

# A Study of the Situation of the Saturday Korean School in the U.S.

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**Kim, Kyung-Ryung. 2005. A Study of the Situation of the Saturday Korean School in the U.S. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 13(2), 1-21.** This paper is to study the current Korean language programs in Illinois, USA, where is densely populated by Korean students and Korean- Americans. In particular, this study focuses on the contexts of programs, organizational set-ups, observational data on dialogues and interactions, the frequency of language mixing(code switching). Also 1-to-1 interviews with parents, teachers and students, have been conducted to analyze the attitudes toward bilingual related issues. Therefore, this study approaches the issue via quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The result shows that the most programs employ conventional teaching style(lecture) and this con-ventionality prevents bilingual students from learning Korean in an active way and fail to motivate the students.

**Key words:** Korean Language School, Korean Language Education, Dialogue, Language Acquisition, Teaching Materials, Language Program

## 1. Introduction

Between birth and the age of five or six, most children begin to speak one language freely enough to express themselves. And in some cases, children learn two or three languages to express themselves. This early period of development is critical in language acquisition because the learning occurs more rapidly and more permanent than language learning at later/older stages.

Many Korean parents living abroad want to raise their children as bilingual speakers of, mostly, Korean and English. To do so, most

parents overseas plan to teach Korean when their children are old enough to recognize their Korean identity. In the US, English is the official language and all formal education is provided in English. However, no formal education in Korean is provided for the children in the critical period of language acquisition, even though some major colleges provide Korean language courses for linguistically grown-ups.

In order to support the Korean-American children's communicative competence in both languages, informal Korean language schools have been set up as an alternative to formal institutions. These schools serve the dual purpose of strengthening the children's overall language development, and enabling them to become bilingual in English and Korean.

Cummins (1979) suggests that there are positive benefits to be derived from a bilingual school experience—specifically, children gain vocabulary and conceptual knowledge. If the child does have a limited understanding of the new language, then the first language which is already fully understood, can help to embody the new words. There are many studies which support this claim (Basena, 1995 ; Genessee, Nicoladis & Paradis, 1995; Koppe, 1996). These researchers argue that the use of certain functions of language including the development of vocabulary and concepts in the first language is important for developing skill in other languages.

Most of the Korean schools in the US are church-based, since Korean churches in the US are a focal point of socialization and Korean-American culture. Attending the weekend (typically Saturday) Korean school, Korean-American children not only learn Korean but also make Korean friends and experience features of Korean culture such as food and music. Positive attitudes toward the culture and the language itself, as well as motivation can play important roles in language acquisition. Gardner and Lambert (1972) tested the hypothesis that a positive attitude toward a group would increase the motivation for learning the group's language. They applied the motivational tests to a group of eleventh grade anglophone students in Montreal. The results indicated that language proficiency was related to individual differences in attitudes toward the

target group (French Canadians). They distinguished between two kinds of orientation-integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation implies a desire to be like members of the other language community. Instrumental motivation implies a desire to gain social recognition or economic gain by learning a foreign language.

In light of these findings, it is useful to examine the motivation of Koreans in overseas for learning Korean. In other words, the nature of Korean school teachers and parents' motivations and their expectations of the Korean school can influence the learning efficiency of Korean in the weekend Korean school.

The purposes of this study are to consider the operational facts, to evaluate the effects of teaching style on bilingual education, and to identify the motivation/incentives of bilingual students and their parents.

As stated earlier, Korean weekend schools play an important role as cultural and social focal points beyond their function as in formal education institutions. Therefore, it is of critical importance to understand Korean weekend schools from a variety of perspectives many such as placement of students(how to evaluate students' language proficiency and place them in classes of appropriate level), teaching goals, methods and materials, ways to encourage parent involvement. This research attempts to answer these questions.

