

**YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW: PARENTAL INVESTMENT IN LANGUAGE
LEARNING AND ITS REFLECTION IN A SEVEN-YEAR OLD'S WORLD**

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ABSTRACT

According to the 2000 Census, 329 different languages, including English, are spoken in the United States today. With the increasing number of immigrant and international groups, a number of topics such as language learning, language loss and maintenance, and bilingual education have started to follow an important line of investigation in the past few decades in the nation. Although language learning is a complex process and an outcome of the interaction between the cognitive processes and the social contexts attached to them, most of the research, especially in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), concentrated on linguistic construction and simply overlooked the strong relationship between one's social identity and language learning. This study, by looking at the data from a case study of a South Korean family in the United States, calls attention to this disregard through an examination of Norton's view of "investment" as opposed to "motivation" in the participants' choices in terms of language learning.

Key Words: language investment, motivation, second language, foreign language, language learning, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Norton

INTRODUCTION

Learner attitudes and affective factors influencing success in L2 learning and development have been explored in numerous prominent studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and motivation, among other variables, has been persistently scrutinized in such studies (i.e., Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Krashen, 1982; Schumann,

1978; Spolsky, 1989). Motivation, by tradition, has been defined as the directed exertion to strive to learn the language due to an inert desire and the feeling of accomplishment associated with this activity (i.e., Gardner, 1985).

Gardner and Lambert (1972), after a long-term investigation of attitudes and motivation, have concluded that the learners' mind-set and attitudes toward the target language, its speakers and culture contribute greatly to the degree of incentive to learn that language. They have introduced two distinct types of motivation, a premise that has long dominated the SLA research; *instrumental motivation* characterized by a desire to learn a language for practical motives such as passing a test, fulfilling a requirement for school, employment or travel, and *integrative motivation* that refers to an aspiration to learn a language due to an anticipated sense of connection with a particular L2 community and the hope to identify with and become part of that community.

Gardner (1985), in the Socio-Educational Model, discusses the social and cultural milieu, individual learner differences, the setting, and learning outcomes as four interconnected aspects of L2 learning with respect to motivation, and describes second language motivation as an intricate construct made of effort, desire and positive affect. Thus, according to Gardner, highly motivated learners make an immense effort to learn the language by availing themselves of various opportunities of practice; they express a genuine desire to master the language; and they truly enjoy the task and process of learning the language, even at times when their enthusiasm tends to decline. This model implies the notion that L2 learning and success is adjudicated by the learners' motivation, and that differences in second language proficiency are rooted in individuals' diverse motivational status.

A similar unitary and ahistorical view of motivation that assumes an isolated self and a fixed identity is observed in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Krashen argues that a number of affective variables including motivation, self-confidence and anxiety, all of which he relates to the individual rather than the shifting social context, play a facilitative, though non-causal, role in second language acquisition. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation and self-confidence, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for victory in second language acquisition, whereas learners with reverse traits are more likely to confront a mental block that will hinder the comprehensible input, and thus, obstruct language acquisition.

These and other analogous theories of SLA (i.e., Schumann's Acculturation Model, 1978) assume that motivation is no different than a physical entity one either has or does not have, or has or does not have enough of, and that the more disposed and *motivated* learners are to master a second language, the more successful they *will* be in doing so. This view impulsively puts the full blame for ineffective language learning outcomes on the learners, as they are then believed to have failed to sustain a necessary level of commitment and drive in the language learning process, paying no heed to the fact that motivation and social context are indivisible and that motivation is anchored in individuals' reciprocal relationships and collective practices.

In a number of studies, Norton (1995, 1997, and 2000) criticizes the way in which SLA theorists have understood the language learner's relationship to the social world. She proposes that social identity is the unpredictable outcome of a combination of diverse systems in which people come to terms with who they are in relation to others around them, and is highly influenced by the way they view the past, present, and the future, respectively. In light of this, Norton (1995) also questions the early investigations of nonlinguistic variables included in the theories of motivation in SLA (i.e., Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1982; Schumann, 1978; Spolsky, 1989) that consider motivation as a distinguishing characteristic of the language learner in an attempt to quantify the learner's commitment to learning a second language, without even paying attention to the complex dynamic relationship between the learner and the social world.

