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Article

Agency and Investment in L2 Learning: The Case of a Migrant Worker and a Mother of Two Children in South Korea

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Abstract

Given the call for more research on migrant workers' L2 investment and agency, this five-year longitudinal case study followed the Korean language learning experiences of Iroda, a migrant worker who moved from Uzbekistan to South Korea, focusing on how and why she exercises her agency and invests in her L2 learning. Drawing upon the conceptual frameworks of agency, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2010, p. 28), and investment, which leads to an increase in an individual's social power and cultural capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015), data was collected from various sources and inductively analysed over five years by using the constant comparative method and the individual-level logic model. The findings show that Iroda agentively and voluntarily seeks out resources to expand her linguistic repertoire, devoting entire weekends to learning the Korean language while balancing her efforts with her weekday job. As her Korean proficiency grows, she endeavours to apply for a graduate programme at a Korean university to enhance her social status, career prospects, and earning potential for herself and her children. Notably, the findings suggest that her purposeful and agentic investment in L2 learning is driven by the growing acceptance and recognition of her potential within the target society.

Keywords

agency; investment; L2 learning; female migrant worker; Korean as a second language

Issue

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1. Introduction

The concept of second language (L2) learners' investment and their exercise of agency allows researchers to further explore the locus of the learners' daily lives and L2 learning experiences concerning learners' desires and hopes to acquire new identities as they approach new worlds (Kinginger, 2004; Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Drawing upon the conceptual framework of L2 learner agency and investment in L2 learning, this case study aims to examine a Russian-speaking Uzbek female migrant's investment in L2 learning and her agency in the process of learning Korean as an L2.

It has been widely reported that female (im)migrants in South Korea, hereafter also referred to as Korea, predominantly consist of "foreign brides" who marry Korean citizens, workers with H-2 or F-4 visas (overseas Korean

visas), or students with D-4 visas (student visas; see Chung, 2020; Heo & Kim, 2019; Shakya & Yang, 2019). Yet, Iroda (pseudonym), the focal participant of this study, is unique in that she was Uzbek and migrated to Korea with an F-1 visa (parents of international students) as a legal guardian of her children who held D-4 visas. Her children were multiethnic (Uzbek and ethnic Korean), being considered the 4th generation of ethnic Koreans from the former Soviet regions, also known as *Koryoin*.

Although her legal status indicated that the primary purpose of her stay in Korea was for the education of her children, the underlying reason for her migration to Korea was twofold: first, to reunite with her husband (3rd generation *Koryoin*), who had been working in Korea since early 2010; second, to follow a desire to escape from the socioeconomic inequality she encountered in Uzbekistan.

Like in the case of Iroda's family members, a growing number of 3rd- and 4th-generation *Koryoin* have migrated to South Korea from Central Asia due to socio-economic disparity and political instability after the resolution of the former Soviet Union in 1991. This population is distinctive from the other ethnic Koreans in foreign countries such as China and Japan because they lost their heritage language (Korean) and perceived Russian as their first/mother/native language. Also, they do not seem to engage in Korean language and learning practices despite considering themselves as returning ethnic Koreans in South Korea. In other words, their focus is primarily on obtaining permanent resident visas and securing decent jobs with good wages, rather than investing in Korean language learning. Their Russian-only practices and their lack of Korean language proficiency have become a social issue, negatively affecting their social relations with South Koreans (Jang, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Kim, 2018).

However, as an Uzbek in the *Koryoin* community, Iroda's remarkable journey demonstrates her determination to learn Korean as her L2 and effectively integrate into the Korean mainstream community. Through her linguistic skills and resourcefulness, she successfully developed her identity as a multicultural Korean citizen, becoming fluent in Korean and even pursuing higher education at a Korean university. It is crucial to examine her case as unique and distinct from other female migrant workers in a *Koryoin* community, emphasising the significance of her resettlement experience.

By focusing on the case of Iroda, a mother of two *Koryoin* children, the research questions will be discussed in depth followed by detailed analysis and descriptions of the individual participant drawn from observations, interviews, and family and life histories as well as other narratives (Duff, 2018). Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does Iroda invest in learning Korean as an L2?
2. Under what circumstances and why does she (re)develop and enact her agency to learn Korean?

By answering the questions, this study seeks to understand the agentic and voluntary L2 investment of the female migrant, as well as identify the imagined and current communities that influence her agency (re)development. The findings of this study are expected to further advance L2 researchers' and educators' understanding of migrants' L2 investment and agency in their host country.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

2.1. Imagined Communities and L2 Investment

The term imagined community was first coined by Anderson (2016) with the conceptualisation of the notion of community. While examining the underlying

sense of community and defining the concept of nation, Anderson (2016) proposed that "it is imagined because members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members...yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion...all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined" (p. 6). This view indicates that community members internalise an image of the community based on a sense of their actual presence in the community. Also, because it is imagined, their "imagined communities" can be created based on the interconnectedness of the communities across borders without the limitation of a particular geographic locale (Chavez, 1994).