To address these points, a case study has been done by observing an weekend Korean school and its students in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA. Most of the students there are offspring of Korean-American parents and Korean graduate students. To support observation/analysis, sessions were audio/video taped wherever appropriate, accompanied by interviews and questionnaires.

## **2. Specific Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

Instruction in the Korean school was done by 11 native Korean

speaking teachers. Some of these had been elementary or middle school teachers in Korea. Others were college students in Ph.D. programs. Their majors were in liberal arts such as education, music, and literature. Other teachers were housewives whose husbands had come to America for academic purposes. Most of the Korean teachers were living in the US and planned to return to Korea within 5 years.

From these eleven teachers, three Korean school teachers were selected for this study. Korean teachers -T1, T2- were students in a Ph.D. program and the third teacher -T3- was a housewife, who had elementary school teaching experience in Korea.

Among the Korean students who were attending at the Korean school, three young Korean-American bilingual children participated in this study. They were all boys and first-born children. S1 was 6 years and 6 months of age ; S2 was 4 years ; S3 was three years old reckoning by American age. Parents of the participants also contributed to the interviews, providing more detailed information with respect to language attitude and motivations.

## **2.2. Context**

Observation was conducted at a Korea Saturday school. Korean classes were taught every Saturday morning from 10 to 2 o'clock at a Korean church. The Korean Saturday school consists of 8 classes. Classes were divided into groups of children under the age of 5 and children above the age of 5. There were 5 more classes for each grade as in an elementary school (from first grade to fifth grade). Each class had 7-8 students in average. It was primarily classes of 6 and 6 years-olds that were observed for this study. Table 1 indicates observation frequency, length of time, audio tape recording session and subject.

Table 1. Audio Tape Recording in the Korean Saturday School

| Observation | Tape  | Length (h:m) | Subjects (students / teachers) |
|-------------|-------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 1           | Audio | 2:40         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 2           | Audio | 2:40         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 3           | Audio | 1:30         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 4           | Audio | 2:20         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 5           | Audio | 1:20         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 6           | Audio | 2:20         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 7           | Audio | 2:20         | S1, S2 / T1, T2                |
| 8           | Audio | 0:30         | S3 / T3                        |
| 9           | Audio | 1:00         | S3 / T3                        |

\*The data has been extracted from the Ph.D. thesis work of the author.

### 2.3. Transcription Criteria

The Korean teachers and students were free to speak in Korean or in English and sometimes they mixed (code-switched) the two languages at the Korean Saturday school. An example of the raw data is presented in Appendix A. Korean and English were transcribed in each language and were using an automatic grammatical tagging program, the utterances were counted.<sup>1)</sup> Language mixing utterances were counted separately. In the present study, Korean and English data are analysed following Brown (1973, p.54) and Choi (1997, p.61)'s coding schema. Only fully transcribed utterances are used. Count as one morpheme all irregular parts of the verb. Count as one morpheme all diminutive. Count as separate morpheme all auxiliaries. Count as separate morphemes all inflections. In Korean, verbs are analyzed by component parts, the verb root and tense suffix. Each component counts as a separate morpheme, etc.

To understand the communication dynamics between teachers and students, the sentence classification of Ramirez (1992) has been adopted and modified such that 'utterance' signifies 'response'.

1) The university of Oslo and the Norwegian Computing Center invented the automatic grammatical tagging system (1983).

## **2.4. Interview**

The main objective for this interview was to investigate the Korean teachers, parents and their children's motivations and attitudes in taking Korean class at the Korean Saturday school. Korean teachers, parents and students were interviewed in order to obtain this information. The actual interview questionnaire is presented in Appendix B.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1. Language Used**

There is a basic rule at the Korean Saturday school. Korean teachers, parents and students are expected to speak only in Korean. For them, the Korean Saturday school was the only situation (outside the Korean church) where they could to speak, read and write entirely in Korean.

