

BRIEF REPORT

Negotiating Tensions in Literacy Instruction in a Community-Based Korean Heritage Classroom in the United StatesJiyeon Kang ^{a*}, Youngjoo Yi ^a^a The Ohio State University* Contact Info: Arps Hall 229A, 1945 N High St., Columbus, OH 43210, U.S.A., kang.1471@osu.edu**Article Info**Received: May 2, 2026
Accepted: June 21, 2026
Published: June 30, 2026**Abstract**

In this brief report, we share preliminary findings from a study that examined how a teacher in a first-grade Korean heritage language classroom in the United States negotiated tensions in literacy instruction. Drawing on teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and the Four Resources Model (Luke & Freebody, 1999), the study analyzed data collected from multiple sources (a scripted textbook, teacher guide, lesson plans, and reflective journals) to examine how literacy practices were structured in the prescribed curriculum and enacted through the teacher's instructional decisions. The study discovered three major tensions in literacy instruction: the dominance of form-focused literacy tasks, the emphasis on individual activities, and insufficient instructional support for open-ended tasks. Such tensions were addressed through instructional redesign, shifting from form-focused to meaning-making literacy tasks, from individual tasks to collaborative social practices, and from unsupported open-ended tasks to ones supported by structured scaffolding. This study argues that even within the institutional constraints of heritage community schools, teachers can transform textbook-based instruction to support more meaningful and balanced literacy learning for multilingual learners.

Keywords

Four Resources Model; heritage language education; instructional redesign; literacy practices; teacher inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Heritage language classrooms serve as critical spaces for the maintenance of linguistic repertoires, cultural knowledge, and identity formation. However, these classrooms in the United States are often community- and volunteer-based, and lack instructional resources (Fishman, 2001; Liu et al., 2011). As a result, curriculum implementation varies widely, and students' diverse language proficiencies and backgrounds further complicate instruction (Liu et al., 2011). These challenges often generate instructional tensions, particularly in literacy instruction. A small body of research has examined such tensions. For instance, teachers of Black immigrant youth have experienced tensions between monolingual and multilingual language ideologies (Smith et al., 2022). Similarly, secondary ELA teachers have experienced tensions between wanting to enact culturally responsive pedagogy and privileging White mainstream English as more legitimate in school (Dobbs & Leider, 2025). However, little is

known about how teachers in heritage schools negotiate tensions in language and literacy instruction.

This study addresses the existing gap by exploring instructional tensions in Jiyeon Kang's classroom, a first-grade class at a community-based Korean heritage language school in the Midwestern United States. Kang experienced disconnections between the prescribed curriculum and classroom realities, particularly students' diverse bilingual backgrounds and proficiency levels. In addition, the school adopted "Korean-only" policies, which limited opportunities for students to draw on their multilingual resources. These disconnections prompted Kang to examine her own language and literacy instruction. In this Brief Research article, we focus on one aspect of the study: how Kang negotiated instructional tensions in literacy teaching to implement more meaningful and balanced learning for multilingual learners.

FOUR RESOURCES MODEL

The Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990) informed this inquiry into negotiating tensions in literacy instruction. This model conceptualizes literacy as a socially situated practice and positions language learners as engaging in four interrelated roles: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Code breakers pay attention to the language system, including understanding the relationships between sounds and symbols, spelling, and features of the script. Text participants construct meaning from texts by drawing on prior knowledge. Text users participate in social practices of literacy by understanding the purposes of texts and using them in specific social and communicative contexts. Text analysts develop critical awareness of how texts are constructed, examining language choices and underlying assumptions (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

The Four Resources Model is useful because it serves as a "heuristic guide" (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p. 7) for educators to examine which literacy practices are prioritized in instruction. In this study, it was used to analyze how literacy practices were structured in the prescribed curriculum and how they were redesigned through teacher decision-making.

TEACHER INQUIRY

This study employed teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) to examine Kang's teaching over two semesters. Teacher inquiry positions *teachers as researchers* who generate knowledge through systematic, critical reflection on teaching practice. In the larger study, Kang

examined her instructional decisions and students' literacy practices in a first-grade Korean heritage language classroom. All students in the classroom had bilingual backgrounds in English and Korean. Given this context, this study is also informed by a translanguaging perspective (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014), which views multilingual learners as drawing on their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning and develop their literacy practices.

