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“Being Gay Guy, That is the Advantage”: Queer Korean Language Learning and Identity Construction

Brian W. King

Victoria University of Wellington

This study works against heteronormativity, which is prevalent in the second language acquisition field, adding queer perspectives to the growing body of research that questions a narrower, 1-dimensional view of the language learner. There is a common belief that learning an additional language (L2) while surrounded by L2 speakers in a naturalistic setting is best. Theories of identity and language learning have destabilized this notion, pointing to the effects of ongoing identity construction on learning. While forming identities in the L2, a learner invests in certain groups of speakers (often imagined communities), leading them to seek out such speakers. Access to speakers in real naturalistic settings is not guaranteed, and social marginalization often prevents learning. This qualitative study explores the naturalistic language-learning experiences of 3 Korean gay men whose marginalized sexual identities assist them with access while articulating other aspects of their identities (e.g., race, nationality) as well as sexual desire.

Key words: access, gay, heteronormativity, identity, imagined communities, language learning

This study has both investigative and transformative purposes. The investigative purpose is to examine second language acquisition (SLA) experiences in naturalistic (nonclassroom and uninstructed) contexts in line with the theories of Bonny Norton (1997, 2000, 2001; Norton Peirce, 1995). The transformative purpose is to work against heteronormativity in the SLA field.

Heteronormativity refers to the habit of viewing humanity as reducible to heterosexuality and to linguistic and/or cultural practices that support such a view. For instance, when people talk or write about heterosexual ways, identities, and images as though they were the only natural or normal way of being human, *heteronormative discourses* are created (Dalley & Campbell, 2006). Warner (1993) points out that these discourses are pervasive and that “so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society” (p. xxi). This study works against such discourses.

Merging with the increasing plurality of SLA research, this study joins the work of other scholars (Armour, 2001; Beebe, 2002; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Ellwood, 2006; Jewell, 1998; Nelson, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2006; Ó’Móchain, 2006) in attempting to address the current dearth of queer perspectives in SLA research. Reflecting back on the situation in 1999, Nelson (2005) writes, “even a brief mention of (homo)sexual identities in language education research was rare (and is only slightly less rare today)” (p. 316). This silence is likely a result of heteronormativity.

Because of the dubious history of the term *queer*, it is vital to clarify its meaning as used in this study. Bucholtz and Hall (2004b) assert that to be queer, one must be sexually marginalized; homosexual desire is not a prerequisite. In addition, Sumara and Davis (1999) have suggested that to be queer is to be cut off from “the cultural rewards afforded those whose public performances of self are contained within that narrow band of behaviours considered proper to a heterosexual identity” (p. 192). In summary, *queer* refers to people pushed to the margins in society (whether homosexual or not), and their marginalization excludes them from the benefits enjoyed by those who match heterosexual society’s narrow expectations of appropriate sexual behaviour. Such a definition does not reduce “*queerness*” to sexual identity. *Queer* does problematize sexual identity categories, but as Kulick (2000, 2003, 2005) insists, sexuality is as much about sexual desires as identities.

Cameron and Kulick (2003) state that desire has its origins in unconscious, irrational processes (a view grounded in psychoanalysis) and that it is transitive (i.e., desire is always for someone or something). They maintain that desire can be *mapped*, or located and analysed in language use, among other social practices. The subject and object of desire become the focus of linguistic analysis, and Cameron and Kulick state that research into language and desire needs to “investigate how the relationships between the two are materialized through language” (p. 107). Finally, they follow Foucault in taking the view that any relationship between people involves power (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 113). In short, desire involves a relationship between the subject and object of that desire, a relationship imbued with power, and desire and its effects can be traced through linguistic analysis. It stands to reason, then, that the Korean men interviewed in this study form relationships while learning English that involve desire and

power (cf. Piller & Takahashi, 2006). Because both sexual desires and sexual identities might influence their language learning, both will receive attention during analysis.

The men in this study self-identify as “gay,” which is an ideological construct produced by the discourse of equal rights in regions of the North Atlantic and Oceania. *Gay* refers to a sexual identity frequently adopted by men who desire sex exclusively with other men. In reference to the participants in this study and their imagined communities, I will use the term *gay* because it is salient for them. In reference to heteronormativity and my transformative goals, I will use the term *queer*.

These men display dissatisfaction with gay identity construction in Korean (both culture and language). Although they are, admittedly, a small sample of the Korean gay male population, their struggle is endemic in the Korean queer community. Seo (2001) relates that queer Koreans frequently identify themselves as “gay,” yet “it is true that the vast majority of homosexuals find it difficult to consciously reflect on and access homosexual identity as a cultural or political reality” (p. 74). Seo suggests that this is partly a result of challenges with the Western “coming out” paradigm. The imperative to “come out” (be open about homosexuality) is seen to be a fundamental difference between Korea and the West by many gay Koreans, who cite powerful Korean familial bonds as a deterrent. Seo identifies this as a kind of “reversed orientalism” in which stereotypical and exoticizing Western generalizations about Asian societies are taken up by Koreans to “distance Korean culture from the west” (p. 77). In other words, Western “orientalist” ideas about Korea (e.g., familial bonds are stronger in Korea) have come to be used by Koreans as an explanation for the difficulties encountered while “being gay” in Korea. On the other hand, the West is seen (even by Seo in his article) as a place where homosexual identity is less complicated, making living in the West an attractive alternative for some.

