



## Can speaking more languages enhance your creativity? Relationship between bilingualism and creative potential among Korean American students with multicultural link

Hangeun Lee<sup>a</sup>, Kyung Hee Kim<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Georgia, USA

<sup>b</sup> School of Education, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187, USA

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between individuals' creativity and their degree of bilingualism, which is reflective of multicultural experiences. A total of 116 Korean American students (49 boys & 65 girls) participated in this study. The Word Association Test (Lambert, 1956) and Subject Self Rating (Peal & Lambert, 1962) were used to measure participants' bilingualism, and the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 2008) was used to measure their creative potential. The results indicated that individuals' degree of bilingualism and creativity are positively correlated, regardless of gender or age. Girls outperformed boys in the areas of bilingualism, Elaboration, and Abstractness of Titles, and age was not an influential factor on either creativity or bilingualism.

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### 1. Introduction

Creative individuals perceive unique combinations and challenges through interactions with their environments, including among these interactions the juxtaposition of their own culture or language use with their hosts' (Raina, 1999). Multicultural experience is a measure of the extent of immersion in different cultures, including factors such as family immigration to a different culture, speaking in different languages, and interacting with individuals from a different culture (Leung, Madduz, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008). Multicultural experience may enhance creativity (Leung et al., 2008). Bilinguals are able to speak two languages that represent two different cultures (Bialystok, 2001). Thus, bilingualism may influence bilingual individuals' creativity, due either to cognitive benefits of speaking a second language, or to the cultural dynamics speakers encounter in everyday life.

In this study, we investigated Korean American students' creativity in their bilingual and multicultural situations (i.e., being in America and having a Korean background). There are gaps in the previous research on the relationship between bilingualism, multiculturalism, and creativity. Prior research provides little empirical evidence to support the notion of positive influence of

multiculturalism on creativity, and researchers have not yet investigated if a certain type of multicultural experience is required to benefit creativity (Leung et al., 2008). In the present study, we seek to fill that gap. Further, gender and age have been shown to influence individual differences regarding bilingualism, creativity, and the relationship between the two. Lopez (2003) suggested the bilingual individual's creative potential should be examined with a homogenous sample to control cultural effect. With this in mind, we investigated multicultural experience focusing on the relationship between the degree of bilingualism and creativity with one homogenous group: Korean American students.

#### 1.1. Creativity in different cultures

Csikszentmihalyi (1999) stated that creativity should be considered more as a cultural and social phenomenon than merely a mental process. Torrance and Sisk (1997) believed that what is honored in a culture will be cultivated within the culture. With this cultural perspective, creativity may be expressed in different ways in different cultures. Research shows different patterns in the ways of expressing creativity across cultures (Niu & Sternberg, 2001; Simonton, 1997). Cultural factors, including educational experience, family expectations, and socio-cultural forces may affect the development of creativity. For example, Asian countries have very different cultures and educational environments when

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 757 221 1328.

E-mail address: [kkim@wm.edu](mailto:kkim@wm.edu) (K.H. Kim).

compared to the US. Asian culture values conformity and collectivism, whereas American culture values independence and individualism (Kim, 2009). Saeki, Fan, and Van Dusen (2001) reported some cultural differences in Elaboration and Abstractness of Titles of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking with American and Japanese college students. American students perform better on Elaboration and Abstractness of Titles than Japanese students. Saeki et al. explained these differences in participants' creativity as the effect of different cultural influences.

### 1.2. Multicultural experiences, bilingualism, and creativity

Bilingual immersion enables students to develop a multicultural identity with a positive attitude toward themselves (Bekerman, 2004). Proficiency in two different languages can represent a high level understanding of both cultures and can, therefore, be instrumental in measuring the degree of multicultural experiences. Research (e.g., Bekerman, 2004; Leung & Chiu, 2010) confirms the positive effect of bilingual competence on cognitive tolerance toward unfamiliarity or openness to change through developing understanding of two different cultures. Maddux, Adam, and Galinsky (2010) found that people who have a foreign-living experience perform better on creative tasks when compared with people who do not have any experience of living in a foreign country. These tasks include idea flexibility, recognition of underlying connections and association, and resistance to functional fixation, by more eagerly removing blocks in a problem solving activity and using multiple approaches. Leung et al. (2008) concluded that creative benefits are most apparent under certain conditions of multicultural experience, such as extensive interaction with different cultures (i.e., bilingualism). Additionally, a successful cultural adaptation, including learning foreign cultures and the ability to speak two languages, is a substantial factor for creativity enhancement (Leung et al., 2008; Maddux et al., 2010). In the present study, we investigated how the degree of competence in two different languages, which represent two very different cultures, affect creative thinking among Korean American or Korean students who had lived in the US.