Later, Norton (2001) expanded the concept of imagined community by drawing upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory to link the learners' current learning and their future affiliations (Kanno, 2003) through a process of legitimate peripheral participation. The process illustrates how newcomers move further toward fuller participation in the community practice of old-timers. Within the framework of community practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Wenger (1999), in his later work, developed the notions of non-participation and participation focusing on their relations with the construction of a learner's identity, suggesting that both types of participation come into play in shaping individuals' identities (also as cited in Norton, 2001). Further, he conceptualised imagination as "a mode of belonging that always involves the social world to expand the scope of reality and identity" (Wenger, 1999, p. 178) which demonstrates the human capabilities of associating with individuals beyond their current realities through their imagination (Kanno, 2003). It is through imagination and in pursuit of their imagined communities that individuals are expanding themselves by going beyond their space and time and by generating new images of themselves and the world while participating in everyday dynamic and complex language practices in the community (Wenger, 1999). The two theoretical frameworks, the concept of community (Anderson, 2016) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) are associated with Norton's conceptualisation of imagined communities, which has been developed in the field of second language acquisition in relation to L2 learners' imagined communities and their investment in L2 learning.

Norton (2013) further developed the concept of imagined communities (e.g., Norton, 2001; Norton & Gao, 2008; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) and investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2016). In her book, *Identity and Language Learning*, she claims that "the target language community may be a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination...that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 3), which presupposes that a learner's imagined identity and investment in language learning are interpreted within imagined and concurrent contexts.

In a similar vein, Norton (2000, 2001) visualises L2 learners' imagined communities as having a significant effect on learners' current language and social practices though it is not immediately accessible and tangible (Song, 2012). Namely, Norton (2013) refers to "investment" as a way to view L2 learners' varying desires to involve themselves in community practices and social interactions.

This has provided a more explanatory construct within a sociological framework that allows researchers to move beyond the binary view of motivation (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001) and to understand how fully motivated language learners show the different levels of L2 investment. Reflecting on Anderson's (2016) imagined community, Norton (2016) employed the term "investment" to refer to L2 learners' "imagined communities" and "imagined identities," and found them to have an impact on learners' literacy and language practices in certain contexts and in their subsequent progress in learning language(s).

2.2. Migrants' Investment in L2 Learning and Agency

Investment can be conceptualised as the commitment to the identities, practices, and goals that (re)shape language learners' learning processes while continually negotiating in various structures of power and social relationships (Darvin & Norton, 2018). That is, learners invest in learning or speaking language(s) if they expect to obtain a wider range of material and symbolic resources, which will lead to the increased value of their social power and cultural capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2016), which in turn presents various identity positions that the learners can perform in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Norton, 2016). Following these lines, research on learners' L2 investment holds a significant place in L2 learning theory in that it illustrates the historically and socially constructed relations between language learners' identities and their learning commitment (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Migrant L2 learners engage in language and learning practices with various forms of social, cultural, and economic capital and make a wide range of investments to negotiate new identities across space and time (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Norton, 2013). Namely, migrant L2 learners are more likely to show multiple identities imagining themselves as part of either their home communities or host communities, or both (Chavez, 1994). Thus, how they invest in L2 learning is dependent on the more dynamic and complex negotiation of power within and across different contexts, which renders investment as complex, uncertain, and contradictory (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 1995, 2013).

In this regard, migrant L2 learners' commitment to language and learning practices has been explored across different settings (Dagenais, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Park & Abelman, 2004; Song, 2012). The existing literature revealed that their imagined communities were closely interrelated with their histories and future

directions, which were reflected in their current language practices and investment in L2 learning (Park & Abelman, 2004; Song, 2012). In addition, their future membership in a specific community impacted their recognised social and economic values of language(s) via language ideology. It implies that the (im)migrants' investment in L2 learning can be considered from their engagement in their local community as well as from their relationships to language and social practices of future communities that exist in their imaginations and across national borders (Song, 2012).

As migrant L2 learners perform across transnational contexts, this highlights two important ideas: that the learners arrive equipped with capital (e.g., linguistic skills, social networks, and material resources) and that their involvement in a given space includes the acquisition of new symbolic and material resources, the use of their equipped capital, and the transformation of the capital into something valuable in new circumstances (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The transformed capital can be called symbolic capital "once they [new symbolic and material resources] are perceived and recognised as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 4), and it is specifically related to the understanding of investment in the new world order (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Likewise, L2 learners reshape their agency, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2010, p. 28), while taking into account their equipped and placed capital, resources, and given contexts. In other words, human agents are neither completely free nor entirely socially determined actors. Rather, given the social nature of agency that can be pervasively affected by cultural, linguistic and social aspects of human actions, beliefs, and intentions, they can transform the existing linguistic and sociocultural systems that in turn (re)produce their agency (Ahearn, 2010). In addition, as the construct of investment is closely related to that of language learners' imagined identities and imagined communities (Norton, 2016), their hopes for the future and imagined identity will influence their agency and investment in language and literacy practices in a new space and their subsequent language learning progress (McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2016).

