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## NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

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# Reconciling with English: An Autobiography to Ruminant Over the Different Meanings That English Has for Us

Akiko Nakayama, Hiroshima University <akknkym@gmail.com>

In this narrative account, I will present the stories of how two women, Jina and I, relate with language learning. Jina is a Korean woman studying at a Japanese university. In the Japanese context, most of the students from East Asia are fluent in either Japanese or English, but she could communicate in both fluently. Moreover, she had invested heavily in English voluntarily. Why did she invest in English in a non-English speaking country? This is the start of this research. The second story is my own story, which emerged as I tried to understand Jina's story reflectively. Although we grew up in different places and times, I was able to reflect on the common life goals of both of us as women, the freedoms we have gained through language learning/ use, and what learning English means to us. By moving back and forth between Jina's and my stories, and re-telling and reliving my story, it became clear that language learning is tied to the feminine realm, especially for me. I will discuss how we both had a common goal of living independently in this modern society, and that in order to achieve this goal, we formed two sides of the same coin, me refusing to learn English and Jina actively accepting it.

このナラティブ・アカウントでは、ジナと私という2人の女性が言語学習とどのように関わってきたかを紹介する。ジナは日本の大学で学ぶ韓国女性である。日本のコンテキストでは、東アジア出身の学生のほとんどが日本語と英語のいずれかに流暢であるが、彼女には両方の言語で流暢にコミュニケーションをとる能力があった。彼女は日本語が流暢であるにもかかわらず英語に大きな投資をしていた。なぜ英語ではない日本に英語なのか。これがこの研究の始まりである。二つ目のストーリーは、ジナのストーリーをリフレクシブに理解しようとする中で生まれた私のストーリーである。私は、生まれたところも育った時代もジナとは異なっていたが、二人のストーリーの間を行きし、自分のストーリーを語り直すことによって、私たちに共通する女性としての人生の目標、言語学習及び使用によって得た自由、さらに私たちにとって英語学習はどのような意味を持つのかを考察した。それにより、言語学習は、とりわけ私にとって女性の領域に結びついていることが明らかになった。また、私たちは二人ともこの近代社会の中で自立して生きるという共通の目標を持っており、この課題を達成するために、言語、特に英語学習に私は拒否を、ジナはそれを積極的に受け入れるというコインの裏と表のような態度を持っていたことが明らかになった。

본고에서는 두 여성이 언어학습과 어떻게 관련되어 있는지에 대한 스토리를 소개한다. 첫 번째 여성은 일본 대학에서 유학 중인 한국인 진아다. 진아는 일본어가 유창함에도 불구하고 영어에 많은 투자를 했다. 그녀는 왜 일본까지 와서 영어를 중시하는가, 라는 의문이 이 연구를 시작하게 했다. 두 번째 여성은 진아의 스토리를 자기성찰적으로 이해하려는 중에 발견한 나 자신이다. 나는 진아와 다른 나라, 다른 시대를 살아왔지만, 우리 각각의 스토리를 오가며 내 자신의 스토리를 다시 말하고 기억을 돌이켜봄으로써 우리에게 공통되는 인생의 목표, 언어학습과 사용을 통해 획득한 자유, 나아가 우리에게 영어 학습은 어떤 의미를 갖는지에 대해 고찰했다. 그 결과, 언어학습이 나에게 여성적 영역에 매여 있었음을 알 수 있었다. 또한 우리는 현대 사회에서 자립하여 살아간다는 공통의 목표를 가지고 있으며, 이 과제를 달성하기 위하여 언어학습에 대해 나는 거부의 태도를 취한 반면, 진아는 적극적으로 수용하는 태도를 취하여 동전의 양면과 같은 태도였음을 알 수 있었다.

## Keywords

English hegemony, autobiography, gender, identity, researcher reflexivity, language learning purposes  
英語のヘゲモニー, オートバイオグラフィ, ジェンダー, アイデンティティ, 研究者のリフレクシビティ, 言語学習の目的  
영어 헤게모니, 자전적 글쓰기, 성차, 아이덴티티, 연구자의 자기성찰, 언어 학습의 목표

