An Educational Perspective on Critical Content Analysis of Two Picturebooks: Aekyung’s Dream and A Piece of Home

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Lee, En Hye. “An Educational Perspective on Critical Content Analysis of Two Picturebooks: Aekyung’s Dream and A Piece of Home.” Modern Studies in English Language & Literature 65.1 (2021): 303-30. Using critical content analysis, this paper explores narratives and representations of Korean immigrant children’s experiences and their lives in the U.S. portrayed in two picturebooks published in different time periods: Aekyung’s Dream (1988) and A Piece of Home (2016). Through the theoretical lens of Freire’s critical literacy, this analysis demonstrates that Korean socio-economic/political/cultural changes interplay in the narratives of the two stories. Shifts in the narratives and representations between these two picturebooks imply the power of reading the word and the world along with the understanding of sociocultural and historical contexts particularly in language and culture education. Based on the findings of this critical content analysis, the paper offers implications for providing a space for critical literacy in educational settings. Suggested are the educators’ roles in doing in-depth exploration of resources that can help them understand broader social contexts in their teaching. The paper further calls for educators’ responsibility for inviting students to an inquiry or research-based space, encouraging them to do their own research to enrich their critical reading and construct new perspectives of the world. (University of Arizona)

Key Words: children’s literature, picturebook, critical content analysis, critical literacy, reading the word and the world

I. Introduction

Picturebooks play a critical role in language and culture education. Not only do they provide pleasure and aesthetic experiences for readers, but
they also help them explore cultural diversity and different parts of the world. Through words and images in picturebooks, readers become meaning-makers of the world and thereby they gain a critical lens as they understand voices, stories, realities, and worldviews of others (Kim, 2020; Rosenblatt, 1938; Short, 2004). This is how readers are invited to have a deeper understanding of lived experiences, value the diversity of cultures across the society and the world, and further broaden their own perspectives of a variety of social, cultural, historical, and political issues. As viewed by Freire (1970), this act of reading or critical literacy, inextricably intertwined with the word and the world, goes beyond just decoding written words or languages. Critical literacy readers, according to Freire (1970), enter into the realities, histories, and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Through critical literacy, they explore sociocultural and historical contexts and discourses in which the texts are embedded (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Given this understanding of critical literacy, this paper examines narratives and representations of Korean immigrant children’s experiences in the U.S. in two picturebooks—*Aekyung’s Dream* by Min Baek and *A Piece of Home* by Jeri Watts. These two books are published in different time periods—the former in 1988¹ and the latter in 2016. Both stories have narratives in common, including 1) memories of Korea, 2) encountering the new language and culture in the U.S., and 3) understanding of Korean and the U.S. cultures. While analyzing the words and images presented in the two picturebooks, shifts are found in the narratives and representations of Korean immigrant children’s experiences and their lives in the U.S. These changes embedded in the stories reflect Korea’s socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts as well as the history of

¹ Note that *Aekyung’s Dream* was originally published in 1978 and the work used for this analysis is a revised edition in 1988.
Korean immigration to the U.S. Findings of this analysis shed light on the significance of exploring socio-historical and cultural contexts when reading texts. Based on the critical content analysis, this paper is aimed to offer educational implications for language and culture educators. Suggested are the educators’ roles in inviting students to the arena of critical literacy and encouraging them to understand broader social contexts and construct new perspectives of the world.

II. Theoretical Framework: Freire’s critical literacy

Rooted in Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogical approach, literacy is a process of understanding people’s cultures, practices, and their daily lives. While he was involved in literacy education in Brazil, Freire created cultural circles to invite illiterate workers to gain awareness of understanding the world through literacy. He explicated how illiteracy constitutes a profound social injustice, which in turn gives rise to inability of making decisions and participating in the society and the world. In the same vein, Giroux (1988) highlighted Freire’s critical literacy by stating that

In opposition to mainstream approaches to literacy which often emphasize learning how to follow words across a page and understand what is there only superficially, Freire’s approach to literacy teaches people how to read so that they can decode and demythologize both their own cultural traditions as well as those that structure and legitimate the wider social order. (p.64).

