

# Asian English language learners' identity construction in an after school literacy site

Jayoung Choi  
Georgia State University

The importance of students' identity development has increasingly been acknowledged in the fields of second language acquisition and literacy research. In the cases of two populations receiving growing attention in the research literature, English Language Learners (immigrant students learning English in school settings) and Heritage Language Learners (students attempting, informally or formally, to learn or further develop a language other than English that is spoken in the home environment), identity construction is an especially complicated process. These students move between two environments, one where the native language and culture are represented and another where a second or target language and its culture are engaged. Determining where and with whom they affiliate academically, culturally, linguistically, and socially is an ongoing process. This article describes a qualitative study of four Asian adolescent English Language Learners who participated in an after school literacy club where, through reading multicultural literature and responding to the literature and each other through face to face discussions and electronically via a Wiki site within a Read, Talk, and Wiki (RTW) format, they also engaged in a process of identity construction. The article examines how the RTW club created an important space in which this process occurred and how the students made use of this setting.

## Introduction

The topic of identity no longer remains on the periphery in second language acquisition (SLA) research (Block, 2003; Fujimoto, Canagarajah, Atkinson, Nelson, & Brown, 2007; Joseph, 2004). A considerable number of identity studies in the field (Kanno, 2003; Kramsch & Von Hoene, 2001, Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2002; Lvovich, 1997; Marx, 2002; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000; Skapoulli, 2004; Thompson, 2006) attest to this trend. As Norton (1995) points out, interest in identity has resulted from the recognition that learning a second language does not entail merely obtaining linguistic knowledge.

Similar to SLA researchers, many literacy scholars have paid increasing attention to learners' identity construction during literacy activities (Arnett Jensen, 2003; Athanases, 1998; Broughton, 2002; Fecho, 2002; Heath, 1983; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008; Sutherland, 2005; Vyas, 2004). The growing number of linguistically and culturally diverse students in North American schools has prompted scholars to encourage incorporation of students' cultures, which are important aspects of their identities, into school curricula. Validating their cultures and languages in school is believed to lead to academic success (Au, 2001; Banks, 2001; Cummins, 1996; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lopez, 2003; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004; Nieto, 2002; Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999).

The strong interest in identity in both fields has resulted from the recognition that teaching second language or literacy unavoidably involves helping learners negotiate their identities and/or forge new identities (Gee, 2003). When learning a second language, which inevitably exposes the learner to different cultural practices through such acts as reading, watching movies, and interacting with people in the target culture, learners create meaning. In reading, an important source of input in both school and informal settings, they interact with the messages encoded in print to construct meaning (Goodman & Goodman, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2004; Smith, 1997; 2004). According to Gee (2003), any activity that requires meaning making is identity work. For example, when a learner tries to interpret characters or events in a book or a movie, his/her pertinent and even personal experiences and value systems which implicate identities are (re)constructed. For example, different ways of living enacted by a protagonist might motivate the learner to try out a different identity by suspending his/her own values. In contrast, if the learner does not find the characters' behaviors favorable, the activity might instead fortify the current identity rather than inspiring new identity construction. What is at work to help learners decide what they endorse or dispute is *cultural models* that are imbued with their beliefs, values, and principles (Gee, 1996, 2003, 2004, 2007 2008). Gee (2008) posits that one's *cultural models* are indicative of his/her identities. After all, *cultural models* are a prototypical understanding of the world which reveals one's beliefs and values. As Gee (2008) asserts,

Our meaningful distinctions (our choices and guesses) are made on the basis of certain beliefs and values. This basis is a type of theory, in the case of many words a social theory. The theories that form the basis of such choices and assumptions have a particular character. They involve (usually unconscious) assumptions about models of simplified worlds. Such models are sometimes called cultural models, folk theories, scenes, schemas, frames, or figured worlds. I will call them "cultural models." (p. 103–104)

Gee's *cultural models* are a useful tool for understanding how learners make decisions about where and with whom they want to affiliate academically, culturally, linguistically, and socially. It should be noted, however, that *cultural models* are not static social theories. Instead, as one's identity is multifaceted, shifting, and fluid in different zones of time and space (Joseph, 2004; Minami & Ovando, 2004; Ricento, 2005; Siebers, 2004; Weedon, 1987; 2004), one has a multitude of *cultural models* that undergo changes as s/he interacts with the members of various sociocultural groups and engages in many meaning-making activities. Gee (2007) contends that *cultural models*, for many people, are unnoticeably and unconsciously formed, altered, maintained, and/or reinforced on an ongoing basis in everyday life, particularly in an environment where this process can occur under non-threatening circumstances. Having a safe space in which cultural models are explicitly explored and thus identities are constructed may be particularly important for English Language Learners (immigrant students learning English in school settings) and Heritage Language Learners (students attempting, informally or formally, to learn or further develop a language other than English that is spoken in the home environment) (Lee, 2002), who traverse two conspicuously conflicting cultural and linguistic worlds. In addition to undergoing the unavoidable trials and tribulations of puberty, in which they frequently question who they are, adolescent English and heritage language learners struggle to construct meaning about their lives in two significant domains: their home and school worlds (McKay & Wong, 1996; Olsen, 1997; Vyas, 2004). Drawing from these perspectives, this article discusses how four Asian adolescent learners engaged in a process of identity construction in an after-school literacy club that created a space for them to grapple with important identity issues.

## Methodology

The study that I report here is part of a larger study that employed a case study methodology to examine the process of identity construction among four Asian English language learners in an out of school multicultural literature Read, Talk, Wiki (RTW) club. My understanding of identities as constantly changing, dynamic, and socioculturally constructed (Ricento, 2005) required a qualitative case study research methodology that permits a more in-depth exploration of each case (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). The data sources included transcripts of nine face-to-face club meetings, one member checking session, three interviews with three of the participants as well as two interviews with one participant, and fifteen electronic Wiki writing prompts the participants responded to over a five month period.

To seek participants, I explored various channels in a number of community settings. The main recruitment took place in a suburban area where many Asians live in a southeastern state within the United States. On a number of weekends, I handed out fliers to potential participants and parents in front of two large Asian supermarkets. When six participants were identified, I discontinued recruitment. Of those six, two girls dropped out of the study after the first two club meetings, and one boy who sporadically came ended up dropping out after the fifth club meeting. As such, of the six initial participants, three, Kush, Null, and Ram<sup>1</sup> sustained participation throughout the study. However, from the fourth club meeting on, Ram invited his friend, Hulk. As such, I ended up having four focal participants who were all high school boys and who came from Korea, Uzbekistan, and India. Upon initial contact, I obtained permission from their parents and consent from the boys to participate in the study.

Data analysis began with data collection. Analyzing data from the beginning was particularly important, as emergent findings guided the direction of the ensuing face to face meetings. I listened to the recordings of interviews and read the transcripts multiple times, and I placed hunches about data interpretation in a researcher journal. I coded a cluster of word(s), phrase(s), or sentence(s), depending on where a single idea appeared in the transcripts (Kurasaki, 2000). The initial codes that emerged from a few transcripts of interviews with one participant were compiled as a preliminary coding manual (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998). I expanded, collapsed, and refined the themes in the initial coding manual by coding the entire set of transcripts involving one participant. I created four different coding manuals while following the same procedures, as each case was unique (Glaser & Strauss, 1965; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Upon completing coding manuals for individual cases, I collapsed the themes for cross case synthesis by making word and sign charts and matrices (Yin, 2003). Drawing upon these data sources, this article examines how the RTW club created an important space in which the participants engaged in identity construction activities.

