

Study Strategies of Korean Students in Australian Higher Education

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Introduction

Korean students are studying overseas in increasing numbers, especially since the Korean government's advocacy of globalization¹. In the past most Korean students studying abroad would first graduate from a Korean university and then go to university in the USA for a degree at the postgraduate level. However, the pattern of Koreans studying overseas has changed in recent years. The number of students going abroad to study an undergraduate degree has increased, and while the USA is still the preferred destination, a country like Australia has managed to obtain a small but significant increase in the number of undergraduate students from Korea².

The difficulties Korean students experience while studying in Australia have been previously investigated by Choi (1997) and Armitage (1999). Choi (1997), for instance, investigated the problems Korean students experienced studying at universities in Victoria in 1992 and 1993 and Armitage (1999) dealt with Korean students at English language centers in Melbourne in 1997. According to Choi's survey (1997), Korean students in Australian universities perceived their competence in their English language skills as having difficulties in speaking (53.2%), writing (25.5%), listening (17.0%) and reading (4.3%). Interestingly but not surprisingly, student's perception in their English language competence is aligned with their perception of difficulties in study genre in order of class discussion (48.9%), written assignments (31.9%), understanding lectures (21.3%), tests (19.2%) and reading assignments (17.1%). She argued that the students' difficulties derived not only from their lack of language proficiency and study skills but also from Australian teachers' and peers' lack of understanding of these problems in the educational context. On the other hand, Armitage (1999) pointed out that one major factor affecting the adjustment of Koreans living and studying in Australia is insufficient preparation prior to their departure from Korea, so they do not develop a fundamental understanding of Australian culture and society. While their findings are valuable, neither Choi (1997) or Armitage (1999) investigated how students develop strategies to overcome their problems.

The main difficulties students encounter while studying abroad involve not only acquisition of English language but also the way language is used in the academic context. Moreover, the use of similar labels for study genre, such as essays or exams,

¹ The number of Korean students who study overseas increased from 53,875 in 1991 to 154, 219 in 1999, an increase of 286%.

² Of the Korean students studying abroad, 42% were in the USA in 1997 but this figure decreased to 35% in 2000. For Australia, the percentage rose from 5% in 1997 to 7% in 2000.

may mislead Korean students to expect something similar to those genres found in their home country. Given that study genres are essential components in any educational culture and involve highly inferred knowledge and include various communicative and social norms (Mauranen 1994), we can hypothesize that differences in study genre can constitute one of the main roots of students' problems when studying abroad.

Methodology

Subjects: This paper deals with 16 Korean students (aged 22- 30 years) who are currently enrolled in different faculties at the undergraduate level at Monash University, which is located in Melbourne, Australia. The code KR (plus number) is used to refer to these students. Of 16 Korean students, 6 were female and 10 were male.

These Korean students fall into two main categories:

- a) Exchange students who are enrolled at their home Korean universities and who study for one or two semesters at Monash University. They have studied two or three years of a four-year university degree in Korea (KR1-3).
- b) International students who are enrolled in a full undergraduate degree course. Some students have been educated at secondary school in Korea prior to their entry to Monash University (KR4-5). Four students have studied at the tertiary level in Korea, either fully (KR6) or partially (KR7-10), completing a four-year university degree. Others have completed a two- or three-year diploma equivalent at a vocational college (KR11-16).

There is a distinctive difference in academic background of the international and exchange students in this study. Due to the requirement for exchange students to achieve a high TOFEL score, all are majoring in English in Korea. In contrast, the Korean international students had a wide variety of academic backgrounds, but their goals of studying in Australian universities were to improve their English in order to obtain a better job. The exchange students also perceived the value of improved English from studying in Australia as an important benefit to their future prospects. All exchange students stated that they expected to be exposed to a multi-cultural society and to understand Australian culture from participating in exchange program in Australia.