Based on this understanding, both Freire (1970, 1983) and Giroux (1988) viewed critical literacy as a precondition for self- and social empowerment. They contended that critical literacy is a “narrative for agency as well as a referent for critique” (p. 65) and it is thereby a
political project in that it is not only about merely reading and understanding one’s own experiences but also about reconstituting one’s relationship with the world by “constructing one’s voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment” (Giroux, 1988, p. 64). Thus, critical literacy, from Freire’s point of view, is a process of locating people themselves into their own histories; becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one’s experiences; and making themselves present and active in the struggle for reclaiming their voices, histories, and future.

Freire and Macedo (1987) developed a model of critical literacy that embodies dialogical relationship between a reading the word and the world. Freire (1983) noted that “reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (p.10). He further elaborated that “decodifying or reading the situations pictured leads them to understand how human practice or work transforms the world” (p.36). In this respect, literacy does not merely consist of decoding written word or language, but it is rather intertwined with knowledge of the world.

Given the notion of reading the word and the world, Freirean approach to literacy education is about humanization, which is “a process of making one’s self present as part of a moral and political project that links the production of meaning to the possibility for human agency, democratic community, and transformative social action” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.15). Moreover, from Freire’s critical perspectives, literacy education is a site of struggle and a commitment to the goals of critical thinking, questioning, raising voices to take action for challenging social injustices, and further creating a better world to actively resist against oppressive systems and practices in society (Freire, 1970, 1983, 2013; Roberts, 2000).
III. Methodology

3.1 Critical Content Analysis

Critical content analysis in children’s literature prioritizes critiquing the accepted norms and questioning what is presented in written and visual texts (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Short, 2017). Through this method, readers and researchers may raise questions of whose stories are told or silenced and how the stories are being told. Short (2017) notes that this analysis focuses on critical investigation of representational issues. It is viewed that the focus in critical content analysis is on “a critical examination of issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation in literature, a deconstruction of books and the societal issues that are reflected in representations of particular groups of people” (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017, p.6). The major step for researchers in this method is to immerse themselves into critical theories. In order to think within, through and beyond the text, researchers interweave theory and data to think in a more integral way. To put it differently, this method allows researchers to locate studies within a theoretical frame and immerse themselves by thinking with theory about their data (Short, 2017).

Critical content analysis is utilized in this study, enabling me to think with Freire’s notion of reading the word and the world when analyzing words and illustrations in Aekyung’s Dream and A Piece of Home. Research questions addressed in this study are: 1) How are Korean culture and people represented in these picturebooks? 2) How do representations of Korean culture and people interplay within words and pictures? 3) How do narratives and representations in the stories shift and/or transform in accordance with the publishing years of picturebooks? 4) How do socio-historical and cultural contexts of publishing years interplay with the
words and pictures in the stories? Keeping these questions in mind, this study closely looks into narratives and representations in the two picturebooks and scrutinizes how socio-historical and cultural contexts in Korea are embedded in the stories.

3.2 Text Description

Two picturebooks to be analyzed in this study are *Aekyung’s Dream* (1988) and *A Piece of Home* (2016). *Aekyung’s Dream* is one of the earliest U.S.-published picturebooks about Korean immigrants in the U.S. It was originally published in 1978 and was later revised in 1988. *A Piece of Home* is also a story about Korean immigrants in the U.S., which is one of the most recently published picturebooks. In order to examine how the narratives and representations shift in accordance with the years of publication, the two books, as the earliest and the latest respectively, are selected to be analyzed in this paper.

*Aekyung’s Dream*, published in 1988, tells the story of a young girl Aekyung, who struggles to adjust herself to the new life in the U.S. She has recently moved to the U.S. and misses Korea with the memories of being in her home country. Aekyung feels lonely and thinks that school is hostile and the U.S. culture is frequently bewildering. What is more, her classmates make fun of her Asian appearance and Aekyung struggles to fit in the new culture and environment. One day her Aunt Kim, who just came back from Korea, visits her and talks about how Korea has changed. Aunt Kim brought several photos of Korea to Aekyung and one of them is the image of King Sejong, who is noted for his creation of Hangul the Korean alphabet in the 15th century. Deeply encouraged by Aunt Kim, Aekyung decides to learn English just like her home language Korean. That night, Aekyung dreams about King Sejong, who gives a royal
message to her that she should become a strong Korean child who maintains Korean cultural identity. This dream remains vivid in Aekyung’s memory and she begins to practice English harder and feels confident about interacting with school peers. Aekyung realizes the importance of embracing her home language, culture and identity while adjusting to the new world.