Notably, the concept of L2 learners' imagined communities and investment enables researchers to move beyond the locus of learners' daily lives and L2 learning experiences. It also allows for a broader consideration of learners' hopes and desires as they strive to embrace new identities while taking proactive steps to explore new and larger worlds (Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In the case of Iroda, a member of the migrant population and a mother of two ethnic Korean (*Koryoin*) children, her language learning trajectories cannot be entirely understood without considering various other factors (e.g., family history and hopes for the future) because she has more flexible and less fixed identities which reflect her current situation and future goals. Thus, for this study, I decide to employ Norton's notion of L2

investment and imagined community, as well as Ahearn's concept of agency to navigate Iroda's investment in learning and using Korean as an L2 and the exercise and (re)development of her agency in the process of pursuing and shaping her career, as well as her academic and other related goals.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context, a Focal Participant, and a Researcher's Role

Due to a recent influx of ethnic Koreans (*Koryoin*) from the former Soviet Union (e.g., Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan), many *Koryoin* communities have emerged in South Korea. This research was conducted in a *Koryoin* community in Dusan (pseudonym), located in southwestern Korea. Among the initial settlers in this community, four *Koryoin* households (Iroda's family, Alexandria's family, Ludmilla's family, and Kristina's family, all pseudonyms) participated in the study over five years, from 2018 to 2022. They were from Uzbekistan but had limited knowledge of the Uzbek language, mainly speaking and perceiving Russian as their L1.

For this study, I decided to focus on Iroda's case as she and her family members were multinational and multi-ethnic, which was uncommon in the *Koryoin* community. Unlike other *Koryoin* families who maintained strong ties to their Korean heritage and identified as ethnic Koreans from the former Soviet Union, using predominantly the Russian language, Iroda identified herself as an Uzbek with Russian nationality, making use of both Uzbek and Russian language in her daily life. Despite not being *Koryoin* herself, she decided to resettle in the *Koryoin* community largely due to her marriage to Theodore (pseudonym), a man with a multi-ethnic background—his father was *Koryoin* while his mother was Uzbek.

Theodore's appearance was more like an Uzbek, but because of his family name, Kim (the most common Korean family name in both Korea and *Koryoin* communities), he was often easily identified by *Koryoin* and Uzbek people as multi-ethnic. Before he migrated to Korea, according to Theodore, because of his multi-ethnic background and on account of the difficult economic situation in Uzbekistan, he could not receive any job offers. As a result, in late 2000, he decided to move to South Korea as a migrant worker, leaving behind Iroda and other family members.

Moreover, Theodore harboured concerns about his children's future, as their last names identified them as belonging to a minority group in Uzbekistan. Similar to Theodore's distressing job search experience, his children, Alexei and Yuri (pseudonyms), might potentially encounter comparable obstacles in the future due to their ethnic background. While no one explicitly informed Theodore and Iroda that their children would face discrimination in hiring based on their race and

ethnicity in Uzbekistan, the challenging situations they had encountered left them worried about their children's future careers and overall life in the country.

Iroda grew up in a bilingual environment, with exposure to both Russian and Uzbek languages. Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian remained the primary language of instruction in her school, leading her to perceive it as her first language. However, within her household, Uzbek was predominantly spoken, and her mother, who was a kindergarten teacher, played a crucial role in teaching Iroda the Uzbek language, enabling her to utilise it academically.

Like Theodore, Iroda had a multiethnic background, as her mother was of Russian heritage while her father was Uzbek. However, by adopting her father's last name, which identified her as Uzbek, she was never treated as a person of mixed ethnicity or a minority in Uzbekistan. Iroda and Theodore first met at the Uzbek university they both attended. As a couple during their college years, they studied together and worked hard to secure decent employment after graduation. However, during their job search, Iroda witnessed the prevalent discrimination between Uzbek and non-Uzbek minorities in Uzbekistan.

In addition to the challenging economic conditions in Uzbekistan, Iroda faced the difficult decision of allowing her husband to seek work in Korea, resulting in several years of living apart. Eventually, she realised that living separately indefinitely was not sustainable. Consequently, she had to choose between relocating to Korea with her children and staying in Uzbekistan with her children while waiting for her husband to be reunited with them. After the birth of her second son, who was diagnosed with hearing problems and required continuous and costly treatment, she decided to migrate to Korea.