Research questions

This paper investigates the range of difficulties which Korean students encounter and how Korean students develop their study strategies while enrolled at an Australian university. The main research questions were:

1. What are the main difficulties Korean students encounter when studying at an Australian university?
2. What type of study strategies do the Korean students employ and what sort of processes do they undertake?

The difficulties Korean students face in the academic context relate to the academic competence which they need in university contexts in Australia. This competence consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural components, and applying at both the receptive and productive levels. The receptive competence involves, for example understanding lectures, tutorials and textbooks, and what students produce includes seminar papers, essays and theses (Mauranen 1994). Some difficulties may derive from their lack of language proficiency in understanding lectures and note-taking, for instance. However, many difficulties derive from more than one source of components. Participation in tutorials, for example, not only involves the implementation of appropriate linguistic elements of language but also the sociolinguistic components such as how and when to speak.

Data collection method and analytical procedures

This study employed a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The students were given an open-ended questionnaire to complete at the beginning of August, 2000. In total, 30 questionnaires were distributed to Korean students via the Korean Students Association. In addition, semi-structured interviews ranging from 30 to 105 minutes in length were conducted in Korean with two female students and four male students. These interviews were recorded on audio-tape. In this interview, students were expected to clarify some of the information recorded in the questionnaire and to provide more detailed information relating to the research questions. The information collected through this interview included students' perceptions about the differences between Korean and Australian universities' educational systems, main difficulties they have in studying at Australian universities, types of study strategies employed and their communication networks.

Conceptual Framework

Because of the small number of participants in the sample and the nature of the study, the data will be analyzed qualitatively rather than statistically. In the analysis of data, the focus will be on finding out factors related to the study strategies used. In analyzing study strategies, the management model will be employed, which was developed by Jernudd and Neutsupny (Jernudd and Neutsupny 1987; Neutsupny 1985a, 1985b, 1994, 1997), and applied by Marriott (1990, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000) in a number of sociolinguistic studies of Japanese students studying in Australia. In this model, interaction difficulties occur when there is a deviation from expected norms or patterns of behaviour. As a means of acquiring those norms which are appropriate in the new educational, students need to become aware of deviations from these norms, evaluate their deviations appropriately and subsequently implement suitable adjustments. However, students may or may not be aware of their deviations. Further more, not all of the adjustments will be satisfactory and so the management cycle may be repeated. I will also draw upon Oxford's categories (1990), which was classified into six types of strategies, i.e., cognitive, memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Findings

Writing essays and examinations

In the interviews examined here, the main areas of difficulty which students reported are writing essays, understanding lectures, participating in tutorials, note-taking and

exams³. The degree of difficulty students encounter varies according to their academic background and their current degrees, but academic writing is one of the serious difficulties students noted. KR2, for instance, reported that writing an essay is difficult and evaluated that her difficulties come from her English proficiency and not because differences in structure of writing. She claimed that she learned how to write an essay at her Korean university and that the writing style is the same in Korean and English. The same claim shared by other exchange students. On the other hand, KR4 stated that writing an essay is the hardest part and that he had never written an essay in Korea because he studied engineering. A similar claim was also made by the student who was studying technology subjects.

Despite the claim by several students, noted above, that the essay genre is consistent across the two countries, it seems that in Korea the most common type of written genre is a “report”. According to one exchange student, many students merely summarized their reading in their “report”, but to obtain a good “report” mark, additional analytical and critical contents are a crucial factor. Deviations in academic writing is rather discovered through assessment structure, which involves the length of term papers and frequency of term papers and the number of subjects required for this in Korea. According to an exchange student, two or three written assignments per week were required in her home institution, but no feedback was given. Even though she had ample experience of writing in Korea, she still claimed that writing was difficult in Australia. She maintained that the difficulties come from the different styles which were required and also the length of essays. In Korea a written assignment was usually short and she did not spend much time on each, since a large number of assignments were required.