* A Piece of Home* conveys a story about a Korean immigrant family experiencing a transition to the new world in the U.S. Leaving behind their life in Korea, Hee Jun’s family including his grandmother move to West Virginia. Hee Jun misses his friends, remembering his school life back in Korea. He goes through linguistic and cultural struggles in West Virginia and feels lonely at school. Hee Jun thinks that his grandmother feels the same way. Hee Jun’s grandmother, who used to be a school teacher and had her active life in Korea, seems to be lonely in the U.S. When Hee Jun goes to the new school in the U.S., he finds himself different from others in physical appearance and encounters a language barrier. While he faces cultural and linguistic challenges, he comes to meet a boy, Steve. One day, Steve invites Hee Jun to his home and finds the Rose of Sharon at Steve’s yard. Hee Jun recognizes the flower with the memories of his grandmother’s yard in Korea. Steve’s mother gives this flower to Hee Jun and he shares it with his grandmother at home. While sharing, both Hee Jun and his grandmother realize that the two cultures have similarities as well as differences. She considers that the flower is ‘a piece of home’ to her. So, she plants the shoot of this flower at home to keep maintaining the Korean culture and identity in the U.S.

3.3 Process of Analysis

Through critical content analysis, I was deeply engaged with texts
including pictures as well as words, along with Freire’s critical theory. When it comes to the engagement with the texts, I read and reread the picturebooks multiple times. Instead of focusing on analyzing the words and images, I initially read the stories without stopping and positioned myself as an immersion reader. During this process, I wrote down brief initial responses, which were conducted through an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1938). Then, I went back to the books and revisited the stories several more times and then began to take an efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1938) in order to enter into “the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary pattern in the data” (Patton, 1990, p.381). This efferent stance led me to reread the books and closely look into the characteristics of the books such as storylines, themes, years of publication, and background of authors and illustrators. As I revisited the words and images, I wrote down emerging patterns/themes/issues across the stories. The major thematic pattern found across the two books is that the stories are about Korean immigrant children who have just arrived and settled in the U.S. with their parents at early ages. The stories focus on how they are going through their new lives in the U.S., encountering cultural and linguistic difficulties, and struggling to make an adjustment to the U.S. Based on these notes about emerging themes, I went back to the stories and documented written and visual representations, particularly focusing on the ways in which culture and people of the two countries are portrayed in the stories. While documenting, I compared and contrasted the representations to observe their differences, shifts or transformations, and made notes in the margins whenever there are any thoughts and reflections in relation to the theoretical frame I used for my study.
IV. Findings and Discussions

Two U.S.-published picturebooks—*Aekyung’s Dream* and *A Piece of Home*—are analyzed in this study. The stories depict a Korean child’s memories of Korea and his or her adjustment to the new culture and life in the U.S. In *Aekyung’s Dream*, a young Korean girl struggles with a new but sometimes hostile culture particularly at school. Aekyung strives to fit into the U.S. culture, and yet still keeps her own Korean identity. During this process, she eventually realizes that the only way for her to acculturate is to embrace her home culture while adjusting to a new one. *A Piece of Home* is also about a Korean boy, Hee Jun, who starts his new life in the U.S. Especially at school, he encounters cultural and linguistic conflicts and misses his homeland Korea. In his acculturation process, he makes a new friend at school and gradually adjusts himself to the new culture in the U.S.

Both picturebooks have some major themes in common: 1) moving to the new land, culture and society in the U.S., 2) Korean child’s cultural and linguistic challenges 3) acculturation process, 4) understanding of cultural differences, and 5) acceptance of dual identity. Despite such common themes, however, it is noteworthy that the two stories show a few significant changes in the patterns of both narratives and representations. It is further noted that they stand in sharp contrast in Korean characters’ approaches to 1) memories of Korea, 2) encountering the new language and culture, and 3) understanding of the two cultures. Paying particular attention to the differences in their publishing years—1988 and 2016—, a strong emphasis is placed on how the narratives and representations may be linked to far-reaching and sweeping changes that occurred in Korean society over almost 30 years. In so doing, this analysis is based on the recursive process of revisiting Frerie’s theory and the
exploration of broader social, historical, and cultural contexts in which the two picturebooks are embedded.