However, the visa application process was not straightforward for Iroda and her children. Despite her husband working in South Korea, they encountered difficulties during their Korean visa application in Uzbekistan. Faced with this situation, she once again had to make a decision: whether to wait for an extended period or to first migrate to Russia and then apply for a visa with Russian nationality. The second option was viable because Iroda was Russian on her mother's side, allowing her to obtain Russian nationality with the necessary documentation. Nevertheless, this decision came with a major drawback. Iroda could not retain dual citizenship (both Russian and Uzbek) due to Uzbekistan's national policy that strictly prohibits it. To expedite the visa issuance process, Iroda made the life-changing and irreversible choice to switch her and her children's citizenship to Russian, ensuring their reunion with her husband in South Korea as soon as possible.

According to Iroda, this decision carried significant consequences, as it prevented her from returning to her home country where her ageing parents resided. In essence, she had made a choice that potentially meant being unable to see her parents again for the remainder

of their lives. While there is no official rule preventing Iroda and her children from crossing the border, she expressed concerns about facing difficulties if she were to attempt to leave the international airport or the train station in Uzbekistan. She believed that she would either be unable to leave or be subjected to extensive interrogation until she paid a substantial sum of money.

This perception stemmed from her own experience when she visited Uzbekistan while obtaining her Russian citizenship in Russia. During that time, she needed additional official documents and had to make the trip to Uzbekistan. According to Iroda, upon arriving at the train station in Uzbekistan, she was treated as if she were a criminal, being denied passage through immigration simply because she was residing and working in Russia. This incident left her with the apprehension that she might encounter difficulties when crossing the border once she had completed the citizenship issuance process. Despite the challenges and sacrifices that came with relinquishing her Uzbek nationality, Iroda persevered and found her way to Korea, ultimately reuniting with her husband.

By the time I started the research in 2018, Iroda was 31 years old and a mother of two children, Alexei (a 13-year-old boy) and Yuri (a 9-year-old boy). She held an F-1 visa as a parent of international students as she was not eligible to obtain a spouse visit visa due to the change of her nationality from Uzbek to Russian; Theodore's nationality remained Uzbek. It was not until 2020 that Iroda was able to switch to a spouse visa (F-1) when Theodore became eligible for the overseas Korean visa (F-4; see Table 1). Theodore, being a descendant of *Koryoin*, had to navigate his in-between status as a "non-overseas Korean" with a working visa until 2020, due to the Overseas Korean Act, known as the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans, which excludes ethnic Koreans from China and former Soviet Union countries, including Uzbekistan (Chung, 2020). This situation had a significant impact on the residency status and even the nationality of Iroda and their sons.

As a Korean-English bilingual with Korean nationality, my first encounter with *Koryoin* children occurred when I worked as an English teacher at a regional elementary school in South Korea in 2012. This experience sparked my deep interest in researching and exploring effective approaches to teaching English to emerging multilinguals within Korean EFL contexts, ultimately inspiring me to pursue a doctoral degree in the L2 education field. I first became acquainted with Iroda on Facebook while recruiting young *Koryoin* learners of Korean and English in South Korea for my doctoral thesis pilot study in 2018. Since

my dissertation was mainly about the *Koryoin* children's language and learning practices across home, school and community, I planned to offer free online tutoring sessions for their English and Korean language learning during the pilot study period. Iroda was the first respondent of the recruitment of research participants posted on Facebook who asked me in English if I could tutor her children for free. From that day on, we became friends, building a good and close relationship. We often spoke in English for the first two years and later in both English and Korean with Iroda's growing Korean language skills. I also performed multiple roles such as a big sister, a tutor of her children and a researcher. Iroda is currently studying Russian language and literature as a graduate student at a regional Korean university, and I am grateful to share her story of overcoming adversity and the obstacles she faced during her resettlement in the host country.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This 5-year qualitative single case study explores how Iroda invests in L2 learning and under what circumstances and why she (re)shapes and exercises her agency to learn Korean as an L2. Given this, Iroda's L2 investment and agency are investigated by focusing on people's lived experiences, finding the meanings people place on the structures, processes, and events of their lives and relating the meanings to the social contexts that they are situated in (Miles et al., 2020). Namely, a qualitative case study approach is employed to examine "a contemporary phenomenon (case) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2018, p. 15).

To provide confirmatory evidence for this single-case study, I adhered to the following guiding principles while collecting data: "(a) using multiple sources of evidence; (b) maintaining a chain of evidence" (Yin, 2018, p. 113). Considering the significance of the principles for conducting a rigorous case study, I collected data using diverse methods which included observations in Iroda's household, community, and a regional immigrant centre, semi-structured interviews, and documentation (e.g., artefacts). Collected information from her story, her perspectives on the research contexts, and her L2 learning and using experiences yielded rich and comprehensive enough data for investigating Iroda's language and learning practices and her actions taken to invest in L2 learning.

To analyse data, I drew upon the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) as qualitative

Table 1. Changes in Iroda's family's visa status in South Korea.

Year	Iroda's husband	Iroda	Children
2018–2019	H-2 Working Visit	F-1	D-4
2020–2021	F-4 Overseas Korean	F-1	F-1
2022–present	F-5 Permanent Resident	F-2	F-2

data analysis. Upon collecting data from diverse sources, the data were verbally transcribed and analysed daily. Then, the data was inductively analysed and coded to identify significant patterns and themes following established qualitative research procedures (Duff, 2018). After certain salient themes were recognised, more theoretical categories were derived from the relevant literature and data.

