Culturally responsive *talk story* and *signifying*: a close reading for Korean multicultural classrooms

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**Abstract**

*Talk story*, a speech event common among the Native Hawaiian, and *signifying*, an African American social discourse, are two of the known culturally responsive models by Kathryn Au (1980) and Carol Lee (1995), respectively. This paper conducted a close reading (Bass and Linkon, 2008) of *talk story* and *signifying* in order to draw their implications for the teaching of multicultural students in the Republic of Korea. These original culture-specific models were chosen as materials for close reading because they were both applied in teaching language and literacy, and they both spoke of communicating. In this paper, close reading involved the analyses of inquiry, text, theory, and argument of the materials reviewed as posited by Bass and Linkon (2008). Generally, the concepts of speech economy and context (Au, 1980) and the theories of sociocognition and schema (Lee, 1995) explain and validate the implications of culturally responsive teaching for the Korean context of linguistic and cultural diversity. Specifically, Au’s (1980) and Lee’s (1995) culturally responsive literacy instruction calls for changes to typical school instructional situations, such as changes in teachers’ and students’ roles, changes in the patterns of interaction and classroom activities, and changes in assessment.

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1. Introduction

Since its evolution as a concept in the 1980s (Vavrus, 2008), culturally responsive teaching (hereafter CRT) has been rigorously studied. Proponents of CRT (e.g., Au, 1980, 1993, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Lee, 2007; Hollins, 1996; Scherff, 2005; Shujaa, 1995) use various modifiers and nouns substituting responsive with relevant, appropriate, congruent, sensitive, or mediated and teaching with pedagogy, instruction, approach, framework, or model. The common thread of this scholarly play of words is culture, which is students’ culture. In a CRT framework, the culture of the minority students, not the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) or the mainstream culture, is viewed as an indispensable resource for teaching (Hollins, 1996; Murray, 1996). CRT contends that the minority students do have the funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzales, 2004; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and cultural talents that teachers can tap in order to engage them actively in classroom learning and to connect the home to schools. In fact, the major goal of CRT is to improve the academic achievement of students, especially those of the students of color (Gay, 2000; Au, 1980, 1993, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Lee, 1995, 2007).

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Two of the culturally responsive models of teaching (which will be elaborated in the later part) are *talk story* and *signifying*. Au (1980), in her ethnographic study, used *talk story* as a participation structure in teaching reading to Native Hawaiian children, whereas Lee (1995) experimented *signifying* as a scaffold in teaching literature to African American high school students. For about three decades now, these and other CRT models have continued to gain attention not only in the field of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2004) but also in language teaching (see Kubota & Lin, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Murray, 1996; Shealey & Callins, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a close reading, a critical practice of literary scholars, of the works of Lee (1995) and Au (1980) on signifying and talk story in order to draw implications for the teaching of multicultural students in the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea). These models were chosen as primary materials for close reading because they were both used in teaching language and literacy and represented the communication dimension of two different cultures. As will be explained in the next section, in the current Korean educational context of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, teaching language and literacy to the children of multicultural families and migrant labor workers is a very high priority.

In this paper, I begin with a description of the Korean context of diversity and then a brief definition and justification of close reading as a methodological lens for the review. I proceed with the close reading of signifying and talk story according to *inquiry*, *text*, *theory*, and *argument*. A general discussion and critical reflection are presented followed by the implications for the Korean case of multicultural education.

2. Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: The Korean Context

Korea has continued to impress the world with its outstanding economic recovery and growth since the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis. The impressive economic phenomenon in Korea has inevitably encouraged its Asian neighbors to start building their own “Korean dream.” This dream is realized through labor migration and international marriage migration. Countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, India, and Pakistan have been the source of mostly male foreign workers since the second half of the 1980s (Kim, Lee, Kim, & Cha, 2009). Although some migrant workers are legally supported in the name of bilateral agreements (e.g., the Philippines-Korea agreement where the latter becomes the recipient of labor workers from the former), the number of illegal or unregistered workers has continued to rise. According to the Ministry of Justice (as cited in Kim, Lee, Kim, & Cha, 2009), the estimated population of both documented and undocumented foreign workers in 2005 was “between 870,000 [and] 1,000,000 or about 1.8 percent of the entire population” (p. 190).

