

## 1.5-Generation Korean Americans' Transnational Identity: Stories from Four College Students

Soojin Ahn  
University of Seoul  
South Korea

**ABSTRACT:** This study explores 1.5-generation Korean Americans' perception of their identity in the southeastern region of the United States. The study focuses on four college students who immigrated during the middle of their childhood. Data were gathered during a semi-structured interview and were analyzed through a thematic analysis. Informed by a poststructuralist perspective on identity, 1.5-generation immigrants were found to have hybrid ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities in citizenship status, language choices, and local-base transnational communities. The findings offer implications for educators to understand how immigrant students situate themselves as well as practice literacy differently in specific transnational contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Transnational community, Korean Americans, 1.5-generations, immigrants

[Conceptual Framework](#)  
[Literature Review](#)  
[Methods](#)  
[Findings](#)  
[Conclusion](#)  
[Notes](#)  
[References](#)  
[Author Contact](#)  
[Appendix](#)

According to the Pew Research Center (2017), as of 2015, 1.8 million Koreans lived in the United States (US). The report also mentions that 26% of these foreign-born Korean immigrants have lived in the US for 0-10 years, while 74% of foreign-born Korean immigrants have lived in the US for more than 10 years. Today, Korean American college students who are from South Korea (hereafter Korea) and come to America during their teens are likely to belong to the category of foreign-born Korean immigrants who have lived in the US for 0-10 years. The Korean student population in English-speaking countries has increased dramatically, as English language skills have become a new investment in social mobility in the Korean job market and education since the mid-1990s (Park & Lo, 2012; Shin, 2010, 2013, 2014). The Korean term *yuhaksaeng* was coined to

describe these study-abroad students in particular. Many of them have studied in English-speaking countries, such as the US, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Some students' families migrated with them, while others came by themselves. The term *gireogi gajok* ("goose family") was also created to describe the families in which the parents continued working in Korea to support their family members in other countries. Many parents decide to send their children abroad or migrate with their children, since they believe that studying abroad will help their children become social elites in both international societies and Korea. At the same time, some researchers have pointed out that the *gireogi gajok* phenomenon has led to several related social, emotional, or economic problems among some of the broken families (H. Lee, 2010; M. W. Lee, 2010).

Such study-abroad students can be described as members of the 1.5 generation of immigrants. According to Rumbaut (2004), the 1.5 or "1.5" generation of immigrants refers to foreign-born youth who immigrate during the middle of their childhood (6 to 12 years old). They usually learn to read and write in their mother tongue at schools in their home country but largely complete their education in the immigrant country. Rumbaut coined the term "1.75 generation" for those who arrive in early childhood (ages 0–5) and retain virtually no memory of their country of birth and language. Meanwhile, "1.25 generation" refers to those who arrive in adolescence (13 to 17 years old) and either attend secondary schools after arrival or go directly into the workplace. As the participants of this paper include a group of youth who experience immigration from ages 9 to 18, the term "1.5 generation" will be used to refer to both groups that Rumbaut called 1.5 and 1.75 generations.

Immigrants of the 1.5 generation were born and raised in their native countries in their early childhood, but they moved to a new place with a different language and culture mainly at their parents' wishes. As a result, they grow up somewhere between their native language/culture and other languages/cultures. Kang (2013) summarized four typical modes of ethnic identity in a multiethnic society based on the work of Berry, Kim, Power, Young, and Bujaki (1989) and Lambert (1978). The first mode is separation, which indicates that immigrants are involved exclusively in the heritage culture. The second mode is assimilation, in which immigrants are involved exclusively in the language and culture of the wider society. The third mode, marginalization, involves no affiliation with either the heritage culture or that of the wider society. Finally, the mode of integration involves high levels of involvement in both the heritage culture and that of the wider society. Kang (2013) found that her research participants, eight second-generation Korean American college students, maintained a boundary and flexible identity between the two worlds of their American-ness and Korean-ness. However, she did not necessarily refer to their identity mode as involvement, which means a relatively new category is needed to describe the increased flexibility of immigrants' identity.

While meeting many 1.5-generation college students in Korean class at a US college, I also acknowledged their flexible mode of identity and naturally developed curiosity about the way in which they perceive and position themselves in the immigrant society today. This study focuses particularly on how the 1.5

generation of Korean Americans' identity can be formed in the third space between the two languages and cultures.