### **Foregrounding the after school literacy site**

To explicate how the participants constructed identities in the RTW club, it is necessary to discuss the multiple aspects and components of the after-school literacy site. In seeking potential participants, I had emphasized one aspect of the club: that it would help the ELLs improve their reading, speaking, and writing skills in English. However, from a research perspective, I was more interested in how they would open up to talk about themselves and their identities with the aid of multicultural literature, which would provide them with relevant and personal

topics to discuss verbally and online as they listened to and talked with their peers and wrote about issues of importance to them. I primarily intended the site to provide the participants with a sense of comfort and security so as to openly talk about their personal experiences, feelings, opinions, and thoughts as a result of navigating through two cultural and linguistic worlds they inhabited as immigrant students.

Responding to literature in a spoken and written format was pursued to study identity in line with Rosenblatt's (1938, 2004) transactional theory, which suggests that reading literature aesthetically requires readers to make connections to personal experiences, which in turn is an important part of one's identity building (Fecho, 2002). In addition, evoking responses in a small group (that is, instead of seeking responses individually) was attempted because listening to what other people say in an intimate group setting inspires others to discuss their personal experiences and opinions (Bahktin, 1981; Gilles & Pierce, 2003; Holquist, 1986; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Marchenkova, 2005; Vygotsky, 1986; Wink & Putney, 2002). Evans (2001) succinctly points out the importance of verbal interactions between small group members while collaboratively constructing meaning from literature:

The springboard nature of discussion groups, where one person's question creates an opportunity for other people to share their interpretations and experience, is at the heart of what occurs in literature discussion groups and is the reason why they are so much more powerful than having students read and respond to literature individually. (p. 20–21)

Many studies in literacy research have utilized this format to explore students' identities and identity construction, such as Latina middle school girls (Broughton, 2002), Asian high school girls (Vyas, 2004), African American and white girls (Smith, 2005), and African American high school girls (Sutherland, 2005). Although literacy scholars have included minority adolescents in their research, the studies continue to display a limited range in terms of featuring minority students beyond certain already established research populations, which constitutes a significant gap in the literature (Dressman & Webster, 2001).

Whereas Asian students' literacy practices that occur in a small group discussion format have received little attention (with the notable exception of Vyas's 2004 study), L2 literacy scholars have recently begun studying Asian ELLs' participation in literacy practices in out-of-school online literacy sites (Black, 2005, 2006; Lam, 2000; Yi, 2008). Black (2005, 2006) examined how an English language learner who immigrated from China to the United States developed her literacy skills in English and reconstructed her Asian identity through active participation in a fanfiction website where she crafted novels drawing on her interest in Japanese

comic books and pop culture. Similarly, Lam (2000) studied one adolescent boy, Almon, from Hong Kong, who at first struggled to gain full participation in the English speaking world after immigrating to the United States. The study showed that an online community he created through his homepage about a Japanese pop star granted him confidence as an English language user as he exchanged emails with international pen pals in English. While Black and Lam studied how ELLs developed English literacy skills and constructed identities in their online sites, Yi (2008) focused on how Korean 1.5 generation (i.e., immigrant) adolescents used their first language in an online community. Among other activities, these students collectively wrote novels on the website they helped create in the form of relay writing, where they each added sections to a novel they were co-constructing. This study found that the online community permitted the learners to engage in rich literacy practices out of school and to navigate through their two linguistic and cultural worlds. These practices constituted efforts to develop or maintain an identity aligned with their Korean heritage.

The studies conducted by these three scholars have contributed to widening our perspectives about ELLs' literacy practices and identity construction. In contrast to the various literacy sites that were organized by the students voluntarily in these studies, my literacy site, the RTW club, was discreetly established by the researcher to study the process of identity construction. My literacy site also differed because it included face to face club meetings in addition to the online Wiki site to add channels through which identities could be constructed. In the following section, I discuss important components of the RTW club, which included the use of multicultural literature, talking in face to face club meetings, writing in a Wiki space, and diverse and unique roles that members played in the club.

### *Multicultural literature*

One important component of the site that prompted the participants to share relevant and personal experiences was the use of multicultural literature. Multicultural literature has been utilized in literacy classrooms in part to comply with the tenets of multicultural education (Banks, 2001). Multicultural literature aims to inject different points of view and information about various cultures and approaches to living into the mainstream curriculum. Cai and Bishop (1994) define multicultural literature as a "parallel cultural literature" that includes stories and poems written by individuals from parallel cultural groups, such as African Americans and Asian Americans, about their common ethnic and racial experiences. A number of multicultural literature studies that have taken place in classrooms have shown that many students from non-mainstream backgrounds enjoy reading multiculturally-oriented stories that depict their own experiences and feelings and thus help them

define and redefine their realities (Athanases, 1998; De Leon, 2002; Ferger, 2006). Drawing on the role of multicultural literature in helping students relate to their own experiences, I compiled a list of Asian multicultural literary texts while consulting professors, pertinent journal articles, and websites before I gathered the participants for this study. After the participants were selected, I chose several short stories and poems from a well-known book entitled *Asian American literature*,<sup>2</sup> to be read during the first five club meetings, and one popular short novel, *Beacon Hill Boys*,<sup>3</sup> for the rest of the club meetings. The readings, which featured simpler uses of language consonant with the intended audience's status as learners of English, portrayed Asian immigrant students' experiences in the US. Topics of the readings included conflicts with parents, pressure to excel academically, complying with community rules, Asian foods, conflicts in high school, and so on.

### *Face to face club meetings*

To complement the use of multicultural literature, face to face club meetings in a small group were intended to provide a venue for the participants to respond to the literature and to each other. We met on nine Saturdays during a five month period. Each club meeting lasted approximately one hour and took place in a group study room in a university library. The participants were expected to read one short story from the anthology or two chapters from the novel before coming to a meeting. I digitally recorded and immediately transcribed each meeting's dialogue afterwards. Although the first meeting was awkward, we began to develop routines and a rapport with each other. By the midpoint of the study, we grew comfortable with each other to the degree that we began to recognize and tease each other about our roles in the club. For example, Kush teased Null for mainly proposing main idea questions, and Null teased Ram and Hulk for being too shy. The intimate small group environment in this out of school setting in which grades were not granted encouraged the four adolescents to open up to one another with relative ease over time.

We usually initiated a meeting with casual talk about events in the participants' school and daily lives. In the first few meetings, I primarily led the discussions by modeling the kinds of questions that they could ask each other, such as making connections to the self, to the text, and to the world (Daniels, 2002). I would prepare approximately ten discussion questions from the week's reading for each club meeting. When preparing them, it was necessary for me to identify emergent themes arising from previous meetings, which could then be addressed again if relevant to the reading(s) for the next meeting. As we moved through my questions, the participants gradually started to pose questions of their own to one another as the meetings unfolded. When we discussed the book *Beacon Hill Boys*,

we took about five minutes to write down questions on a slip of paper to pose to one another at the beginning of each meeting. After the participants' questions were addressed, I asked some more that I had prepared. We also discussed the meaning of some words that had proved problematic. One participant in particular, Null, often asked vocabulary questions which the rest of us addressed. In addition, to further stimulate their responses to the literature, in the last three club meetings we acted out some scenes from the book.