## Prologue

The hegemony of English is having a significant impact on our lives in the East Asian context (Park, 2009; Seargeant, 2009). Japanese universities have created many English-mediated programs to attract international students (Ninomiya et al., 2009) and pressured researchers to present their research in English regardless of their field of study. I have been involved with international students in Japan for more than 20 years as a Japanese language teacher, and during that time I have sensed the influence of English on the students I have met. In

the past, there were two different kinds of international student groups, one using English and the other using Japanese (Simic et al., 2006). It was rare to meet a student from East Asia who was fluent in both English and Japanese. However, in the past ten years or so, I have occasionally met international students from East Asia who can speak both Japanese and English fluently even at a university located in a small town. Jina (a pseudonym) is one of these examples. She was an international student from South Korea, studying at Dream Field University (also a pseudonym, and hereafter DFU) in West Japan, who majored in social science as an undergraduate. Although she was fluent in Japanese, she preferred to speak in English and actively interacted with English-speaking international students. Jina went to a Baltic country for an English-medium program as an exchange student for one year. Why was English so important even when she was in Japan, a non-English-speaking country? Had the advantages of learning Japanese already disappeared? Jina made me realize the hegemony of English and made me reconsider what the purpose of learning a foreign language is when it loses economic merits. In this autobiographical narrative, I would like to look back on the language learning processes of two East Asian women, Jina and me, using our life stories, and reflect on what language learning has meant to us as learners.

This narrative account also has another purpose, which is my private goal (Maxwell, 2013). I want to construct my new English writing self (Canagarajah, 2002) by reconciling myself with the period in my life when I did not like studying English. While studying for my doctoral dissertation, I was amazed by the volume and the width of the field related to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) written in English. I wished I could join this group sometime in the future. It was my “imagined community” (Kanno & Norton, 2003). But once I started writing in English, I stopped writing and asked myself, “Why do I want to write in English?” I felt I had to understand why I had so little interest in studying English. There were several previous studies that depicted Japanese women who invested in the language for the purpose of escaping their lives in Japan (McMahill, 1997; Yoshimoto, 2008). For some girls, English could be a tool for emancipation from conservative, patriarchal Japanese society; however, it did not seem like I fit in those cases. But that does not mean I was satisfied with the current gender inequality situation in Japan. It is as if I had gone through the struggle to construct a different identity and self to find my own voice, as many language learners have done (Canagarajah, 2002; Morita, 2004; Taniguchi, 2013). When I initially started writing about Jina, I had not recognized my ambivalent feelings toward English entangled with my gendered life story, as well as my mother’s and my grandmother’s. Understanding my feelings toward English shed light on my life story from a different angle, and therefore changed the view I had about Jina and other women.

To achieve these multiple goals, I will share my semi-autobiography that has emerged from reflexively inquiring into Jina’s language learning experiences. Why did she invest in English so much? What did her experiences using Japanese mean to her? Why did I not like studying English? I have moved back and forth between Jina’s stories and mine, and through comparison and contrast, I was able to retell and relive (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) my stories which I wrote in Japanese in the past (Nakayama, 2016b). Jina and I were both not only multilingual in Korean, English, and Japanese, but also sailing in this modern competitive world as women heading towards the accomplishment of our missions of independence. I could find a new meaning in our different attitudes to language learning by connecting them with our mission. In addition, both of us experienced the construction of our new L2 selves, which entailed freedom from our native cultures, albeit in different languages and different environments. However, both of us felt uncomfortable using L2, Japanese for Jina, and English for me. It was suggested that the feelings and emotions of L2 experiences are good or bad, generated from the transaction with the society and the learner (Block, 2007;

Duff, 2019). This transaction is unique to each learner because it is related to their personal history.

This narrative account proceeds in the following order. I start with my story. As I mentioned above, in order to write this semi-autobiography in English, I need to look back at my own history. I first share how I recognized the value of English, but ultimately kept it away from me because it was a role assigned to women (Kobayashi, 2015). I continue with Jina's story. Following the memory of my encounter with Jina, I retell her experience of "total freedom" with English as a lingua franca (ELF), which happened in a rural Turkish town where she visited as a volunteer teacher. This prompted me to recall my experience of using ELF in Korea and learning/using Korean. For me, speaking Korean in an L2 environment helped me to feel free from my native Japanese culture to some extent, but this was not the case for Jina when she spoke Japanese in her first study abroad experience at a large private university in Tokyo. In the final part of this narrative account, I will explore the meaning of learning English for Jina. Jina was trying to put on English armor in order to survive in this society. Isn't that the flip side to why I kept away from learning English in high school? Understanding the common mission that Jina and I shared helped me to change my view of women who invest in language learning, which had been difficult for me to understand for so long. Through this series of small stories, I want the reader to understand the insight of learning/using English and other languages in the East Asian context. I hope I can convey our truth of being multilingual women.