This is not to imply that gay identity construction is straightforward for everyone in the “West”; rather, some Koreans, like the men in this study, have the perception that it is more difficult in Korea. Thus they have invested in an imagined, “Western” gay community, which has brought about strong investments in learning English as their gateway to that community. The term *West* shifts its meaning across time and space and, like Boellstorff (2005), I use the term ironically (p. 9). It refers more to an elite attitude than a region. It is ironic because Korea’s “West” lies in various directions; nevertheless, “Western” has meaning to Korean identities by representing something Koreans are not.

Poststructuralism conceives of reality as produced by social and cultural organization rather than being located in the material world or in human perception; this view of reality leads to an antiessentialist stance (Pennycook, 2001). *Essentialism* in this study refers to the philosophical theory that groups of people (like gay men) have fundamental qualities. Alternatively, poststructuralists argue

identity undergoes continual construction and has a multifaceted nature, and one cannot easily define one facet of identity (like sexuality) in isolation from the others (like race or class). I have reconciled both my research goals and the interactive group interview process with the antiessentialist views of poststructuralism.

In positing the ongoing construction of identity (Norton, 1997, 2000, 2001; Norton Peirce, 1995; Wenger, 1998), one must acknowledge SLA as inseparable from identity formation and transformation (Pennycook, 2001). This notion has been explored from the perspectives of women (Kinginger, 2004; Norton, 2000; Polanyi, 1995; Siegal, 1996) and racial minorities (Ibrahim, 1999; McKay & Wong, 1996; Parks & Raymond, 2004), but there has been a paucity of research on queer perspectives. Hence my political (transformative) purpose is to focus on the investments, successes, and challenges of queer Korean English learners in *naturalistic contexts*, a term that will be defined in greater detail later.

On reaching the periphery of real English communities of practice (gay or otherwise) both in Seoul and abroad, the participants' legitimacy as English speakers in those communities has varied not only within and between individuals but also across time and space. Thus, the degree to which they have gained access and undergone language learning has varied accordingly. There is, however, a prevailing feeling among them that, as gay men, they have a distinct advantage when it comes to being granted legitimacy in, and access to, target communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(Strategic) Essentialism

Ricento (2005) has emphasized that early work in SLA research rarely addressed the multiple memberships of learners based on gender, class, and race and how these memberships interacted with learning contexts. Norton's research and theories attempt to do so by examining the effects on language learners of diverse and complex social interactions (Ricento, 2005, p.899). Thesen (1997) has criticized Norton, however, for giving fixed labels to the discourses she deems important and thus positioning people and relying on single identity markers like "multicultural citizen." The main issue here is that despite looking at identity as multiple and changing, when she uses such static identity labels, it's as if "multicultural citizen" were not in itself both manifold and disputed (Pennycook, 2001, p. 148). This debate about the labelling of discourses hinges on the concept of essentialism.

It is a commonly held belief that gender is innate, a core that manifests itself in human behaviour. Feminist poststructuralists counter that sort of essentialism, viewing gender as a social construct (Sullivan, 2003). This perspective has been applied to identity in general, resulting in a reluctance to tease apart different aspects of one's identity for investigation. A weakness of sociological essentialism is its assumption that each social alignment (gender, sexual orientation,

ethnicity, class) can be isolated (Seidman, 1993). These different alignments are always “intersecting and mutually inflecting” (p. 136), so people experience sexual orientation in nuanced ways, depending on their individual alignments.

However, to remedy the historical underrepresentation of social groups, it can be useful to invoke difference as a discursive strategy (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004b). The strategic essentialism posited by Spivak (as cited in Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a) advocates the use of essentializing moves to “purposefully oversimplify complex situations in order to initiate a discussion that will later become more nuanced.” (p. 376) In other words, sometimes we have to temporarily tease apart identity markers to be able to study the salient markers in our participants’ lives (such as the ideological marker “gay”). Thus, in this study, the antiessentialism of post-structuralism has been tempered by strategic essentialism to focus on gay L2 learners in a politically useful manner.

