

A SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESSES OF TWO KOREAN SIBLING'S L2 LITERACY PRACTICES

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1. Introduction

1.1. Notions of literacy

Recently, an increasing number of literacy theorists question the conventional notion of literacy which often refers only to an ability to read and write letters. This notion of literacy has implied that literacy is just a set of skills that can be simply taught by a teacher (Street, 1994, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

However, from a Vygotskian sociocultural view and Bakhtinian dialogic theory, literacy implies much more complex than just acquiring a set of skills to read and write. Human mental processes of language acquisition cannot be separated from the social and cultural aspects of language acquisition (Hall, 1995; Peirce, 1995; Rampton, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1998; Maguire, 1999). The complex picture of social influences on the L2 contexts (in which language learners belong) should be included in the area of literacy research.

1.2. Danger of simplified understanding of socio-cultural influences on L2 literacy

However, over-simplified understanding of socio-cultural influences on the L2 literacy practices has often brought about stereotyping of L2 students from the same cultural background, treating them as if they share similar knowledge, beliefs, morals and values.

However, from a social view of literacy, second language phenomena are deeply rooted in situated, circumstantial, and interactional experiences of the individual as a social being. Individuals make choices among various communication tools for

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meaningful distinctions based on their beliefs and values. Therefore, one person may engage in a particular literacy practice in a different way from another embedded in the same social and cultural context (Ivanic, 1998).

2. The study

The goal of my case study is to understand interactions of two Korean children with their social worlds. I attempt to obtain specific social-cultural-historical information and analyze influences from family, institution and community on the two individuals. This is to understand how the young individuals' beliefs and values influence their evaluative orientations, and specific literacy practices through socializing in different L2 contexts; and how their individual agency plays a role in the processes of their daily decision-making, negotiations and evaluations in different social contexts.

2.1. Research methods

The focal participants in my study are Hyun-Soo and Young-A. They are brother and sister in a Korean family who came to Canada in 2000 with their mother to pursue their schooling. I visited their home on a regular basis (once every other week) to conduct open-ended interviews from September 2000 till November 2001. I also conducted participant observations in different social occasions, such as casual home visit, family dinner at home as well as in a restaurant, family outings (e.g. going to see a movie), and birthday parties of the family members. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in English (translated from Korean). I also kept field notes and reflective journals after each interview and participant observation.

2.2. Socio-cultural-historical background information

Hyun-Soo and Young-A both were born and grew up in South Korea until the age of 15 and 12 respectively. Korean is their mother tongue and the most comfortable language for them when I met them to begin this case study. Thus, there was no need for them to go to a Korean heritage language school in Ottawa. Their initial goal was to acquire English language skills so that they could adapt into their new school environment. Their mother told me that she would not encourage them to participate in the activities organized by the Korean community in Ottawa, because she believed that

hanging out with Korean children from the community might have negative influences on the amount of their practice of English as a second language.

2.2.1. Parental support

The family belongs to an upper middle class in Korean society. Thus, Hyun-soo and Young-A had an access to a lot of resources in terms of mediational means for their L2 practices. The parents had been very supportive in providing their children with a variety of cultural tools for L2 literacy practices, such as books, computers with fast internet connection, computer games, clothes, and so on.

2.2.2. Canadian school context

When this case study was conducted, Hyun-soo was attending in grade 9 in an English-medium high school. He was taking ESL courses offered in high school. Thus, he had rarely interacted with Canadian students in the school who have a white-mainstream background. Hyun-Soo told me that most his classmates were Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Russians, Arabs and Africans. On the other hand, Young-A was enrolled in grade 6 at an English-medium public school. Her classmates were mainly from a white mainstream background. She said to me that most her classmates were white, a few black students and there is only one more Asian girl from China.

2.2.3. Public schooling they had in Korea

The characteristics of Korean national education systems are intimately related to Hyun-Soo and Young-A's motivation to come to Canada. According to a report in one of the daily newspapers in Korea, Digital Chosunilbo (May 2001), a poll administered by the Korean Gallup showed that a large number of Korean students do not want to attend schools in the country and hope to go other countries to study. Public schooling in Korea has been operated by strong national curriculum based on "equality," which forces every school to follow the same curriculum regardless of the level of achievement of students in the same grade. This control resulted in experiencing the same pattern of schooling and learning under very rigid supervision. In accordance, there are often extreme power and controls exercised by the school and teachers to constrain individual students' styles of schooling and learning in general.

3. Findings

3.1. Agency, voice and choice of mediational means

I present some quotes that reflect agency and voices of Hyun-Soo and Young-A in their choosing mediational means to achieve their different goals based on different values.