Norton (1995), in her exploration of the underlying principle behind the actions and reactions of the immigrant women in her study, comes up with the concept of investment, which is linked to the social context and assumes a complex social identity, changing across time and space, and having multiple desires unlike motivation advocating a static identity and a singular desire on the part of the language learner. Correspondingly, through detailed individual portraits of the ways in which opportunities to practice speaking English were socially structured for participants in her later study, Norton (2000) demonstrates that, no matter how *motivated* and prepared language learners are, they do not always feel comfortable, nor are they at all times permitted, to interact with whom they choose, as they are often inhibited by inequitable relations of power, shifting notions of identity, and even antagonism in the target language environment, which is ideally believed to provide nothing, but a

supportive naturalistic language learning context.

Furthermore, considering the readiness to produce the language that the theories of SLA ardently desire, one should note that “a learner’s motivation to speak is mediated by other investments that may conflict with the desire to speak—investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners’ identities and their desires for the future” (Norton, 2000, p. 120). In other words, learners’ communal ties and anticipated future uses of the second language have an impact on their choices of engagement in the language learning process. Thus, as Norton (1995) argues, people, when they interact, not only exchange information, but also restructure an identity and how it relates to the outer world. For this reason, for her, speaking a language is investing in an identity as speakers of that language with the hope of gaining access to a wider range of symbolic (i.e., education, occupation, friendship) and material resources (i.e., real estate, money). Investment in this sense accounts for ambivalent desires and feelings in the process of language learning, and answers the question motivation has long failed to answer, why learners are willing and geared up at times, and reluctant and not ready at other times.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In an attempt to identify the underlying factors contributing to cultural and linguistic loss or maintenance in an international setting, and, at the same time, to assess the linguistic, social and psychological impact of L2 on the child's L1 over time, a qualitative research design has been implemented in this study. Although there is no universal definition of qualitative research, for Merriam (1998), it is “an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). Qualitative research is an inductive approach and a naturalistic inquiry method that has the goal of gaining a deeper holistic perspective of people’s experiences, incorporates data collected in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers, and offers no intervention, treatment or manipulation of participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). The basic principle of a qualitative study is that “meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). According to Ross (1999), qualitative approaches to research are based

on a “world view,” and have the following assumptions: 1) there is not a single reality; 2) reality is based on different perceptions and changes over time for each person; and 3) what we know has meaning, only within a specific context.

The majority of past educational research has been based on the quantitative approach to research design (Borg & Gall, 1989). As helpful as this has been, quantitative research, by nature, is limited to uncovering new knowledge concerning issues that can only be quantitatively, or in the traditional sense, objectively, evaluated. However, not all educational concerns emanate from variables that can be gauged with numbers or analyzed through statistical procedures, nor would educational issues necessarily lead to cause-effect relationships or generalizations about a theory. Likewise, some problems call for an evaluation through the appraisal of merit, value, or worth of a phenomenon. Thus, as Cresswell (2003) discusses, a “match between problem and approach” is essential in deciding a framework for design (p. 21). Pursuing this observation, and due to an interest in “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6), a qualitative design was opted for in the current study.

As a type of qualitative research, the case study format has been chosen “to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Since the focus of this study was on exploring beliefs and attitudes that are hard to observe, it was crucial to grasp, through the case study method, an intense and evolving understanding of wide-ranging issues that would then lead to particular findings. As Merriam (1998) argues, the case study format differs from other forms of qualitative research in that it offers rigorous descriptions and analyses of an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community, and thus, was deemed to be an appropriate selection for this study to help better understand the intrinsically bounded system in question.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The study took place at a large Midwestern university in a small city (population of 65,000) in the United States. The university offers numerous undergraduate, graduate, as well as certification and distance education programs in various fields of study, and has a large

international student population from around the world. To find the best case available to study, a key selection criterion was established as “an international family, with at least one school-aged child.” As the aim was to discover, understand, and gain insight into an important issue, selecting a sample from which the most could be learned was essential. Given this, the sample selection method decided on in this study was “purposeful” (Patton, 1990, p. 173). This selection could also be regarded as “convenient sampling” (Merriam, 1998, p. 3) for two main reasons: first, the family was introduced to the researcher by an international acquaintance, who has known the family for approximately one year. Second, based on the researcher’s initial conversation with the family members, a negotiation was made that the researcher would not interview the entire family, but would interview the father and the daughter only, due to reasons such as time constraints and availability of respondents.