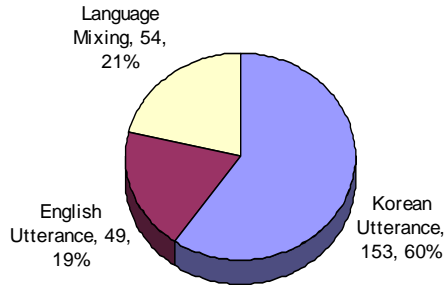
Against the rules and these motivations, Korean/English bilingual students in this study show variance when they interact with peers and teachers. Most of the students tried to use Korean within the Korean school setting (60%). But both English and Korean language mixing utterances appear 40% of the time according to the observations.

The Korean students preferred to speak English or to mix the languages mainly when they did not understand the meaning of the Korean; Korean/English bilingual students tried to utilize the English vocabulary when they did not understand the meaning of new Korean vocabulary.

Teachers spoke mainly in Korean in the classes at the Korean Saturday school. However, when students did not understand, they explained in English or mix two languages.

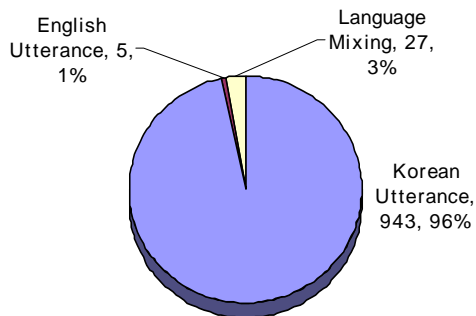
Teachers at the school claimed that children did not listen when they mixed English and Korean. But when a teacher used only Korean, the students tended to focus intently, it was claimed.

Figure 1. Spoken Language in the Korean Saturday School by students



Most of the Korean teachers tried to speak only in Korean even when students asked questions in English or when they needed further explanation. The Korean teachers adhered to the rule of using "only Korean" throughout the semester. Owing to this policy, 89% of the utterances by teachers were Korean and 11% of the utterances were English or mixed Korean-English utterances.

Figure 2. Spoken Language in the Korean Saturday School by teachers



The Korean teachers preferred to code-switch when they had significant difficulty explaining a concept using Korean vocabulary. In such cases, they resorted to mix the two languages. Interestingly, the

teachers spoke English more frequently in the classes of older children than in those of younger children. This suggests that older children begin to prefer to understand new Korean word through the English and they are more exposed to English speaking environments such as American schools.

### 3.2. Interaction among Teacher and Students

When comparing the number of utterances, it was founded that Korean teachers spoke 4 times more than students. The teachers generally "explained" rather than leading the class though "conversation." Most of the teachers had the similar teaching style which is popular in Korea; relying heavily on reading and writing. They spent a lot of time explaining and directing students to write throughout the class.