As is common in a book club study, topics generated in the club meetings were not only directly related to those in the assigned texts. For instance, the participants sometimes talked about various issues related to international affairs, the role of the US in world politics, and world history. These seemingly irrelevant topics were actually highly pertinent to my study because they spoke to the participants' identities and process of identity construction. Discussion topics relevant and/or irrelevant to the readings included education vs. family, behavior in school, attitudes towards their L1 and English, the importance of their names, perceptions of American peers and American education, religion, plagiarism, and complying with societal rules, among others.

### *Writing in a Wiki site*

In addition to the face to face club meetings, I facilitated writing on a private Wiki site to provide another venue for the participants to express their identities (<http://readtalkwikiclub.wetpaint.com>). I included writing in a Wiki site for several reasons. First, writing in response to books has been shown to be an effective way to help students construct meaning, especially in conjunction with group talk, in a book club setting (Daniels, 2002; Gilles, 1989; Johnson, 2000). Second, I believed that this online space could attract adolescents given how their lives tend to be intricately related to online environments (Thomas, 2007). Third, the online site was also created to foster a sense of community among the participants, in line with what several researchers have found regarding the benefits of online interaction (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Jacobson, 1999; Ruhleder, 2000). However, acknowledging some potential perils of gathering online data (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003), I established a strictly private Wiki website in which only invited persons could access the contents.

After each club meeting, I identified two topics that generated considerable discussion and merited elaboration. I posted prompts about these topics on the private Wiki site and invited the participants to write responses before the next meeting. To make this writing appear less formidable, I encouraged them to write as if they were chatting with a friend via instant messenger, with which all of them were already familiar through their own use of this medium of communication.

The questions prompted them to place themselves in a specific situation or to give advice to a friend. These kinds of questions were intended to reveal the participants' value systems, which were tied to their *cultural models* (Gee, 2003, 2008). To enhance opportunities for participation, I gave them ten minutes to write their responses online during a few face to face club meetings. As it turned out, Kush only completed his when asked to do so during the five meetings in question, that is, five times. In contrast, Ram posted more than what was expected, which was seventeen times. Null and Hulk each posted seven times.

What also complemented talk in the face to face club meetings and writing on Wiki was three individual interviews with Kush, Null, and Ram and two with Hulk. Each interview was conducted within a two-month period and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed immediately. Before the first club meeting, I conducted initial interviews in which I asked the participants to describe themselves with respect to family, personal interests, school, and life before and after immigration. The second and third interviews asked them to reflect on the club meetings and to elaborate on their comments during club meetings, previous interviews, and Wiki postings. Individual interviews contributed to gaining more personal and in-depth understanding of each participant than what was disclosed in the club meetings or Wiki postings.

### *Participants*

The last important component of the after-school literacy site to take into account was the unique and diverse roles that each of the four club members played. However, before discussing each member, I should delineate the multiple roles that I played in the RTW club. As its founder and as a researcher, I chose the readings and the sequences in which the stories were read. I was a facilitator and participant observer, in that I actively raised questions, probed into answers, and keenly observed their interactions. I also took on the role of an active member by sharing my own experiences as a Korean national relative to various intercultural issues and the process of learning English. In addition to my already discussed roles in the club, I provided transportation for the participants to the club meetings and to other places. I occasionally helped some of the participants with school projects and their families with situations involving the use of English. Informal conversations in the car allowed us to enhance our understanding of each other on a more personal level, especially as we listened to our favorite music together and talked about various events that occurred in our families or at school.

Kush (10th grade Korean boy) had been in the US for five years at the beginning of the study. I first got to know him as my friend's nephew. Although I had seen him occasionally over the years, I never got to know him until he joined the

study. Kush did not take much interest in school work and often got in trouble in school. Kush strongly identified himself as a talented skater (skateboarder) and a guitar player. Kush exclusively befriended American peers who skated and who shared an interest in similar music genres. Kush often criticized Korean peers who (in his view) studied too much and therefore failed to find a common interest with them. During individual interviews, I found it challenging to make him elaborate on his comments, as Kush often said, "I don't know," "I don't care," and "I guess." Interestingly, as much as he may expect not to have been interested in the club given these attributes, Kush often voluntarily posed questions to the others and led interesting debates due to his perspectives on various issues that differed considerably from the others. Kush's general lack of conformity and rebellious behavior were pointed out by Null, who classified Kush as Jerry, the troublemaker and rebel from the assigned book, *Beacon Hill Boys*.

Null (10th grade Uzbek boy) had been in the US for two and a half years at the beginning of the study. I was introduced to him through a friend of mine who worked with his older brother. Null's immigration history was different from the other participants because his family had sought political refuge in the US. Due to the abrupt transitions in his life and not knowing English upon arrival in the US, Null experienced an enormous sense of loss and was often nostalgic about his previous life in a homogenous environment with his fellow Muslim Uzbeks. Despite feeling frustrated as an ELL, Null tried hard to receive good grades in school and hoped to be a computer programmer after graduation. Null actively initiated questions in the club meetings, thereby significantly enriching our discussions. Null's sizable contributions to the club meetings were recognized by Ram, who attributed a rather unexciting and quiet club meeting to Null's absence that day. Null, too, gave himself credit for making people talk in the club meetings. He jokingly labeled the club members based on their characteristics, such as shy and defiant. Indeed, Null often served as a humorous facilitator throughout the club meetings.

Ram (11th grade Indian boy from New Delhi) had been in the US for eight months at the beginning of the study. Ram was the only one who responded to my flier distributed at an Asian supermarket. Ram was fluent in English when he arrived in the US, yet he was placed in an ESOL class when he began his American school life. Ram hoped to exit ESOL soon and to enter honor's level classes. He openly criticized the US school curriculum that he saw as less challenging compared to the one he experienced in India. Ram was a shy and serious boy who spoke little. Interestingly, Ram opened up a lot in the club meetings over time, and he considered that the club experience would be beneficial to him later in college, such as engaging in debates and speaking in class. Ram's responses were detailed and well thought-out in the interviews. Furthermore, he was the only one

who completed the entire set of Wiki postings. Compared to the rich data he provided via interviews and Wiki postings, Ram was reluctant to share his personal opinions, especially in the first few club meetings, which prompted Null to label Ram as a quiet Asian boy. However, Ram often vehemently expressed his opinions when they were met with opposition in the club meetings.

Hulk (11th grade Indian boy from Gujarat) had been in the US for four months when he joined the study, which he was introduced to by his friend, Ram. Like Ram, Hulk was driven to succeed in the US and to fulfill his dream of becoming a heart surgeon. Hulk considered himself intelligent, and sometimes utilized the car riding time to ask me questions about college. Similar to Null, Hulk held onto strong religious values and principles as a Hindu. Due to the shorter time I knew him compared to the other participants, I did not get to know him as intimately as I did them. Interviews with him were also relatively shorter than those with other club members; I sensed that Hulk did not feel comfortable talking under such circumstances. Hulk valued abiding by rules and not causing any conflicts with people. Hulk usually spoke softly, and thus his voice was often pushed into the background during the face to face discussions. When he did not endorse someone's position, Hulk voiced his contrasting opinions in a rather softly spoken and calm manner.