## My Story: Two Faces That English Has

### *First Encounters with English*

It was the time when my family and I were living in a small *danchi*, the unattractive public housing provided by the Japanese government. A number of same-size buildings were standing in a row on the top of the hill, and in the summer, pink flowers of bamboo peach would bloom for a long time. We moved to this *danchi* in Osaka from Yokohama, near Tokyo, because my father quit his job and started his own business. Due to this, my mother quit her desirable highly skilled government work to save their marriage. Despite this, she was enthusiastic about her new missions: the education of her three daughters and the management of the household. We, the three sisters, or at least me, were happy, even though we did not have much money. I am the eldest and was about to start elementary school at the time. I was pleased that our mother was at home now and I could spend time with my father when he came back early. I will never forget the taste of the sweet coffee milk he bought for us on the way back from the public bath. We were poor but enjoyed a stable nuclear family life in the *danchi*.

One day, my mother bought a luxurious English self-study set for us. It included about ten thick books written in English with a few pictures, finger puppets or plastic toy vehicles, cassette tapes, and a set of picture story cards. The cards depicted a story with images, and the cassette tapes read out the plot in English and Japanese. It was designed for children to play and learn native English by themselves. At least it was supposed to be. My sister and I started with the picture story cards. We flipped through them, listening to the audiotapes. They told the story of a boy who visited a magic kingdom suffering from the pollution caused by the king of darkness. In the magic kingdom, everybody spoke English. A black parrot—bilingual in English and Japanese—served as a translator and helped the boy. We imitated and laughed at the native English pronunciation because it was so different from the way we spoke Japanese. The parrot prompted the boy to say, "I beg your pardon?" to the English speaking trees, and ants were marching, saying "left, right, left, right." "What are you doing? 何をしているのだ! [Nani o shite iru noda]," the king of darkness roared in English and Japanese.

We were very young, and we indulged ourselves in this interesting story. Even though we did not have opportunities to use those English phrases in everyday life, we could still memorize them easily. My mother looked happy and satisfied with her purchase as she watched us giggling while listening and repeating the phrases. “The pronunciation of ‘a’ in ‘black’ is between Japanese ‘あ’ [a] and ‘え’ [e].” Sometimes my father showed off his knowledge on what we were studying. My mother said, “My daughters’ pronunciation is much better than mine. I cannot pronounce it. It is absolutely necessary for them to start learning a language when they are young.” However, the story cards were the only part of the set we used. We were supposed to use the books and other finger puppets to learn family names and other basic words, but it was no fun at all with only English. My mother was busy taking care of my youngest sister and it was too time-consuming for her to read the instructions and teach us how to play. Later in our lives, she financially invested a lot in our education, and the English study set turned out to be a waste of money. The nice storage case it came in occupied a large space in our small apartment.

It was unclear why my mother invested in such an expensive English-studying set for us. No foreigners lived in our area and otherwise she was very careful about our family’s everyday expenses. She sewed almost all of our clothes and we did not go away on any overnight trips. In my memory, my mother and father sometimes were talking about an Englishman. My mother’s voice sounded pleasant when she was talking about him, and I could guess the time with the foreigner was not bad for her. Later, when I was in middle school, I had a chance to ask my mother who this Englishman was. According to her, he was my father’s private English teacher. These days, when I recall this vague memory of mine, I see her telling me that my father’s company hired this teacher for him. My father once had been a brilliant and promising businessman in an excellent company. Sometimes my father had invited the teacher to dinner with my mother. About my father, I asked my mother, “Why would he take English lessons? Wasn’t it expensive?” My mother replied, “Your father was called a future CEO in the company. Speaking good English would be a necessary skill for him as the CEO, I guess.” I was amazed by my father’s unknown past and connected the word “promising” with English. After this conversation, I took the English studying set out from the closet and tried to listen to the tapes again that did not have any Japanese translation, but it was too hard for me.

### ***Mission to Be Independent***

“Look at the new news anchor in the show! She looks so intelligent, and it seems that she is fluent in English,” my grandmother said excitedly at the dinner table one day. All of my family, except my father, sat around the low table at the center of the cluttered but cozy tatami living room and had dinner prepared by my mother. My father usually came back late and had dinner alone. When I was nine, we moved to Nara, where my mother had grown up and started living with my grandmother. The house was attached to my grandmother’s shop, which she had started from scratch and made into the biggest one in the small town. She was like a mother goddess. After she lost her husband at the age of 33, she quit her teaching job and started her own shop. She worked day and night, bought a house, and sent all of her kids to university. My mother was the oldest among her siblings, so she had a strong bond with my grandmother. For a while her assistants lived with her but after all got married, my grandmother was alone in the house. Somehow, my family ended up moving in and living with her. My poor father agreed to live there but had to spend more than two hours commuting every day, and so spent less time with us.