While the larger study explored the context of redesigning heritage language teaching, this article focuses specifically on her negotiation of tensions in literacy instruction. Within this inquiry process, reflection was supported through a trust-based relationship with Youngjoo Yi, the second author, as a “critical friendship” (Brewer et al., 2021, p. 76), whose feedback supported deeper reflection on Kang's teaching and the co-authoring of this article.

From September 2025 through April 2026, during Kang's second year teaching at a community-based Korean heritage language school in the Midwestern United States, we gathered data from multiple sources, such as a textbook, teacher guide, lesson plans, and reflective research journals in which instructional planning and classroom experiences were documented. Data analysis followed an inductive and iterative process. Kang repeatedly reviewed the data to identify recurring tensions in literacy teaching. Three major tensions were identified through data analysis: (1) the dominance of form- and accuracy-focused literacy tasks, (2) the emphasis on individual tasks, and (3) limited instructional support for open-ended tasks. Through recursive analysis and ongoing dialogue with Yi, we interpreted how literacy practices were structured both in the prescribed curriculum and in Kang's redesigned instructional activities, drawing on the Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From Form-Focused to Meaning-Making Literacy Tasks

Initially, Kang's literacy instruction was quite form-focused mainly because she closely followed a textbook that emphasized forms and accuracy. Each unit consisted of a fixed sequence of eight activities, including listening to dialogues, introducing key vocabulary, completing writing tasks based on grammar, matching listening to images, describing pictures, reading comprehension checks using O/X questions, open-ended writing, and introducing Korean cultural content. While this fixed structure made the instruction more consistent, it also led to a greater focus on forms and accuracy in language learning.

interpretations by constructing meaning from images, or use literacy for social purposes by sharing their interpretations. In this sense, the task itself constructed literacy as reproducing accurate forms rather than as meaning-making or social practice, which created tension between the emphasis on accurate forms and opportunities for students' meaning-making.

In response, Kang redesigned writing tasks to be more flexible and student-centered. She began by encouraging students to collectively generate ideas, often allowing them to use their preferred language to draw on their full linguistic resources. As students shared their responses orally, Kang wrote down these responses on the board, creating a space where ideas were collaboratively developed through interaction and later taken up in writing (Williams & Lowrance-Faulhaber, 2018). During this process, Kang engaged in translanguaging (using Korean, English, and other non-linguistic resources) to explain key expressions and invited students to translate English into Korean. With a collaboratively generated list of expressions, students then chose and expanded ideas for their own writing.

Through this redesign, while a focus on form remained, its function within literacy tasks changed. In the textbook activity, form functioned as a controlling structure determining what counted as a correct answer through character counts and predetermined sentence patterns. In the redesigned activity, however, vocabulary and sentence structures became more flexible resources that students could draw on as they engaged in idea generation, interpretation of images, and peers' responses. From the perspective of the Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999), these shifts reconnected code breaking with meaning-making and social language use rather than treating it as a main goal. The redesigned task created more meaningful contexts for students to actively construct meaning from prompts and peer contributions, adapt shared ideas and language for writing, and engage with more personally meaningful ideas rather than reproducing predetermined answers. In this way, the task illustrates how instructional (re)design can provide opportunities for students to move beyond form reproduction toward more meaningful language use, while leveraging their full linguistic repertoires.

From Individual Tasks to Collaborative, Social Literacy Practices

Another tension was that literacy activities in the textbook were primarily structured as individual tasks, such as answering comprehension questions or writing short responses. Typically, only one of the eight activities in each unit includes peer interaction. Although students engaged in individual meaning-making, these practices rarely extended beyond

personal responses. This created a tension by framing literacy practices as an individual cognitive activity rather than as a social practice. From a social literacy perspective (Bloome & Green, 2015; Street, 1995), literacy participation was narrowly organized to complete personal responses, limiting opportunities for interaction and shared meaning-making.

To address this tension, Kang redesigned literacy activities by incorporating multiple forms of peer interaction. For example, reading tasks that were organized by teacher-led repetition were explicitly restructured as pair or small group work. In the original reading activity, Kang modeled each line, and students repeated the dialogue by following her pronunciation. In the redesigned activity, students took turns reading dialogues with peers, switched roles, and presented their readings to the whole class. In this process, they listened to their peers, attended to when it was their turn to speak, followed the flow of the dialogue, and responded to others' readings.