### Conceptual Framework

For this study, I drew on a poststructuralist and postcolonial concept of identity to explain the flexible ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity of 1.5-generation Korean immigrants in the US. In particular, Bhabha's postcolonial cultural theory is applied to the immigrants' multicultural situation. First, Bhabha (1988) suggested the notion of *cultural difference* rather than *cultural diversity*, since the latter constitutes a norm created by the host society or dominant culture (Rutherford, 1990). He stated that he understood culture within the position of liminality, "in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 209). According to his understanding, different cultural practices can exist without necessarily melting into one universal form. Also, the existence of different cultural practices can possibly lead to the construction of their own systems of meaning and social organization.

Based on his understanding of cultural difference, Bhabha argued that all forms of culture are in a process of *hybridity*, in which two or more cultures are brought into and reformulated as new ones. From the context of colonization, hybridity is understood as "the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (Bhabha, 1995, p. 35). It "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structure of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211); he called this process *the third space*. In this ambivalent space, "something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation," is made (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211).

Furthermore, Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity and the concept of the third space are connected to the flexible cultural identity. Bhabha believed that hybridity is established only in a "non-sovereign notion of self" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 212). In other words, identity cannot be understood simply as some essential categories such as class, race, and gender. Rather, he emphasized the "importance of the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of solidarity" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 213). According to his understanding, identity is a process of negotiation and reconstruction of the self. That is, one's identity is likely to be negotiable rather than fixed.

Informed by Bhabha's postcolonial perspectives on identity and represented by the cultural hybridity and the third space, this study aims to investigate how 1.5-generation Korean Americans perceive their identities in relation to the social contexts surrounding them in the immigrant society. The main research question is as follows: How do four 1.5-generation Korean American

college students perceive their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities in the transnational context?

## Literature Review

Many researchers have attempted to explain what social contexts contribute to young adults' identity formation in their immigration experiences. Although the literature covers a wide variety of explanations, this review will focus on two major themes: the transnational contexts of immigration and the 1.5-generation Korean Americans.

### Transnational Contexts of Immigration

The main context of this study can be explained using the term *transnationalism*, which refers to “various kinds of global or cross-border connections” (Vertovec, 2001, p. 573). Most immigrants are placed in such transnational situations in which they tend to form social networks based upon some shared identities, such as a place of origin and the cultural and linguistic traits associated with it (Vertovec, 2001). Smith (1998) and Goldring (1998) assert that transnational communities are sustained by social networks, including hometown associations, economic remittances, social clubs, celebrations, and other bi-national social processes, as well as indirect means of communication and transportation (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). However, more recently, immigrants' identities have come to be considered negotiable and multiple, rather than each being fixed, such as a national identity.

On the one hand, citizenship can be an important index of immigrants' identity in the transnational context. Citizenship and a sense of national belonging are not synonymous. In a study on Arab American youths in the US, El-Haj (2009) found that citizenship represents myriad legal rights for immigrant youths and their families. However, they often felt a sense of connection to and affiliation with a national identity different from that of the US. They described themselves as being Arab rather than American, regardless of their US citizenship. Therefore, this study confirmed that citizenship and its political and civic rights can differ from the immigrants' perceived personal and sociocultural identity. Meanwhile, Ong (1999) asserted that some transnational “individuals as well as governments develop a flexible notion of citizenship and sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power” (Ong, 1999, p. 6). In her studies of Hong Kong businessmen, Ong found that these transnational elites enjoyed capital, social, and cultural prestige in the US by holding multiple citizenship. Similarly, Balta and Altan-Olcay (2016) investigated Turkish elite couples who traveled to the US to provide their children US citizenship. For them, US citizenship is considered a global citizenship as well as a means of obtaining legal advantages within the US. As a result, they found

that such practices which are only allowed to prestigious families contribute to new inequalities at the local and global levels.

On the other hand, Levitt and Schiller (2004) emphasize the transnational migrants' literacy practices with the notion of simultaneity. Simultaneity refers to "living lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally" (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1003). This concept of simultaneity explains why individuals' social processes of incorporation into a new land and transnational connections to a homeland are not contradictory. This concept may be more applicable to the 1.5 generation of immigrants rather than the second generation or the first generation of immigrants, since the 1.5-generation immigrants might have hybrid and dynamic experiences with both their new and home cultures.