Debunking the Myth of Naturalistic SLA Contexts

The naturalistic SLA context involves no formal instruction and the learning of a language spoken in the surrounding community (Block, 2003). Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, & Broeder (1996) challenge three assumptions about naturalistic contexts. The first assumption is that naturalistic contexts provide learners with more input. In fact, Bremer et al. found that outside of limited “gate-keeping” or service encounters like banks and doctors, L2 speakers receive little input in the L2 community. Another assumption is that mutual negotiation for meaning takes place in such gate-keeping encounters. Conversely, Bremer et al. realized immigrants most often had to engineer understanding. Finally, there is an assumption the learner will learn the L2 through conversational interaction, whereas Bremer et al. found learners were not getting many opportunities to do so. Consequently, Norton (2000, pp. 110–113) rejects the idea that a naturalistic setting provides abundant and useful opportunities for the learner to interact in and learn the L2, and she argues there should be more interest in how learners develop identities as—what Bourdieu (1977b) calls—legitimate speakers.

Investment in Imagined Communities

Norton Peirce (1995) developed the concept of *investment* while drawing on the economic metaphors of Bourdieu (1977b). Investment takes for granted that when language learners speak, they are doing more than just exchanging information with target language speakers; rather, they are continually organizing and reorganizing awareness of who they are and of their connections to the social world. In this (re)construction of identity, learners invest themselves in certain communities of target language speakers in hope of gaining resources that are either symbolic (language, education, friendship) or material (goods, money). Norton (2000) has problematized motivation and insists investment must not be

confused with the instrumental motivation of Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1985). The latter concept presumes “a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner” (Norton, 2000, p.10), whereas investment “conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires” (p. 10). The communities in which people invest might take various forms.

Wenger (1998) has hypothesized three modes of belonging—engagement, imagination, and alignment. He also posits that communities can form around those senses of belonging. Space does not allow for an analysis of all three, but an example of an imagined community is the so-called gay community. Two men who self-identify as gay might imagine a common history or assume they are similar. In this sense, they might both feel a sense of belonging to a community, although in fact dispersal rather than localization continues to characterize queer self-understanding (Warner, 1993). Imagined communities unfold our array of possible selves by connecting us with communities outside the local and immediate (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Investment in imagined communities has a powerful influence on identity construction and language learning.

Identity Construction and Language

To participate is to become a member of a community of practice (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These authors theorize that “learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon” (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). Social participation refers to “being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relationship to these communities” (p. 4). Communities of practice relate to the different subject positions we adopt moment to moment, daily, and actually throughout our lifetime, depending on who we are with (Block, 2003). Wenger (1998) cites examples like family, colleagues, and social networks at school. The various parts of our “selves” are connected, with hazy boundaries. An identity, then, involves not merely a single pathway but is rather a nexus of multimembership. The work of identity is ongoing, and identity is not an essential core.

Morgan (1997) asserts that identity work in language learning is fundamentally transformative; there are a series of changes, redefinitions, and renegotiations of identity. This is consistent with the communities of practice concept. Ibrahim (1999) insists that these both pre- and reconfigured identities regulate what language learners acquire and how. “What is learned linguistically is not and should not be dissociable from the political, the social, and the cultural” (p. 47). Hence to learn is to invest in something (e.g., a “gay” community) significant to who one is or what one has become. McKay and Wong (1996) contend that an additional language (L2) learner’s historically specific needs, desires, and negotiations are neither distractions from the appropriate task of language learning nor inadvertent digressions from an ideal language learning situation:

“Rather, they must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of students’ lives and determining their investment in learning the target language” (p. 603). This assertion is directly related to the notion of investment as developed by Norton (see Investment in Imagined Communities section).

Access to Communities of Practice

Once an investment in an imagined community has been powerful enough to lead the learner to the periphery of a community of practice (with the goal of improving their L2 skills), being accepted by target language speakers is not automatic (Leki, 2001; Mohan & Smith, 1992; Norton, 2000). Granting access to a newcomer requires a mutual renegotiation of identities because communities of practice and the identities of the people in them are mutually constitutive (Wenger, 1998). Such repositioning often proves conflictual (Norton, 2000). How one is perceived by others and the self-image one projects can be powerful mediating factors when a language learner chooses to speak and interact (Parks & Raymond, 2004).

To end up on what Wenger (1998) calls an “inbound trajectory” (p. 101), the learner first has to win and/or be granted some legitimacy as a potential member of that community of practice. Only then can “their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion” (p. 101). Legitimized newcomers begin in a state of nonparticipation, which allows them to learn. Along such lines, Bourdieu (1977a) suggests that in situations of unequal social interaction, language becomes “an instrument of power” (p. 648), and “some persons are not in a position to speak or must win their audience, whereas others effortlessly command attention.” (p. 650). Davies (2005, p. 557) adds the important nuance that gaining legitimacy in a “self-constituting” community of practice (unlike an institutionally imposed one like a classroom) can be “a matter of sanction from within the hierarchy” of that community. In other words, in communities of practice that coalesce socially rather than being assembled institutionally, legitimacy is often policed by certain powerful members of the community itself. In that sense, “winning” is not enough because one might still be excluded. These concepts have been bundled by Norton (2000) into the term *access* (as used in this study.) If access is neither granted nor won, language learning is derailed in any context before cognitive processing can do its part.