Interestingly, international marriage migration only became popular in the 1990s (Shim, 2009), but it is now one driving factor that makes multiculturalism an irresistible phenomenon in Korea. Among others, the Unification Church—committed to matching couples and officiating mass weddings—founded by Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the marriage brokers are two vehicles for the continuing influx of international marriages in Korea (Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs, 2009). Although labor migration attracts male Asians, who are mostly married before leaving their home countries, international marriage migration to Korea involves the Asian women from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Cambodia, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan (Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs, 2009). Most of the Korean partners of these Asian brides are from rural areas and have failed in their first marriages (*The Korea Herald*, November 28, 2009; Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs, 2009). The Korean National Statistical Office (2009) reported that international marriages in 2008 accounted for 11.0 percent (or 36,204 cases) of the total marriages.

As statistical records show, Korea is no longer the once homogeneous nation. It is now a country characterized by a phenomenal linguistic and cultural diversity. Although much has reportedly been done by the Korean government for multicultural communities and families (see the Policy Report of the Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs in 2009), there has been no transformation happening in schools yet (Kim, Lee, Kim, & Cha, 2009). I believe that because the majority of the children (or 57.1% of 58,000) of multicultural families, as reported in 2009, were still infants and 6 year olds (Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs, 2009), issues related to the unique needs of students in multicultural contexts have not yet fully surfaced in educational settings.

As the population of multicultural children continues to rise from 25,000 in 2006 to 44,000 in 2007 and to 58,000 in 2008 (Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs, 2009), there is no better time to prepare for the education of these multicultural children but now. There is no issue more pressing than teaching these children—whose parents are from two different cultures—how to be literate and how to celebrate the culture they bring from home. What do these household cultural differences mean to the education of multicultural children in Korea?
3. A Close Reading Methodology

Originating from literary criticism, close reading is hermeneutics. It is the act of reading, interpreting, and seeking for meaning in texts. On a basic level, a close reader in literary criticism analyzes the diction, word order, point of view, and metaphor found in the text of the material read. On a more substantial level, a close reader relates further the textual analyses to a theory like feminism, Marxism, formalism, and others. In other words, an ideal literary critic is committed to reading the “literary texture and what is embodied there” (Lentricchia & Dubois, 2003, p. ix).

In this paper, I pay attention to a balance of both the text and its embodiment using the framework of Bass and Linkon (2008), that is, an attention to inquiry, text, theory, and argument. This close reading framework is an ideal methodology for extrapolating the similarities, differences, problems, and promises embedded in talk story and signifying. Integrating inquiry, text, theory, and argument “does not signify only the careful analysis of the individual text...[it] refers to the full range of critical practices” (Bass & Linkon, 2008, p. 247) needed in scholarly close reading. As a close reader, I have the following guiding questions in the process.

1) What did Au and Lee argue and find about being culturally responsive in teaching language and literacy?
2) What were the effects of the culturally responsive instructional models they studied?
3) What part of the inquiry, text, theory, or argument in Lee’s and Au’s models can be applied in the Korean context of linguistic and cultural diversity?
4) In light of the implications of Au’s and Lee’s models, what opportunities and challenges are there for the Korean teachers to be culturally responsive?

4. Close Reading of Talk Story and Signifying

In 1980, the Anthropology & Education Quarterly published a study on the “Participation Structures in a Reading Lesson with Hawaiian Children: Analysis of a Culturally Appropriate Event” (more commonly called talk story) by Kathryn Au. In 1995, the Journal of Black Psychology published “Signifying as a Scaffold for Literary Interpretation” (in short, signifying) by Carol Lee. Although the participants in these studies represented two different ethnic backgrounds (i.e., Native Hawaiian and African American), they shared one common thing: they were all low performing students in class, particularly in reading. As empirically proven, talk story and signifying improved the reading comprehension skills of students. Hence, I call them culturally responsive models of teaching language and literacy.