### 1.3. Degree of bilingualism and creativity

Research has focused on creativity, such as problem-solving models, creativity training programs, and studies of gender differences (Fleith, Renzulli, & Westberg, 2002). Fleith et al. (2002) studied the effect of a creativity training program on divergent thinking and self-concept with monolingual and bilingual students, and found that creativity training improves divergent thinking in bilingual students. Lasagabaster (2000) found that, although bilinguals are superior to monolingual peers in creative thinking as measured by the Torrance Tests of Creativity Thinking, no differences are found between *nonbalanced* and *balanced* (see Section 2.2) bilinguals. Therefore, an inconsistency is found among the research involving the relationship between the degree of bilingualism and creativity. The complexity of the concept of bilingualism and the different nature of two language proficiencies might explain the disagreement among studies (Simonton, 2008). Further, the effect of demographics has been considered in the investigation of the relationship between bilingualism and creativity. For example, Konaka (1997) found that the degree of bilingualism have a substantial effect on divergent thinking and that there is no gender difference in divergent thinking among balanced bilingual students. Although an inconsistency exists in research studies, the majority of studies suggest that bilinguals tend to be more creative than monolinguals and confirm bilinguals' linguistic flexibility in monitoring their language production appropriately in different contexts (Ricciardelli, 1992).

### 1.4. Effect of gender and age on bilingualism and creativity

Ekstrand (1980) and Boyle's (1987) early investigations of gender and bilingualism reported the superiority of females. Creativity test results show that boys are superior on flexibility and originality, whereas girls are superior on elaboration (e.g., Ai, 1999; Torrance, 1965).

Research supports the critical period for second language acquisition based on the belief that children are biologically better prepared to learn second languages than adults (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000; Singleton, 2003). On the other hand, research has also shown that the native-like proficiency is attainable irrespective of the age at which acquisition began (Birdsong, 1992; Bongaerts, Planken, & Schils, 1995). Smith and Carlsson (1985) reported positive aging effects on adolescents' creativity. Lindauer, Orwoll, and Kelley (1997) also reported that the quality of the visual artists' work improves as they age, although quantity does not. However, there is a nonlinear trend in creativity with aging, showing that creative productivity tends to rise rapidly to a definite peak and decline gradually until output is about half the rate at the peak (Diamond, 1986), though the location of the peak and the post-peak declines vary depending on the domain of creative achievement (Simonton, 1988).

### 1.5. The research questions are

1. Is there a relationship between the degree of bilingualism and creativity composite score (i.e., Creativity Index) as well as each creativity subscale (i.e., Fluency, Originality, Elaboration, Abstractness of Title, Resistance to Premature Closure, and Creative Strengths)?
2. Is there a gender or age difference in bilingualism or creativity and their relationships?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 116 Korean American students who were attending the Atlanta Korean American School participated in this study. The participant inclusion criteria in this study included students who had more than two years of schooling in the US, who had Korean speaking parents, and who had at least 75 correct responses on the Word Association Test (WAT, Lambert, 1956). This was necessary to screen students who had low proficiency in both Korean and English. The participants consisted of 49 boys with the mean age of 11.84 (range 8–16) and 65 girls with the mean age of 11.26 (range 7–18). Among the students, two did not indicate their gender or age.

### 2.2. Instruments

The WAT and the Subjective Self Rating (SSR, Peal & Lambert, 1962) were used to determine the students' degree of bilingualism. The WAT is one of the most widely used measures of bilingualism (Carringer, 1974; Konaka, 1997). To measure the degree of bilingualism in Korean and English, we used 16 English words from Lambert's list (1956) and 16 Korean words chosen based on the Korean frequency list from the Korean Frequency Report (2005). The Korean word list was modeled on Lambert's criteria. On the WAT, Korean and English words were presented alternately, and the students were asked to write down as many words as they could think of that seemed to "go with" or "belong with" the stimulus word. These sums of the association were the main considerations for achieving a balanced score:

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