After we moved to my grandmother's house, my life changed a lot. My mother, who made decisions about our education, sent us to many different after-school activities including piano lessons, calligraphy, painting, a ski camp in winter, and a swimming course in summer. In addition, she started monitoring our school grades. My grandmother believed it was important to get an education and a strong will was necessary to survive in society, especially for girls. She kept repeating a family motto from my great-grandfather: "Girls need to get a skill to live by themselves." When he was working in a factory, he saw young female workers being forced to work under bad conditions and decided to educate his daughters. He did not want his daughters to end up like those factory girls. He pushed his daughters, including my grandmother, to get a skill—and she eventually became a teacher. My great-grandfather's motto became part of my grandmother's history, and she passed it on to us. In addition to all this, there was competition among families who lived nearby over whose children were academically successful. Back then, even though my mother was busy campaigning for the local government to provide better educational facilities, she was still a full-time homemaker. She found the time to monitor our studies. I constantly felt the pressure from her for good grades, something I had never felt in the small *danchi* in Osaka.

My grandmother held power in our family in many ways, one of which was by controlling the only television set in the house. She liked NHK—*Nippon Housou Kyoukai* [Japan Broadcasting Corporation]—and did not let us watch any other channel at dinner time. Her favorite television personalities included women anchors on the 7 o'clock NHK news show. Most of them were young, charming, graduates of famous universities in Japan, and they were fluent in English. I remember they were called *kikoku-shijo* [returnees], who had grown up abroad because of their parents' jobs. I looked at their long black hair (mine was very short) and admired them, but there was no way I could be like them.

### ***Ambivalent Feeling Toward English***

English came to mean something different to me; it was not only a symbol of success, but also an emblem of being female. Even if the young female anchor on the NHK news show was talented, she always sat next to an older, unappealing man, nodding her head benignly without expressing herself. I wanted to have "my" things to say, not to read something other people wrote. I was a girl who had a desire to rise in the world as much as my competitive friends in middle school. My mother, who still had a hard time giving up her attachment to her previous job, used to tell me "Girls must be three times as excellent and useful as boys to pass the job exam, at least it used to be like that." I felt anger and fear facing that reality, and she encouraged me to fight against the obstacles which stood in my way just because I am a woman.

I studied very hard to enter the best high school in our area. After that I could relax somewhat, freeing myself from the pressure to enter a good high school. I remember two English teachers. The elder one had such a strong Japanese accent in English, it sounded like a cat meowing. The younger one, who had studied in the U.S. for a year, taught us some tips on pronunciation and how to improve our listening. But overall I was not so interested in English. At that time, I devoted a good deal of my energy to high school athletic club activities. Often when I was in English class, I fell asleep. I also hated learning new words and grammar that required repetition and took time. I thought everything worth reading was translated into Japanese, and I would be fluent if I had a chance to stay in an "English native-speaker" country for a year or so. "Why is it necessary to study English?" I was naïve and did not know the reality of language learning.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, like others from our young

1. Research about studying abroad indicates it has positive outcomes for language learning, but the individual differences are big (Kinginger, 2015). You can find a couple of unhappy cases in Block (2007).

generation (Kobayashi, 2002; Takahashi, 2013; Yoshimoto, 2008), I longed for the world outside Japan. So, blind to my own English ability, I even begged my father to pay for me to study in the United States for a year.

This was all happening in the 1980s, a time when the world was amazed at Japan's economic success and called it No. 1. This discourse affected me. I was very proud of Japanese culture and loved the old artifacts of Nara, which was the first capital of the country. On the contrary, I resented the dominant position of European culture. I perceived the people who worshiped the products, fashion, and customs from Europe and America as frivolous and sometimes even despised them, including one of my girl classmates. Today, I still wonder where this malicious feeling came from, however I remember the classmate used to tell me she wanted to go to Tokyo to major in European languages in university, because those languages were just cool. I thought she was the type of person who volunteered to be a manager for the high school baseball team. They were never out front putting themselves on the line as players. Instead, they worked hard in the background for the male players. It seemed like my classmate friend did not mind being positioned in that—female—realm. I wanted to live for myself in society, not for someone else. For me, English was not a vehicle that would take me in that direction.

For me, English was associated with social success and decent jobs. That is why my father took private lessons and the TV anchors were fluent in English. But at the same time, speaking English or any foreign language well was also considered something that women were good at and in the domain of women (Schmenk, 2004). On the one hand, I wanted to get a respected job and interact with people from all over the world, but on the other hand, I had an aversion to being labeled as a woman.