Moreover, an individual-level logic model was employed as it outlines a complex and recurring sequence of events or incidents over a specific time-frame (Yin, 2018, p. 186). In detail, the patterns not only demonstrated how a preceding event can serve as a causal factor resulting in a subsequent outcome but underscored the interconnectedness of events in generating multiple outcomes (Yin, 2018). In other words, this model not only elucidated a range of activities or events, but also revealed the transitions between events and the contextual conditions that influence them (Yin, 2018), which assisted me to explore how, under what circumstances, and why Iroda invested in L2 learning and developed her actions and strategies to learn and utilise an L2. During the data collection and analysis, the inductive and systematic comparative approach and the individual-level logic model enabled me to pinpoint the primary focuses of this research: (a) a female migrant worker's L2 investment and (b) her agency as an L2 learner.

4. Findings: The Story of Iroda

"The most challenging thing was the *language barrier*" (interview, 24 May 2020). This statement was made three years after Iroda's resettlement in South Korea, which aligns precisely with what she stated in her initial interview conducted in May 2018, approximately eleven months after she migrated to South Korea. Although she perceived L2 learning and use as the most challenging task to achieve, she had been showing strong motivation and constantly investing in learning Korean as an L2.

Likewise, the existing literature on L2 investment and imagined community provides clear evidence of migrants' strong motivation in acquiring an L2 (Darvin, 2020). However, their level of investment in the language and learning practices within a specific classroom or community can be influenced by how these practices make them feel inadequate, incapable, or unworthy (e.g., Norton, 2013; Reichmuth, 2020; Sung, 2023; Wu, 2017). Conversely, Iroda sensed her marginal standing in South Korean society, but she made ceaseless efforts in learning her target language which makes her case distinct and provides insights into the role of agency in good L2 learning.

In the early stage of her resettlement, her primary motivation for learning Korean was to obtain a visa that would allow her to work legally. However, as her children grew older and enrolled in secondary school, she prioritised developing her socioeconomic status in Korea. In other words, Iroda had a strong desire to pursue higher

education to obtain a diploma that would qualify her for an office job, aiming to serve as a good mother who was responsible for raising her children as good multicultural Korean citizens.

Additionally, in preparation for graduate school, she acknowledged that attaining proficiency in the Korean language would be a valuable means to achieve her career and personal goals. This realisation became a driving force for her to *act* and *invest* further in her Korean language learning as well as building relations with native Koreans. Overall, acquiring proficiency in the Korean language had always been a matter of great concern and a motivation for her as it is an essential aspect of becoming acclimated to Korean society and establishing herself as a member of the community. In the subsequent sections, Iroda's story will be illustrated chronologically.

4.1. Building a Better Future: Pursuing South Korean Citizenship for Family Benefits and Education Opportunities

As briefly addressed in the methodology, Iroda originally hailed from an Uzbek community and identified herself as Uzbek, while her husband had a multi-ethnic background, being half-ethnic Korean and half-Uzbek. Despite her husband's ethnic Korean background, he was not recognised as an overseas Korean, which prevented him from obtaining an F-4 visa (legal status for overseas Koreans) and negatively affected Iroda's visa application process in Uzbekistan. Iroda stated that the visa application became politically complicated, resulting in a potentially lengthy wait of several years for her Korean visa to be issued in Uzbekistan. Thus, to reunite with her husband in Korea within a year or two, she had no choice but to change her nationality to Russian and apply for a Korean visa in Russia. After much effort and navigating through the challenges, she was finally able to reunite with her husband in Korea. However, in the process, she lost her Uzbek nationality and her way back home to Uzbekistan, where her parents and relatives still resided. When asked about her plans to return to Uzbekistan, she sadly expressed her sincere desire to do so but mentioned that she would not be allowed to cross the border.

It was an irreversible decision, but she had a clear purpose for migrating to Korea and a vision for herself and her children. As evidenced in the interview conducted during my initial visit to her home in 2018, she was resolute in settling in Korea for the better education and future prospects of her children. This aligns with the cases of other migrants documented in existing literature (e.g., Norton, 2013). Similar to Iroda, these migrants exhibited strong motivations and high expectations regarding the potential benefits they could obtain through successful adaptation to their host country:

We came to Korea one year ago...with a specific purpose. Let me explain from the very beginning.