## Findings

Various elements in the after school literacy site, such as the use of multicultural literature, small and intimate group setting where free talk was encouraged in response to literature, free writing via Wiki, and the unique roles and conflicting opinions and identities that each club member played and presented contributed to generating various aspects of identity construction during the study. In this section, I explore how the after school literacy site helped the participants to (re) construct their academic and social identities around the topics of education and ethnic and cultural identity.

### *Site for constructing academic/social identity around education*

The site provided multiple opportunities for us to talk about where and with whom the participants affiliated academically and socially with respect to education. The idea was to see how they felt about formal education in light of the emphasis placed on education and educational success in Asian culture. Thus, education is a useful topic for discerning identities and cultural affiliations among members of Asian populations. Each participant's views about what it means to

be educated made the discussions richer and more interesting. While three of the participants, Null, Ram, and Hulk, were intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to receive good grades in school, as per their cultural backgrounds, Kush did not care much about school work. Ram and Hulk had entered the US voluntarily and most recently (less than a year before the study began) with concrete goals in life, such as going to college and becoming professionals. Null maintained a good relationship with his teachers, participated in extracurricular activities, and strived to receive good grades. What Null and Ram had in common, in addition to the seriousness they attached to school success, was that they did not align themselves with American peers academically. Both of them were critical of what they saw as the inappropriate and disrespectful behavior displayed by some American peers in school. For example, in an interview, Null distanced himself from American peers who complained about teachers and offered a well thought-out lecture about the role of teachers:

...when you at school, [some Americans say that] "I hate teachers, this teacher and this teacher". They are here to teach you. They are not here to hate you or fail you. If they try to teach you, they want you to work hard. You would like, "this teacher hates me," and they would be like "this teacher hates me making me work hard." No, this teacher likes you making you work hard (laughs). They try to make you better. That's the part I don't like because they [some Americans] never understand that teachers are trying to help you. (2nd interview with Null: 04/15/08)

While Null, Ram, and Hulk commonly valued education, Null differed from Ram and Hulk, who placed a priority on education even at the expense of relationships with their families. Here we see an intriguing negotiation of values associated with education in Asian culture and the participants' identification with these values. The impetus for this discussion was raised in a face to face club meeting where we discussed a short story called "Coming Home Again." The story is about a Korean American man who comes back to a dying mother and tries to rekindle the relationship between them that was lost for years due to his being sent away to a boarding school when he was fifteen. This story evoked a lot of interesting discussion because its central topics, such as relationships with parents and friends and the importance of education, were integral to the participants' lives. In the following excerpt, I asked them if the parents' decision to send the son to a boarding school was the right choice, particularly since the dying mother had begun to regret it. It is apparent that Null strongly opposed the idea of sending a young child away for a better education when he (in Null's view) needs to be nurtured in the home environment. Null buttressed his idea by citing the example of an acquaintance of his who often exhibited negative behaviors as a result of not being disciplined by

parents. In contrast, Hulk strongly opposed Null by arguing that it was wise and considerate of the mother in the story to provide a better future for her son. Ram, who often showed a practical and realistic side throughout the club meetings, supported Hulk's position by saying that education is the only way to be independent, and he was willing to sacrifice his relationship with family and friends for a better education, as we see in the following exchange:

- Choi: ... Do you think this was a right decision for the mom?  
Null: No.  
Choi: No? ... So you are saying it's not a good decision. Talk more about that.  
Null: How old was he when he went?  
Choi: He was 15 when he left.  
Null: He is 15, and he'd better be with his family because I know one guy he goes to a border school and after he finished the board school, he got so bad-drinks and smoke....  
Choi: What do you all think? Do you think it's a bad thing?  
Hulk: NO, it's good. Because the mom wants to make the career of the child. So she was making a good decision for the child. ....  
Ram: Yeah because it's they will not stay with you forever. And if you are not educated and then, and if you like to live your life with comfort, then you need to be educated.... So it's important to be educated. Sometimes you have to lose things for that. With your family and friends. Education is more important....  
Hulk: If you sacrifice your relationship with your family for five years, for 10 years, we will have a better life after that. Because we are told that we have to feed ourselves. They will not be there for every time. So, to gain something, we need to lose something. (4th club meeting: 03/15/08)

The excerpt does not reveal a disinterest in attaining a better education on Null's part. In fact, Null was as motivated to do well in school as Hulk and Ram. But it shows that Null placed more importance on familial values and principles than on education. Throughout the study, it was apparent that Null's behavior and thoughts were informed by familial and religious principles and a strong identification with them. After hearing the opposite opinions from Hulk and Ram, Null again proposed a scenario in which a child grows up to be prosperous but pompous and disrespectful to his parents because of living away from them. Ram responded to Null that the parents would still feel content with the son's promising future and wealth despite the distant relationship. Null was unhappy about Ram's response and voiced the belief that there are more important things in life, such as building good relationship with parents and people, than having a lot of money.

What was also interesting about this exchange was how it revealed the spirit of camaraderie that had developed among the participants through the opportunities

for interaction provided by the after school club. In this instance, I found it intriguing that a fiercer confrontation was circumvented by their deliberate use of "it depends" and evasive laughter, which frequently occurred during the club meetings:

- Null: ... Ok, your kid go to a boarding school, and then after like five years, he comes back. He would be like, "you put me a boarding school, and I am smart(R laughs) and now I hate you now". What do you say? It's like he is smart and become really rich and he hates you. What would you do?...
- Ram: Then, if since they love him, they will have to be happy for him. Like he's making good money and he is happy in his life. ...
- Null: ... you have to be a person. It's not all about money. You make money and then you hate your parents and then you hate everybody and you hate all the parents and you like money and you have lot of money. What do you spend that money for?
- Ram: But that depends on the person (laughs)
- Null: Yeah, depends on the person. (4th club meeting: 03/15/08)

Ram aligned himself strongly with educated persons because he firmly believed that education would help him become independent and accumulate wealth, which were high priorities in his life. Ram's dedication to attain success in education was so serious that he asserted that building relationships with family and friends could wait until he becomes highly educated and fulfills his dreams. Ram also associated educated persons with maturity and seriousness about life, and thus he aligned himself with Asian peers who he perceived as placing a similar priority on education. In the interview segment below, Ram distanced himself from American peers who seemingly (in his view) are not serious about education and who do not prepare carefully for the future:

I like to think that education is important. It's not that everybody thinks education is important. And that's mostly in this country [the US] yeah. If you have education, then it makes you more mature and you know about life. And you think your future is with education. And you are more and you have beliefs and fundamentals in which you like to go by. If you are surrounded by educated people, then you have good thoughts in your mind and yeah....they [Asians] have brain(laughs).... They [Asians] think before doing everything, they are more mature, and they are serious about their life and they know that education is more important than anything else. (2nd interview with Ram: 04/09/08)

What is interesting here is how, on the one hand, he displays a strong affiliation or identification with Asian culture and yet, on the other hand, places education and individual success above the traditional Asian emphasis on the importance of family and serving or contributing to the family.