## **Jina's Story**

### ***The First Time I Met Her***

Another way the hegemony of English has impacted me has been the declining Japanese learning and teaching in South Korea as a result of it. I taught Japanese there in the 1990s just before the peak of Japanese language education in South Korea (The Japan Foundation, 2020). At that time both university students and working adults, regardless of their specialties, were learning Japanese to get a job or a promotion. Since being able to speak Japanese was also a promise of employment, I did not question why so many Koreans studied the language, and why I taught it in this former colony of Japan. When I started researching language issues in Korea in the 2010s, I was stunned by the decline of Japanese language education in the country. Many students and teachers told me that Japanese language skills were no longer enough to get a job, so students were eager to study English, even if they had majored in Japanese (Nakayama, 2016a). If language learning does not promise future wealth or economic benefits as linguistic instrumentalism does (Kubota, 2011) then, what is its purpose? When I was facing the social economic realities surrounding Japanese teaching, I met Jina.

The first time I met Jina was at an orientation for international students. I remember she was wearing somewhat showy clothes, and her Japanese was fluent. She asked staff members some questions after the session. It was unusual to see that kind of active—even slightly aggressive—city girl in DFU. She was enthusiastic and looked thrilled to start her new life in DFU. Soon after the orientation, Jina joined an international students' club that I sometimes helped. She was older than her Japanese peers and took great initiative in the club activities. She was a kind of scary, older sister. She was also involved in other activities, including

working as an interpreter/translator for the local government. It seemed she was always busy trying to achieve something—like a tuna fish that would die if it stopped swimming.

I knew that Jina spoke excellent English. First, she did not take Japanese classes for international students. Instead, she took English classes with other Japanese students. She also emceed in English at the parties for international students. She seemed confident in her English. She told me she wanted to work in international business using her English and Japanese skills. So, I was not surprised when I learnt that she was going to study at a university in a Baltic country that provided courses in English for a year. It was easy to guess that she longed for the “big world” away from this small town where our university was.

### *Complete Freedom Provided by English as a Lingua Franca*

When Jina returned from studying abroad, we met by chance in front of the main gate. “What? Are you home already? How was your study abroad experience?” I asked her. She looked good and seemed not to have changed much, but I noticed she was wearing sneakers, whereas earlier she always wore high heels. At that time, I was interviewing international students for my research. I asked Jina for an interview about her experiences while she was abroad for a year, and she immediately accepted. But I had to wait several months to have interview sessions with her. Before the first interview, I explained to her the purpose of the research, the procedure of the data collection, and ethical matters. I managed to have three interview sessions, in October, February, and March of Jina’s senior year. I chose my office for interviews so we could talk in a quiet atmosphere while having tea and snacks together. We spoke in Japanese most of the time, except some Korean words here and there. After the interviews, we went out for a late lunch or a walk around the campus. I jotted down the conversations and how she looked in my field notebook. The recorded interviews were transcribed, sorted by event, and rearranged to create Jina’s story. I later sent Jina’s story to her after she graduated and returned to Korea, and asked her to check the contents. The story of Jina used in this narrative account is constructed from those original interviews.

In the interviews, I asked her about her experiences using Japanese and English when she was studying abroad. Her best experience using English, she told me, happened during her summer vacation. It was a long one, so she looked for a part-time job abroad and ended up working as a volunteer, teaching English in a village in rural Turkey. She said she experienced “complete freedom” there. Her students welcomed her, and even invited her for dinner. Jina felt their “love” in communication without words. Her peer volunteer teachers in the village came from all over the world, including Taiwan, Spain, France, Serbia, and Francophone Canada. They were from many age groups and had different occupations in their home countries; some had just graduated from high school, and others were teachers in their countries. She recounted her experiences to me.

**Jina:** Everyone was equal, and you could feel perfect equality. Everyone spoke a little bit of English, which was the common language. That was the environment where we became friends, so I did not have to be somebody different from my own self. It was not necessary to pretend that I was somebody who could do something or that I was a tough person. It was not necessary to feel pressure to achieve something. (I could feel) complete freedom. It did not really matter if you had money or not and it was not necessary to pretend you had money or a good character. In such an environment, personalities were different from person to person. Especially in Japan, there is such a thing as a good personality. I think it is the same in Korea. A particular type of character is considered good.



**Akiko:** Good character?

**Jina:** Yes, the expression “She’s a good girl” is an especially good example. It decides, to some extent, a particular personality is a good one. But um... how can I explain that when you use English, the bias or *omoikomi* / 思い込み [belief] got weaker. Especially when non-native English speakers from different countries got together, there was no right answer for the character. ... So, I did not need to be good. I could be the way I was. That experience was precious to me because I could feel freedom, not worrying about anything. I could not be freer ever at that time. (From the first interview)

When I heard Jina’s story, the first thought that struck me was the different positions English and Japanese had in the world. The Japan Foundation announced there were more than three million Japanese language learners outside Japan in 2018 (The Japan Foundation, 2020). However, I cannot imagine a volunteer Japanese language class run in a Turkish village by non-native Japanese-speaking teachers from all over the world. For Jina, English was literally a tool to communicate with people from across the globe. By using it, she felt she could escape cultural norms that had bound her. Why could only English, not Japanese, or Korean, provide her with the opportunity to escape the cultural norms and make her feel free?