Figure 3. Comparison of Teacher/Student Utterance at Saturday School Classes

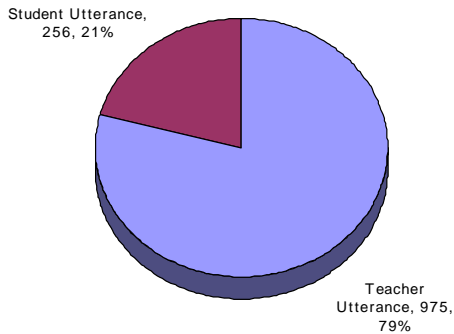


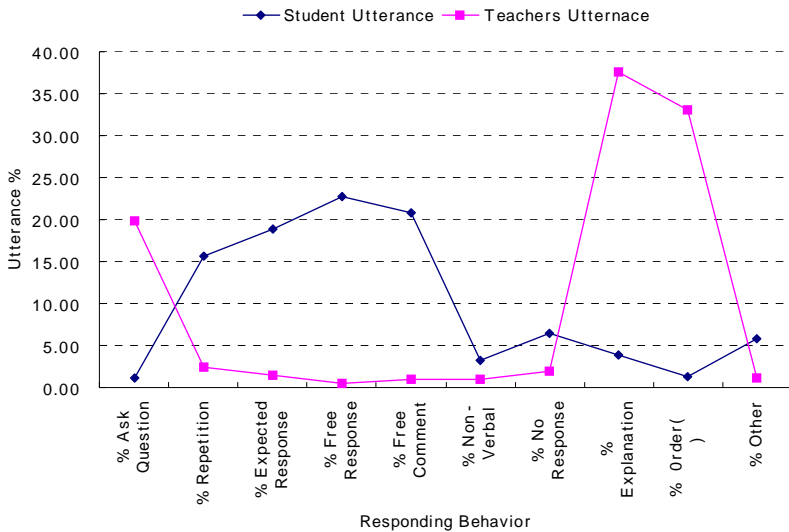
Figure 3 analyzes the utterances in the Korean teachers' and students' interaction. The Korean teachers mainly led the class by "explanation" and "instruction" strategies. They strongly preferred giving specific orders(instructions) such as "do this, do that, read it, write it," while students preferred to respond in more varied ways to the teachers'



instructions. Utterances occurred mainly in four categories - free response, free comment, expected response and repetition.

Figure 4(next page) shows the responding behavior of students in the Korean Saturday school. In the figure, it is apparent that responding behavior of student utterance is in inverse proportion to that of teachers. For example, 37.6 % of explanation by teachers is high whereas 3.9 % of explanation by students is low. This tendency prevails throughout the whole responding behaviors exception of 4.8 % non-verbal and 5.2 % no response behaviors (both teachers and students).

Figure 4. Responding behaviors in the Korean Saturday School



### 3.3. Text Book Used

Pre-schoolers (Children aged 4 and 5)

In the classes for 4 and 5 year olds children, flexible/informal text materials were used. Teachers sometimes made handouts or used text

books published by a Korean company. Specifically, a teacher who taught 5 year olds mainly focused on reading and writing in Korean. Teachers and parents expected their children to meet Korean friends and have fun at the Korean school. They wanted their children to develop natural study habits at an early age in reading and writing Korean.

Most of the bilingual children had difficulty trying to learn from the Korean text books written for Korean speaking monolingual children in Korea. Language learning proceeds much more efficiently when students understand the social and cultural background of the language.

The bilingual students' social and cultural backgrounds were very different from the backgrounds of the monolinguals'. For example, the Korean-American students try to learn and understand Korean in American society and culture. This troubles the bilingual students. Therefore, textbooks developed specifically for bilingual students are absolutely necessary for more efficient Korean language acquisition.

To overcome the difficulty presented by this lack of adequate materials, teachers at the Saturday school modify the textbooks on an ad hoc basis and improvise. Teachers might supplement the textbook in advertently using illustrations that have an relevance in the American school context.

Teachers endeavor to speak only Korean in the classroom but this becomes difficult when they want to explain concepts specific to Korean culture. Sometimes, this strategy is more efficient. It is interesting to note that older students understand explanation in English better than in Korean, This implies that English becomes the more dominant language as they grow older.

Most of the class sessions are devoted to writing and speaking. Classes are structured with time designated specifically for writing. A writing assignment is given each week -intended not to be overload but to involve parents in the learning experience, where such assistance is not possible, tutors may be engaged.

#### Elementary school age children:

There are 5 classes for elementary school students. The same text book which is used in Korea is used for these classes. Because students in the Saturday school have very different expectations or motivations for learning Korean, and since individual differences also come into play the primary textbook is supplemented by handouts prepared by the teachers.

For example, most of the students in 4th grade classes have Korean-American parents. They are permanent residents in the U. S who have no plan to live in Korea and therefore need only basic communication skill in Korean is needed. The 5th grade classes, on the other hands, have more students whose parents are studying in the US, and will return to Korea after staying 6 or 7 years. These parents understandably want their children to learn more advanced Korean writing and reading. In other cases, the students are mixed; some will remaining in the US and some will return to live in Korea. In such cases, teachers cannot rely merely one textbook.