The type of writing required differs according to the academic subjects and it was revealed that students taking Arts subjects experienced more stress with writing. One Science student who enrolled in an interdisciplinary subject offered by the Arts Faculty claimed that writing an essay for the Arts Faculty required a different style and which he had not yet mastered.

Examinations also constituted a difficult task for students. The exchange students did not find a big difference in examination formats between Korea and Australia. They claimed that the focus of the exam was comparison and analysis in Korea, and it was quite similar to the one in Australia. However the strain of exams was not eased, as exam was being required to write in L2 in a limited time period. One exchange student expressed her frustration, claiming that she could not answer a question, since it contained an unfamiliar key word, and wished she could have used a dictionary.

Understanding lectures and note-taking

Other difficulties students encounter during their study are understanding lectures and managing the quantity of reading. All students who participated in the interview reported that understanding lectures was very difficult. Even though the lecture genre constitutes the main part of courses in Korea, the amount of reading required per subject, unfamiliarity of background information and knowledge required, together with lack of English language proficiency, pose enormous constraints on Korean

³ The same difficulties were found for Japanese students studying in Australian universities (Marriott 2000) and Korean students studying in Australian universities (Choi 1997).

students studying in Australia. An exchange student claimed that even though she had fewer subjects, she only managed to read one-half of the required reading whilst in Australia.

It is anticipated that the slow speed of reading in their second language and difficulties of listening hinder students' reading and understanding of lectures. In addition, the different character of their previous subjects undertaken in Korea in conjunction with a different educational system, such as the amount work per subject and the number of total subjects taken per semester, create difficulties for Korean students⁴. An exchange student claimed that fewer subjects and fewer contact hours in Australia gave her the wrong impression that students study less at Australian universities. But she quickly realized the importance of the different study methods required. She also experienced that the subjects in Australia went into more depth than did those similar subjects she undertook in Korea.

Along with difficulties in understanding lectures, note-taking was reported as a problem. Difficulties derived from note-taking are not only related to their language proficiency but also related to skill in selecting the salient content. Students claimed that they often failed to listen while they engaged in note-taking during lectures. But they also reported that they did not actually take notes but just copied the content from the over-head projector used by the lecturer. One student reported that the availability of lecture notes on the web helped him to understand lectures.

Participation in tutorials

The difficulties related to writing essays, understanding lectures and note-taking and exams are different from difficulties in participating in tutorials. The former difficulties mainly derive from linguistic aspects with some cultural differences, for instance, turn taking, when and how to talk and the hierarchy between tutors and students. Students found more difficulties in participating in tutorials compared to lectures. One student claimed, for example, that it is more difficult to understand other students' talking in class than it is to understand the speech of tutors, since they have to get used to all different individual accent and some comments and questions by other students are not directly relevant to the class content.

One conspicuously different feature in the university system is that only the lecture type of classes is available in Korean universities and it is not accompanied by related tutorials, as in Australia. Most Korean students reacted favourably to their experiences of tutorials. For instance, one student thought tutorials better, since students could ask a tutor when they did not understand. In fact, most students have a positive attitude to the relationships between lecturers/ tutors and students. As one student explained there is more interaction between teachers and students in Australia, whereas it is very difficult to meet teachers in the Korean universities. Nevertheless,

⁴ An undergraduate degree in Korean universities consists of a large number of subjects and more contact hours. For instance, one exchange student who enrolled at Faculty of Arts, Monash University explained that she studied seven or eight subjects each semester totaling 21-24 contact hours per week at her home institution in Korea, whereas she enrolled in only three subjects at Monash University, which required 9 hours of class attendance.

due to unfamiliarity with the new study genre, participation in tutorials is one of the most difficult tasks for Korean students.

