Ambivalence in national identity: An ethnographic study of South Korean undergraduates studying English in Toronto.

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Although national identity has received much attention in the field of study abroad, most previous work on nationality has been limited to European and American contexts (Kinginger, 2009; c.f. Block, 2007). Moreover, few researchers have fully addressed the issue of national identity construction and practice, simply attributing them to geographical belonging and citizenship. This study examines how South Korean identity is constructed and negotiated in the culture of English study abroad through the lens of critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2011).

The motivation for English study abroad in South Korea is linked to the country’s dominant ideology of English as a necessity for social mobility (Park, 2009). In the country’s neoliberalization, youth unemployment and job instability have intensified this language ideology (Park & Lo, 2012). Post-secondary English study abroad is an educational investment for communicative fluency in English, which is thought to be an important skill in the job market. This paper explores how this instrumentalism in English learning affects the construction and negotiation of “Koreanness” during English study abroad.

The researcher conducted fieldwork for fourteen months with a group of fifteen South Korean post-secondary learners attending a private language institute located in downtown Toronto. Data analysis revealed ambivalence about Koreanness. On the one hand, learners tried to overcome stereotyped characteristics of Korean students (e.g., shyness, silence in class, strong national membership). They tended to believe that acting “non-Korean” would give them more opportunities for exposure to English. On the other hand, due to institutional constraints, lack of social networks, and the emotional burden caused by acting “non-Korean,” South Korean learners appreciated the importance of their Korean peers in sharing information and feelings on their lives in Toronto. They mobilized Korean popular culture and language in facilitating intercultural communication with non-Korean interlocutors. This paper concludes by discussing how the ambivalence about Koreanness affected learners’ reconstruction of English study abroad experiences when they returned.

References