In summary, language learners invest themselves in “imagined communities” of target language speakers to gain symbolic and/or material resources. Once they reach real communities of target speakers, they must take part in communities of practice to learn a second language. If a speaker/listener is either granted or engenders legitimacy (and so access to learning) in the community, then learning will take place, with mutual negotiation of identities shaping the process. If the

speaker/listener is marginalized, and access is denied or inhibited, then learning will either cease or become difficult. Power relationships between speakers and listeners are therefore of central importance in language learning.

CONTEXT OF STUDY

Learner Characteristics and Setting

The language learners I interviewed are Korean men who self-identify as gay. When I was looking for candidates in queer establishments in Seoul (and among my Korean friends), I asked each man to describe his sexuality in English, and I did not prompt him with any terminology. I left it up to him to come up with a description. This was when the word *gay* was used by the three men in this study to describe their sexual identities. They are all successful learners of English who have spent substantial time abroad, using English among English speakers. They also use English quite frequently in the multinational sector of Seoul's queer community.

The interviews were conducted in Seoul at a café in which one can rent small rooms for seminar purposes. I chose to use this setting because I wanted to create a casual atmosphere while also facilitating the recording of the interview. The small room in which we met also allowed for some privacy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Engaged, Empowering Research

From Pennycook's engaged framework (2001), I primarily take an opposition to essentialist categories except in the strategic sense. I strategically chose to focus on the participants as gay learners of English, leading me to organize the data collection in alignment with the goal of encouraging them to speak from a gay subject position. In addition, I asked them early in the interview to think about and discuss the two experiences of being gay while speaking either Korean or English. In this way I deeply shaped the interview, and it was a strategic move. However, I try, in the words of Seidman (1993), to "avoid reifying what are analytical and political moves" (p. 137) by being explicit about such differentiations. In addition, I keep an eye to the identity struggles and mediations resulting from the intersection and mutual inflections of sexual orientation, class, race, gender, and nationality.

I also take from Pennycook the idea of orientation toward transformative goals by including the goal of transforming the SLA field in order to work against heteronormativity. Similar to Norton (2000), I take from Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson (1992) two basic tenets: First of all,

people should not be treated as objects; hence goals, assumptions, and procedures should be made clear and methods should be open, interactive, and dialogic. I set up this approach at the orientation meeting by distributing and explaining a handout that summarized these themes. Another tenet is that participants have their own agendas, and researchers should strive to attend to them. Keeping this in mind, I chose to use an interactive group interview format (Ellis & Berger, 2003), telling participants we were *all* participants and all of us could raise questions. The interview questions appear in Appendix A.

In line with Norton (2000), first of all, I aim to investigate the relationship between the individual and the social, collapsing neither into the other, while focusing on the everyday world of Korean gay men. Like Norton, I assume that understanding social structures involves understanding inequitable relations of power in, for example, sexual orientation. In SLA, this means acknowledging that power relations are always at work between speakers. Following Norton, I take an interest in the way individuals see their own experiences. For this reason, I chose an interactive group interview format and encouraged the participants to relate their experiences in detail, and I include their voices (representations of their own lives) in my findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initially I spoke to Korean queer friends whom I thought might suit this study, but I soon realized they were not comfortable with it. Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer (2003) point out that being a member of a queer community can allow for insider connections, but it's much more important to construct an ethical identity as a trusted insider who will not misrepresent other members. To that end, I created a brochure about my research interests, which I placed in various queer establishments in Seoul and spent time approaching Koreans there. After a few weeks, I had enough participants to conduct both a pilot and main study.

I chose to initially elicit some writing (in English) from the participants. I asked them to write about a negative experience they had had while speaking an additional language (i.e., a language other than Korean) among a group of people who often spoke that additional language together. I also stipulated that during the participants' time as part of that group that the participants were not satisfied with their language learning. The participants were also asked to address the same question from a positive point of view (see Appendix B). They submitted their writing at the initial orientation meeting. I used their answers to focus my questions for the interactive group interview and to stimulate the participants' memories.

I opted to conduct an ethnomethodological analysis of the interview transcript insofar as it serves my goal of examining the SLA experiences of participants. Ethnomethodological approaches to analyses of interviews treat answers as

accounts. People are interviewed as members of some category or population, for example Korean men who self-identify as gay (Baker, 2003). Accounting for oneself as part of that group is not merely a matter of giving details or replying; it is a way of coordinating versions of how things are or could be and is a reflexive portrayal of the social worlds participants are talking about (p. 399). Keeping this in mind, analyzing interview accounts leads one to focus on the “subjects who lurk behind the interview participants” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 5).

