investigating daily linguistic practices and related beliefs depending on students’/parents’ immigration decisions rendered challenges to a direct comparative study of two different types of family immigration status in the U.S. Moreover, the families included in this study have a specific cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic background; thus, the extent to which these findings match with families differing in these respects is unknown. However, the information presented in this study has potential to foster greater understanding and positive changes to the language and literacy education of linguistically diverse children within the U.S.

**Conclusion**

Many immigrants have come to the U.S.; the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences they bring is astonishing. Yet, efforts at understanding young learners’ multilingual practices and their complicated multi-lingual/cultural identity negotiation process are only a beginning to recognizing this diversity. As suggested throughout the findings section of this paper, different types of immigration patterns and families’ decision making about their future residency can contribute to young language learners’ ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity as they are embedded in their daily bilingual and biliteracy practices. Researchers and educators can attend to young diverse learners’ linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds as they relate to each family’s own story of residential history as well as determinate or indeterminate residency futures.
References


INDETERMINATE FUTURES AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION


