

**Title of Project:**

A Safe House for Korean (Im)migrant Women in the United States:  
A Feminist Cyber-Ethnography of Korean (Im)migrant Mothers'  
Investment in Learning English Online

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**Final Report**

**Motivation for the Research**

Although (im)migrants' investment in the target language and their identity reconstruction while doing so have been studied (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2013), studies looking specifically at Korean (im)migrant mothers in the United States and their investment in learning English are few in number. In particular, few studies have examined an online English language learning community of Korean (im)migrant mothers, relevant to the experience of Korean (im)migrants, when migration no longer means permanent one-way movement or disconnection from the home country thanks to advances in technology and easier access to the Internet. Koreans' connectivity through the Internet (Lee et al., 2014) and tendency to gather in an ethnic community, thereby maintaining Korean-ness (Min & Kim, 2002), have combined to engender several online ethnic communities. Yet, research regarding how Korean (im)migrants (especially mothers) form and use online ethnic communities is mostly found in health-related studies, gender studies, or media studies. Since language acquisition is considered a key factor for successful acculturation, it is quite surprising that none of the aforementioned studies have investigated how Korean (im)migrant mothers use online ethnic communities as platforms for investing in language learning and reconstructing identities. Approaching an online language learning community of Korean (im)migrant women by using feminist cyber-ethnography is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature by shedding light on how technology supports a marginalized group of (im)migrant women's proactive investment in English learning in pursuit of becoming legitimate speakers and empowering themselves.

**Research Questions**

This study examines the issues described above by investigating the following research questions based upon three theoretical frameworks: safe house (Pratt, 1911), investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015), and translingualism (Canagarajah, 2012).

1. How do Korean (im)migrant mothers who came to the United States as trailing spouses view their online language learning community SEED (Study English Enable Dreams) as a safe house?



2. What made Korean (im)migrant women come to invest in learning English through the creation of an online language learning community? What roles have identity, capital, and ideology played in understanding these women's investments in learning English?
3. How do the women enact translingual practices in their online community while their identity, ideology, and capital intersect with their translingual practices?

### Research Methodology

I employed feminist cyber-ethnography, adopting the “epistemologies of doing” (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007) that asserts cyber-ethnographers should fully engage themselves in “the production of culture and subjectivity in the specific context” (p. 1). The setting is an online language learning community of Korean (im)migrant women, self-identified as SEED (Study English Enable Dreams), established on August 1, 2011, and evolved to run like a school by the members themselves. Most of the members were trailing spouses and mothers, who came from affluent families and were highly educated with advanced English skills. For my dissertation, four members were selected: two current members (Sandra<sup>1</sup> and Regina) and two former members (Angela and Kirin). As described in Buch and Staller (2006), three primary forms of data were collected: “ethnographic talking to informants, observations, and social artifacts” (p. 209). Given the nature of cyber-ethnography, most of the data were archival data (web posts) and interview data. Additionally, follow-up focus group text messages and observations of weekly meetings were also utilized as data. I used thematic analysis (Cresswell, 2013) for my feminist cyber-ethnography because it provided a way to not only construct explicit themes but also make explicit the themes that are implicit to the stories that my participants wrote and told. The thematic analysis was a continuous process that began when I started collecting the archival data and continued throughout all phases of the study up to and including the writing of the dissertation (Cresswell, 2013; 2014).

### Summary of Findings

Findings showed that SEED was a cyber safe house and a place of their most important shared identity as Korean (im)migrant *ajummas*, referring to their status as mature, married Korean women, usually mothers. Beyond a place of accommodable English study, SEED was the following: (1) an online safe house of retreat, emotional support, and sisterhood for the members; (2) a place in which they proactively prepared for experiences in the contact zones, without which the safe house concept was not meaningful; and (3) a place that enabled the members to reclaim and redefine their gendered identity as Korean (im)migrant *ajummas*.

Exploration of the participants' chronological investments in English were located at the intersection of their capital, identity and ideology and revealed that (1) their similar yet not identical capital affected their investment in English according to their (im)migration phases as their capital and identity shifted; (2) the cyber safehouse, despite its possible appearance as a means of withdrawal, allowed the members to continue investing in English learning; and (3) the women were juggling between multiple ideologies in their positions as Korean (im)migrant mothers while balancing their commitments to their familial roles and their self-achievement.

Lastly, the investigation on linguistic paradigm shifts, influenced by the participants' experiences as (im)migrants in the United States, as well as their unconscious engagement in translingual practices with SEED members, disclosed that (1) despite the homogeneity of the group, the learners' translingual practices in SEED enabled them to build up their linguistic repertoires, as well as their funds for survival as Korean (im)migrant mothers in the United States; (2) the participants' perspectives on English

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<sup>1</sup> All of the participants' names are pseudonyms.



language were still toggling between monolingualism heavily influenced by their EFL learning backgrounds and translingualism, which was affected by their lives as (im)migrants; and (3) engaging in translingual practices using English was rare outside SEED for Korean (im)migrant mothers, and when they did, they reported it did not necessarily improve their command of English language.

### **Implications**

This feminist cyber-ethnography, particularly from an emic perspective, presents a rich description of the target community and how each member interacted within it, supporting the appropriateness of the methodology for investigating women's online communities. In addition, it confirms and extends previously established concepts (i.e., safe house, investment, and translingualism) by providing contextualized evidence. It further articulates the benefits of safe houses for mainly marginalized homogeneous communities and the supports the participants' proactive and autonomous investments without help from practitioners or the structure of community associations. The study expands previous understandings of investment as a response to Norton's call for diverse research that can reveal how language learners' current capital (especially their mother tongues) serves as an affordance for their English language learning. Also, it contributes to the body of research on translingualism in that it provides the perspective of (im)migrant learners with an EFL background.

This study offers three implications for practitioners working with adult English learners. First, it introduces a unique language learning community model of linguistically homogenous members. Second, it suggests that practitioners be aware that homogenous groups are also to be encouraged. Third, it advocates for the need to increase awareness of the benefits of translingual perspectives and practices.



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