### 1.5-Generation Korean Americans

Korean Americans have provided a good example of a model minority, a concept introduced by Suzuki (1977) in the 1970s. *Model minority* refers to a common stereotype that Asian American students are "superbright, highly motivated overachievers who come from well-to-do families" (Suzuki, 2002, p. 26). In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers challenged the model minority myth, including Suzuki herself (Jiobu, 1988; Nee & Sanders, 1985; Suzuki, 1989; Wong, 1982, all as cited in Suzuki, 2002). Those studies showed that Asian Americans cannot be understood as a homogeneous group, because they had very different socioeconomic statuses, and their achievements were not always considered to be examples of full equality and participation in American society.

Particularly in the 1990s, many Korean researchers tried to trace young Korean Americans who come to the US during their teens, either with their parents or without them. In either case, they come and attend US schools mainly seeking better access to global social capital, such as the English language. Kim (2016) and M. W. Lee (2010) showed an example of early study-abroad Korean students in America who realized the privilege of bilingual fluency as social capital in a global society. Similarly, Kim and Duff (2012) and Shin (2014) found that the 1.5-generation Korean college students in Canada had tried to achieve global English capital and thus become cosmopolitan citizens with high mobility and better opportunities in the global market.

However, the researchers also found that a student's journey in a new country is not simple. When the students encounter a new culture and language, their linguistic identities continue to be formed and reformed. Shin and Choi (2013) pointed out that 1.5-generation Korean American students' multiple identities as international students, non-native speakers, and early study abroad students were dynamically formed and reformed in the social contexts of their schools, homes, and churches. That is, they did not always have the same opportunities to speak English in terms of Bourdieu's (1977) concept of legitimate speakers. Similarly,

Kim and Duff (2012), who examined the experiences of 1.5-generation Korean Canadian students, found that their participants had experienced frustration and challenges regarding a lack of opportunities to use English, low confidence in their English skills, and doubts about their future trajectories. Other Korean Canadians examined in Shin (2014) reported that they experienced certain amounts of racial and linguistic discrimination in the local contexts, which in turn resulted in self-marginalization.

Additionally, Kim (1999) said that 1.5-generation and second-generation Korean American students often showed ambivalent attitudes toward their Korean ethnic images and perceptions within the mixed cultural contexts. Kim and Chatpunnarangsee (2013) found that their study's 1.5-generation Asian American college students, including a Korean American, used a strategy of association and disassociation in both their homeland and their host society. Drawing from Bhabha's (1994) concept of third space, the study showed that 1.5-generation students can reconceptualize who they are and what they might be able to accomplish in different contexts of home and school. M. W. Lee (2010) found that this concept can be explained using Anzaldúa's (2007) term *borderlands identity*. The Korean American participants in her study who moved to the US during their elementary or secondary school years tended to situate themselves between two languages and cultures rather than attach themselves to one dominant language and culture. Similarly, a young Korean American in the study by Kim (2016) was found to employ a way of othering to negotiate his ambivalent identity as an illegitimate member of the White American community and as an academically competent learner compared to other Korean peers in the community.

### Methods

The participants of this study were four 1.5-generation Korean American college students who attended a public university in the southeastern region of the US. I met two of the participants (Kyle and Mary; pseudonyms) in a Korean class in spring 2014 and met the other two participants (Derek and Sophie; pseudonyms) in spring 2015. As informed by the consent, the study was conducted out of the classroom context, and all of participants agreed that their interviews would be used for the research only. The participants and I, however, shared a trusting relationship which was built during the semester, so the participants seemed to feel comfortable sharing about their experiences as young immigrants. The details about the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Study Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Citizen-ship</b>	<b>Arrival age</b>	<b>Future plan</b>
Kyle	M	27	Biochemistry	US	18	To be a medical doctor in the US
Mary	F	23	Flute Performance	Korean	10	To be a flutist in the US or Korea
Derek	M	19	Undecided	US & Korean	10	To work in the US or Korea
Sophie	F	20	Microbiology	Korean	9	To work in the US

Kyle came to the US when he was 18. He immigrated with his younger brother, not with his parents. The main reason for their immigration was the pursuit of educational opportunities. Kyle's parents subsequently came to the US, but his father had to travel back and forth between Korea and US to run his family business. Although Kyle came to the US during his late teenage years, he achieved US citizenship when he completed service in the US Army in 2010. Kyle was a senior, majoring in biochemistry and planning to go to medical school in the US.

Mary came to the US when she was 10. She immigrated with her family, including her parents, older brother, and younger brother. Mary came to the US somewhat earlier than Kyle had and was able to adapt to the new language and culture during her early teenage years. She majored in flute performance and had a goal to continue her career as a flutist either in the US or Korea.

Derek came to the US when he was 10. He had been born in the US, but his family moved to Korea when he was two. Because of that history, he held both US and Korean citizenship at the time of the study. Similar to Mary, he came to the US with his family, including his parents and younger brother, and he was exposed to the new language and culture from his early teenage years. As he had just finished his freshman year in college, he had not yet decided his future major or career, but his intended major was public relations.

Sophie came to the US when she was nine. Her parents sent her and her brother to the US for education purposes, and they were adopted by her uncle who had immigrated to the US as a pastor. Sophie held a green card, although she had not achieved US citizenship yet. Her major was microbiology, and she said she wanted to work for a company in the US.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In fall 2014, I asked Kyle and Mary if they would be willing to share their stories for this study. They agreed to participate in the study. The interview with Kyle and Mary was conducted in October 2014 in a classroom on campus; the interview lasted approximately one hour. Later, in spring 2015, I invited Derek and Sophie to participate in the study, and they agreed. Their interviews were conducted in April and May 2015, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. All of the interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded.

Within the semi-structured interview, the interview guide questions were designed to ask participants about their previous experiences and perceptions about living as 1.5-generation Korean immigrants in the US, referring to Shin's (2010) autobiographical interview questions. The topics were broadly categorized into four parts: (a) educational background, (b) identity, (c) literacy, and (d) community. Each topic had five sub-questions that asked the participants to talk about their specific life experiences related to that topic. The sub-questions focused on their experiences between the two languages and cultures (see Appendix).

After the interview, the collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis. Examining the data repeatedly, the researcher developed potential themes and categories and assessed them. Among them, key themes were determined, which were repeatedly and importantly found across the data (Creswell, 2003). During the analysis of the data at the preliminary level, two international fellows who were not involved in this research project gave feedback to me as a way of peer debriefing, which is used to reduce the researcher's biased interpretation in the qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Findings**

In this study, 1.5-generation Korean American college students were found to perceive their identity flexibly according to their transnational context, specifically their citizenship status, language choices, and local-base transnational communities.

### **Citizenship and Identity**

The participants' perceived ethnic identity cannot be categorized by their legal citizenship status alone. Regardless of their current citizenship status, all participants said that they still felt like they were ethnically Korean. However, at the same time, they acknowledged the benefits of having US citizenship in terms of their current education and future careers. For example, Mary kept her Korean citizenship because her family originally planned to go back to Korea after Mary and her brothers completed their higher education in the US. However, her family's

plans had changed, and they decided to stay in the US for a longer period. She said that, even though she had lived in the US for more than 10 years, she still felt like she was Korean.

Sophie also kept her Korean citizenship while holding a US green card at the time of the study. Since she wanted to work for a US company in the future, she was planning to apply for US citizenship sooner or later. She said that she had learned the American mindset during her 10-year stay in the US, but she had always wanted to be like Koreans.

#### Excerpt 1

I have a mindset of American, but I wanna be Korean. So when I talked to my dad, so I only saw my dad like four times for twelve years or something like that. So, yeah, he can tell the difference how I changed. And last year when I saw him and met him, he told me that my mindset is more of American. Like more independent, and, yeah. More like really independent. But my dad also told me that I have the, umm, *jeong itjanayo* [It is kindness], yeah. *Hanguksaramui jeong* [Koreans' kindness]. (.....) So I kind of had that, that origin of Korea, but my outer is more covered with more American lifestyle and mindset. But, I like to be *yeui bareugo* [having good manners], you know, formal. (Sophie)

In Excerpt 1, Sophie said that she still wanted to keep her traditional Korean values, such as having good manners (*yeui*) and kindness (*jeong*) toward other people, although she was more accustomed to American values such as being independent. Her pursuit of values from both cultures was not directly reflected in her legal citizenship status. Rather, her intention to apply for US citizenship or a green card is related to the power of legal citizenship as social capital for her future career.

Derek had dual citizenship, because he was born in the US. He said that he was supposed to choose only one citizenship when he turned 20. He seemed more open-minded about choosing either US or Korean citizenship. He explained this flexibility with the knowledge that there still could be a chance for his parents to go back to their home country, so Derek also thought about going back with his parents in the future. Since he had taken US citizenship for granted because of where he was born and was not yet sure about his future plan, he seemed to be willing to give up US citizenship and go back to holding only one citizenship, that of his native country.