Holstein & Gubrium caution against a traditional view of interviewers and interviewees wherein the interviewer keeps the respondent’s “vessel of answers in plain view” (p. 13) but tries not to influence the “extracted” information. The interview is being reconceptualised as an occasion for participants to construct versions of reality interactionally with the interviewer (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). This viewpoint is compatible with my research assumptions that identity is multiple, continually constructed, and a site of struggle. The varied subject positions expressed in the interview process need to be taken into account during interpretation of the interview’s content, which I do in the next section.

FINDINGS

I do my best to allow the participants to represent their own lives; inevitably, because of space restrictions, I have to be selective in presenting their words. Participants have also expressed that the original transcript (with its careful rendering of every false start and every hesitation) did not represent them well. As the participants are L2 English speakers, I agreed to edit out some of those L2 errors to address their concerns. Please refer to Appendix C for a key of transcription conventions. Utterance numbers on the left correspond to the entire interview. All names of people and places have been changed, and permission was secured from all participants for the publishing of their perspectives.

Pyo: Gay Investment, Nonparticipation, Power Balances

Pyo is a 30-year-old, middle-class self-identified gay man whose language-learning experiences in Manchester demonstrate what Wenger (1998) calls nonparticipation. Excerpt A demonstrates that he is unsatisfied with gay identity construction in Korean. Accounting for himself as a border-crosser between two gay cultures (lines 185 & 187), his account expresses frustration with a negative Korean discourse. He indicates he feels drawn to English in line 189. This investment in the gay imagined community of the West is also influenced by the fact that he sees White men as his “type” (he is attracted to them). He reveals this investment in Excerpt B (line 219).

Excerpt A

185-Pyo . . . when i speak korean? with korean gay guys (2) i::: became more SERIOUS . . .

.....

187-Pyo . . . being a gay in korean society so sometimes it's quite BORING to ME:: . . . OH::y'know? . . . my parents are push me to get married or things like that

.....

189-Pyo . . . but . . . when: i speak english with other like foreigners? at the time y'know it's not necessary to say just like that (1) but just negative way? . . . so i'm quite happy with speak english //with

190-BK //as- as a gay man

191-Pyo YEAH yeah yeah

In Pyo's case this investment does not lead to successful use of English among gay White men. His investment leads to a silencing power differential (Norton, 2000).

Excerpt B

218-BK . . . at THAT time which english speakers did you WANT to speak to

219-Pyo actually in my case my boyfriend (nervous laugh) yeah

.....

236-BK so a FUTURE boyfriend=

237-Pyo =yeah yeah //right

Newcomers to a community of practice who have been granted some legitimacy yet stand on the periphery can use nonparticipation productively to learn (Wenger, 1998). Without legitimacy and access, however, it can lead to marginalization, which was Pyo's experience in Manchester's gay establishments. Speaking from a gay subject position in Excerpt C, line 301, Pyo says he was uncomfortable with White gay men, but he had no trouble speaking with a gay Filipino man. In line 303, he speaks from a gay visible minority subject position, which reflects the relative power balance that he and the Filipino man shared at that time because of their similar situation. This incident was important for Pyo, as he has since had friendships with Filipino gay men, increasing his confidence in English and allowing him to speak to White gay men (his "type").

Excerpt C

301-Pyo . . . one day i went to gay sauna . . . i met one filipino friend but . . . y'know white men is my type . . . sometimes i was uncomfortable in front of face to white guy because i was quite SHY but to filipino? at the time? i:: wasn't because . . . he was not my type

.....

303-Pyo so i FIRST said HI to HIM because i thought hmm it's okay if whether i couldn't speak well or not . . . and we continued the conversation more than one hour . . . just our life in manchester or just being gay: in like minority groups in manchester . . . so i thought WOW it works (laughs) my english works

Hyoung: Gay Investment, Legitimacy/Access, Language Learning

Hyoung is a 35-year-old, middle-class, self-identified gay man. In Excerpt D he speaks as a gay Korean man about reasons for his investment in New Zealand's English-speaking gay community.

Excerpt D

453-Hyoung . . . i don't want to involve the korean community an:d cause i already had a experieance in Singapore an:d that korean community's not very good especially being GAY they wanted to know where am i and so detail

.....

458-Hyoung so i already had experieance . . . they really like SERiously they HAD to know WHO you are WHAT you do . . . and then they suspecting like us being gay cause i lived with BOYfriend and they asked me HOW could you live in that expensive aPARTment

459-BK mm:

460-Hyoung . . . WHY they ASKED me i don't know cause he's MY friend i stayed at my friend's HOUSE (1) HOW do you KNOW him ((Pyo nodding vigorously))

In line 458, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the Korean community in Singapore. The others agree that Koreans typically want to know everything about your life and ask many questions. Hyoung wanted to keep constructing a gay identity in English, but this came into conflict with the nongay identity he was constructing among Koreans in Singapore. Living our lives—with actions and interactions— involves making our memberships coexist, “whether the process of reconciliation leads to successful resolutions or is a constant struggle” (Wenger, 1998, p. 160). For Hyoung in Singapore, it was a struggle, and this later caused him to invest more exclusively in the gay imagined community of New Zealand, and hence in English.