4.1 Memories of Korea

Korean culture and environment are represented mainly through the characters’ memories of Korea. While traditional elements are found in *Aekyung’s Dream*, few of them are found in *A Piece of Home*. In the first book, when she struggled with English and the new culture in the U.S., Aekyung was even afraid of the birds singing near the window because she thought they would sing songs in English. As she felt scared and lonely, she remembered her old days in Korea, where she used to interact with birds in Korean. On page 5, Aekyung is waving her hand through the window saying hello to the birds (See Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Aekyung’s memories of Korea](image)

As illustrated in the image on page 5, Aekyung’s memories of Korea are full of traditional Korean items. First of all, her house in Korea, as in Figure 1, is portrayed as a traditional *Kiwa*\(^2\), or clay-tile roof house. As

\(^2\) *Kiwa*, generally made out of clay from the rice paddy field, is a traditional Korean house construction material for roofing. The *Kiwas* are all in shapes of curved lines and surfaces.
seen through the window where Aekyung is standing, there is a rice-paper door, which is particularly characterized as one of the important structures of traditional Korean house. Next to this door is a cherrywood box with traditional Korean celadon potteries on it. Based on these visual representations, Aekyung’s memories are saturated with traditional Korean elements.

On the other hand, in the second book *A Piece of Home*, it is striking that rarely found, to the exclusion of a few cultural items, are traditional Korean elements in the Korean character’s memories of Korea. Instead, the majority of Hee Jun’s recollection of Korean life is depicted with contemporary images of Korea (e.g. the school where his grandmother used to work, Hee Jun’s house, and Hee Jun’s classroom). Particularly when it comes to the representations of Hee Jun’s home in Korea, his house is portrayed as a Western-style house with no traditional housing structures such as clay-tile roof, rice-paper door, or any other traditional items. The memories of Korea continue to come in his mind when he struggles to adjust to the new world in the U.S. Especially in bed at night, Hee Jun misses Korea thinking of the city life in the country. His memories of Korea are partially depicted in the following written text:

Here there are mountains, like in Korea, but the sky seems smaller and darker. I miss the lights of our city. The dark here is so black, at night I touch my eyes to make sure they are open (p.15).

In contrast to the mountainous area and darkness atmosphere in the U.S., Hee Jun is longing for the lights of the city in Korea, which implies that his memories of the home country are pictured with modern and urban environment.

As has been examined, memories of Korea are portrayed in both picturebooks through the representations of Korean culture and environments. Yet, while traditional elements are more likely to be found in the memories of Korea in *Aekyung’s Dream*, such is not the case with
4.2 Encountering the new language and culture

Korean immigrant children in the two stories go through the process of exploring and navigating their cultural and linguistic identity. As they encounter the new world, they go through questioning, resisting, understanding, or accepting the new language and culture. However, although both Korean protagonists in the two stories experience a similar process of acculturation, it is interesting to see that it may be realized in different ways and/or in different perspectives.

In *Aekyung’s Dream*, Aekyung encounters the clash between the two different cultures/languages, feeling lonely and scary because of the way in which she was treated at school. She was teased by her school classmates about her physical appearance. Overt racial discrimination at school made Aekyung become uncomfortable and even intimidated. Facing this situation, she had no option but to burst into tears as a way of responding to them (See Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Aekyung goes through racial discrimination at school](image)

Aekyung’s struggles and her feelings are also described in the written texts:

Aekyung tried not to say anything to her mother about what had happened. She knew how hard and late into the night her parents worked, and she didn’t want to make them sad. But when her mother came into her room, Aekyung couldn’t help saying in a trembling voice, “Mother, I don’t want
to go to school. I don’t like to be teased for being different. Besides,” she exclaimed, trying to hide her tears, “I’m Korean, not Chinese!” (p. 9).

This shows that Aekyung tries to be silent about her difficult situation at school. She has been hesitant to share this with her mother, trying not to give any burden to her. But she eventually tells her mother about what had happened at school. In response to Aekyung, mother recommends her to just accept the way it is, saying that “…that isn’t enough reason to stop going to school. You shouldn’t let those mean feelings bother you. Just ignore them. Everything will be all right” (p. 9). So Aekyung fully listens to what her mother says and tries to ignore her school classmate’s teasing.