My husband is of Korean ethnicity, and the Korean Embassy allows ethnic Koreans to come here and earn money [with a working visa]....When he had the opportunity, my husband came here to make some money. However, as our children grew older, we decided that it would be better for them to receive an education and work in a developed country like Korea....We believe that there are many more opportunities for our children’s future here, rather than in our homeland. (Interview, 6 May 2018, originally in Russian)

What distinguishes Iroda’s case from the extant literature is her strategic mindset and well-defined strategies in utilising available resources to effectively pursue her objectives, which shows her agency. For instance, Iroda shared her well-thought-out plan to obtain South Korean citizenship to avail her children of increased government benefits while residing in Korea, such as those offered under the Korean multicultural benefit policy and access to student loans. Her goal of achieving dual citizenship (Russian and Korean) was clearly defined and meticulously planned, based on the information she had diligently collected from the immigration office, the *Koryoin* community, and online.

The first step of her plan to obtain Korean citizenship was to pass the test of proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) level 3. To do so, she enrolled herself and her two children in the free Korean language programme at the regional migrant worker centre, as seen in the picture in Figure 1. As part of her L2 investment, in addition to participating in the programme at the centre, she diligently took free online TOPIK courses for six months, which were offered by a regional university, culminating in her successful passing of the level 3 exam in July

2019. It is important to note that she participated in the programme with her children, showing them what actions they could take to invest in L2 learning (joining the free Korean language programme in the community) and what goals they could accomplish by learning the target language (applying for dual citizenship).

Her unwavering commitment to L2 learning was fuelled by her strong affiliation with an imagined identity (e.g., Korean citizen) and community (Korea), which motivated her to voluntarily and agentively invest in learning Korean as an L2. This investment in her L2 learning reflected her active engagement with her future community, illustrating that imagined communities are not distant from individuals’ everyday realities, but rather significantly influence their present investments and actions (Norton, 2013).

4.2. Iroda’s Agentive Quest for Career Advancement Through L2 Learning During Covid-19

With the outbreak of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Iroda encountered significant financial challenges although she was officially eligible to work after changing her visa status to F-1 (a spouse visa of overseas Koreans) upon Theodore’s F-4 visa (overseas Korean) being issued in 2020. The impact of the pandemic on the job market made it less likely for her to find a job with reasonable pay. She faced ongoing financial difficulties as the pandemic situation prolonged.

One day, I received a text message from Iroda, in which she informed me about her challenging circumstances:

I cried because there are no decent job opportunities available for me....Currently, I work at a nearby



Figure 1. Iroda’s Korean learning with her children at a regional migrant centre (December 2018).

factory, which is physically demanding. I worry that I won't be able to continue such work as I get older. While my husband will be eligible to apply for an F-5 [permanent resident visa] next year, I don't anticipate a significant change. I mean...I believe *pursuing an education at a Korean university may be necessary*. With a diploma from a Korean university, I think I can improve my chances of finding a decent job.

When asked about her academic aspirations, she expressed a strong desire to pursue a degree in the field of multicultural education or social welfare. Her motivation stemmed from a deep-seated passion to help migrant children who, like her own children, faced linguistic challenges with their academic work. Furthermore, she believed that her fluency in multiple languages, including English, Korean, Russian, and Uzbek, would provide her with an advantage in the job market, particularly in multilingual and multicultural educational institutions, if she obtained a diploma in the related field. It is evident that her dedication to learning Korean and pursuing a degree has served as a pathway for accumulating social and cultural capital. This, in turn, empowered her to assert her agency and actively participate in the process of navigating and constructing her L2 learning experience and (re)shaping her imagined identity which was deeply interwoven with her multilingual identity (Kim, 2019).

Iroda could have pursued practical education, such as her friend who obtained a certificate as a Korean-Russian interpreter after completing a Korean language programme where "many [migrants] see greater *potential and benefit*" (Dadabaev et al., 2021, p. 451). Yet, she hoped to apply for a graduate school in multicultural education or social welfare. From her perspective, it would allow her to work in a field that not only benefited multicultural and multilingual society, like the *Koryoin* community where a growing number of emerging multilingual migrants resettled, but also prioritised the well-being of her children.

In pursuit of her dream, Iroda diligently prepared for and successfully completed level 4 of the TOPIK. As such, she remained committed to further enhancing her Korean language skills in pursuit of imagined identities related to her professional aspiration. Clearly, her L2 investments are (re)constructed by her negotiation of various roles within Korean multicultural citizenship, striving to become a fluent Korean speaker, a middle-class Korean, and a university student, which also reflects her commitment to personal growth and integration (e.g., Kim, 2019).

Her aspirations also show that migrants imagined the world to be different from prevailing real worlds (Greene, 1995), planning their futures and devoting themselves to belonging to their imagined communities. It also suggests that the more detailed imagined community and the stronger desires they possess, the more likely they will become agentive in making L2 investment in differ-

ent forms to reshape their identities to best fit into their prospective communities.

4.3. A Persistent Strive for Inclusion in an Imagined World: Utilising Linguistic Repertoire for L2 Investment

Iroda's voluntary acts to participate in Korean society were not limited to learning Korean as an L2 but also encompassed active involvement in local events. Her motivation for getting involved in the local community was twofold: to cultivate meaningful relationships with Koreans and to deepen her knowledge of Korean culture and language. As an example, in 2020, during the fourth year of her stay in Korea, Iroda was invited to serve as a judge in a regional bilingual speaking contest. In this contest, young emergent bilingual children showcased their language skills by delivering speeches in two different languages: Korean and their native language (L1).