Excerpt E

427-Hyoung . . . actually i stayed at his house for a WHOLE month y'know for one month and . . . then hanging out with friends . . . we hang out on sunday play tennis and quite a regular life and i like that actually? . . .

- 428-BK //mmhm?
 429-Hyoung //mostly his around peoples are very kiwi and i had to speak english all the time? an::d SO . . . i learned MORE english . . .

 445-Hyoung i LIKE it actually environment is so great. . .

In Excerpt E (line 429) he says his English learning in New Zealand was enhanced because the “environment is so great” (line 445). Clearly Hyoung gained legitimacy as a gay man. Unlimited access to his boyfriend’s social network provided him with opportunities to build a gay identity in English and his investment brought him great “symbolic capital” (Norton, 2000). Access, however, was still influenced by sexual identity, as seen in Excerpt F. When asked what kind of people he was most comfortable speaking with in New Zealand (line 700), he admitted he was more comfortable speaking with gay friends than heterosexual ones (line 703).

Hyoung doesn’t understand why this happens and blames himself (line 707). Then again, as he points out, he shares experiences with the gay men (line 707) who “know our life.” Access is easier with them because Hyoung finds immediate legitimacy amongst them.

Excerpt F

- 700-BK so generally what kind of people were you most comfortable speaking with . . .
 701-Hyoung ah in new zealand . . . actually my boyfriend’s friends . . .
 702-BK so were you comfortable with all of those people? speaking // english?
 703-Hyoung //mmm actually straight people is like a little more difficult really . . .

 707-Hyoung i don’t know what’s wrong with me . . . it’s very difficult sometimes and not very much comfortable and then we talk like much comfortable is like GAY people like they know our LIFE and they . . . know the y’know experience and we can SHARE

Tak: Gay Investment, Legitimacy, Counterdiscourse, Access

Tak is a 28-year-old, self-identified gay man from a middle-class background. His language-learning experiences as a gay man in San Francisco highlight the fact that sometimes learners can work against power differences. In Excerpt G (lines 110–122), Tak speaks from a gay male subject position, emphasising his sexual desires. His initial investment in English involved the fact that he was trying to build a gay identity and date White men. In Tak’s account, he did not

speaking explicitly about any dissatisfaction with gay identity construction in Korean, but he often voiced agreement with the other participants that this identity work is less difficult in English.

Excerpt G

110-Tak ((smoking)) so at that time so that's why I learned english and that is one reason and second reason is . . . at that time i really loved the white men

.....

120 Tak yeah i wanted to see the y'know white dick ((laughter)) how big they are y'know

.....

122-Tak yes so if i y'know had i really wanted to have the relationship with white guys so i had to SPEAK (laughs) right? . . .

McKay and Wong (1996) stress the subject's agency: he/she is both positioned by relations of power and resistant to that positioning. Norton Peirce (1995) indicates they may even "set up a counter-discourse which positions [him/her] in a powerful rather than marginal subject position" (p. 16). Tak relates such a shift in agency in Excerpt H (lines 760–768), born of frustration with a lack of effort on the part of Americans he spoke to.

Excerpt H

760-Tak . . . first time i was BLAME MYSELF ((knocking empty cup on table in rhythm with words)) . . .

761-BK ah:: //yeah

762-Tak //because my fucked up english y'know? and then i changed ((tapping cup on table)) because i tried and they don't try . . .

.....

766-Tak so because i was born in THERE so if they don't understand? ((shrugs)) but their FAULT

767-BK //yeah

768-Tak //y'know WHY ((becoming agitated)) if they::: y'know want some then they gonna ASK me RIGHT?

.....

771-BK so how did this attitude influence your english speaking

.....

778-Tak OH actually that made my self CONFidence

This supports the notion that the onus is on the L2 speaker to secure understanding. Tak employs human agency to work against the discourse that says it is the L2 speaker's fault if understanding fails. He reversed the power imbalance out of exasperation and found that his self-confidence increased as a result of this new

attitude (line 778). This is not directly connected to his gay identity, but it shows that access in the broader world of San Francisco was problematic, especially compared to the legitimacy he found in the gay community.

Excerpt I demonstrates that Tak's access to English increased over time in his boyfriend's social network. His gay identity gave him legitimacy among those men, and as a Korean, his access to English was improved because his foreign perspective made him interesting to that community. Language learning was accelerated (line 385).

Excerpt I

375-Tak marshall? marshall always took me . . . to gay bar

376-BK uh-huh?

377-Tak . . . he's old so his friend is not my age and they are very nice and they are quite interested about the korean because . . . before they met me they didn't have any korean friends

.....