The family under discussion in this study was from South Korea, and had been in the United States for about twenty months at the time of the interviews. The first participant, the father, was in his late thirties, and was studying towards a master’s degree in Counselor Education at a major research university in the Midwestern United States. His daughter, the second participant in this study, was about seven and a half years old, and was a first grader at an American elementary school. The other two members of the family, who did not participate in this study, were the mother, and the eleven-year old son of the family, who was a fourth grader in the same school as his sister. Both parents were highly educated, former elementary school teachers in South Korea, with a few years of teaching experience. The family did not anticipate long-term or permanent residence in the United States at the time of this research, and were making plans to move back to South Korea within a year upon the father’s completion of his graduate studies.

Procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol (a mix of more- and less-structured questions) was developed for this study, and one interview was conducted with each participant consequently. The interview questions included some short factual questions to start with and core questions that were organized in several sections such as, but not limited to, education and linguistic development, homework and lessons, strategies and support systems, error correction, and bilingual identity. A non-direct approach was followed in the interviews, as the

purpose of this study was not disclosed to the respondents and was not completely obvious given the nature of the interviews. The interviews were in the form of a *conversation* rather than *inquiry*, and the researcher showed great compassion in understanding the participants, following Merriam's (1998) statement that "empathy is the foundation of rapport" (p. 23). Correspondingly, both interviewees were enthusiastic to talk, and presented a positive attitude toward the researcher. Each interview took about 45 minutes to complete, and was tape-recorded with the father's consent. Interviews were then transcribed word for word, as "verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 88). As a further step, the transcriptions were carefully read and analyzed in terms of common themes that emerged. Finally, the most recurrent themes governing the interviews were picked, and certain quotations from the participants' responses that characterized these themes were logged on a Microsoft word file to explore through the lens of previous research, primarily of Norton's concept of investment versus motivation. Member checks, verifying the interview transcripts and findings with the research participants, were used as a method of obtaining the credibility of the data.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The data revealed various examples of what Norton (1995, 1997, and 2000) called "investment." As an international parent in the United States, the father demonstrated an investment in furthering the use of both Korean and English in his children for various reasons. In view of language diversity as a *resource*, rather than as a *problem*, the father's beliefs and actions provided an adequate amount of evidence of an effort to protect and nurture the two languages by not suppressing or accommodating any one of them. Jun-ho¹, talking about bilingualism, illustrated a fine picture of this positive view, as well as the investment he had in his children's language learning process:

I think it's very good, because they, some research, I read some research that if people speak two languages, two different languages, they can be a smart person, because their right hand, the right, right brain and left brain work together, so it's kind of help, yeah. So I just enjoy them to speak two different languages.²

The father's desire to learn about issues related to language and

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language learning, demonstrated above, is hard to explain through the concept of motivation. His aspiration to explore research on bilingualism is not simply due to a hunt for the answer to an urgent question or for instant help in guiding his decisions regarding his children's education, but seems to be supported by an expectation to receive a type of return on his time and efforts. Another good example of this undertaking, blended with the same positive approach towards bilingualism came later in the interview:

Yeah, because our intellectual ability can improve in specific ways, so people can learn at least two languages in perfect way I think. I think they support each other. I think, it can, I think they can compensate each other even though; they can help each other, like facility. That means, some like, like language professionals say, a person who can speak one language like perfect way also can learn a different language in perfect way.

The use of both English as a second language, and Korean as the mother tongue were supported by members of the case family in this study. However, as disclosed in the data, it was hard at times to determine what language to put the emphasis on and how to do so, because both languages seemed to have particular uses and payoffs in So-yeon's³ future. In this Korean family, many areas of investment for So-yeon's future emerged, and they will be identified below through a discussion of results in two categories: Investment in English: Second Language Learning, and Investment in Korean: Home Language Maintenance. A discussion of how her parents' investment in her language was reflected in So-yeon's own beliefs and actions will follow.

Investment and Second Language Learning

The first investment in English showed up in one of the initial decisions the mother and father made for their children: enrolling them in an American school, unlike many other Korean parents who choose to send their children to a Korean school. The rationale behind this was to help the children learn English faster without any interruptions, thus making the adjustment procedure easier for them. Motivation would not be satisfactory to explain this decision, considering the fact that Jun-ho had conflicting views with the school policies that he, sooner or later, had to close his eyes to, just for the sake of his children and their success in their status as *students and residents in the United States*.

I don't think it is kind of issue, because if I just want my children just to learn any Korean language, I don't need to let them just attend an American school, because I, as long as I let them just attend an American school, I should follow the rules and the school policy. So if they do not like show like any English improvement, they cannot follow their schoolwork.