However, Aekyung gradually starts recovering her identity when Aunt Kim talks about the recent visit to Korea, sharing gifts and photos about Korean culture. In addition to this, Aekyung dreams about King Sejong in the 15th century, who created the Korean alphabet called Hangul. In her dream, King Sejong said to her, “My dear child, you must be strong like a tree with deep roots. In this way, the cruel winds will not shake you, and your life will blossom like the mu[g]ung flower” (p.17). This message encouraged her to feel the sense of belonging to the Korean heritage and a strong affinity for Korean linguistic and cultural identity. King Sejong remained vivid in her memory, and as time passed, she stopped crying at school. She started to spend her time practicing English and gradually became confident in speaking the new language and interacting with her classmates.

When it comes to Aekyung’s acculturation process, it is evident that she kept her voice silenced, trying not to say what she had experienced at school. It was through King Sejong’s message that Aekyung was able to resist the linguistic oppression and racial discrimination, and become empowered to recover her home identity and embrace the new language.
and culture.

Just like in *Aekyung’s Dream*, Korean immigrant child Hee Jun in *A Piece of Home* faces similar linguistic and cultural obstacles as he arrives in the new place in the U.S. When he is in class, he feels that he is not ordinary and physically looks different. Missing his life in Korea, Hee Jun wants to go back home. In order to help Hee Jun adjust to the school environment, his school teacher tries to support him as much as possible so that Hee Jun can be familiar with the new language and culture. But Hee Jun entirely resists it. He does not want to be in class anymore and avoids the situation he had to face in his classroom (See Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Hee Jun’s resistance in A Piece of Home](image)

Figure 3 shows both written and visual representations of Hee Jun’s overt resistance. He straightforwardly turns his back against his school teacher and rolls his eyes down towards his desk, saying in Korean that “여기에 싫지 않아” (p.18), which literally means that he does not want to be in class. In addition to Hee Jun, his little sister, Se Ra, also resists more explicitly due to her language barrier at school (See Figure 4).
Figure 4 shows the images of Se Ra, who gets upset, physically expresses resistance, and even uses violence against her teacher. Not only in the visual representation, but also in the written text, Se Ra is portrayed to resist against the new language and culture in the U.S. in general and against her school teacher in particular. She actually “... bites and kicks and even spits on her teacher” (p.19). In this situation, her father calls the school administrator, explicating that Se Ra is having a difficult time adjusting to the new school environment.

As seen in Figure 5, Se Ra’s father directly talks to the school authorities in English, saying “She is having a hard time adjusting” (p.20). As a matter of fact, it follows that he is raising his voice against the school authorities to let them know that Se Ra is in the process of going through linguistic challenges and adjusting to the new school culture and environment. These visual and written representations of father’s action
demonstrate that the father is fully understanding and supporting Se Ra’s resistance.

4.3 Understanding of the two cultures

As remarked in the preceding section, *Aekyung’s Dream* and *A Piece of Home* deal with the stories of Korean immigrant children going through difficulties in making a transition and adjusting to the U.S. culture. When it comes to the representations of Korean culture, both picturebooks portray the Mugung flower, or the Rose of Sharon within the stories. In *Aekyung’s Dream*, Aekyung dreams about King Sejong, who gives her a powerful and encouraging message that she should keep her Korean identity and cultural root. Figure 6 presents the scene in which Aekyung is in King Sejong’s palace back in the 15th century.

![Figure 6. Mukung flower in Aekyung’s dream](image)

In this image, we can see Aekyung standing in front of the King and the court dancers positioned around the King. As he conveys his message to Aekyung, he mentions the Mugung flower (Rose of Sharon) saying that she must be strong like a tree with deep roots in order not to be shaken by the cruel winds and that her life will blossom like the Mugung flower.
As noted on the bottom of page 17, the Mugung flower is defined as a Korean national flower. That is to say, the flower serves as a cultural mediator, symbolizing Korean nationalism, cultural root, and a sense of belonging to the Korean identity.

What is particularly interesting is that the Mugung flower also appears in *A Piece of Home*. In the first part of the story, Hee Jun has the memory of this flower planted in his grandmother’s yard in Korea. While adjusting to the new life in the U.S., he makes a new friend Steve at school and he is invited to Steve’s house. In Steve’s yard, Hee Jun discovers the same flower as he used to see in Korea. Figure 7 shows the images of two different scenes portraying the same kind of flower planted in two different places.