During the contest, Iroda assumed the role of a judge for the young Russian-Korean bilingual participants, assessing their proficiency in the Russian language. It allowed her to establish a connection with Dr. Choi, who also performed as a judge in the contest. Dr. Choi was a professor from a Korean university who specialised in Russian language and literature. Their acquaintance was not limited to a one-time meeting, but as Iroda continued to serve as a judge in the subsequent years, in 2021 and 2022, their relationship grew closer to the point where they could openly discuss Iroda's aspirations for further academic pursuits. Dr. Choi provided counsel to Iroda, suggesting that she consider applying for a multicultural education programme.

However, due to the absence of any available multicultural education programmes for international graduate students in nearby universities, Iroda found herself at a crossroads, having to decide whether to abandon her application or explore other programme opportunities, such as Korean as second language (KSL) programs. Iroda chose an alternative path despite the KSL education program being available to her because she was intrigued by Dr. Kim, a professor in the Russian Language and Literature Program at a regional university, who showed a keen interest in Russian-speaking children in South Korea. This, along with her prior encounters with Korean monolingualism in KSL education, greatly influenced her decision-making process.

Upon submitting her application, she reached out to Dr. Kim and was fortunate to have a recommendation from him. It facilitated her acceptance into the programme and led to her being awarded a graduate assistantship which further fuelled her determination to continue her studies. It exemplifies her proactive efforts to establish connections with native speakers, driven by a desire to enhance her communicative competence, secure meaningful employment, and attain symbolic membership within an imagined community of accomplished multilingual and multicultural migrants (Cervatiu, 2009).

After her initial meeting with her advisor, Dr. Kim, Iroda shared pictures on her Instagram (Figure 2) of books she discovered at the university library. She was particularly intrigued by finding the Korean version of *Central Asian Studies* (Figure 2a) and the Russian version of the *History of the Korean Independence Movement* (Figure 2b). In her written comment on the picture, she expressed her enthusiasm, stating: “My first day at the university...and such a useful book 🥰” (originally in Russian, as seen in Figure 2). These books were valuable to her as they were not readily available in local libraries. She appreciated that her proficiency in Korean and Russian was valued in the programme she enrolled in and would be further enhanced through reading materials in these languages. Additionally, she was excited about expanding her knowledge of Korea by utilising her linguistic repertoire.

It is noteworthy that she voluntarily utilised her full linguistic repertoire to take part in regional events as well as to get better involved in her university life, which demonstrates her agency concerning her multilingual and imagined identity. Namely, “success does not so much depend on abandoning their culture and language to embrace those of another society as on preserving their original cultural endowment while adapting instrumentally to a second” (Portes et al., 1999, p. 229). Also, the example above certifies the ability of individuals to develop a sense of community and to create social relationships under adverse conditions (Chavez, 1994). Clearly, individual agency and identity should be understood concerning their investment both in realities and in possible future worlds (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

In late 2022, she expressed her gratitude for her accomplishment on Instagram, as shown in Figure 3. Her message showcases her agency—what attitudes and mindsets she had and what actions she had taken to achieve her goals. Despite facing numerous challenges during her resettlement in Korea, she remained resilient and determined. Rather than giving up or feel-

ing defeated, she made multiple attempts to overcome the obstacles, to be inclusive in her host country, and achieve the successful and fulfilling life she had imagined. It proves that individuals can connect themselves with future communities that exist beyond their immediate community and that investment in such imagined communities may have an impact on involvement in language learning as well as identity construction (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Thus, it seems that language learners’ orientation toward imagination—imagined communities and imagined identities—has just as much effect on their current identities and language learning as the direct, everyday actions they take within their various communities (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

5. Conclusions

The story of Iroda illustrates how she took action and why she reshaped her agency while investing in Korean learning. As a female migrant of Uzbek ethnicity and Russian nationality and with limited knowledge of the Korean language and culture, Iroda migrated to Korea and (re)constructed her imagined communities with a keen awareness of the context and constraints she faced daily. In other words, she did not seek to merely adopt a Korean identity at the expense of her Uzbek identity. Instead, she imagined herself transcending borders and sought to incorporate the Korean language and culture into her linguistic and cultural repertoire.