Talk story is “the local term for a rambling personal experience narrative mixed with folk materials” (Watson as cited in Au, 1980, p. 95). Au (1980) contended that the participation structures in the reading lessons she designed for the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Honolulu, Hawaii were similar to a talk story. The resemblance of the reading lessons to talk story could be found “in the receptive role of the adult and the social relationships among the participants, in the mutual participation characteristic of both [the adult and the participants], and in the phenomenon of co-narration” (p. 95). In simple terms and in relation to classroom teaching, talk story is a speech event characterized by a joint performance of students in class (Au, 1980). Signifying, on the other hand, is “a ritualized language play involving clever insults” (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 23). Characteristic of an African American traditional social discourse, signifying requires participants “to speak with innuendo and double meanings, to play rhetorically upon the meaning and sounds of words, to be quick and often witty in one’s response” (Lee, 1995, p. 359). Indeed, both talk story and signifying are two of the cultural communicative tools among the Native Hawaiians and African Americans, respectively.

4.1. Close Reading of Inquiry

Inquiry generally results from patterns, problems, or anomalies observed (Bass & Linkon, 2008). In the materials reviewed, Au (1980) and Lee (1995) primarily anchored their research inquiry on the typical problems of schools such as poor academic records, high absenteeism, low graduation rates, unresponsiveness, and unwillingness. Their individual studies were grounded on the belief that something could be done on any of these problems, especially those experienced by or labeled to the minority group in the U.S. context of education. For example, Au’s (1980, p. 94) randomly selected participants were among those that scored “no better than the second stanine on tests of reading achievement,” whereas Lee’s (1995) high school participants mostly scored “in the bottom quartile on the national standardized test of reading achievement” (p. 362). The design of the new reading
program by Au (1980, p. 94) was therefore aimed at improving the reading comprehension levels of the KEEP children using reading lessons “devoted largely to the teaching of comprehension (the understanding of what is read)” as opposed to teaching phonics and then monitoring closely on the participation styles or structures employed in class. Lee (1995), on the other hand, was determined to experiment the efficacy of signifying as a “scaffold for teaching skills in literary interpretation” (p. 357). In particular, Lee (1995) wanted to ascertain if prior knowledge and the skill in signifying had an effect on the students’ skills in reading and interpreting fiction.

4.2. Close Reading of Text

Text refers to the views and imperatives presented in the materials read. To begin with Au (1980), the teaching of comprehension, teacher direction and guidance, and interaction patterns resonated strongly all throughout the text. Au (1980) implied that teaching sound-symbol relationships in a reading class would be meaningless if the goal was to help students understand the reading materials. She also posited that motivation alone could not guarantee success in reading. She asked the teachers to carefully instruct, walk through with the students, and continue to complement and build on the students’ own experiences.

With the above imperatives, Au (1980) proposed the Experience-Text-Relationship (ETR) framework in presenting a reading lesson. In the E component, the teacher encourages the students to share their experiences related to the topic of the story. The teacher then assigns a page or two of the story (i.e., the T component) for silent reading. After silent reading, the teacher asks questions to check whether or not the students understand the text read. Finally, the teacher draws the relationship (or the R component) between the students’ experiences and the text. In Au’s (1980) study, the ETR framework afforded 66 sequences or turntaking falling into nine categories of participation structures, including transition, chorus, single, single/joint, single/open, joint, joint/open, open, and damaged transition (see Au, 1980, pp. 96-108 for the detailed explanation of each of these). As Au (1980) noted, the conduct of an ETR-planned reading lesson and the talk story practiced outside the school shared the same characteristic features, which were the high degree of joint performance, cooperative production among participants, and the performance of different roles (Au, 1980).