![Figure 7. Mugung flower in grandmother’s yard in Korea and Rose of Sharon at Steve’s home](image)

As soon as he recognizes it, they both share the names of the flower alternately in Korean and then in English. On page 25, Hee Jun and Steve’s cultural sharing is demonstrated in written text:

“Mugunghwa”, I say.
“Rose of Sharon,” Steve says.
“It’s mugunghwa in Korea,” I say.
“It’s Rose of Sharon here,” Steve says.

The written representations about the flower gives an implication that the two cultures may be different but they can be shared with mutual
understanding. This cultural sharing continues up to the end of the story, and thereby Hee Jun comes to realize how cultures are connected and eventually accepts both cultures.

As far as the flower is concerned, it seems that the representations of the same flower are viewed in different ways. The flower in Aekyung’s Dream is solely described as an item to symbolize the Korean ethnicity, culture and identity. Representing it as a national item in this story implies that the flower exists only in Korea. On the contrary, however, the flower in A Piece of Home is not only represented as a Korean flower Mugunghwa, but it is also represented as Rose of Sharon in the U.S. The flower in this story serves as a bridge between the two boys, Hee Jun and Steve, connecting them to mutually exchange and share the two different cultures. The flower simultaneously represented as Mugunghwa and Rose of Sharon demonstrates the significance of understanding cultural similarities as well as differences. Table 1 summarizes the contrasts and differences in narratives and representations between Aekyung’s Dream and A Piece of Home.

Table 1. Contrasts and differences in narratives and representations between the two picturebooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aekyung’s Dream</th>
<th>A Piece of Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memories of Korea</td>
<td>Memories of traditional Korean elements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- traditional Korean Kiwa house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- cherrywood box</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- rice-paper door</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- celadon potteries, etc.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memories of non-traditional/contemporary Korean elements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Western-style Korean house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- School life in urban Korea</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Lights of the city in Korea</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Encountering linguistic and cultural challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language conflict</th>
<th>Language barrier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- No one in Aekyung’s family speaks English</td>
<td>- Hee Jun’s father speaks English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit racism</td>
<td>Feeling difference in appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Bullying</td>
<td>Lethargy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt racial discrimination</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show tears/Silence</td>
<td>Raise voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covert resistance</td>
<td>Overt resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child is hesitant to share challenges with parents</td>
<td>Father is aware of the child’s situation and takes actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Resistance to linguistic and cultural challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Korean culture is predominantly presented.</th>
<th>Both Korean and the U.S. culture are presented. (e.g. Mugung flower in Korea and Rose of Sharon in the U.S.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. Mugung flower as a Korean national flower)</td>
<td>Both cultural differences and similarities are shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus is on cultural difference.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Cultural Understanding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4.4 Social contexts influencing shifts in narratives and representations</th>
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Based on the findings discussed so far, this section is particularly concerned with a question of how they can be related to socio-historical/economic or cultural contexts that had gone through the far-reaching and sweeping changes over a long period covering the two publishing years in question, 1988 (1978) – 2016.

When discussing these contexts, special attention needs to be paid to the dynamics between Korea and the U.S. As far as the relationship between the two countries is concerned, it is of importance to note that the U.S. had overwhelmingly been influential to Korea from the beginning of the country as a nation state (Brazinsky, 2007). Starting in 1945, when the country was liberated from Japanese rule, Korea was greatly indebted to
the U.S. throughout its whole statecraft. In addition, when Korea got into a desperate situation during the Korean War (1950-53), the U.S. served as a savior with its critical military intervention, and Korea began to be much influenced by the U.S. throughout its entire society (Lee & Patterson, 1999). Even after the war, while Korea went through a range of political and/or economic challenges, the U.S. maintained a strong alliance with Korea, continuously supporting the country militarily, politically and economically (Brazinsky, 2007; Hahm, 1981). Aligned with this special relationship between Korea and the U.S., Korean immigration to the U.S. started to emerge. As the Immigration Act 1965 made it possible for immigrants to move to the U.S., the Korean immigration to the U.S. entered a phase of acceleration from the late 1960s and the early 1970s (Hurh, 1998; Kim & Min, 1992). One of the major push factors was the low standard of living and lack of job opportunities in Korea. So there were a substantial number of Koreans seeking better economic and educational opportunities in the U.S. Another major factor that accelerated the massive Korean immigration includes political insecurities and issues of human rights under the military dictatorship and authoritarian governments particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s (Min, 2011). Thus, there has been an accumulative rise in the Korean immigration to the U.S. up until the late 1980s. As the immigration boom gradually grows in Korean society, pro-American sentiments began to escalate. Also, American Dream came to be glorified by the Koreans in general to seek out their opportunities to have a better life in the U.S. as well as an upward social mobility for their family and children. This dominant ideology of American Dream permeated the Korean immigrants’ mindset, accelerating their admiration of the U.S.