Hyun-Soo likes reading very much. He loves reading history novels particularly about Korean or Chinese history. Since he came to Canada, he has been reading a large number of books in English as well as in Korean, mostly books about history. Whenever he talked about the books he was reading, he showed great enthusiasm toward gaining knowledge from reading books. He said that he feels very good whenever he realizes that he gained some knowledge from reading books or studying hard. Hyun-Soo also loves thinking. He regarded intellectual and spiritual growth through personal speculations as very valuable to him. He told me that he was interested in games and cartoons that made him think and did not like the ones that contained only violence without meaningful messages. Hyun-Soo said,

I think I came to think a lot about myself. I read many books and searched for the books I want to read more. Also, through playing many computer games and watching cartoons, I got to think a lot about what other people might think and what they might have been thinking while they were making these games and cartoons... I thought about what it is what I want? Where can I use what I want? And what would be left after I use them... (February 2001)

On the other hand, Young-A likes singing and dancing. She described herself as a person who likes very much to get attention and recognition from others. Ever since she was a little girl, she has been very interested in becoming a pop singer. Young-A said,

I like singing and dancing on TV, being photographed, and getting a lot of attention from people. I want to become popular and be recognized by many people. I think that's very nice. (October 2000)

Another quote below by Young-A shows her strong role in her L2 social worlds as an active agent by using cultural tools that are familiar and interesting to her.

Young-A: Now I do a lot of chatting with friends here.

Interviewer: How many friends have you been talking to in the chat room so far?

Young-A: About six...

Interviewer: Wow, already! Within only one week! How long do you usually stay?

Young-A: I don't know, about two to three hours. (February 2001)

3.2. Different approaches to dealing with frustration

I found that Hyun-Soo and Young-A experienced a lot of frustration in the process of adapting to their new social environment. At the beginning of the first semester, Hyun-Soo would come back home right after school and spend a lot of time by himself, since he did not have any friend whom he felt comfortable to hang out with. He seemed to feel lonely quite a while. However, recalling very rigid schooling in Korea in which students are forced to study very hard all the time, Hyun-Soo tried to see a positive side of being in Canada as well.

Interviewer: Do you like living here? Or are you feeling lonely?

Hyun-Soo: A little bit of both. I am satisfied but I also feel lonely. But most of all, I am very relaxed here. (January 2001)

In accordance, Hyun-Soo came to spend much more time staying at home. In the times he was at home, he indulged extensively in reading books he wanted to read.

Meanwhile, Young-A tried very hard in order to make new friends at school and particularly to become a part of the group of students from the mainstream culture. It was not easy for her to achieve this goal, and she was very frustrated. The quotes below reflect that she was feeling very lonely when she did not have anybody at school as friends.

Interviewer: Why don't you ask your mom to prepare a box lunch for you and eat at school?

Young-A: Just... I feel a little bit lonely... Well, the kids play only with each other, I don't feel like getting in there... (October 2000)

Young-A: ... it's no fun because I don't speak English well. I don't know much... I don't have confidence, either. I say something, and many kids don't understand me. Then, it's really embarrassing!

Interviewer: Okay... Do you have any friend here that you sometimes exchange emails with besides your friends in Korea?

Young-A: No, not really. It is not easy to write in English. My typing in English is also very slow, although I can type fast in Korean. I still haven't memorized the English keyboard. (October 2000)

Young-A then noticed that English language skills were not the only means that would initiate her to make friends at school. After observing the patterns of socialization among the kids at school, she noticed there were other cultural tools besides language skills that she could use to draw attention from her peers and to get along with them, such as playing games and dressing well. There were two different groups of peers that she hung out, what she called "Geeky group" and "French class group". She said that she originally wanted to hang out with the "French class group"

since they were the most popular girls at school. However, she felt that it might not be easy to get close to the group and become a member of the group. Thus, she decided to start to hang out with the “geeky group” by playing volley ball with them. Young-A said,

Young-A: The girls in the “Geeky Group” usually play with balls or games, while the girls in the “French Class Group” usually chat with each other. At first, because I could not speak English very well, I came to play volleyball with the girls of the “Geeky Group”. (January 2001)

In addition, Young-A realized that the ways one dresses played an important role in the world of her peers at school. She reflected that the way she dressed might have attracted her peers and helped her become popular.

Interviewer: Why do you think you’ve become so popular among your friends at school?

Young-A: Well, maybe because I dress well and now speak English better as well. I used to dress only in Hip Hop style, but these days I wear tight clothes... yes, you need to dress well. (October 2001)

3.3. Different evaluative orientations, different L2 literacy practices

Hyun-Soo and Young-A showed very different ways of developing, negotiating, evaluating their L2 literacy practices at school and home, bringing their own pre-existing knowledge and purposes to L2 literacy learning. They had different views on making friends, achieving accomplished feeling, and need for language skills.