Most students experienced constraints in interacting with tutors and classmates in the group. The differences in the teaching style from Korea, where tutors asked lots of questions in class, and also the requirements of presentations and group discussion in Australia classes restricted students' involvement in class. The students evaluated the resulting difficulties as coming from their lack of English proficiency and their introspective characters. However, most students were not aware that different socio-linguistic rules relevant to this new study genre, involving matters such as how and when to speak in classes was same of the norms they needed to acquire and that lack of familiarity or exposure to these norms could make them less active in classes.

Tutorials are normally small-sized classes in which students are regularly expected to participate in discussion or to present a topic. Students reported that this type of class made them anxious and that lack of their confidence hindered them from participating. Exchange students and one international student could minimally participate in tutorials, but most students claimed to be unable to participate in tutorials during the first semester of their studying abroad, and although they started to participate from the second semester, often they did not gain full confidence even by the time they graduated or finished their overseas sojourn.

It is possible that Korean students suffer from the difficulties to a greater degree than students from some other countries where the educational environments have more in common with the Australian one. It is also possible that a lack of awareness on the part of different academic experiences may lead Australian teachers to reach a negative evaluation of Korean students and a consolidation of a stereotypical and ethnocentric image of Asian students as passive recipients of knowledge and lacking in critical evaluation skills (Ballard and Clanchy 1991).

Adjustment strategies and implementation

It is assumed that when students interact with other people, they do so at varying levels of awareness. An important step in awareness is about the monitoring of one's own and the other's behavior. According to Marriott (2000), analysis of difficulties and the implementation of appropriate adjustments can occur only after students note the difficulties or deviations. In some cases, students do not notice their deviations and become frustrated when unexpected outcomes occur. In most cases, it takes a while for students to become aware of the existence of deviations. Consequently a specific and extensive correction process is required to deal with deviations from the norms at the beginning stage (Neustupny 1985).

As mentioned before, only after a negative evaluation of a deviation is formed can various corrective strategies be employed. Some deviations may remain unnoticed, some other deviations are noticed but no corrective adjustment strategies are pursued since these are evaluated neutrally (Neustupny 1985). After planning and implementation of various strategies, if difficulties still remain students need to review and modify the strategies which they previously utilized.

Although various strategies were employed by different students, there were common strategies among them. One type of strategy is a self-reliant adjustment strategy, such as listening to lecture tapes, utilizing library resources, previewing and reviewing of classes; re-writing the draft many times, and using dictionaries. A second type of strategy is utilization of a network-reliant adjustment, such as utilizing language exchange network, or peer support network, consulting with lecturers and tutors in their own subjects, the Language and Learning Service Unit which is a faculty-based-center for assisting students, either local or overseas, with a variety of study skills. A third type of strategy is problem minimisation, such as avoiding certain subjects which require oral presentations or which the students or other students have previously failed. Alternatively, these students may avoid teachers who have a reputation of harsh marking.

Self-reliant adjustment strategies: Lack of English proficiency is a major difficulty which students encounter in the first stage of studying abroad. Most students noticed the difficulties and evaluate their language proficiency negatively. The analysis of this problem facing the students led to the implementation of various strategies at different times. Some students analyzed that deficiencies in their English were combined with a lack of disciplinary content knowledge.

Strategies students employed regarding lack of disciplinary content knowledge and language proficiency involved making a vocabulary list, reading books on the disciplinary subject in Korean first and then reading a book in English, previewing the subject before classes using studying lecture notes on the web, reading subject objectives first and then reading the books and articles on the reading list, writing drafts several times, memorizing the important parts from books and articles and listening to lecture tapes.

During the first semester, most students who were interviewed used the lecture tapes and listened to these tapes. After implementation of this strategy, most students found that it was not working effectively and stopped using the tapes altogether. One exchange student managed to implement an adjustment strategy which was a combination of cognitive (analysis) and compensation strategies (guessing intelligently). She adjusted her strategy from just listening to the tapes to listening to the whole tapes first and listening again to find out the parts she did not understand. She stopped the tapes at the part which she could not understand and guessed the meaning through the context, and then referred to books and a dictionary if she still did not understand, and listened to the tapes again.