Similarly, Lee (1995) designed a lesson, taught, and explored the teaching of literature using the prior knowledge of students and their skill in signifying. Prior knowledge, in Lee’s (1995) views, included both subject matter knowledge and “social knowledge about human values, motivation, and routines” (p. 371). Contrary to what other people might have known, signifying is highly figurative in nature; it is not always a form of insult (Lee, 1995). In bringing this culture to an educational setting, Lee (1995, p. 360) stated:

Signifying requires quick processing of the intended meaning of dialogue that is often either metaphoric, ironic, or both. It is students’ knowledge of the purposes and rituals of this discourse form as well as their social knowledge of the persons (one does not signify with strangers) that in part allow them to process so quickly. This knowledge parallels the knowledge that the expert reader of a text of fiction brings to bear in literary interpretation: knowledge of the genre, of the literary convention used in the text, of the author, and of the social world of the text as it unfolds.

The above statements are profound. They imply both the teachers’ and students’ commitment and proficiency in signifying if literary instruction is fashioned in a culturally responsive way and aimed at improving achievement levels.

4.3. Close Reading of Theory

Although other scholars might have attributed any children’s problem in reading to “sociolinguistic interference” (e.g., Hymes as cited in Au, 1980, p. 91), Au (1980) used the “speech economy” and the concept of “context” to explain it. For Au (1980), minority children come from a speech economy with “ground rules for speaking performances consistent with its total pattern of culture” (p. 91). And by context, she referred to the verbal (i.e., rules in speaking, listening, and turntaking) and nonverbal (i.e., different kinesic “positionings”) interactional contexts.

In her work on signifying, Lee (1995) grounded her advances on prior knowledge and skill in signifying on two grand theories: the sociocognitive perspective on literacy and the schema theory in reading comprehension. Based on the theory of sociocognition, Lee (1995) cogently elucidated that novice readers of fiction or students of literature could only construct their generalizations, interpretations, and claims if they had (1) knowledge of social
and cultural values, (2) knowledge of rules and norms for coherence and significance, (3) their sense of participation within a community of learners, and (4) their awareness of a variety of strategies and/or rules to apply when confronted with situations. Drawing on the schema theory, Lee (1980) posited that students learn “new knowledge by noting analogies between existing schema and the demands of the problem at hand...or by fine-tuning variables within an existing schema” (p. 371).

4.4. Close Reading of Argument

In the talk story research, Au (1980) argued that a culturally responsive approach to teaching reading would have to satisfy three criteria: (1) instructional comfort for the children, instructional comfort for the teacher, and the promotion of better acquisition of basic academic skills. Au (1980) claimed that the ETR-framed reading lesson was culturally responsive because it resembled the speech act of the Native Hawaiian community known as talk story. This culturally relevant reading instruction was comfortable for the children and the teacher and promoted better acquisition of basic academic skills as proven in the study. Furthermore, Au (1980) also contended that an ETR-based or talk-story like interaction in reading comprehension lessons would mean nothing without the expert direction of the teacher.

Meanwhile, Lee (1995) had these claims in her experimental research on signifying. First, she implicitly asserted that the teaching of literature should include the use of texts based on sociocultural themes, values, and conventions. Second, she explicitly purported that the students’ prior sociocultural knowledge and skill in signifying would increase their interest in studying literature and consequently improve their reading comprehension.

5. Discussion

Au (1980) and Lee (1995) provided interesting and original studies which sought to connect out-of-school experience with school experience. Among others, the promise in Au’s (1980) work was an assurance that by the time the students “leave the KEEP school at the end of their third-grade year and enter public and private schools with conventional programs, their reading achievement scores on standardized tests at the end of fourth grade remain significantly better” (p. 112). In another respect, the lesson designed by Lee (1980) allowed the students to manipulate language as an object in academic aesthetic situations. Besides the improvement of their reading skills, the students also increased their repertoire of signifying skills, that is, from the limited signifying knowledge of sounding and playing the dozens (e.g., talking about yo’ mama) to the more sophisticated knowledge of “signifying within the context of literature...to include literary uses of figurative language” (Lee, 1995, p. 373). Two of the themes common in the studies of Au (1980) and Lee (1995) include the role of knowledge and culture in reading comprehension and the indispensability of adult mediation in culturally responsive instruction.