Starkly different from Null, Ram, and Hulk, who wanted to align themselves with Asians who are serious about education, Kush did not align himself with Korean peers who study a lot:

They [Koreans] study like crazy in here. All the Koreans like they go to school, and after that, they go to some classes to study, like to get in college...I am not doing that, so that's a good thing... It's not fun at all. Studying every day gets kind of boring. You will have like major headaches every day. (2nd interview with Kush: 04/09/08)

Also, unlike the other three participants, Kush did not set specific plans to go to college. Perhaps, being surrounded by members of a cultural group for whom entering prestigious universities is a highly acclaimed achievement might have adversely affected him in terms of developing more positive thoughts about going to college, particularly given his personality that valued being different, as noted earlier. Kush was in fact an especially interesting participant in this regard, as was revealed in part when we discussed a short story called "Two Kinds," which is about a Chinese American girl who experiences conflicts with her immigrant mother who tries to raise her as a prodigy. This short story yielded rich discussion about Asian parents' expectations. For instance, Null and Ram stated that they would politely tell the mother what they want to be instead of yielding passively to her wishes. The discussion then turned to their dreams and goals, which in turn led us to talk about colleges in the US. Whereas Ram argued that getting into American colleges is easier than in Asian countries (as long as a person masters English), Kush explained that being admitted to college in the US is harder:

... There's like so many people living in the US than in any other countries except China. It is a lot harder to go to college....There are so many people trying to go to Harvard or all these good schools, so it's really hard to get in. (2nd club meeting: 02/16/08)

These comments raise a question as to whether Kush was avoiding college because he objected to the traditional emphasis in Korean culture on education and attending a highly regarded university or simply felt that such a goal was unattainable in his case given his apparent refusal to study as hard as his Korean peers. They also suggest that Kush was engaged in a particularly complicated identity construction process as a Korean immigrant. For example, the data revealed that Kush had rather harsh attitudes toward formal education: he did not consider schooling as meant to prepare students for college or to obtain important knowledge. Instead, Kush perceived the role of mandatory schooling as shaping students as social beings. This was revealed in a club meeting where we had a heated discussion about whether history education should be mandatory while responding to the story

“Coming Home Again.” Kush asserted that “I think the main goal of being in school is to teach students like how to act in society, not like teaching everything. Who cares about history, so? You don’t have to know it” (4th club meeting: 03/15/08). In the same club meeting, responding to “Coming Home Again” prompted us to discuss whether being educated and smart was necessary to become wealthy, which was a desirable trait both for Ram and Kush. Whereas the other three participants agreed that a person has to be educated to be wealthy, consistent with traditional Asian views on the subject, Kush voiced the opposite view, which resulted in an intense discussion. Kush then wrote in a Wiki posting comment that echoed and elaborated on what he had said during the discussion:

I believe that education is not necessarily mandatory trait to have to have successful life later on....People could be well successful without being highly educated, people like Bill Gates, he did not attended college, but he is the most wealthy person in the world. this is why it is not necessary to be educated. becoming rich is all about luck. Bill gates was lucky to invent Microsoft. (Kush’s third Wiki posting: 03/22/08)

Kush was deeply engaged in the conversation about the relationship between education/intelligence and money, so he proposed a question to everyone: “I have something for everyone. What’s being smart?” (4th club meeting: 03/15/08). When asked to first describe his understanding of a smart person, Kush made it clear that he associated smart or educated people with having a condescending and snobbish attitude, which he did not aspire to develop:

you know there are people who know a lot of stuff, but you are like you are not being like human being.... you know how like if you are smart, and you are not good, and you are acting like trash. And then no one wants to be around you.... If you are smart and you think you are better than everybody. (4th club meeting: 03/15/08)

The lower value he assigned to education was also reflected in another Wiki posting where Kush responded to the first two chapters in *Beacon Hill Boys*. This particular posting signified the importance of having Wiki postings as an alternative outlet for the participants to explore their identities because they contained content that had not been disclosed in the face to face meeting. Dan, the main character of the book, does not perform well in school and always spends time with his friends, who have little interest in learning. In contrast, his older brother, Brad, is a straight A student and is admitted to a prestigious university. Therefore, Dan is constantly compared to his older brother and is pressured to be more like him by their parents. In responding to the question of what he would say to Dan, who is tired of being compared to Brad, Kush stated that

I would tell him [Dan] to ignore when people compare him to his big brother Brad. Dan is better at everything it actually matter later in life. actually he should be happy that he is being compared to Brad, Dan is way better human individual. (Kush's fourth Wiki posting: 04/05/08)

Kush's interpretation of the two characters suggests a very different kind of identification within the Asian context than might be considered the norm, where Brad would be regarded as the more successful brother. What is also noteworthy here is the apparent intensity that Kush feels about education and the mantle of success that it places on people, fairly or otherwise. This suggests that for Kush, education was an important site for identity construction, albeit in ways that run contrary to conventional Asian views.

As seen through their responses to the topic of education, the after school literacy site provided a safe ground for the participants to construct and reconstruct with whom and where they affiliated academically and socially. Responding to multicultural literature, such as the stories "Coming Home Again," "Two Kinds," and *Beacon Hill Boys*, all of which dealt with the themes of education and family that are so important in Asian culture, in a small group setting with unique contributions from the members, created valuable opportunities to engage in identity construction. Whereas Null, Ram, and Hulk were motivated to be educated and aligned themselves with Asian peers who valued education, Kush did not align himself with educated persons and Korean peers because he considered them as lacking other skills which he valued more than education. That not all four participants shared the same identification, but through the after school site had opportunities to discuss their views on the topic and thus further their identity construction, suggests the importance of providing such opportunities for adolescents who share the bicultural backgrounds that these adolescents did.

#### *Site for constructing ethnic/cultural/linguistic identity around languages*

In the same way that the after school literacy site offered numerous opportunities to talk about where they positioned themselves academically and socially, the site presented a number of occasions on which the participants discussed with whom and where they affiliated ethnically, culturally, and linguistically with regard to languages and language use. This was an important component of the study, because how we think and feel about our first and second language (if not third) is intricately related to our ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities (Joseph, 2004), especially for ELLs. Thus, in the interviews I intentionally included questions about the language(s) that they spoke in different circumstances. In this section I first discuss how the participants situated themselves ethnically and culturally

when talking about languages, and then I discuss how they constructed their linguistic identities while using English.

*Expressing ethnic/cultural identity through views on languages*

I deliberately included a question about language use when the participants did not bring it up while discussing a chapter in *Beacon Hill Boys* that described Dan, a Japanese American boy who could not communicate with his parents in Japanese. In the club meeting, I asked them about what they thought about Dan's situation and about whether they thought that speaking their first, or heritage, language was important. Null and Hulk responded without hesitation that speaking their parents' language was important because it helped define who they were within their ethnic and cultural community. Ram partially agreed with Null and Hulk, but Ram also stressed the importance of learning English:

Null: [speaking parents' language is important] because that makes you, if you are Korean, you speak Korean. That makes you Korean.