The frequently-appearing strategies which students employed for lectures or tutorials are a limited set of metacognitive strategies. Students found the amount of reading required for lectures and tutorials was a burden, so they had to employ a metacognitive strategy, such as giving priority of class preparation to tutorials, or practical classes. The format of tutorials requires more interaction than lectures and non-participation in tutorials is more obvious than in a lecture. One international student claimed that if she did not prepare, she could not participate in tutorials or she could not understand when other students talked. Another international student who enrolled in the Science Faculty claimed that he did not prepare for class much, though he prepared for practical classes. Without preparation, it took too long for him to understand questions in laboratory classes, because of difficulty of understanding

English. He also pointed out that the curriculum structure which contains enormous continuous assignments made him do more reviewing than previewing.

Some students employed a strategy of not preparing lectures at all. However, a few found a suitable adjustment strategy, such as the international student who reported that she read books on the reading list and prepared some answers to tutorial questions. She also prepared questions to ask in class in advance and memorized some phrases or expressions from the books on the reading list to ask questions in tutorials.

Another self-reliant adjustment strategies students commonly employed is utilizing library resources for writing. One international student reported that she undertook various adjustment strategies at different stages of writing. She used cognitive strategies in the drafting her essays. She read books for a brainstorming and idea mapping. Then she read more books as a means of changing her original ideas and also deleted unnecessary parts. If new evidence was required, she went to the library to find more information. Related to this, some students looked for models of good essays written by students who had studied the same subject before.

Social-reliant adjustment/ network-reliant adjustment: When Korean students confronted difficulties and evaluated their pattern of studying negatively, they usually seek self-reliant adjustment strategies. If self-reliant adjustment strategies were not employed successfully, especially relating to their major academic work such as essays and exams, which directly affect their academic results, often social-reliant adjustments are employed. The social network students utilized are lecturers/ tutors, peer support network or language exchange networks. Some students consulted their lectures/ tutors at the planning or drafting stage of writing. For example, an international student consulted with a lecturer as a mean of selecting relevant articles to read. He reported that he did know how and where he would start, so he requested help from a lecturer, and the lecturer assisted with this task.

Sometimes students did not detect the existence of a deviation. One international student reported that she was not aware of her problems in the structure of writing until receiving the written comments by a lecturer, "...the essay makes interesting remarks about the situation in the Korean peninsula, and make a valiant effort to analyse it from a realist perspective. It would have been improved, however, had it a clearer structure to outline the realist ideas and principles". She employed a clarifying strategy to rectify deviations and implemented it in her next essay. In this case, she made a table of structure using yes/ no forms, and showed it to the tutor before elaborating further ideas. A clarifying strategy was commonly employed by students. Students consult with a lecturer or tutor to clarify the requirement or structure of essays, or asked classmates or tutors about the parts they did not understand.

One of the effective strategies employed by students in this study was utilizing their peer support network, especially for writing essays and preparing for examinations. A good example of implementation of this strategy can be found in an international student who analysed that the good students are those who sit in the front of the lecture hall and identified them as his potential sources of support. He approached them and introduced himself as an international student, and told them frankly that he needed their help. However, we cannot expect all of the students to be as active as he is in building the peer networks.

The pattern of students' peer networks is varied. One of the students' peer networks is utilizing the language exchange network with students who study Korean language at the same university. Korean students put their messages seeking an exchange partner on the Korean bulletin boards of the Korean department homepage. Students found this network was very useful, since not only could they receive help from Australian students in terms of their study but also they could experience Australian university student culture and life through socializing with the language exchange partner and their friends. Another network was formed through Korean students club in the university. Some students felt more comfortable to ask help from Korean Australian students at the club than from other Australian friends since this type of 'primary, monocultural network' can provide a setting in which ethnic and cultural values are shared (Bochner et al. 1977). A third network was formed with students with whom they share classes. The various networks are very much dependent on the individual character of each students as well as the subjects in which they are enrolled. Here, there is a tendency for Korean students to form peer networks with other Asian students in preference to native Australian ones. But many of these have superior English speaking background, for example, Singaporean students who could provide them with a great deal of assistance. Korean students feel more comfortable with these students as they have much in common with them and can lower their affective filter when they speaking to these students.