In the year that, these observations were conducted, the 5th grade students achieved very high academic performance in Korean. The teacher primarily used the same high level textbook and exercise materials used by 5th grade elementary students in Korea, and pushed the students to achieve the expected goal. This was an exceptional case because their parents were going back to Korea that year so these children were afraid of being fallen behind in Korea. Therefore, they had to study very hard in order to adapt themselves in Korean school. But for the first, second and third grade classes, teachers did not employ such intensive instruction strategies.

#### **3.4. Korean Culture & Intimacy through the class**

Students learn Korean songs and dances, and play Korean games at the Saturday Korean school. Teachers strive to make the learning process as enjoyable as possible, and children appear to be interested

specially in sing-along Korean songs.

Tea/Snack time is the most popular part of the experience among students. They fully enjoy this and spend the time talking (in both English and Korean) and playing together. Some children come to the school just for this social aspect. Tea/drinks/snacks are prepared by parents on a rotational basis.

Toward the end of a semester, students and teachers present a school art festival where dance, play, and music are performed for the parents.

### **3.5. Motivational Factors**

Most of the teachers are very enthusiastic about teaching Korean to young children. There are additional motivating factors unique to every teacher.

First, finding employment as an elementary, middle or high school teacher is quite difficult in Korea. Accordingly many teachers in Korea who live for a time in the US, may apply for sabbatical leave from their jobs in Korea and work as teachers during their stay in the U. S. This way, they lose their jobs in Korea while they are abroad.

Some teachers who are in doctoral program want to teach at a Korean school as part of their own academic goals (collecting children's language data and get experience in teaching) or for financial reasons. Teachers in the Korean school are paid between \$84 and \$120 a month according to their level of experience. A Korean student pays a tuition fee in the amount of \$65 per semester. Parents who send two children pay \$110, and for three children in one family, the cost is \$150. Some of the teachers are housewives and they are motivated to seek employment simply because they enjoy the stimulation and the outside contact.

Most of the Korean parents force their children to attend the Korean school. They strongly feel that their children must have basic competence in reading and writing basic Korean and must have some appreciation of Korean culture.

On the other hand, most of the Korean-American parents who have settled permanently in the US seem not too seriously demand high level

of Korean proficiency while Korean parents who have plan to go back to Korea shows a strong motivation for gaining a high level Korean proficiency.

Young Korean/English speaking children seem to enjoy going to the Korean class because of the social element. They can play with their peers and this motivates them to attend the Korean Saturday school. However, as they grow older, they become bored with the experience and quit the school.

Given the many individual differences among students and teachers, not all children's needs can be accommodated by the program. Therefore, it is the middle level of students that is targeted in the teaching. For upper level and lower level students, parents may hire private Korean tutors for more intensive instruction.

There are many necessary conditions for operational efficiency of Korean language schools. However, the most important condition, identified by this study, is the motivation of parents and teachers for Korean education. This condition keeps students of Korean interested in Korea and Korean, and therefore, keeps the Korean language schools in operation. This is also the reason why economically inefficient Korean language schools remain operational.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Language**

Lucas & Katz (1994) argued that a cognitive and academically beneficial form of bilingualism can be achieved only on the basis of adequately developed first-language skills. It is clear that American schools can not provide a customized bilingual program for every student; hence the Korean Saturday school is ideally suited to supplement what American schools missed. For example, when a Korean child needs clarification in assignment given by the American school, they bring the question to the Korean teacher. The Korean teacher explains in both languages and helps the student understand the

direction or question (not the answer). This enables new bilingual students to adapt themselves in the bilingual environment.

Thomas & Collier (1996) describe the facet of effective reading instruction for language-minority students. In their paper, the teacher (Sonya) reveals a good example of a bilingual teacher; She gave a clear definition in both languages when introducing a new vocabulary.