As Kubota (2011) points out, speaking good English does not guarantee being an excellent international businessperson. However, the assumption has increased the number of serious English learners, and the more people learn it, the more firmly English becomes the international language. This phenomenon covers many places in the world, and it gave Jina a chance to escape the cultural norms of the person she thought she had to be in South Korea and Japan—her Japanese and Korean selves. She came to realize how much Japanese or Korean selves were not her own. I was amazed that, in this story, how people from all over the world—the volunteers—claimed ownership of English (Norton, 1997) by teaching it as a foreign language. Based on the terms she was using, “not necessary to pretend that I was somebody,” Jina could be a resident in the land of nowhere, and its official language was English.

The second thought I had was a feeling of envy. I had married an American I met in Korea when I was teaching Japanese there. Why could I not have such a feeling in English? When I visited my in-laws in the US, even though they all welcomed me, I sometimes felt odd because most of the time I was the only one who was not white and not a native speaker of English. When I was holding my first baby in their home, visitors occasionally thought I was a babysitter. Once, at a restaurant where we all went for a meal, one of the waitresses looked at me briefly as if she had found someone who did not fit there. I felt marginalized in the US outside of the family.

Is this the only reason I do not like speaking English? Have I ever used English as a *lingua franca*?

## My Story in Korea

### *Being an Ornament*

After I got my master’s degree in history, I ended up going to Korea to teach Japanese. I went there because I failed to get into the Ph.D. program I wanted to join, and this happened just as I got my master’s. Since I had not prepared what to do beyond studying at education, teaching Japanese was the only chance I had to get a job immediately after graduation. I felt relieved to get such a position at a university, so I did not complain that the university was in the countryside, and I would be the only Japanese in the entire town.

In my first year in Korea, there was a sort of unofficial exclusive foreigner club. Most of the time, the host was an old English teacher, and the other members were a Russian couple, a Spanish couple, a French teacher, a Chinese teacher, and me. We seven were the only non-Korean workers at the university. I joined the party when I was invited even though I quietly sat there without any clue about what they were saying. Also, Korean women who were the wives of wealthy families sometimes joined us. As far as I remember, they were students of the English teacher, and they would occasionally invite all of us to a picnic or for a meal in an expensive restaurant. “Why do they want to invite foreigners?” I felt like I had become an ornament (Levy, 2011) for rich Korean ladies, because I could not see the reason they wanted to invite us, especially me. It seemed like being friends with us had symbolic value. At the party without them, we talked about how strange Korean customs were. At the time, it was not long after Korea’s democratization, and it was quite different from the Korea of today. To me, the relationship between the foreign teachers and the rich Korean ladies was strange. I felt uncomfortable to be around it, even though my loneliness in Korea was alleviated to some extent by the parties.

Rethinking the reason I was uneasy at the club, I felt it was more than because my English was not so good or that I was unfamiliar with European customs. Japan had occupied Korea until the end of World War II. Most of the Japanese who settled in Korea in the colonial period did not learn any Korean and despised their traditions. The first thing I decided to do in Korea was learn Korean because I did not want to be the same kind of person as the Japanese before the war. When I was speaking English in the club and being positioned as an ornament for Korean ladies, I felt like I was a new version of a pre-war colonial settler. That was not the position I wanted to take. After the English teacher retired, the foreigners’ club did not meet up so often and the university stopped treating us as precious guests anymore. Instead, the university authorities started hiring more English teachers and treating foreign language teachers like teaching labor.

### *The Freedom Provided by Korean*

I could not feel free like Jina when I was using English in Korea, although I felt I was able to jump away from Japanese norms when I was using Korean in Korea.

My diligent work studying Korean was rewarded. I enjoyed speaking Korean with my students. First, we were almost the same age, and some of the boys were even older than me because they had to do military service. They treated me half as a teacher and half as a friend, and supported and protected me in many ways, as I did not understand Korean customs. Second, I found that they were good at making jokes. We laughed together, went out for drinks and karaoke parties, and talked in coffee shops after class. I was so happy that I was accepted by my students and other Korean people that I met. Then, I found I was to some degree different from what I was in Japan. I was less timid about joking around in Korean than I was in Japanese. I even used my female position to make jokes. Also, I was fearless when it came to asking questions of anyone—which was very different from how I acted in Japan. To some extent, I was not the same “me” in Korea as in Japan. In other words, I was able to create a new self outside of my Japanese one.