5.1. Knowledge, Culture, and Literacy

In the field of multicultural education, Banks (1995, pp. 393-395) classified knowledge into five categories: (1) personal/cultural knowledge—based on one’s learned behaviors, interpretations, beliefs, concepts, and experiences from home and from the community where he/she lives; (2) popular knowledge—based on the images, beliefs, values, and interpretations popularized or institutionalized by the mass media (Cortés, 2004); (3) mainstream academic knowledge—based on objective truths, established knowledge in the sciences, and other disciplinary canons in schools, colleges, and universities; (4) transformative academic knowledge—based on “the concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge” (Banks, 1995, p. 394); and (5) school knowledge—based on the textbooks, curriculum materials, and academic guidelines interpreted by the teachers in the classroom or any school setting.

The above typologies of knowledge are congruent with the subject matter and sociocultural knowledge or everyday and scientific knowledge relevant to the teaching of language and literacy (Au, 1980, 1993, 2006; Lee, 1995, 2007). Conclusively, CRT is based on the need to balance the cognitive dimension of learning with the affective by interweaving students’ experiences at home with their learning endeavors at school (Au, 1993; Scherff, 2005). In early literacy research, Kana iaupuni and Else (2005) sought to find the significance of parents’ cultural inputs to early education outcomes and yielded positive results. Furthermore, scholars like Nieto (1999), Villegas and Lucas (2002), August and Hakuta (1998), and Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales (1992), who speak of the disconnect between the home and the school, also affirmed the above imperative. Au (1997, pp. 182-187) eloquently
captured the tripartite relationship of knowledge, culture, and literacy by saying that human experience at home and in schools is mediated by culture and that literacy learning can only be understood through the study of its social and cultural origins.

5.2. Adult Mediation and Gradual Release of Responsibility

Drawing on the sociocultural perspective, I believe that the underlying principles of the CRT model in language and literacy are adult mediation and gradual release of responsibility. These principles are embedded in the sociocognitive requirements from novice readers of fiction posted by Lee (1995) and the nature of teachers’ authority described by Au (1980). Adult mediation and gradual release of responsibility are important especially when helping students approach what Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development” (zpd) (Miramontes, Nadeau & Commins, 1997; Nasir & Hand, 2006). In the zpd, students receive appropriate guidance and support from the teacher until they are able to reach independence in performing tasks. This is why Au (1980) raised the issue of complexity of the teachers’ role in literacy instruction. In other words, teachers in CRT take full responsibility in the initial stage and gradually release that responsibility to students after the processes of modeling, intervention, instruction, and practice have been perfected. Lee’s (2007) cultural modeling framework underscores a consistent and effective adult mediation that assists students in examining their knowledge of everyday life and in developing the knowledge of strategies they need when confronted with difficult situations (Lee, 1995). Once students gain independence in performing tasks, teachers may consider this an opportunity to increase the level of expectations for students to do more consistently.

6. Implications for Korean Multicultural Classrooms

Talk story and signifying were cultural practices specific to the Native Hawaiians and African Americans only. These practices may not be applicable to Korea, but the philosophy and endeavors of Au (1980) and Lee (1995) in bringing them to classroom experiences are worth emulating. Generally, Au’s (1980) and Lee’s (1995) culturally responsive literacy instruction calls for changes to typical school instructional situations. The word typical generally refers to the transmission model of teaching and mainstream-based curriculum. Hence, if Korean teachers were to be culturally responsive, they would need to undergo the changes outlined below (Au, 1980, 1993, 1997, 2006; Lee, 1995, 2007):

