The Value of Bilingualism in South Korea

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Abstract

With increasing population of intercultural families in South Korea, bilingual education has become more urgent and important. Married immigrant women who are not ethnically Korean do not believe in the effectiveness of bilingual education for their children, which may influence bilingual education in South Korea. This paper educates married immigrant parents in South Korea about the effectiveness of bilingual education. Based on the research of Baker (2011), Lee & Suarez (2009) and Park (2010), this paper describes how bilingual education helps immigrant children in South Korea develop more positive bicultural identity, stronger social relations, more successful academic performance with higher majority language proficiency and better cognitive strategies.

Keywords: bilingual education, heritage language, cognitive effectiveness, academic performance
The Value of Bilingualism in Korea

South Korea has been a monocultural, monoethnic, and monolingual society in its long history. More recently international marriage between Korean females in the agricultural area of Korea and females from other underdeveloped Asian countries started in the late 1990s causing Korean society to rapidly change into a heterogeneous, multicultural, and multilingual society. International marriage accounts for 11.1% of all newly married couples in South Korea in 2008 (Park, 2010). Accordingly, the number of children by interracial and international families increased to 58,000 in 2008 and is expected to reach 142,000 in 2020 (Park, 2010).

With increasing populations of multicultural and interracial families and their children in South Korea, bilingual education in governmental, societal, and institutional levels are urgent and important. In 2008, the government of South Korea launched a measure called “Customized Supporting Measures according to the Stages of Life Cycle” to support multicultural families (which is a generally used term in South Korea) with the multilingual education program in South Korea (Park, 2010). However, a needs analysis of married immigrant women shows that married immigrant women are not fully aware of the effectiveness of bilingual education and weaken the success of bilingual policy (Park, 2010). Married immigrant women believe that bilingual education will help them have closer relationship with their children (60%) and help their children to get better jobs in the future (25%) (Park, 2010). The problem is that not many married immigrant women expect their children to develop better bicultural or multicultural identity (10%) or achieve academic success (5%) through bilingual education (Park, 2010).

Even worse, a high percentage of married immigrant women showed their worries that if their children learn their heritage language (which means their mothers’ language such as Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, or Tagalog), it might make a bad effect on their children’s
Korean language development (40%) or academic success (15%) (Park, 2010). With the lack of the stakeholders’ awareness about the value of bilingual education, it is difficult to expect that any bilingual education policy can end up being successful. The purpose of this paper is to educate multicultural families in Korea, especially married immigrant women, about the effectiveness of bilingual education through more reliable research results and to prepare their children for multilingual education in South Korea.

**Identity Development, Social Relations and Academic Achievement**

Currently, bilingual education for immigrants in South Korea is scarce. Most immigrant children have little opportunity for a bilingual education. Only 21.9% of all immigrant children speak their foreign national parent’s language (heritage language) at home and only 10% of them take bilingual classes in public educational institutions (Park, 2010).

For bilingual education to be successfully implemented in South Korea, immigrant children’s heritage language (which means mostly their foreign national mother’s language) education is indispensable. Heritage language education is important for immigrant children in three perspectives: identity development, social relations, and academic achievement (Lee & Suarez, 2009). There is a strong positive relationship between the heritage language education and identity development (Lee & Suarez, 2009). Children with heritage language proficiency develop “higher self-esteem, more capacity toward self-determination and a stronger sense of identity (Lee & Suarez, 2009).” Deprivation of either language of the parents may damage the immigrant children’s sense of identity; identity is defined as a “collective terms of shared culture.” A language is an important construct of culture (Lee & Suarez, 2009).

Heritage language maintenance is also important for the development of stronger social relationships (Lee & Suarez, 2009) Bilingual education is a benefit for immigrant children.
Immigrant children who are fluent bilinguals are more likely to have more solid family relations than the majority-language-only (which is Korean-only) speakers. If the immigrant children have less competence of heritage language, it causes them to have more conflict with their parents and to feel isolated and excluded from members of their own ethnic group. However, the use of heritage language only in the home is not sufficient for their development of identity; thus heritage language should be used outside the home which may lead to an immigrant children’s advantage over Korean-only immigrant children in participating and integrating in both cultures (Lee & Suarez, 2009).

The correlation between heritage language and academic performance is an important issue among immigrant parents as well as among educators. Contrary to immigrant parents’ worries, heritage language proficiency through bilingual education leads to greater academic achievement with higher grade point averages and lower school dropout rates (Lee & Suarez, 2009). Immigrant parents wrongly believe that their children’s higher academic failure rates than among the mainstream student population are mainly derived from their children’s low proficiency of majority language, which is Korean. Contrarily, immigrant children’s academic failure may come from other correlated factors, such as the majority language proficiency, the immigrant family’s socioeconomical status (SES), and mismatches of cultural understandings (Lee & Suarez, 2009). In addition, high bilingual proficiency to the factors that affect immigrant children’s academic success, pointing out that students with high bilingualism has “a net 8 % advantage on the standardized tests in math and reading over their monolingual counterparts (Lee & Suarez, 2006).” The better academic performance of high bilingual immigrant children is attributed to “higher cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies” of bilingual immigrant children (Lee & Suarez, 2009).
Cognitive Effectiveness and Maintenance of Heritage Language

Bilinguals, especially balanced bilinguals have advantages in many ways over monolingual mainstream counterparts. There is historically prejudice about bilingualism, especially in English-speaking regions (Baker, 2011). Many teachers or doctors believe that bilingualism can cause problems, such as burden on the brain, mental confusion, slowing down of the acquisition of the majority language, identity conflict and even schizophrenia (Baker, 2011). However, in the last decades, such prejudice about bilingualism has decreased. Positive beliefs about bilingualism have spread to most professionals in the field. Nowadays, many language teachers, speech therapists and school psychologists agree with many bilingualism researchers like Baker (2011), who believes that bilingualism has cognitive effectiveness, such as divergent thinking, creativity, early metalinguistic awareness, and communicative sensitivity (Baker, 2011).

Heritage language programs are the most common type of bilingual education for immigrant children in South Korea; they are effective in four different ways: (1) the immigrant children do not lose and sometimes avoid using their heritage language (Baker, 2011), which happens frequently to the immigrant children who are placed in mainstream education; (2) there is no loss in curriculum performance for the immigrant children who learn their heritage language; (3) immigrant children have more positive attitudes when placed in heritage language education with enhanced sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-concept through the heritage language education; and (4) the benefit of heritage language education for immigrant children is an improved Korean proficiency contrary to their parents’ misconceptions.

Conclusion
Now strong forms of bilingual education such as immersion, heritage Language, and dual language bilingual education are generally considered to promote both first and second languages of immigrant children. Multilingual education helps immigrant children in South Korea develop more positive bicultural identity, stronger social relations, more successful academic performance with higher majority language proficiency and better cognitive strategies. Immigrant parents with multicultural and multilingual backgrounds play a pivotal role in their children’s multilingual education, so they should make special efforts in their home to maximize the benefits of multilingual education. By encouraging their children to use their heritage language from their birth, immigrant parents can expect their children to grow up as balanced bilinguals who will be able to contribute to future Korean society and international societies.
References