Starting in the 1990s, however, Korea became free from its long-time dictatorship, giving rise to a democratic climate across the country.
Moreover, the growth of Korean economy created more job opportunities in Korea and the country also began to become positive about globalization as a general trend of the time, along with its open door policy toward the world. By embracing these successful shifts in democracy and economy, the country was also recognized on the global stage as one of the OECD countries. Additionally, Korea has emerged as a global leading country in various industrial areas such as IT, communication, transport, and civil engineering. In accordance with such societal changes and improvements in Korea, its immigration to the U.S. gradually declined (Min, 2011; O’Conner & Batalova, 2019). Despite a few rise and fall patterns in the number of immigrants during the 2000s, Koreans found fewer incentives to emigrate and the immigration to the U.S. sharply declined (Min, 2011). In light of this decreasing trend, Koreans became better off in their own country socially, politically, and economically. Also, their general perspectives on the U.S. and their admiration of American Dream have been shifted due largely to the issues of economic inequality, racial division, and social inequity prevalent in the U.S. (Min, 2011).

Going back to the two picturebooks, these social, historical, political and economic contexts are embedded in the narratives and representations. As opposed to these contexts underlying a sense of pro-Americanism, the dominant ideology of American Dream, and Korean immigrants’ admiration of their entry to the mainstream U.S. culture, however, both narratives and representations in Aekyung’s Dream predominantly show how Korean immigrants are socially targeted as minorities in the U.S. As clearly portrayed in the story, the first difficulty encountered in the U.S. was English. Due to the language barrier, Aekyung was not free to interact even with the birds that she thinks are singing in English. While Aekyung was faced with linguistic obstacle, she was also racially attacked by the
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mainstream groups at school. She encountered intentional racial slurs and overt discrimination, but hardly did she find any ways to resist. She went through inner dilemma and was kept silenced and oppressed. Even though it was hard for her to find a direct way of resistance to the oppression, however, she takes a covert stance by relying on her own dream about King Sejong. As one of her ways to resist against a diverse range of challenges, she depends on the return to the glory of the past history of Korea, or the era during which King Sejong created the Korean alphabet Hangul. While the King delivers a message in her dream, the Korean national flower Mugunghwa particularly stands out, serving as a gateway to retrieve her Korean home identity and thereby to become strong enough to survive the linguistic and cultural domination and oppression in the U.S. In this regard, it is not until she meets the King and is reminded of the national flower that she finally overcomes her linguistic barrier, recovers her home identity, reclaims her own voices, and thereby becomes empowered.

On the contrary, socio-historical and economic shifts that occurred in Korea are fully reflected in the narratives and representations in *A Piece of Home*. What is notably portrayed in the story is a drastic improvement in the living standard of Korea. Unlike Aekyung’s story, the contemporary living environments and urban surroundings are pictured across the board in the immigrant child’s memory. But when it comes to the adjustment to the U.S., Hee Jun does encounter linguistic challenges and feel alienated. Interestingly enough, however, Hee Jun does not keep silence in the situation he faced. Instead, he questions himself constantly about the linguistic and cultural difference he experiences. Both Hee Jun’s little sister and his father do not keep silence, either. Se Ra even dares to attack her teacher by violently expressing physical resistance. Additionally, Hee Jun’s father is committed to resisting in his own way. He actively engages in
the Se Ra’s case and raises his own voice, instead of avoiding the situation. This whole dynamic process of Hee Jun’s acculturation is reconciled by his interaction with a new friend along with the advent of the flower, Mugunghwa/Rose of Sharon. Realizing that the flower exists not only in Korea but also in the U.S., Hee Jun becomes aware of the coexistence of cultural similarities as well as differences, embracing the two cultures in harmony. The flower represented in the story reflects the shifts in socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts in that it relates to the position of Korea as an advanced country on the global stage. When there was a drastic difference in socio-economic and/or cultural gap between Korea and the U.S., the flower seems to have acted as a means for the retrieval of Korean ethnic and national identity. But the Korea’s advanced status, which resulted in lessening the gap between the two countries, is embedded in the flower holding a bilateral stance of Mugunghwa and Rose of Sharon. The flower illuminates the equivalent position of the two cultures shared in harmony and cooperation.