Changes in teachers’ and students’ roles. In CRT, Korean teachers have to provide literacy instruction based on students’ own needs, interests, and cultural backgrounds. They may need to invite parents or other community members to bring in culturally relevant content into the classroom, or to teach content collaboratively with them. They also need to act as mediators in helping students of diverse backgrounds acculturate to structures for participation consistent with mainstream values and expectations. On the other hand, the children in CRT are encouraged to act not only as responsible students but as actively engaged readers who: (1) choose to read for enjoyment and for information, (2) select their own topics and engage in the full process of literacy instruction, (3) respond to the literature read in oral and written forms, and (4) volunteer to read on their own either at home or in the classroom.

Changes in the patterns of interaction and classroom activities. In CRT, achieving a balance of rights is imperative. It is therefore expected that in multicultural classrooms, teachers need to be aware of the individual cultural backgrounds of students, lead the mutual adaptation of teachers and students, and build bridges for differences in interactional styles, e.g. topic-centered style of sharing time vs. topic-associating style of sharing time (Au, 1993) and known-answer questioning style (Au, 1993: 100-103) vs. individually engaging and experienced-based questioning.

Meanwhile, classroom activities in CRT need to be structured in a way that would allow the teacher to gradually release the responsibility to students. Any deductive or inductive approach may do as long as it brings students together as a community of learners; it guides students point-by-point through the reading of the text; it supports a diverse worldview as opposed to the dominant worldview of individualism and competition; it allows students to use the learned or modeled strategy and to reaffirm that students can also learn from their peers; and it promotes the students’ interest in reading and improves their reading comprehension.

Changes in assessment. Korea is known for its heavy dependence on standardized tests. In CRT, teachers are generally discouraged to base judgments on standardized tests, which often identify the problem in the students, not in the situation (Miramontes, Nadeau & Commins, 1997).
In a CRT framework, Korea’s richness in linguistic and cultural diversity resulting from international marriages offers opportunities and challenges. One opportunity would be the availability of cultural and linguistic resources. Teachers, who support multicultural education and use a culturally relevant pedagogy, will have the abundance of students’ funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzales, 2004). As for the challenges, because teachers share with the culture of the paternal representatives of the children of multicultural families, one challenge would be the teachers’ bias towards a more active promotion of the Korean culture or the tendency of a strong sense of assimilation instead of acculturation.

On a larger context, the Korean Ministry of Education has to spearhead this educational reform for multicultural education (Banks, 1995). To maximize the opportunities and minimize the challenges, school administrators have to lead the culture of research in academic institutions. Classroom teachers at any level have to be engaged in exploratory practice or action research on issues concerning their students and teaching profession.

7. Conclusion

Although what is happening in Korean classrooms now may not be remarkable and therefore receives little notice, any new population of students in classrooms certainly requires changes in teaching approaches or programs. With the increase of international marriages between Koreans and other nationalities, students in Korea are consequently becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse. To this end, understanding a diverse community of students in relation to teaching and learning and addressing their learning styles (Irvine & York, 1995; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989) and linguistic and cultural differences are important calls for action.

To reiterate, the CRT models presented by Au (1980) and Lee (1995) are empowering because they provide both the affective and cognitive domains of knowledge, celebrate learning from cultural differences, welcome an additive incorporation of language and cultural diversity (Stritikus & Garcia, 2003), and support acculturation (Olsen, 1997; Nieto, 1999; Orozco and Orozco, 2003). These models are “not just good teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Although CRT may serve as an ideal pedagogy to use in multicultural settings like those in Korea, teachers are highly encouraged to be reflective, adaptive, and critical because “there is no one right way to teach” (Nieto, 1999, p. 108) and “no one teaching strategy will consistently engage all learners” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 17). Success in teaching students, may the classroom context be multicultural or not, largely depends on the processes of thoughtfully selecting and then adapting techniques that best fit the situation, the students, and the purpose of instruction.

References