I have often wondered why I could be like that. One possible reason is that my attributes and affiliations as a native Japanese speaker and a young female university professor in terms of cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1993; Norton, 2013) had different values in Korean and Japanese society. If I made a mistake due to my ignorance of Korean language or culture, nobody would scold me. Every time I spoke Korean, they praised me as if I was totally fluent. I had access to the things that Koreans sought. Among the Korean housewives I met at the

Korean music class I took, Japanese products, including rice cookers or tea pots, were very popular. Maybe because I was right in front of them, Japanese products became a topic of conversation. I was treated differently in Korea than in Japan, and in response I acted differently.

My generally happy experience in Korea influenced my teaching after I returned to Japan. I have always wished for my students to be happy when they speak Japanese, especially outside the classroom. But when I reconsidered my story and Jina's, another purpose of foreign language learning emerged; to give learners a chance to break free from the norms of their native language and culture. Jina felt free while using English as a lingua franca, whereas I felt free when I was surrounded by native speakers of Korean. We can see it is not the prerogative of English alone to give learners such a chance. By learning a foreign language, learners can create a new self that is different from their native-language self (Pavlenko, 2004). What makes us free is not which language we learn, but with whom, when, and in what kind of community we use it. That relates to identity and personal history and how learners perceive themselves.

However, Jina's experience with using Japanese in Japan was quite different from my experience of using Korean in Korea. Actually, Jina had a hard time when she came to Japan for the first time as a student at a big private university in Tokyo. This experience could explain why Jina could be free in English but not in Japanese.

## Jina's Story in Japan

### *Jina in Tokyo*

In our interviews, Jina shared a lot of her background with me. Before she joined DFU, she attended a university in Tokyo for a year where she struggled to gain full acceptance from her peers.

**Jina:** That university is quite big, and international students are not rare. (...) Unless they become almost Japanese, I mean, unless they make contact in the Japanese student style, the students do not take their international counterparts seriously. Japanese students do not want to change their style much for international students. They do not have any sense of consideration for international students. So, to make Japanese friends, I have to be like them. (From the first interview)

What Jina felt at her university in Tokyo was the pressure to speak and act like a Japanese student. Jina felt that she would not be able to make friends with Japanese people if she did not remove all traces of her being an international student. As a Japanese language teacher, I was shocked that she felt constrained to "act and behave like a Japanese person," especially when compared to the "complete freedom" she felt when she was in Turkey and when compared to the jolly self that I had constructed in Korea. It is difficult to find out the real reason why Jina felt the barriers of Japanese youth culture in Tokyo. Is it because the youth in Tokyo are not interested in getting to know people from different cultures and backgrounds? Or is it because people in Tokyo are too busy? In contrast, I did not have to be 100% bound by Korean norms. Sometimes I wanted to be like the Koreans around me, but I never felt the need to erase my Japanese identity, and that was just not possible anyway.

In Tokyo, Jina was trying to find the way to make her life fruitful, so she joined a student association to promote the connection between students in different departments. Fortunately, she met a Japanese student who had lived in Brazil for a couple of years. He took her to different places for the association's work. His communication style was not "typical Japanese" and was relatively easy for Jina. Other members of the association did not treat Jina coldly

or rudely but they did not know how to interact with her. She felt that they treated her as a “Gaijin” (foreigner) and kept their distance. Even now, she feels “inhibited” when using Japanese.

**Jina:** So when you speak Japanese to a Japanese person, you need to be nicer, more considerate, use polite language, and when you are talking with your teachers, you need to use honorifics to be respectful. Maybe my Japanese ability is not quite good enough yet, and I do not have the skills to be able to control everything, or maybe that’s the problem. When I am speaking Korean, I have to use honorifics, but I guess I can handle it to the best of my ability. I do not have to worry about using language. I can trust myself that I am polite enough to the teacher, but not in Japanese. (From the second interview)

Jina does not have complete confidence in her ability in English and Japanese. It is difficult for her to change the way she speaks depending on the context of the situation. However, she believes “basically, it’s not necessary to worry about it,” in English but it is necessary in Japanese. Jina assumed the reason she feels a strong constraint in Japanese is partly because of her personality. “I’m pretty good at following some kind of rules to some extent,” she told me.