Through this redesign, what counted as literacy participation changed. Students were repositioned from passive receivers who followed the teacher's modeling to active participants who produced and shared language with peers. In the original activity, successful participation meant following the teacher's model and repeating the lines accurately. In the redesigned tasks, students still attended to linguistic form, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure, while contributing to shared meaning-making during interaction, responding to their peers, and presenting to the class. In this way, code breaking practices were connected to social language use in interaction, rather than remaining solely form-based practice (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999). This shift highlights that literacy practices are reshaped not by changes in content, but by how students are positioned within activities. By reconstructing participation to include peer interaction, turn-taking, and shared meaning-making, students expanded their engagement with literacy as a social practice.

Structuring Open-Ended Literacy Practices through Instructional Support

While some literacy tasks were highly restrictive, others were designed as more open-ended activities in the textbook. These open-ended tasks invited students to write their personal experiences related to the unit topic, positioning students as text participants by engaging them in the process of meaning-making individually. However, they often lacked sufficient support. For example, prompts did not provide relevant vocabulary, alternative forms of expression (e.g., drawing), or genre-specific models. In invitation-writing tasks, key elements such as time,

audience, and purpose were not specified. Students found it difficult to develop ideas and often struggled to begin their writing.

This created a tension between the open-ended tasks and limited instructional support, where students were required to generate ideas without adequate resources to develop them meaningfully. In response to this tension, Kang redesigned open-ended tasks by providing structured scaffolding, allowing students to first develop ideas before introducing linguistic structures that supported more formal expression (Grapin et al., 2021). First, she developed a word bank with students using key vocabulary and displayed it for reference while encouraging translanguaging. For example, in an invitation-writing activity, Kang first asked students to identify the audience, purpose, time, and place of the invitation, and wrote their brainstormed ideas in English and Korean on the board. She then modeled the writing process through think-alouds, such as demonstrating how to organize these ideas into an invitation. Then, she introduced genre-specific knowledge by explicitly teaching key features of genre types, such as who was being invited, the reason why the person was being invited, and where and when the event would take place. Finally, students exchanged drafts with peers, asked questions, and provided feedback to check for clarity.

Through this redesign, students engaged in more accessible open-ended tasks with instructional support by expanding literacy engagement across code breaking, meaning-making, analyzing genre-specific knowledge, and social use (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Students constructed sentences using appropriate language forms, generated and developed ideas, and focused on genre features, examining what elements were required and how specific features shaped meaning within genres. In addition, peer interaction allowed students to use language purposefully to communicate their ideas and refine their writing in response to feedback. This shift highlights that open-ended tasks alone are insufficient for meaningful literacy engagement; they require structured scaffolding to help students leverage their full linguistic repertoires and participate fully in literacy practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine how a heritage language teacher negotiated tensions in literacy instruction through curriculum redesign. In Kang's classroom, the study identified tensions around what counted as legitimate literacy participation in the heritage classroom: form-centered activities, individual tasks limiting social interaction, and a lack of sufficient instructional scaffolding for open-ended responses. These tensions were also situated within

ideological and institutional conditions in the heritage language school, including the school's Korean-only norm, which influenced how multilingual resources were recognized during literacy learning. The findings show three shifts in literacy practice: from form-focused to meaning-making literacy tasks, from individual tasks to collaborative, social practices, and from unsupported open-ended tasks to ones supported by structured scaffolding. These shifts expanded opportunities for language learners to engage as code breakers, text participants, text users, and text analysts.

The findings suggest that even scripted textbooks can be repositioned as meaningful resources through curriculum redesign. They also suggest that heritage language teachers can create more supportive environments where language learners collaborate, negotiate meaning, and draw on their multilingual resources as a part of the literacy instruction. At the same time, opportunities for text analysis remained less developed than other dimensions of literacy practice in the redesigned instruction, suggesting future redesigns to create more explicit support for students to examine how texts shape meaning for particular purposes. While this study focused on a teacher's negotiation of literacy practices, future research should explore how students navigate tensions in their literacy learning and how these experiences can inform more effective approaches to literacy teaching and learning.

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