Kyle's case is somewhat complicated compared to those of the other participants. Kyle came to the US at the age of 18 and has lived in the US for a shorter time than the other participants have. He, however, achieved US citizenship when he was 24 after completing military service in the US Army. This was a special situation, because his native country, Korea, adopted the

conscription system, which means he would have had to enlist in the army in Korea anyway. He thought it would be better to choose the US Army, because he could also gain US citizenship after three years of service, which was a kind of incentive for foreigners. He thought this opportunity would give him a chance to live in the US as a citizen and mingle with people in mainstream society. For him, this life decision gave him a totally different sense of living within immigrant society. Although he officially became a US citizen and felt he could build a career path from there, he said that he felt he had more of a connection with Koreans. In Excerpt 2, Kyle explains how he felt about his citizenship and the sense of belonging he experienced by providing an example of sports team support. He said that, when there was a soccer game between the Korean national team and the US national team, he would support the Korean team rather than the US team.

#### Excerpt 2

I mean, I feel like I have more connection with Korean communities and obviously more Korean friends, but at the end, at the end of the story, I'm a US citizenship like I'm a US citizen and I'm gonna live in the US, United States. And then I will belong US, US citizen. But I like, I, you know, whenever, you know, it's like out of the question but like, when some other like sports, and I cheer for Korean team. more than US team. (Kyle)

The participants' self-perceptions showed their true feelings of belonging, which are not necessarily equal to their legal citizenship status. This finding is in line with that of El-Haj (2009) that an immigrant youth's citizenship is not equivalent to his or her sense of belonging. It is also related to the notion of flexible citizenship by Ong (1999) as a guiding principle in building strategies to accumulate social capital and power in immigrant society. Kyle and Sophie, who were considering pursuing their future careers in the US, especially proved that they had acknowledged the social capital and power of US citizenship. In fact, Sophie could not visit her parents in Korea often in order to be eligible to apply for the green card and citizenship.

### **Language Choices and Identity**

The participating 1.5-generation Korean Americans' language choices are flexible depending on the specific social context in which they need to speak a certain language. Of course, all participants considered themselves to be bilingual, but Mary, Derek, and Sophie had a greater sense of being bilingual than Kyle did. This difference was affected by their arrival age and the length of their public education experience in the US. Mary, Derek, and Sophie arrived in the US when

they were around 10; thus, they had more chances to speak English in schools than Kyle, who arrived in the US when he was 18.

The students' use of language is categorized into two social contexts: language use in public spaces and language use in personal spaces. All participants were found to have used English for communication in public spaces, such as in classrooms, but used Korean in personal spaces when establishing close friendships with other Korean Americans. An interesting example was found in their language use on social networking services (SNS). I asked the participants how they used each language on SNS such as Facebook, and they explained how they felt using each one online. Sophie said that she found subtle differences in her feelings about Facebook postings from Korean American friends and other friends.

### Excerpt 3

Like, I mean, I'm not a person who does post. I read. So that's why I do Facebook. But like White people's Facebook is different from Korean people's Facebook. For example, Korean people post something like *Hangugui bullyangsikpum* [Korean junk food]. You know, when I look it up, I'm like, "huh", you know, *gonggamhae* [I can relate]. Like, "I know, I know this." That reminds me of my past. But the Americans like, (...) like shoes, dress, and what movie they saw. I don't like that type of movie. It's like, I don't know, it's different. (Sophie)

In Excerpt 3, Sophie said that her Korean American friends posted about the things that reminded her of her memories in Korea, whereas her White friends posted about the cultural trends. She said that she had different feelings about those postings. Similarly, Kyle said that he preferred to speak Korean with his Korean American friends and was more comfortable doing so on Facebook, such as posting about his personal life, because he felt that the online space was his personal space.

Mary and Derek showed more balanced use of both English and Korean on Facebook compared to Sophie and Kyle. Mary said that she posted online in Korean and English flexibly when she felt more connected to friends who spoke either language, as shown in Excerpt 4.

### Excerpt 4

Umm, in Facebook, ah, because I have more Korean friends. I try to use Korean, but sometimes if I'm, um, more connected to, if I feel more like connected to my [White] American friends like that month or that week, or even that day, then I try to write in English. (Mary)

In other words, only when Mary wanted to speak with her Korean American friends did she choose to use Korean on Facebook. Derek also said that he generally posted in English to communicate with his White American friends, but he posted in Korean when he felt like talking about his most personal feelings on Facebook. For them, Facebook can be both public and personal spaces depending on their different communicative purposes.