385-Tak . . . they are . . . curious about the korean culture . . . and some people even asked about north korean and south korea's . . . politics and that kind of thing so for answer that i learned more vocabulary

In Excerpt J, Tak speaks of the fact that outside of a gay setting, nobody would talk to him (line 550–552). This resonates with Pyo (line 555), who presumably experienced something similar in Manchester.

Excerpt J

552-Tak NObody ((shakes head))

553-BK do people AVOID speaking to you?

554-Tak NO::=

555-Pyo =just ignored

Finally, Tak asserts that gay men have an advantage in gaining access to English-speaking communities of practice (Excerpt K, line 1135). In line 1131, he says his “straight” (heterosexual) friends have no idea how to meet foreigners. He insists that for gay men this is much easier both in Korea and abroad, a sentiment that resonates with the other participants. This is presumably a result of the legitimacy they gain (and are granted) as gay men in certain situations. Barriers are broken by the powerful “mode of belonging” (Wenger, 1998, p. 173) that creates gay imagined communities, providing access to language learning in many cases.

Excerpt K

1119-Tak hey y'know when i talked over the phone with my boyfriend . . . i was speaking english?

1120-BK mhm?

1121-Tak ((puts on naïve voice)) OH who is he OH you speak ENGLISH and oh HOW did you met him . . . they want . . . to FOUND the native speaker like me

.....

1131-Tak yeah because they wanna speak? but they have no idea to meet the foreigners

.....

1135-Tak gay- being gay guy that is the advantage

Tip of the Iceberg

As a product of strategic essentialism, these results might draw criticism because I was very selective in extracting these data from the broader interview. Indeed, a much larger study could be conducted based on the many interesting details I neglect in my attempt to focus on gay identity construction, investment, and access in language learning. This is merely the first step, whereas future research could explore how queerness articulates with other aspects of identity in one person during naturalistic language learning. Identity is multiple and dynamic, rather than static, so this interview study provides only an incomplete “snapshot” of these particular men at a particular time. Longitudinal studies, in-depth narratives, and ethnographic accounts of language learning by queer Koreans (and others) need to be done in order to focus on the dynamic nature of identity construction and language learning (Ricento, 2005). Such methods will broaden understanding of identity and language learning by exploring how experiences and learning vary across time and space both within and between individuals.

Finally, fruitful and plausible research is waiting to be done concerning the influences of heterosexual identity construction and sexual desire on language learning. In its own right, such research will serve to counter heteronormativity, working against the normalized status of heterosexuality, which has been, as Wilchins (2002) has aptly put it, “aged in the keg, and widely enough accepted, [to be] promoted to common sense” (p. 33). By challenging the common-sense status of heteronormative attitudes in SLA, the growing body of inquiry into the social nature of language learning can be enriched and extended. These types of inquiry place studies of how languages are cognitively learned into social and political context, adding to our knowledge about SLA.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the final question of the interactive group interview, the participants were asked to give advice to other Koreans about how best to learn English outside of an instructed setting (see Appendix A). In Excerpt L, Hyoung states his advice.

Excerpt L

847-Hyoung to learn english and then they have to really go FOR it (.) and if you just go there wasting time and just hanging out with like some KOREAN groups they never learn any- just to try to get a local friends and get a more y'know general li:fe (.) language is like a part of culture so you have to understand where they live.

Hyoung emphasizes that taking full advantage of time spent among foreigners (line 847) is a sound strategy. He speaks of the importance of making friends who are from the country of residence because the learning of culture can support the learning of language. This perspective has doubtless been gained from Hyoung's experiences in Singapore and New Zealand. As seen in Excerpt E, his English learning in New Zealand was productive because he spent so much time in a comfortable English-speaking environment.

Tak, in Excerpt M, modifies the idea that having an English-speaking boyfriend is useful for language learning by stressing that mental (cognitive) effort is still required (line 932).

Excerpt M

932-Tak . . . i wanna add (.) (sigh) like having a (.) american english speakers boyfriend that is very good (.) but that is . . . mean something? but not whole thing

934-Tak //even has boyfriend if he . . . not try hard? to . . . learn english? y'know they- their english al::ways every day same

935-BK so it's not automatic

936-Tak //yeah that is not automatic

If a Korean learner and his boyfriend just spend time together, learning will not take place automatically, an echo of Hyoung's perspective that learners have to "go for it" (Excerpt L, line 847). This opinion lends support to the notion that social and cognitive learning are both important in SLA. Moreover, Tak's viewpoint has been influenced by his experiences in San Francisco (see Excerpt H), where he had to use agency to work against being placed in a marginal position for learning English.

Finally, Pyo stresses the need for goals and supports the idea that a relationship with a "foreign" (non-Korean) man should be equal (line 963). It is clear that he has learned from his experiences in Manchester (see Excerpt C) that power differentials can result in problems with language learning in naturalistic contexts. If the two people interacting in a second language do not share an equal interest in each other (line 967), then language learning can be derailed.