Hulk: If you don't speak the language, you are not Korean.

Ram: If you are Korean, and you don't know the language, that's not good. If you are here in the US, you need to know English. If you know Korean and don't know English, nobody will help you. There is nobody there to teach you English. (7th club meeting: 04/05/08)

As Null and Hulk shared similar views about being respectful to parents and complying with the ethnic community's expectations concerning language (due in part to their religious values), it was perhaps not surprising that they both advocated teaching their first languages to the next generation. This seemed to signify a strong ethnic identity on their part. In fact, Null was adamant about teaching or if necessary forcing his children to learn his language in the US: "Yes, I would make sure that my kids speak my own language even if they don't want 2..." (Null's 7th Wiki posting: 04/10/08). Hulk took a similar stance, as we see below:

I would teach [my languages]. It is about our culture and we have to continue our culture...They [immigrant parents in the US] don't teach young ones their language. I can take my family, who's my mom's sister. Her kids they don't know our language. They can understand it but they can't speak....It's not good .

(2nd interview with Hulk: 06/28/08)

Similar to Null and Hulk, Ram maintained a strong ethnic identity and thus valued speaking an Indian language, though he did not explicitly indicate whether he would teach his language to the next generation. He did, however, express strong views about Indians speaking an Indian language, not English, in the US:

Like me and my brother, our cousin, we all moved here [the US] and they moved here so we spoke in Hindi. We both have a full understanding of English, but still we like to talk in Hindi... Yeah. When I am with Hulk, I don't think I should speak English, even with family. When I am with Hulk, my family or my brother, I should speak Hindi. (2nd interview with Ram: 04/09/08)

Ram was also proud of the way he sounded when speaking English (i.e., with an Indian accent) and criticized some Indians who compromise their accents to sound more like Americans, thus further signaling his identity or affiliation:

If everybody is able to understand that [my accent], every educated person is able to understand that, then, there is no other thing there is no force I should change my accent. That's fine...he [somebody] was telling me that the parents who like live here four or three years, they want their children to speak with an American accent. I don't know why they think like that. (2nd interview with Ram: 04/09/08)

Although Ram valued speaking Hindi with fellow Indians, he was so acutely aware of the power of English that he was adamant about the importance of knowing and using English and felt that all Indian schools should teach English, as indicated in a follow-up interview:

In some areas, in village, people don't speak English because the schools are in the native language-if it's in Gujarati, it's Gujarati medium, not English medium. So that's something I would like to change that every school should use English medium itself not Gujarati or Punjabi or Hindi medium...No one speaks Hindi. If you are a rich person in India, you will not speak Hindi, not even with your family. And like if you work in an office, people use Hindi but if you are working there, and don't use English with clients, then sometimes it gets too (inaudible). You don't feel good about yourself that you are talking in Hindi when everybody else is talking in English...if you think about your future, English is more important. (3rd interview with Ram: 06/28/08)

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly in light of findings shared earlier, Kush's position on the prospect of teaching Korean to the next generation in the US sharply contrasted with Null's and Hulk's views. Kush did not see the need to teach Korean to his children later because, in his view, English and Spanish are the only two necessary languages in America. In the following excerpt from a club meeting discussion, Null confronted Kush, who did not want to go back to Korea and therefore did not believe that his children would need to know Korean. The spirited exchange between them suggests how important language issues are in the context of identity construction:

- Kush: You have to know English and Spanish in this country. So you don't have to like teach another language.
- Choi: Even if that's the language that your parents and you speak?
- Kush: It's like no one speaks it. You don't need it.
- Null: What if you go to your country?
- Kush: Probably I am not going to go there.
- Null: You are not gonna go, but maybe your kid is going to go?
- Kush: Probably not.
- Null: Maybe he gets old and he gets smart and then he is like "why didn't you teach me? I need it. I am Japanese, and I don't speak Japanese."
- Kush: Then, you can go to some school and pay for it.
- Null: you don't say that. You never say that. When a child gets old, he says "you didn't teach me that." What's what all the child say.... And if you say like, "you didn't care" and they say, "why didn't you like hit me and make me", you know? That's what they say. ...
- Kush: ...and most likely, the people who grow up here in the US, "oh, Dude, I want to learn another language." they are not gonna say that.
- Null: It's really different. You know I have my own religion and different. We have different rules in my religion. (7th club meeting: 04/05/08)

What we have seen is that the use of multicultural literature that portrayed a conflict between a child and immigrant parents due to their different linguistic orientations, combined with deliberately crafted questions prepared by the researcher and the contributions of the participants, made talk about ethnic and cultural identity construction related to language use an especially rich and valuable feature of the after school site and its aim to create opportunities for identity construction. This was true not only with respect to use of the heritage language, but also English, as seen in the next section.

### *Expressing linguistic identity through using English*

Discussion about languages in the site allowed us not only to talk about where the participants stood ethnically and culturally, but also linguistically. Due to traversing two different linguistic spheres, some participants commented that they felt different when speaking English. This was not the case with Kush, who predominantly aligned himself linguistically and culturally more with American (i.e., native English speaking) peers, or Ram, who perceived Hindi and English as of equal status to him due to having spoken both languages from a very young age. However, Null and Hulk offered different perspectives that reveal how complex issues concerning language identity can be.

Although Hulk, like Ram, had a full grasp of English, he felt that he needed to adopt a different mode of talking when speaking English. For instance, he re-

strained his emotions when speaking English and tried to be more polite, since he could not predict how others would react to him. This topic emerged during a club meeting where we responded to the first two chapters in *Beacon Hill Boys*. In this meeting, we discussed various labels used to describe some Asians who act like black or white young people, a point that was mentioned in the book while describing some characters. This led to conversations about how we choose what is right for us when we are surrounded by diverse cultural practices. Then, Ram commented that people constantly needed to change in order to adapt. Ram's comment inspired me to pose a question as to whether the participants felt that they had changed due to their immigration experiences. We see below how Hulk and Ram responded to my question:

- Hulk: In here [the US], we have to be very polite. (R laughs)  
Choi: Polite?  
Ram: Yeah(laughs)  
Hulk: To other people when talking to someone, you have to be too polite in here. In India, it's not like that. No one cares....  
Hulk: No, it's not like that. But uh, how can I say that?  
Ram: The way he speaks with other people like his other friends who are like Vietnamese or anybody. He is more cautious towards speaking to them than he is to me. He can say more good things than bad to them.  
Hulk: Something really  
Ram: Because they may think differently.  
Hulk: Yeah.  
Ram: They may think take his view of thinking, of the way he wants to say differently. And that may cause him some problems....  
Hulk: Like I don't know whether he is trustable or not. He may tell others.  
(6th club meeting: 03/29/08)

When asked to elaborate on this in an individual interview, Hulk explained that he felt restrained if he wanted to express his emotions when speaking English, as he was not completely comfortable with speaking English. Therefore, Hulk might have felt that he had to be polite when speaking English with people:

... if I act like I act with my friends, somebody may not like how I behave, so here I have to be like general, not so much exciting or too much down...um, if I am excited about a certain topic and I go and tell some of my friends here, they may not like the topic but I would be excited about it. They may not much like it or they may ignore it because they are (inaudible) so... Yeah. In English, I don't know completely, but I can't talk certain topics completely....if I need to explain something, I cannot explain it properly, which I would be able to do in my language....I sometimes don't feel comfortable speaking English, but in my language. Every person thinks like this. (2nd interview with Hulk: 06/28/08)

Not knowing the appropriate pragmatic linguistic codes in the US made Hulk feel different when speaking English as opposed to speaking his first language. This in turn prohibited Hulk from claiming full ownership of English or developing a positive identity related to the language. Unlike Hulk, Null faced greater challenges due to having to learn English from scratch after arriving in America. For example, while describing his earliest days in the US, Null stated that he felt disabled because he did not understand the language. When asked in the first interview about the worst thing that had happened in his life, Null explained that his English was his worst problem. Interestingly, though, Null was acutely aware of the progress that he had made over the years and was highly reflective about the personality changes that accompanied his increased proficiency in English. As the study progressed, it became clear that he had a very complex relationship with English. He indicated at the beginning of the study that, when speaking Uzbek, he felt talkative and funny whereas when speaking English, he felt quiet and serious. And yet he was talkative in our group interaction and usually led discussions in the face to face club meetings in a humorous manner. This was a striking contrast to how he represented himself in our first interview:

I guess I am serious (laughs)...I am a serious person. I don't like talking much. Maybe I do. In my country, I used to talking much. Here maybe I have English problems. Sometimes, I can't say what I want to say exactly. That's why I don't like talking too much. Actually, I am like a funny person. (1st interview with Null: 02/08/08)

When asked to elaborate on this in the last interview, Null articulated how he changed from not speaking to being talkative and funny over the three year period in which he had lived in the US:

First year, I was very quiet. I didn't say a word and people didn't even hear me saying a word all year. The second year, I did a little bit (laughs), and the third year, this year, I was really loud you know a little bit not that much....But I was like no one thought I was funny. Everyone thought I was [serious]. I thought I was serious too because I didn't speak English and I wasn't talking to anyone. And I got used to it, for two years, and this year, I have lots of friends. I have changed. (3rd interview with Null: 06/16/08)

In the last interview, I asked him to rate his speaking ability in English. Although he was shy about admitting it, he was content with his improved speaking skills in English. Null grew confident about his English by increasingly interacting with American peers in his school during the year in which the study took place. More frequent contact with American peers and conversations with them helped him claim an emergent ownership of English. Ironically, Null began to acknowledge

American peers' inadequate knowledge of English, especially grammar, where Null believed he was stronger than they were:

I think I am speaking like great. I know it's not (laughs). It sounds like for everybody you know when you speak other language. You can like you can talk like a little bit better and you speak really good and sounds like American you know...I mean Americans they don't speak 100 percent...I talk to my American friends, and they say "I don't speak 100 percent American" and they are like he said that "I am learning". The guy was like memorizing grammar, words, and I was like "you don't even know this one?" He was like "no, I have a literature class. I have to memorize this." I was like, "ok, then you don't speak English." (3rd interview with Null: 06/16/08)

His confidence in English seemed to stem from his participation in online spaces. Null spent a considerable amount of time on the Internet, and he explained that he mostly chatted in English. Null also regarded the time spent on the Internet as a way to connect to his peers in the US. Null frequently reminisced about the intimate relationship with his previous friends that was built on outdoor activities in Uzbekistan. Recognizing circumstantial and cultural restraints to establishing the same kind of friendship with peers in the US, Null sought out the web community, which to him was a more comforting and accessible domain:

Yeah, because all my friends [in the US] are in the computer and game is on the computer and everything is on the computer...In my country, I didn't have time to go inside the house. I was outside every day, playing with my friends and swimming and all this, playing soccer, and go out with my friend. But here, you go outside and there is no one. (3rd interview with Null: 06/16/08)

When talking about how he improved his English, Null frequently credited online games in which he enjoyed playing as a merchant whose job required him to learn English faster to negotiate prices with online gamers. Null also attributed his accurate spelling in English to chatting while playing online games. Null felt proud of being a good speller, a skill which distinguished him from his peers in his ESOL class:

Like I used to play games, online games. That's how I learned how to spell. ....Yeah, you can chat, and there is work inside the game. I was the merchant, which is inside people, hundreds of people. To do a merchant, you have to know how to speak English....buy stuff and sell stuff on people....So you have to know how to say things and when people talk, you see one word and you are interested in the game so you learn fast...I feel that I learned a lot of spelling in that game because my friends we got in to the same ESOL class. I do more than they do. I never learned in class how to spell and stuff. (2nd interview with Null: 04/15/08)

Developed spelling skills in English by taking an active part in online games and online instant messenger activities seemed to help Null forge a new identity as a legitimate English speaker/writer:

Writing in English? Pretty good because I chat with people and they don't know I don't speak English....I can just say I am an American, and they believe me (laughs)...Like my writing is better. Like my spelling is better. (3rd interview with Null: 06/16/08)

What we have seen in this section is that the after school literacy site, which included individual interviews intended to provide opportunities for deeper reflection on issues that initially emerged from face to face club meetings, and the rapport that I developed with the participants over multiple encounters in the site, allowed me to examine how Hulk and Null negotiated their complex linguistic identities with respect to English. Hulk, having been to the US only for several months at the time of the study, felt a need to adopt a reserved speaking mode when speaking English, although he was a competent English language learner. For him, then, there was not a strong English identity. On the other hand, Null gradually emerged as a confident and legitimate English speaker and writer, especially through his active membership in online spaces. Of course, he had much more time to learn and use English in America than Hulk, but his negotiation of a stronger English identity is nevertheless intriguing.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal the valuable opportunities for identity construction that took shape in an after school literacy site where four Asian ELLs responded to multicultural literature and to each other in a small group format and wrote reflections electronically on a private Wiki site. The intensity of many of the comments made by the participants suggests an eagerness on their part to engage in such construction as they negotiated their lives as immigrants living in an English dominant country. It appears that for them, these opportunities to explore their ethnic and linguistic affiliations or identities were desirable, thereby suggesting that there is value in creating spaces for identity negotiation like the after school literacy club that was the site of this study. We see this in two primary ways.

First, the use of multicultural literature provided pertinent topics that related directly to the participants' experiences and identity building, such as issues with family members due to cultural conflicts and pressure to succeed. The role that the multicultural literature played in the RTW club in my research is congruent with how the students in studies such as Broughton's (2002) and Vyas's (2004)

responded positively to literature that depicted characters like themselves. Nevertheless, it is important to note studies that utilized multicultural literature but that did not elicit personal responses from students. Dudley-Marling (2003) discussed challenges he encountered when incorporating multicultural literature in his class. Dudley-Marling introduced folktales that depicted what he thought represented his diverse students' ethnic, religious, and cultural experiences in his third grade classroom. Contrary to his preconceived expectations, Muslim students and students from other Middle Eastern countries did not make connections to the stories and did not want to contribute their knowledge to discussions of their reading of folktales. Dudley-Marling (2003)'s reflections on what went wrong are echoed by Athanases (1998), who cautions that while teaching multicultural literature, we should not make the mistake of "reducing them [readers] to mere members of particular identifying groups" (p 291).

