Chapter 7

Heritage Language Learning for Contesting the Model Minority Stereotype:
The Case of Korean American College Students

Hyun-Sook Kang
Illinois State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a qualitative study of a group of eight second-generation Korean American college students who appeared to fit the model minority stereotype: high academic achievers who had adjusted to the American culture at the expense of their heritage language and culture. Contrary to what the model minority stereotype predicts about Asian Americans’ assimilation into mainstream society, these college students chose to take Korean language classes in an attempt to relearn the language they were exposed to while growing up in Korean immigrant households. These Korean American students, rather than being passive recipients of language instruction, brought their hybrid, transnational life experiences to the language classroom interactions. The findings regarding the students’ development and maintenance of their heritage language while achieving academic success challenge the prevalent model minority stereotype and suggest a promise of bilingualism and multiculturalism in a multiethnic society such as the United States.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7467-7.ch007

Copyright ©2015, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.
INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, the media began portraying Asian Americans as “successful” in education and economic attainment (Petersen, 1966); a slew of publications and criticism have ensued. One implication for the model minority stereotype (Lee, 1994; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007; Suzuki, 2002) is that Asian Americans conform to the norms of the American society and are high achievers in mainstream formal schooling and professional careers. This model predicts that Asian Americans (including Korean Americans) will, with little or no resistance, assimilate into mainstream American culture while denying their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998).

Contrary to this prediction, many Korean heritage students in higher education take Korean language classes to (a) reacquire the language they used to speak and understand but have lost full abilities in and (b) reconnect to their roots (Byon, 2008; Lee & Shin, 2008). This chapter presents eight second-generation Korean American college students who were participating in a yearlong Korean-as-a-foreign-language (KFL) class to reacquire their heritage language and reconnect to their linguistic and cultural heritage.

This chapter also contests the model minority stereotype imposed by the mainstream media, specifically the assimilation prediction, by exploring the communicative practices employed by these second-generation Korean American students. By taking a qualitative approach to the interview and classroom observation data, the study attempts to examine the language practices that Korean heritage learners employ, and how these practices interact with the Korean heritage learners’ representation of their identities. Rather than being passive recipients of heritage language instruction, these learners brought their hybrid, transnational life experiences to classroom interactions and expressed the Korean side of their lived experiences. Discussion of the learning and teaching of heritage languages for minority groups in the U.S. context follows thereafter.

BACKGROUND

The Model Minority and Its Implications for Korean Americans

Since the 1960s, when the term “model minority” was introduced to refer to Asian Americans (Petersen, 1966), the stereotypes associated with this notion have continued to shape the way the majority group and other minority groups view Asian Americans and the way Asian Americans see themselves. Part of the model minority concept proposed by the media postulated that Asian American families had a higher
Culture, Communication, and Identity in Anglophone Study Abroad English Language Provision

www.igi-global.com/chapter/culture-communication-and-identity-in-anglophone-study-abroad-english-language-provision/180562?camid=4v1a