This finding is similar to those by Kang (2013), who investigated the use of languages among second-generation Korean Americans. The study revealed a pattern of their use of English as a primary way of communication and their use of Korean in association with their childhood memories, food, and kinship. Such a tendency to use the heritage language and the official language of the immigrant society for diverse communicative purposes is observed more often these days with the development of digital communication. Lam (2009) found that the immigrant youth actively exchanged multilingual online instant messages with their peers across borders. In fact, their native language cannot be simply replaced by the new language in the immigrant society. Depending on their communicative spaces in which they interact, their language choices are changed and mixed often. The 1.5-generation students' use of multiple languages for different communicative purposes reflects their flexible linguistic identities in the transnational context.

### **Local-base Transnational Communities and Identity**

The local-base transnational communities also play an important role in establishing 1.5-generation Korean Americans' cultural identities in their daily lives. All participants' current school lives and daily routines belong to Korean immigrants' local-base transnational communities regardless of whether their parents immigrated with them or not. Since their current school was located near a popular destination city for Korean immigrants, they often visited Korean grocery stores, restaurants, and churches in Korea town. All participants were also part of Korean student circles in school. Those Korean grocery stores, restaurants, churches, and social networks are good examples of the local-base transnational communities in which they exchange and reproduce materials, funds, information, rituals, and social ties (Goldring, 1998; Smith, 1998). Mary explained why she joined such Korean American communities. She said that she felt comfortable when she spent time with Korean friends and did not want to lose her native language.

#### **Excerpt 5**

Umm, I'm satisfied, I'm satisfied with my current, umm, friends and my community cause umm, if I'm hanging out with mostly Koreans, then I feel like I'm not working on anything in English and I'm afraid, I'm worried that I might lose the language. But because I hang out both at school, I hang

out with more [White] Americans and at home I hang out with Koreans. I think that's good to be balanced. (Mary)

In Excerpt 5, Mary emphasized the balance between the two languages and two cultures for Korean Americans. Her opinion is supported by Jeon (2007), who found that many Korean American families acknowledged the importance of biliteracy development. They do not want to rely on monolingual resources, so they try to strike a balance between their home culture and the immigrant culture.

In addition to the larger community, including Korean grocery stores and churches, the student circles in college were found to be important local-base transnational communities for all participants. There were two Korean American student circles in this school in which all participants attended. In fact, one group mainly consisted of 1.5-generation students, and the other group consisted of second-generation students. Although the main language they used and the important cultural values of the two groups were different, both student circles became an important social network for most Korean American students on campus. Derek joined the group of second-generation students, while Kyle, Mary, and Sophie joined the group of 1.5-generation students. In Excerpt 6, Derek said he joined the group to learn more about Korean culture.

#### Excerpt 6

Yeah, just because like, I didn't know a lot of Korean kids. And honestly stepping out of high school, I kind of wanted to be exposed to more Korean culture, so that's why I joined the Korean Student Association. And I'm in the family groups, umm, well, last semester our family group was very active. I showed up to every single meeting. I still go to all the general body meetings that not a lot of people come. (Derek)

Derek went to middle and high schools where he was the only Asian student, so he thought his knowledge of Korean literature and culture fell far behind those who attended Korean schools. Similarly, Sophie said that she lived in rural areas where she also was only Asian student in school. When she moved to a city in which she found more Korean and Asian friends, she said she found it much easier to hang out with them based on their shared cultural understanding. Moreover, Kyle, Mary, and Sophie said that they could build friendships with other Korean American students through their student circles. They not only held official meetings regularly but also built a close relationship by eating, drinking, and sometimes living together near campus.

It is notable that most 1.5-generation students try to find colleagues who they share a similar culture and feel comfortable with. Even though their previous cultural experiences were quite different depending on their arrival age and the ethnic diversity in their elementary and secondary school education, they thought

it was important that they at least shared one common experience of moving from Korea to the US. From this common experience, they felt they could build a connection and friendship. That is also why they took my Korean classes, in which they could meet more Korean American students and other students who have an interest in exploring Korean language and culture.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest that 1.5-generation Korean American college students perceive their identity flexibly according to their transnational context. Their hybrid ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities were evident in their citizenship status, language choices, and local-base transnational communities. By living with two or more languages and cultures, they developed hybrid ethnic identities regardless of their legal citizenship. They tended to use multiple languages for different communicative purposes in public or personal spaces. Their daily lives also relied on the local-base transnational youth community with which they shared cultural understanding and built connections.