Another investment, that goes along with that, was the parents' decision to encourage the use of English at home in their first months of stay in the United States. Unlike many parents who disregard the recommendations of educators and go beyond the boundaries by forcing their children to speak the second language at home, causing adverse effects on children's language and identity development, Jung-ho, though troubled by his children's lack of English in an English-speaking society, was very well aware of the slow, but steady, progress that was to follow. He explained:

At first time honestly I just reinforced them, just encouraged them to speak English inside home, because I really kind of worry about their language; because they don't speak English, they cannot understand English. So I just wanted to help them through let them speak English even inside home. But now... but they couldn't speak English, but now their...my son and daughter mostly speak English even inside home, or sometimes they speak English to me and to mom, so it's kind of gradual change.

To provide another reason for the investment in English, Jung-ho affirmed that he felt it was important for his daughter to learn English, in addition to other languages, as the world is becoming smaller with the impact of globalization:

This is, you know, a global world, so they should learn as many languages, they should learn like, besides Korean, they should learn English, French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese.

Although monetary reasons and financial matters were not brought up often in the interviews as part of the investment decisions made, Jung-ho was alert to the necessity of learning English in the Korean education system, as well as the price to do so. He provided a good

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example:

In my country, from third grader, classroom teachers try...we have curriculum, from third grader in elementary school, we have to teach English. So learning English is really, kinda expensive in my country, so I hope my children to maintain and include it in their life.

Evidently, this investment suggested a “kill two birds with one stone” strategy. Jung-ho was not only thinking about whether learning English would give his daughter access to material resources in the future, but also was investing in his own identity as a father, who would later come to terms with the cost of his daughter’s learning English. This example also suggests that different investments might be included in a single investment action.

Investment and Home Language Maintenance

Although Norton’s notion of investment was centered on the second language, findings in this study indicated that “investment” was also applicable when we talked about the first (home) language. Maintaining Korean was seen as an asset in So-yeon’s life for various reasons. One, and perhaps the biggest, area of investment in Korean was for the children’s future identity as *students in South Korea*. Jun-ho repeatedly talked about the differences between the Korean and American school systems and raised concerns regarding the prospect of his children’s imminent return to South Korea the following year and her education-to-start in the South Korean education system subsequently. He added that his daughter shared the same fear of the likelihood of problems to occur in a supposedly native, but entirely new educational context:

She is really concerned about that, because I sometimes I tell her, to my daughter and son, to prepare for them to just one day they go back to Korea, maybe they have totally different situation, different schools, educate them ‘hey, Korean school is different, they don’t have this kind of system, this kind of facility, huge difference; the teachers like, like, teach in a different way’.

Similarly, Jun-ho anticipated that language might be a barrier to his children’s success in schooling in South Korea upon their return to the

country:

Korean students in her same age like can speak Korean really fluently, and they can write down a lot of great expressions, so I'm really concerned, because if they compete with each other, she cannot follow them, catch up with them, so in kind of in terms of preparation I started to let them write Korean journal and something like that.

The last, but not least, investment in Korean was for the children's identity as Korean nationals. For Jun-ho, how his children understand their relationship to the world as Koreans, along with the possibilities for a future, in a society constantly providing mixed messages regarding who they are, was a way of empowerment, and would mean recognition of their roots, and thus, was tremendously important, as suggested by the quote "...our culture, our ancestors, we have long history, so she is also Korean."

So-yeon's Response to Parental Investment

Results confirmed that So-yeon acted positively in response to her parents' investment in her second language learning and home language maintenance. This investment was reflected in her linguistic/meta-cognitive awareness in English, as well as in her responsiveness to learn and speak Korean for specific purposes.

It was remarkable to perceive that So-yeon, a very bright little girl, was overly mindful to the language and language use. She stated that she liked speaking two languages as she found it "cute." She identified herself as a Korean and with the Korean language and culture at every possible occasion; yet, she knew how to make certain resources, such as education in the United States, accessible by investing herself in English. At the same time, she was planning ahead for her future by taking into account the need for English in Korea and how her current investment in English would make things trouble-free and simple for her later: "When I go to Korea again, then I will, I will remember, I think I can, I can learn English more faster, I think."

In light of what is presented above, it would not be surprising to observe the meta-linguistic awareness So-yeon created as part of her *investing* personality. Yet, one of the great instances of this fact, demonstrated by the seven-year old, was striking. Talking about how much she liked being corrected, so that she could advance her

knowledge in the language, she explained: “One time I said ‘I buy something, I buy something,’ and then they said, my brother said ‘you bought something,’ not ‘I buy something’.”