V. Final Reflections and Implications

Overall, *Aekyung’s Dream* and *A Piece of Home* are the stories of the Korean immigrant children who came to the U.S. in two different time periods. Through the lens of critical literacy, both stories are illuminated as a way in which immigrant minorities or non-mainstream social groups in the U.S. reclaim their voices and reaffirm their identities (Burney, 2012; Freire, 1970; Said, 1978, 1993; Xie, 1997). As examined in the findings, it can be critically interpreted that reading the socio-cultural and historical shifts embedded in narratives and representations within the stories is a way of reading the word and the world (Freire, 1970). This act of
reading offers critical insights into understanding cultures, histories, realities and social trajectories of Korean immigrants in the U.S. More importantly, the narrative and representation shifts found in the two stories are viewed as writing back, or re-presenting/re-doing (Burney, 2012) the cultures and identities of Korean immigrants through their own voice and vision.

Findings and discussions of this critical content analysis shed light on the significance of reading the world and thereby offer educational implications for language and culture educators to consider how to support students in critically engaging with texts. Suggested are educators’ roles in providing a space for critical literacy in educational settings. One of their major responsibilities includes the preparation for selecting children’s literature that provides stories with diverse voices and representations. In order to scaffold this, educators should do in-depth explorations of a variety of children’s books and also search for socio-historical and cultural sources so that they can better understand much broader contexts within which a book is embedded. For instance, when educators incorporate children’s books like _Aekyung’s Dream_ and _A Piece of Home_ into their class contents, they are required to understand the history of Korean immigration to the U.S., Korean immigrant children’s acculturation process, their linguistic/cultural challenges, and their identity construction. Moreover, educators need to be well equipped with socio-historical contexts related to the stories such as historical facts about King Sejong, the creation of Hangul, the underlying meaning of Mugung flower etc.

While they do research on social contexts in relation to the stories they are covering in class, they can also possibly do additional search for background knowledge about authors/illustrators, locate other related non-fiction books/informational texts, and seek out digital resources that can help students understand stories reflecting a wide range of voices.
Moreover, educators are responsible for inviting students to an inquiry or research-based learning space. Going beyond an information-driven approach, inquiry/research-based strategies encourage students to do research on the issues or themes of the books discussed in class. They may include doing internet research (e.g. authors’ websites, interviews, book reviews, and online blogs) or gathering informational texts. It is through these strategies that students can do their own exploration to enrich their critical reading and further construct new perspectives as well as knowledge. As a result, they are also able to unpack different layers of meanings of the texts and recognize social and cultural contexts embedded in the stories. Listed below are some of the examples of guiding questions that can be utilized in an inquiry/research-based approach:

- What is the time period of the story?
- How are the time period of the story and the publishing year of the book related?
- What are the author’s backgrounds and experiences in relation to the story?
- How does the book verbally or visually describe countries, cultures, or people?
- Are there any historical/contemporary contexts within the narratives? How are they portrayed?
- What are the characters’ experiences in the story? How are their lives described?
- ‘How do you relate yourself to characters’ experiences in the story? Are they similar to or different from your own experiences? Do you feel closely connected to characters? Or is there any distance from the characters’ lives?
- If a situation/experience/character in the story is closely connected to you, how can you distance yourself from it to explore what is not addressed in the story?
- If there is too much distance from a situation/experience/character in the
story, how can you close that gap?
- What are socio-cultural, historical, political, or economic contexts in which the narratives are embedded?
- What other texts would be useful to read alongside this story?

Taken as a whole, critical literacy in language and culture education invites students to think beyond the written words or visual images in books and also enables them to engage in an inquiry to explore social, historical and cultural contexts of the stories. This act of critical reading in educational settings further provides students with a literacy space to explore a diverse range of narratives and voices, and thus offers insights into creating ways of seeing and interpreting the world.

**Works Cited**


An Educational Perspective on Critical Content Analysis of Two Picturebooks: Aekyung’s Dream and A Piece of Home


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