The students' identities with regard to citizenship, language choices, and local-base transnational communities were closely connected to each other, and all worked together in a complex way. Since this finding cannot be explained by one cultural perspective or category, it can be understood through Bhaba's concept of the third space. That is the reason Kim and Duff (2012) and Shin and Choi (2013) called for educators' attention to understand how study abroad students' various experiences, beliefs, and ideologies are intertwined. This study will help researchers and educators understand how 1.5-generation students situate themselves as well as develop hybrid identities in specific situations within transnational sites. The 1.5-generation's unique life situation might not have received much focus in previous research because of the focus on either the first or second generations. Therefore, school teachers and researchers must acknowledge that certain groups of students might be similar to but also different from typical first- or second-generation immigrants. This could be the starting point for understanding their lives beyond the monolingual classroom and help them identify themselves as transnational citizens with hybrid ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities.

Educators could also guide them to think about diverse paths for their future. For example, by conducting research and interacting with the participants inside and outside the classrooms, I was able to understand their future plans and expectations based on their transnational life experiences. In particular, Mary and Derek expressed that they expected their post-graduation lives to be changeable and flexible according to their future job and family situations. Mary especially seemed to have flexible future expectations due to her major, flute performance, which gives her relatively more freedom to choose a place to live. She said she could become a transnational flutist who travels back and forth between two or more countries.

One limitation of the current study is that all participants showed quite positive attitudes and responses to their transnational life experiences. However, contrasting cases might exist that involve serious identity conflicts, difficulty in literacy practices, relationship problems, and discrimination in the transnational contexts of 1.5-generation immigrants, whose experiences could be more complex than we generally expect. Some young adults might simply not be good at adapting to the dual or hybrid cultures and environments around them. In this study, all of the participants' parents decided to move or send their children to the US to ensure a better education and a promising future for their children, and the participants showed gratitude for their decisions. The participants were found to be satisfied with their transnational life experiences and to have survived quite well in their new country for about 10 years. If participants had been recruited from outside the college setting, the study might have demonstrated rather different stories of 1.5-generation young adults. This could be another topic for future research. Future researchers also need to find a wider variety of cases of 1.5-generation Korean Americans' and their families' transnational stories.

### Notes

1. Part of this paper was presented at Second Language Research Forum (SLRF) 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia.
2. The study was approved by the University of Georgia IRB (#STUDY00001253). The author's affiliation has since been changed from the University of Georgia to the University of Seoul. The IRB was approved at the time when the author belonged to the former institution.

### References

- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Balta, E., & Altan-Olcay, Ö. (2016). Strategic citizens of America: Transnational inequalities and transformation of citizenship. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(6), 939-957.
- Berry, J. W., Kim, U., Power, S., Young, M., & Bujaki, M. (1989). Acculturation attitudes in plural societies. *Applied Psychology*, 38(2), 185-206.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1988). The commitment to theory. *New Formations*, 5, 5-23.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London, England: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1995). Signs taken for wonders. In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, & H. Tiffin (Eds.), *The post-colonial studies reader* (pp. 29-35). London, England: Routledge.

- Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information*, 16(6), 645-668.
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- El-Haj, T. R. A. (2009). Becoming citizens in an era of globalization and transnational migration: Re-imagining citizenship as critical practice. *Theory Into Practice*, 48, 274-282.
- Goldring, L. (1998). The power of status in transnational social fields. In M. Smith & L. Guarnizo (Eds.), *Transnationalism from below* (pp. 165-195). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Guarnizo, L., & Smith, M. (1998). The locations of transnationalism. In M. Smith & L. Guarnizo (Eds.), *Transnationalism from below* (pp. 3-31). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Jeon, M. (2007). Biliteracy development and continua of biliteracy: A case of Korean Americans. *Korean Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23(1), 201-215.
- Jiobu, R. M. (1988). *Ethnicity and assimilation: Blacks, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Mexicans, Vietnamese, and White*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kang, H. (2013). Korean American college students' language practices and identity positioning: "Not Korean, but Not American". *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 12(4), 248-261.
- Kim, H., & Chatpunnarangsee, K. (2013). Transnational Asian college students: Bilingualism, biculturalism, and identity. *Bilingual Research*, 52, 71-99.
- Kim, J., & Duff, P. A. (2012). The language socialization and identity negotiations of generation 1.5 Korean-Canadian university students. *TESL Canada Journal*, 29(6), 81-102.
- Kim, L. (1999). The 1.5 generation and its self-identity development. *Korean and Korean-American Studies Bulletin*, 10(1-2), 27-41.
- Kim, S. (2016). A small story of an early study abroad student: A positioning analysis. *Korean Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 32(4), 57-87.
- Lam, W. (2009). Multiliteracies on instant messaging in negotiating local, translocal, and transnational affiliations: A case study of an adolescent immigrant. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(4), 377-397.
- Lambert, W. E. (1978). Cognitive and socio-cultural consequences of bilingualism. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 34(3), 537-547.
- Lee, H. (2010). "I am a *Kirogi* mother": Education exodus and life transformation among Korean transnational women. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 9(4), 250-264.
- Lee, M. W. (2010). Bilingual education communities of Korean immigrant families in the U.S. *Studies in English Education*, 15(1), 23-48.

- Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society. *The International Migration Review*, 38(3), 1002-1039.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Nee, V., & Sanders, J. (1985). The road to parity: Determinants of the socioeconomic achievement of Asian Americans. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, 281-306.
- Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Park, J., & Lo, A. (2012). Transnational South Korea as a site for a sociolinguistics of globalization: Markets, timescales, neoliberalism. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 16(2), 147-164.
- Pew Research Center. (2017). *Koreans in the U.S. Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/fact-sheet/asian-americans-koreans-in-the-u-s/>
- Rumbaut, R. (2004). Ages, life stages, and generational cohorts: Decomposing the immigrant first and second generations in the United States. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 1160-1205.
- Rutherford, J. (1990). The third space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207-221). London, England: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Shin, D., & Choi, H. (2013). A study of the opportunities and rights to speak English: Focus on early study abroad students in the US. *Foreign Languages Education*, 20(2), 189-212.
- Shin, H. (2010). "Gireogi Gajok": *Transnationalism and language learning* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada). Retrieved from <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/19133>
- Shin, H. (2013). Ambivalent calculations in Toronto: Negotiating the meaning of success among early study abroad high school students. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 22(4), 527-546.
- Shin, H. (2014). Social class, habitus, and language learning: The case of Korean early study-abroad students. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 13(2), 99-103.
- Smith, R. (1998). Transnational localities: Community, technology and the politics of membership within the context of Mexico and U.S immigration. In M. Smith & L. Guarnizo (Eds.), *Transnationalism from below* (pp. 196-239). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

- Suzuki, B. H. (1977). Education and the socialization of Asian Americans: A revisionist analysis of the "model minority" thesis. *Amerasia Journal*, 4(2), 23-51.
- Suzuki, B. H. (1989). Asian Americans as the "model minority": Outdoing Whites? Or media hype? *Change*, 21(6), 13-19.
- Suzuki, B. H. (2002). Revisiting the model minority stereotype: Implications for student affairs practice and higher education, *New Directions for Student Services*, 97, 21-32.
- Vertovec, S. (2001). Transnationalism and identity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27(4), 573-582.
- Wong, M. G. (1982). The cost of being Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino in the United States 1960, 1970, 1976. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 25(1), 59-78.

### Author Contact

Soojin Ahn, [soojina2013@uos.ac.kr](mailto:soojina2013@uos.ac.kr)  
Division of General English, University of Seoul  
163 Seoulsiripdaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02504, South Korea

### Appendix

#### Interview guide questions

1. Educational Background
  - 1) Age, Class, Major
  - 2) Year first arrived in the US
  - 3) Public school education background
  - 4) Years for English learning
  - 5) Language you can speak other than English
2. Identity
  - 1) Self-identity on your citizenship
  - 2) Opinion on identity difference between 1.0-generation and 1.5-generation immigrants
  - 3) Most difficult identity experience and strategy to find your own identity
  - 4) Connections/contacts with Korea
  - 5) Opinion change on citizenship and identity after graduation

### 3. Literacy

- 1) Self-report as bilingual/multilingual
- 2) Use of English in daily life
- 3) Use of Korean in daily life
- 4) Use of English/Korean on social network services (like Facebook)
- 5) Opinion change on Korean/American language and culture

### 4. Community

- 1) Who are your daily friends and community?
- 2) Satisfaction with your current friendship and your community
- 3) Most difficult friendship issue and strategy to overcome the issue
- 4) Opinion change on friendship and community after graduation
- 5) Opinion on community difference between 1.0-generation and 1.5-generation immigrants