While all of these factors were helping her to open herself up for better learning experiences in English, So-yeon was also capable of exhibiting actions that could be associated with her investment in Korean, which can be viewed as a main part of her home-language maintenance. First of all, her awareness of the vital need for Korean is worth noting here, and is a good representation of parental expectations. When responding to a question about what reasons her parents would give her for error correction in Korean, she said: “Because I have to know Korean better than English.”

So-yeon’s consciousness of why she needs to speak Korean seemed to have been raised by certain dynamics. Bringing up the reasons she felt invested in Korean, for instance, she pointed to her mother’s low proficiency in English: “When I talk to my mom, I speak in Korean, and she can understand very good.” So-yeon made reference to the same theme later in the interview. She said she would tell her mom what had happened at school only in Korean, because of the fact that her mom could not understand English. For So-yeon, this inquiry to connect with her mother emotionally and socially was a symbolic resource, which was embedded in her investment.

Confirming her father’s assertion about the concern she had for schooling in South Korea, So-yeon declared that she anticipated language problems. To invest in her future identity as a student in a Korean school, she took further steps to eliminate this potential problem. The first step was to identify her biggest trouble with the Korean language; writing. Although she asserted that she liked speaking Korean better than English, she could not write in it. Therefore, she was to contribute to the parental investment by performing a writing activity at home inspired by a similar one done in English for school. She declared: “I write journal in school, because I have to do, and it’s hard to write journal in Korean, because I don’t know how to write it, it’s hard, so I have to practice.”

LIMITATIONS

Although this research sheds light on language investment based on the findings from a single case, it presented certain limitations. To begin

with, this study was a short-term project that took three to four months to complete. Such a study would require a much longer timeframe to work on so that a deeper understanding of the case under investigation could be obtained. Additionally, triangulation of the data with observations would strengthen the reliability of the findings, and could also help provide rapport between the participants and the researcher, which could eliminate the possible restraints of an “etic” perspective (Merriam, 1998, p. 7) by offering a better picture of the intrinsic cultural features of the case in question.

CONCLUSION

Norton’s notion of investment applied well to the case that has been investigated in this study. The participants unveiled a universal need for recognition and welfare in society, which often produced manifold, and at times contradictory, dreams and desires, and presented models of investment with expectations to receive returns that would give them access to previously unattainable symbolic or material resources. Confirming Norton (2000), although seldom, there were conflicts between the ongoing production of So-yeon and her desires for the future at times. However, it should be noted that the findings of this research went beyond the limits of Norton’s studies in several ways and suggested a re-conceptualization of her view of investment.

First, Norton talked mainly about “investment in second language learning,” but this study supported the view that first language investment is no different than second language investment in an international context where the home language does not get special attention and the schooling is conducted in the second language, and especially with young learners. Although Norton neglected the status of first (home) language investment in respect to second language learning, this study provided evidence for a close tie between the two languages, as the maintenance of the first language with reasonable stipulation for the learning of the second language was evident. Second, Norton’s notion of investment originated from studies of immigrant adult women. While this study showed that investment was present in a completely different setting and with different participants, new ethnographic studies of investment focusing on international vs. immigrant settings, women vs. men, and adult vs. children participants, are strongly encouraged. Finally, Norton referred to investment as her participants’ own product; yet, the findings of this study revealed that people can invest for others

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(i.e., parents for children), or that investment decisions and actions can well be shared by individuals (i.e., parents and children).

Nonetheless, supporting Norton, the findings suggested that language learners are not ahistorical, one-dimensional and always coherent, but rather have complex and sometimes contradictory social identities, changing across time and space. Just like speaking a language is not merely exchanging information, but is relentlessly reshuffling our identities and how we connect to other people and the social world, learning a language is a *raison d'être* for the anticipation of prospective revenues and power, without which linguistic and social development could face restraints. Since a low affective filter does not always guarantee the desire to learn or practice a language, the use of a term like *motivation*, which takes away from the lived experiences and identity reproductions of the learners as social beings, needs to be reconsidered. Alternatively, *investment*, as an operational term, would successfully explicate the learners' ambivalent desires by highlighting the fact that learners habitually seek a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital in a given social context. In conclusion, understanding the language with reference to its social meaning rather than perceiving it as an objective medium of communication must be the starting point of all research in second language learning, as well as an important message language teachers should convey.

NOTES

1. Jun-ho is a pseudonym for participant one (father).
2. All quotes are verbatim transcriptions from the interview data, and no attempts have been made to alter them for grammatical accuracy.
3. So-yeon is a pseudonym for participant two (daughter).

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