In the present study, most of the Korean Saturday school teachers showed a negative attitude toward speaking English or code-switch in the classroom. In the older student classes however, teachers or students spoke in English or code switched when explaining words or concepts that varied the two cultures. In the latter case, English was used to facilitate understanding Korean words and sentences.

As presented in Ogbu's(1992)study, minorities believe that competence in both languages will help them succeed not only academically but also in the labor market. Most of the Korean parents speak Korean at home . Some families(S1 or S2) adhere strictly to a Korean only rule in the home. They appreciate the importance of the language and its role in sharing one's identity.

Thus, forfeiting the Korean language can lead to a loss of the Korean identity and to prevent this, parents insist that their children only use Korean at home. In the case of S2, parents recognized the fact that they could participate in two cultures without undermining their loyalty to the minority community. This is relatively easy while the children are young, since in their early years they prefer to speak in Korean and like to attend the Korean Saturday school. But sustaining the Korean identity and language becomes a more challenging prospect as the children grow older and lose those preferences.

#### **4.2. Language Attitudes of Parents**

The attitudinal patterns of parents toward language are important because these attitudes are likely to be transmitted to the children. If parents show ambivalence toward both the home and school languages, the children will probably feel the same way and not be strongly

motivated either to maintain the first language or fully master the second. Also, if the parents feel their native language to be inferior, they may not strongly encourage their children to develop first language skills. This would leave the children without a solid conceptual basis for learning the second language in a school situation where the second language is emphasized; it is possible consequently, that only lower levels of proficiency would be achieved in both languages.

Cummins (1980) argues that the success of a dual language program is highly dependent on the children taking pride in their own language and culture as well as on the cognitive and linguistic abilities they bring with them to school. This validates the emphasis that Korean parents place on the importance of first language acquisition through the Korean Saturday school.

Goldberg (1987) emphasizes the importance of parent's contributions to their children's literacy growth; Parents can play an important role in developing children's literacy. Korean parents are highly motivated to help their children succeed and they are very interested in having their children appreciate the value of success through education.

Some parents may be overly aggressive in their involvement with their children's Korean Saturday school assignments. In the case of JW, he has a study plan for after school hours throughout the week. For example, on Monday, he studies Math and English readings and on Tuesday, he writes Korean journal and studies science. JW's parents want to train him as a balanced bilingual speaker.

Some of the observed Korean parents utilize a computer to teach Korean or English. A bilingual dictionary is an indispensable tool for completing assignments given by the Korean Saturday school. Maintaining and developing one's heritage language does not interfere with the development of other language proficiency. Cummins (1981) explains that identifying a common underlying proficiency enhances cognitive and related academic skills. Learning the Korean language supports the building of a solid linguistic foundation in content while helping to maintain self esteem and language abilities.

The Korean Saturday school actually bears out this claim as they

uphold the priorities of the parents. It's a bilingual program for the Korean students, whose primary purpose is to teach Korean. A concomitant purpose is to teach Korean culture. The most significant factors in maintaining bilingualism are the parent's intentions and efforts.

### **4.3. Written Korean**

Saville (1984) points out that the language skill that most likely develops competence is writing. It has been found in the present study that both Korean parents and Korean teachers understand the importance of writing. They believe that writing ability in Korean is their first step toward maintaining and developing the Korean language heritage. Accordingly, most of the curriculum and activities of the Korean Saturday school primarily focus on improving reading and writing competence.

In Lucas & Katz (1994)'s paper, it is shown that effective teachers worked consciously to provide the children with practice in the greatest possible range of oral and written uses to obtain high level of language proficiency. The present analysis suggests that, specially in Korean Saturday school, both Korean parents and teachers focus more on written language skills.

A problem arises in that there is a lack of textbooks designed for this purpose. There are many textbooks for adults but few have been developed for children. Teachers create their own teaching materials to suit their needs and also use parts of available textbooks to teach. This lack of adequate textbooks for younger students inhibits them in building bilingual proficiency.