Hyun-Soo aspires to be a person who has high intellectual knowledge. The comments below made by Hyun-Soo reflects that the meaningful evaluation of his accomplishment for him is based more on good grades and teachers’ complimentary comments on his performances.

Interviewer: How is your school life these days?

Hyun-Soo: It’s been very good. Teachers like me very much. They think of me as a good and hard working student. It’s maybe because I am quiet in the class and respect the teachers, and behave well... I think that’s why they trust me and like me.

(April 2001)

Therefore, it seems natural that he preferred to hang out friends who study diligently as he mentioned below.

Interviewer: How did you find the Chinese students?

Hyun-Soo: They work hard. They do a good job with schoolwork, too. (April 2001)

On the other hand, in the world where Young-A wanted to belong, active social interactions with other cultural tools, such as cool outfit and pop music, rather than high school marks seemed to be more appreciated. She said,

Young-A: There is a group of girls that I want to hang out with, the “French Class Group”. Their style looks more interesting than the “Geeky Group”. They are boring even though they are my friends. (January 2001)

Interestingly, since interactions with friends mean a lot to her, Young-A evaluated her accomplishment based on the recognition by the peers and the degree of the popularity among the peers. She expressed her exciting feelings based on her friends’ comments on her achievement when she got a high mark on the presentation of a book report in English class.

Interviewer: How do you feel after getting a good mark on the presentation?

Young-A: Just... I felt good. Friends told me that I should feel good about it. (March 2001)

3.4. What they have achieved in a year

At the end of the school year, 2000 to 2001, Hyun-Soo received the academic distinction award in his school. He also made a very close friend who is doing very well at school and enjoys a computer game. Hyun-soo referred to him without hesitation as his best friend. In the last interview, Hyun-Soo told me that he read about forty-three books during the last year.

In the last interview, Young-A was busy with making the invitation cards on the computer by herself for her 13th birthday party in November (2001). There were thirty-six friends of hers who came to celebrate Young-A’s birthday. After the party, she had no doubt that she had become the most popular girl at school. Her English proficiency has greatly improved and her speaking sounded almost like an English native speaker. When I observed her chatting with five kids on MSN messenger (in October 2001), her typing in English keyboard was so fast that I could not follow all the words she was writing.

4. Discussions and implications

Different individuals have different orientations and approaches to literacy practices, and therefore accomplish different outcomes. The two Korean siblings demonstrated that they evaluate, resist or choose from different mediational means that

are available to them based on their own value systems. Hyun-Soo and Young-A constantly questioned what they wanted and searched for the best ways to achieve their goals. Literacy is situated in its specific environments and dependent on its own contexts (Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic, 1994). Once they found the world they want to belong to according to their own beliefs and values, Hyun-Soo and Young-A tried to engage with the “popular” ways of literacy practices to fit in the world they want to participate. That is, different individuals adopt different culturally-mediated tools to achieve their goals.

Interestingly, language skills did not seem to be the most important mediational tools of social activity for these young individuals. For instance, Young-A exercised her agency to gain access to the social network (among her peers) that she wanted to be close. She made effective use of a variety of resources to gain access to her peer networks, such as clothing, doing sports, and chatting on the Internet. Her active participation in social activities with her peers seemed to help her acquire fluent oral and informal written English, and familiarize herself to expressions common to her peers.

The experiences of Hyun-Soo and Young-A make us think that we need to include more ways of evaluating students’ L2 literacy practices (e.g. whether they are successful L2 learners). Depending on different personal beliefs and experiences in different social contexts, we can view one student as a successful learner or a failure. For instance, Hyun-Soo and Young-A’s mother was concerned with Young-A because she was viewed as a “bad” student by her school teachers in Korea, due to the fact that Young-A was always hanging out with her friends without working hard on her schoolwork. The mother was always worried that her daughter hardly sits down at her desk and does her school work. Since they came to Canada, Young-A, thanks to her active social activity skills, was able to make quite a few of friends at school. This time, the mother is very happy with her daughter’s active social behaviour, and proud of Young-A’s English fluency.

I would like to argue that L2 students’ literacy practices should not be evaluated only by accepting the conventional ways of evaluating a successful learner, such as those based on standard test results or teachers’ or parents’ perceptions of a student. The conventional evaluation system measures only classroom texts. As Peirce (1995)

pointed out, language learning does not only occur in classrooms, and it should be extended to the actual practices in diverse social contexts.

In addition, we should not neglect that there can be many different interpretations in evaluating student achievement depending on who made the evaluation and in which context, and with what purpose. Personally I believe that one of the crucial considerations to be taken into account in the evaluation is that which is (are) the most meaningful interpretation(s) for the individual agents based on their beliefs and values.

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