Excerpt N

959-Pyo so the goals of learning english should be CLEAR first of all y'know?

.....

963-Pyo and second one is the relationship between korean gay guy and the foreigners the relationship SHOULD be just EQUAL. . . .

.....

967-Pyo so should be same level so . . . i'm very interested in your culture western culture:: and also you sh- mmm and also same level open-minded to other culture so we should understand differences between them mhm?

These three Korean gay men engage in ongoing identity construction like the rest of us, but their attempts to construct a gay identity in Korean are less than satisfying, leading them to invest in imagined gay communities in English-speaking countries. In two cases, they have invested in English partly because of sexual desire. They have struggled to find legitimacy and access in heteronormative contexts and even (in Hyoung's case) among straight people outside of the heteronormative fold. In broader public settings it has been necessary to take legitimacy and access by force through counterdiscourse and agency, whereas in queer settings, these "gay" men have often found easy legitimacy and access. The exception is Pyo, whose investment silenced him in one queer setting, but who has found legitimacy on another queer path. These accounts show that, despite the prevalent heteronormativity of SLA research, queer identities have a significant effect on language learning for these three men. Therefore, ignoring queer perspectives limits the SLA field. "Because language is never neutral, learning it cannot and should not be either" (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 366). By the same token, future research into SLA must delve further into the politics of both naturalistic and classroom contexts. Researchers must continue to focus on power relations between language learners and the people with whom they speak in order to explore the interplay between identity construction and language learning, breaking down the one-dimensional view of language learners that still prevails.

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APPENDIX A

General Starting Questions

1. Tell us who you are, who you hang out with, and what you like to do in your free time.
2. Describe a good language learner. What does that person do? What is that person like?
3. Please listen to this opinion statement. “English is best learned by speaking in English communities.” Do you think so or not? What influenced your answer? What part of speaking English in communities is good? What part is bad?
4. Think silently for a moment about being gay while speaking Korean. Think silently for a moment about being gay while speaking English. Let’s compare those 2 experiences. What parts are the same or different?
5. Which of the two experiences feels better to you? What parts are good for you? What parts are bad for you?

Key Questions

6. Think back to when you first started to learn English. Which English-speakers did you want to speak to someday? Did this stay the same or change as time passed?
7. _____, think back to _____ and your time there. Tell us your story about English in [that place]. [Fill in the other names and places.]
8. (*to be used as follow-up to Question 7*). Think back to that time and describe your mind, goals, and desires.
9. Think back in the past to the places where your stories happened. Before you went, what was your dream about the people there?
10. Think back to the experiences you wrote about. What kind of people wanted to speak with you? What kind of people avoided speaking with you? Did this change with time? What parts changed? What did you do to cause the change?
11. Think back to your experiences you wrote about. What kind of people were you comfortable speaking with in English? Who were you least comfortable with? What influenced your comfort level?
12. In both cases, what was their attitude while you were speaking to them? How about when they were speaking to you? How did that make you feel?
13. What happened to your attitude toward English at that time? What changed as time passed? What influenced that change?

Ending Questions

14. What advice would you give to others who want to learn English outside of the classroom? How about Korean gay men in particular?
15. Now let's talk about anything that was missed.

APPENDIX B

The following is the preliminary writing task, which participants received by e-mail. They submitted their writing at the initial orientation meeting. I used it to focus my questions for the interactive group interview and to stimulate the participants' memories, for these experiences might have happened several years ago in some cases.

Writing Task

Some people think that the best way to learn a language is by speaking that language outside of the classroom. Write in English about your experiences using

a language (besides Korean) among a group of people who often speak that language together. Please describe two experiences:

- a. (100–250 words) Describe a negative experience that you had while speaking a language (besides Korean) among a group of people who often speak that language together. During your time among those people, you were *not* satisfied with your language learning.
- b. (100–250 words) Describe a positive experience that you had while speaking a language (besides Korean) among a group of people who often speak that language together. During your time among those people, you were satisfied with your language learning.

When you tell your stories about positive and negative experiences, please tell information about who? what? when? where? with whom? language used? misunderstandings and difficulties?

APPENDIX C

Transcription Notation System

- // Slashes indicate the point at which a current speaker's talk is overlapped by another's talk.
- = Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning of the next, indicate no gap between the two lines.
- word- A hyphen indicates abruptly cut-off speech.
- (1) Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time of silence in seconds
- (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny gap, less than 1 sec.
- :: Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. The length of the row of colons indicates the length of the prolongation.
- WORD Capitals indicate especially emphasized sounds compared to surrounding talk (including "I").
- [word] Square-bracketed words are possible hearings.
- (()) Double parentheses contain author's descriptions rather than transcriptions.
- ? Indicates rising intonation in the previous syllable.
- xxx This means garbled speech. One "x" for every word that is impossible to decipher.
- ... An ellipsis means that something has been removed by the analyst.
- Three ellipses, centered, indicate that whole lines have been removed.