Iroda also demonstrated a strong motivation in learning and utilising her linguistic and other resources, including Korean, Russian, and her newly formed connections in Korea. Her pursuit of near and far imagined communities and identities drove her to make continuous efforts in L2 learning. It is worth noting that, initially, there was a significant gap between her current situation and her imagined world upon resettling in Korea. However, as the agent of her own life, she gradually narrowed the gap by taking step-by-step actions to address life-challenging

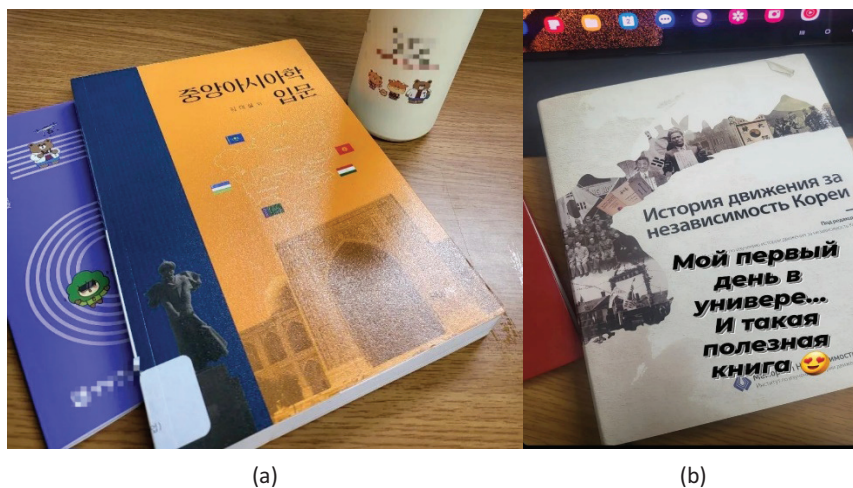
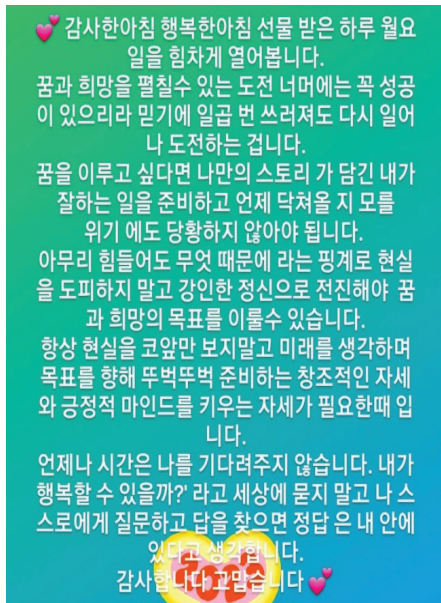


Figure 2. Iroda’s posts about *Central Asian Studies* (a) and the *History of the Korean Independence Movement* (b).

[Original post]



[Translation]

Grateful morning, happy morning. I begin Monday, a day that feels like a gift, with energy. I believe that beyond challenges, there will be success, where I can unfold my dreams and hopes. So even if I fall multiple times, I will get up and try again. If you want to achieve your dreams, you need to prepare for what you are good at, which contains your own story, and not be flustered even in unforeseen crises. No matter how difficult it is, you should not escape from reality with excuses but move forward with a resilient spirit to achieve your goals, dreams, and hopes. It's time to promote a creative attitude and a positive mindset, always thinking about the future and preparing step by step towards your goals. Time never waits for me. Instead of asking the world "can I be happy?" I believe that the answer lies within myself; when I ask myself, the answer can be found inside of me. I'm grateful. Thank you.

Figure 3. Grateful message on Iroda's Instagram upon acceptance to a graduate programme.

problems, such as initiating her Korean language learning at the age of 31, and creating a clearer vision of her future, as shown in her application process for graduate school. Overall, Iroda's case highlights her imagined identities and agency based on the notion of becoming a good mother as an L2 learner and a multilingual and multicultural Korean citizen who is responsible for raising her children in the host country, which greatly affect her L2 investment and vice versa.

Although the findings of this study contribute to the broader body of research on this topic, it is essential to recognize its limitations. The data was collected from a single case, which may not entirely encompass the complexities of imagined communities, L2 investment, and agency among female migrant workers in South Korea. Furthermore, considering that this research was initiated before the pandemic and continued throughout its occurrence, it is crucial to acknowledge that there might be other instances of female migrants' agentive moves and L2 investment that differ from the findings reported in this article. Consequently, this calls for further research to explore and comprehend these variations in different contexts and circumstances.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for educators and researchers in the field of L2 education. Namely, Iroda's experiences as a newly migrated worker and her accomplishments through L2 investment provide valuable insights for educators and researchers to understand the trajectories and identities of female migrant workers, as well as the importance of the exercise of their agency in host countries. The implications

of this research lie in recognising the significance of investment and agency in L2 learning among female migrant workers. As exemplified in Iroda's case, despite limited time and energy due to caregiving and full-time employment, certain female migrants exhibit remarkable dedication to learning L2s. Understanding their motivations and language practices holds the potential to shape their future paths, offering insights into L2 learning processes, informing educational policies, and exploring the impact of language proficiency on socio-economic trajectories. This research agenda contributes to enhancing knowledge, facilitating social integration, and empowering female migrants in their pursuit of socio-economic advancement.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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