Second, the findings which showed how the participants positioned themselves academically, socially, ethnically, and culturally align well with Gee's (1996, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008) notion of cultural models. That is, the participants' affiliation with certain cultural and ethnic groups illustrates the important workings of cultural models (Gee, 2003, 2007) in their lives. To make sense of the behaviors and phenomena occurring within their sociocultural groups, the participants affirmed or reconstructed their cultural models as they demonstrated the degree of affiliation they felt toward them. Furthermore, cultural models helped them decide where and with whom they would like to fit in. In the case of Ram, he developed a firm cultural model about education which entailed the belief that being around educated people would be beneficial to him because educated people are more mature and more likely to be wealthy. Due to his strong cultural model of education arising from his native language background, when he observed some American peers who did not appear serious about studying, he decided to fortify his existing cultural model by identifying himself with Asian peers. In the process, however, Ram also developed an erroneous and stereotypical view that Americans are not mature and do not plan for the future. Ram's thoughts precisely echoes Gee (2008)'s concerns that cultural models can generate counterproductive stereotypes at the same time that they help people feel at ease with the events and issues arising in daily life:

But all cultural models tend ultimately to limit our perception of differences and of new possibilities. They allow us to function in the world with ease, but at the price of stereotypes and routinized thought and perception. It is the job of the teacher to allow students to grow beyond both the cultural models of their home cultures and those of mainstream and school culture . (p. 114)

In the case of Kush, perhaps due in part to his coming to the US at such a young age that cultural models from his heritage culture were not as strongly established

as Ram's, Null's, or Hulk's, he might have been more susceptible to the cultural models presented by his American world. As a result, he was less inclined to consider his own original and seemingly weakly formed Korean cultural models. It is also possible that the significant differences Kush must have experienced in his earlier years in the US and the fact that he had been in the US the longest among all of the participants might have led him to want to fit in with American peers while distancing himself from Korean peers' values. The lower value Kush placed on his Korean cultural and linguistic roots is in sharp contrast with the findings of Yi's (2005, 2008) studies that depict the rich bilingual literacy activities that Korean ELLs engaged, particularly in Korean, which helped build stronger ethnic identities with their Korean heritage.

What we saw of Hulk and Null feeling different when speaking one language over another has been found in previous studies as well. Negotiation of identities via language use was illustrated by Zou (2000), who felt reserved and introverted when speaking English as opposed to feeling confident when speaking Chinese in her beginning years in the US. Moreover, the process by which Null gained confidence in English is echoed in previous research that examined how ELLs begin to gain ownership of English by participating in online spaces out of school, either through writing on a homepage and emailing (Lam, 2000) or fanfiction writing (Black, 2005, 2006). Null gained confidence in informal and casual writing required in his online community. However, it should be noted that outside of the online space, Null did not see himself to be a good academic essay writer. This may be explained by the fact that Null willingly invested in developing his informal writing ability but did not see the need to invest in formal writing. McKay and Wong's (1996) study similarly described a middle school Chinese boy, Michael, who invested greatly in his oral language development rather than his writing ability so as to reinforce his social identity as a popular athlete in school.

Collectively, then, the results indicate that, on the one hand, generating opportunities for ELLs to engage in meaningful identity construction is important, but that this process is likely to be complex due to the variance that occurs in the factors impacting on their identity development.

The study also suggests some pedagogical implications with respect to teaching ELLs in ESOL or literacy classrooms. As Gee (2003) asserted, ESOL and literacy teachers who work with ELLs should be mindful that reading, writing, and discussing in class to help ELLs achieve adequate English is inherently identity work. Therefore, teachers can work as bridges enabling ELLs to go beyond their own cultural models practiced at home and extend their negotiation of identity to cultural models shared in the mainstream culture. Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) has suggested that ESOL teachers do not need to emphasize the difference between ELL students and American peers simply by valuing the ELLs' first language culture. Instead,

ESOL teachers should play a prudent role in order to prevent these students from developing stereotypes about American peers, thus precluding the chance to expand their horizons and their own identity construction (Gee, 2003).

As the study has shown, establishing a safe and intimate environment in which ELLs share their experiences and their opinions in response to culturally relevant readings can inspire them to talk about their lives and their feelings, which will in turn foster communicative competence and literacy skills. Also, having alternative modes available for them to construct meaning from what they read and what they experience through activities such as group discussion and Wiki writing could help the learners affirm and challenge their beliefs. In particular, organizing small groups with students from diverse cultural backgrounds and holding diverse opinions can elicit richer talk about their identities in relation to others' and develop the kind of multicultural awareness that teachers strive to cultivate in the classroom. In this study, both Ram and Null stated that they did not have a chance to engage in similar discussions in school. Therefore, they appreciated the opportunity to express their thoughts on what personally mattered to them, as evoked from our readings. Meanwhile, after stating in an interview that Null did not want to talk a lot because he was self-conscious about the way he sounded in English, Null found that talking in the small group we formed empowered him as a speaker and as a debater. Ram, too, who considered himself shy and quiet, also appreciated the opportunity to think in English and argue on his feet in that language.

This study attempted to examine the identities and identity construction of Asian ELL adolescents in an out of school read, talk, wiki (RTW) club. As much as the findings of the study are intriguing, there is a need for further exploration of learners' identity development. For instance, this study was relatively short in duration. It would be beneficial to see longitudinal studies that could permit future researchers to examine in greater depth the identity negotiations and changes in cultural, ethnic, and linguistic affiliation such learners experience over time. For example, although Kush did not have specific plans to go to college and detached himself from Korean culture, when I was talking to him informally after the conclusion of the study, he spoke of possibly going to college and of perhaps going back to Korea later. Prolonged engagement with the participants could document changes and negotiations over time. Future research might also employ similar research methods and replicate the study in another setting, perhaps in the classroom instead of out of school, or with mixed racial groups or perhaps only with members of the same ethnic group. It would also be useful to focus on female participants instead of the strictly male group in my study, or perhaps a combination of females and males. Lastly, my study was rather contrived in the sense that I pre-established the RTW club in which we read certain types of books and I intentionally asked certain types of questions to elicit specific data about the participants'

identities both in club meetings and via Wiki exchanges. Studies that explore identities in naturally occurring settings, such as through observations and through critical discourse analysis (McKay & Wong, 1996), might yield different data.

## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms. All of them had wanted to use their real names throughout the study, but I insisted on making up pseudonyms to protect privacy during the last member checking session. To make my work easy, I asked them to come up with a name that started with their initials.

2. Short stories and poems read in the book included:

Karim, P. M. (2001). Hybrid. In Glencoe (ed.), *Asian American literature* (p. 246–247). New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill: Author.

Tan, A. (2001). Two kinds. In Glencoe (ed.), *Asian American literature* (p. 267–276). New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill: Author.

Divakaruni, C. (2001). Bad luck woman. In Glencoe (ed.), *Asian American literature* (p. 77–87). New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill: Author.

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Only half of the book, eight chapters, were read in the club.

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### *Author's address*

Jayoung Choi  
5430 Taylor Rd.  
Alpharette, GA 30022  
USA  
sole1st@hotmail.com



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