### *Jina’s English Learning History*

Unfortunately, the Great East Japan earthquake occurred around the time Jina finished her freshman year in Tokyo, and she was forced to immediately return to Korea. It took two years for her to come back to Japan as a DFU student due to the economic difficulties her family faced. I asked her what she did during the two years. Jina told me that for 10 days of a month, she worked to make some money, but for the rest, she was studying English near her home in the library. She also joined the English–studying club, which was run by a church. Why was she studying English? Wasn’t she planning to return to Japan? Didn’t she have a hard time communicating with her peers at the university in Tokyo? She explained to me without any hesitation:

**Akiko:** Why did you study English? What did you want to do after improving your English?

**Jina:** It is not to say what I wanted to do, but it is an essential skill.

**Akiko:** Essential? What does that mean?

**Jina:** Like getting a job after school, I think...I felt at that moment that English was an essential skill to be a part of society—*shakai hito ni naru* / 社会人になる[shakai hito ni naru]. (From the first interview)

Jina told me her story and her relationship with English. It had played a big role in her younger days and was also related to Korean “English studying fever” (Park, 2009). When she was young, her parents, especially her mother, gave her many home study programs. She studied Chinese characters, math, and English. I was surprised when she said in the interview that she used to be obedient to her parents. Because of her efforts when she was young, she did not have any problems getting good grades especially in English and Japanese in middle school. At the same time, she wanted to leave her parents, partly because their quarrels were severe.

**Jina:** My parents fought a lot, and the house was not at peace until junior high school... and I hated them anyway. In junior high school, I hated my parents and wanted to leave home, and that's all I could think about. (From the first interview)

When Jina heard that an elite foreign language high school had a boarding facility and she had a chance to live there, she instantly decided to take the entrance exam and applied for the test. She passed and moved out of her parents' home.

**Akiko:** Did you go to a foreign language high school because they had a dormitory? Then, it was not like you were interested in a foreign country or anything until then.

**Jina:** Not at all.

**Akiko:** You didn't particularly like to study English?

**Jina:** No, I didn't. (From the first interview)

Life in the foreign language high school, however, was rather tough for Jina. The students were very good in English. For example, some of them had grown up in the US and lived there for many years. Even though Jina kept studying from six in the morning to midnight, she still could not catch up with the returnees. Her pride in her English ability fell apart, so she ended up making no effort to study it. Even without studying, Jina's score in English on national exams far surpassed that of the average Korean high school students.

After listening to her high school story, I realized that her investment in English was related to the self she lost in her high school. She needed to study English to regain confidence and control over her life. In this sense, Jina may have felt the same mission of independence as I did when I was young. In her journey to be a grown up with no one to protect her, perhaps Jina thought that English would give her a way to survive and have her abilities recognized by society. In this way, English was a protective shield for her in society.

### ***Jina After Studying Abroad***

It was June in her senior year when she visited my office. She suddenly started confessing that she did not know what she wanted to do after graduation. I was a bit confused because she had been talking about getting involved with international business. I asked her about that. She told me that she did not think about what she really wanted to do because she used to worry about what other people thought of her. Trying to be involved in international business was what other people thought cool. I do not remember how this conversation ended. The next time she visited my office, she asked me to help her prepare for the entrance exam for graduate school to be a Japanese-Korean translator. Until I finished writing her story in this narrative account, I did not realize that her experience in Turkey might have had some impact on the change in her plans for the future. The experience of total freedom might give her the chance to reflect on her life.

At her graduation ceremony, her mother and grandmother from Korea participated. Jina's father could not come because he had some duty on his business. Jina showed me her picture with a cute red *han-bok* [Korean traditional cloth], which was a gift from her grandmother. She was smiling in the picture with her mother and grandmother.

Last time I met her, she told me she is teaching English and Japanese as a part time teacher in Seoul, at the same time, she is working as an actress. I cannot tell you what place English,

Japanese, possibly other languages will take in her life from now on. The journey of her life continues.

## Epilogue

My attempt to retell my story in order to understand Jina's story has had a number of outcomes which related to me as a woman and as a teacher. The first was that I was able to connect my language learning history, especially English, with my mission to be independent. This is a mission that has carried me from my childhood to now. My reluctance to study English was strongly linked not only to my ability, but also to gendered linguistic ideologies. After retelling our stories, I can realize now the mission is possibly shared by not only Jina and me, but also other women, like the wealthy Korean women who were hovering around us or my high school friend who loved to learn Western languages. Thus, language learning, even the rejection of it, is strongly connected to the question of how women live their lives. Secondly, I was able to reconsider the purposes that people have in learning languages. The personal language use experiences that Jina had with English as a lingua franca and that I had with Korean encouraged us to construct our new selves. Just as I became more outgoing in Korea and Jina changed from high heels to sneakers, language learning could free learners from the constraints of cultural norms to some extent. I have not yet come to a conclusion on how to teach language as a language teacher, because learning a language always involves learning grammatical pragmatic rules made by someone else (Bakhtin, 1981; Barfield, personal communication, April 21, 2021). However, I have been able to reaffirm the value of language learning through this narrative account, and that will guide me in my classes.

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## Review Process

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