In addition, there is an interaction problem between teachers and students in that Korean teachers prefer the 'instruction and explanation' teaching style whereas students are accustomed to the 'conversation and interaction' teaching style of American schools. The Korean preference leads to older students easily becoming bored and dropping out of the Korean Saturday school. This tendency shows that there exist



differences not only in the languages(Korean and English) but also in the teaching methods and materials, and it implies a need for formally trained bilingual teachers. Another challenge in operating the Korean Saturday school is a financial one. Korean schools survived so far but to flourish and to fully accomodate their needs, they need financial support from the Korean government and industries. For now, Korean parents' donations are the major financial source.

## **5. Conclusion**

Korean Saturday school teachers, parents and students are enthusiastic about learning Korean. For the young children, attending the Saturday school means playing with Korean friends. Therefore, the children at the school have very positive attitudes towards the Korean language and culture. Even 4 and 5 years old children can are able to read Korean quite naturally.

The mother of a S1 failed to teach the Korean alphabet to her daughter at home because she lacked interest in having her daughter learn Korean. After attending the Korean school, S1 was eager to learn Korean in order to associate/compete with her Korean friends.

Teachers' and parents' efforts were impressive(providing rides for their children every Saturday morning and afternoon, preparing snacks for 60 students once per semester, helping their children with Korean assignment). Children's positive attitudes toward the Korean language and culture were the result of the teachers' enthusiastic efforts and the parents' dedication.

As the Korean economy flourishes, Korean is becoming an important 2nd language not only for foreigners but also for Korean-Americans. The development of proper textbook for young Koreans overseas can contribute to upgraded Korean programs for them. It is hoped that, this research might serve to initiate the process.

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### Appendix A

#### Raw Data

T: ... 가 가 .. ? 가

S1: party .

S2: , .

S3: eleven .

S1: ( ) power ranger last galaxy ?

T: , power ranger 가 ?

S:

T: ?

S: Soup.

T: ?

S1: Strawberry soup

T: ? 가 ?

S:

T: ? ? 가 가

S: ?

T: . 가 . , , ... .

S: ( )

T: 가 ? - - - .

S: ( 가 ) , I cannot reach the one.

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

#### Teacher

- Q1. How many teachers are at this school ? Tell me about the teacher's background for Korean school.
- Q2. What is these teachers' motivation to teach Korean ?
- Q3. How much are the teachers paid ?
- Q4. Tell me about the Korean class and the students.
- Q5. How many students are in each class ?
- Q6. What kind of text book do you use ?
- Q7. Do these students come to Korean school willingly or because of parent's pressure ?
- Q8. Do teachers speak only Korean during in the class ? How about students ?
- Q9. What are the parents' attitudes toward the Korean class ?
- Q10. Which skill is emphasized in the Korean ? reading, listening, writing or speaking ?
- Q11. Apart from coming to the Korean school, is there any other way for Korean children to become a competent in Korean ?

#### Parents

- Q1. Why do you send your child to the Korean school ?
- Q2. Does he/ she enjoy to attending Korean school ? If not, why not ?
- Q3. Do you prepare a snack for Korean school students ?
- Q4. Are you satisfied with this school ? if not, why not ?
- Q5. Does your child attend an American nursery school ?
- Q6. Does your child speak both English and Korean at home ?
- Q7. Does your child have equivalent skills in speaking, reading and writing in both languages ?
- Q8. What level of competence in English are you expecting from your child ?

Q9. What is your plan for enabling your child to achieve academic success in the future in Korean and in English ?

### **Children**

Q1. Do you speak Korean or English at home ?

Q2. Is the Korean school interesting to go ?

Q3. What is most interesting for you ?

Q4. Do you enjoy playing with your Korean friends during the break time?

Q5. Do you enjoy writing Korean ?

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