Problem minimization adjustment: Whether it is desirable or not, problem minimization is another strategy students employed by making choices to avoid problems which the students evaluated as beyond their capability to solve. Problem minimisation can be explained as a kind of metacognitive strategy. Students evaluate their past learning experiences and conclude that they would not able to meet the challenges of the subject. Thus they arrange and plan their study to utilize their time more effectively within a limited time frame. As discussed before, many students were not able to participate in tutorials especially at the beginning stage of their studying overseas. When communication deviations occur in the initial interaction, the negative effect generated might prevent students from interacting in the future in class situations. For instance, because students evaluated participation in tutorials as beyond their competence, they often minimized their involvement or even attendance. Another variation of this kind of adjustment is to ask questions of their teacher after classes instead of during class time.

Some students employed this kind of strategy for selecting subjects. One international student reported that he chose to avoid the subject in which he had previously failed. The rationale of employing this strategy was that he failed the subject in spite of studying hard, so he would fail again if he repeated it. We can argue that he could not find ways of rectifying the deviations, so he employed a strategy of avoidance. Students utilize their social network to get information about subjects, especially related to marks. In this regard, there seems to be a tendency for students to avoid a subject which is known for its high failure rates. However, lack of information sometimes prevented students from employing this strategy. One student reported that he did not understand the tutorial very well and he thought it was due to his poor English. However, he later realized that the teaching methodology of his tutor in the first semester was not good, after he experienced a better tutor in the second semester.

He realized too late that he had a tutor with poor teaching skills, not realising it was possible to change tutors.

Another example of the employment of problem minimization was found from the international student who evaluated that he lacked presentation skills, so he enrolled in an open learning subject during the summer break to avoid presentations. An additional rationale for this was preparation for the possibility of failing a subject, as could obtain extra academic credit before the semester began. As a result, he was able to manage the following semester more smoothly.

Conclusion

The study revealed that students' difficulties were not only due to deficiencies with their English language competence but also their lack of familiarity with sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence, especially in relation to study genres. The difficulties of adopting to different study genres were partly due to their previous educational experiences. This previous educational background, together with an unawareness of cultural differences in the genre system, may place the Korean students in situations where learning is difficult.

This study focused upon the procedure of overcoming difficulties and identified several specific management strategies students employed to rectify deviations. Some important strategies like affective strategies and metacognitive strategies were not investigated much in this study. For example a good time management strategy can contribute to accomplishing academic life effectively. However, the management strategies outlined may give a valuable guide not only to Korean students but also to other international students who start an overseas sojourn. Hopefully this study will contribute to developing an effective way of teaching and learning not only for Korean students but also other international students.

Implications for Korean students in Australia and for the Australian institutions

From the above discussion we can draw some implications for Australian institutions as well as for students who need to implement appropriate management strategies for their study at the Australian institutions. Given that Korean students have predominant previous contact with the lecture genre and no experience of with tutorial genre, training will be beneficial in order to acquire turn-taking rules and argumentation skills, and to become aware of the hierarchy relationship between teachers and students. Video and simulation of class using computer can be used to implement this kind of training.

As students will have undertaken written genre, they will need training in writing not only before commencing study but also concurrently with their academic subjects. To implement the training successfully, research on the comparative studies between Australian students and Korean students' written genre will be required.

Students will be benefit from guidance from not only academics but also students from the same academic background, especially about how to implement strategies in their study. A mentor system between new students and current students can be utilized for this purpose.

Students should also play more an active role in establishing social networks within the Australian academic environment, and the Australian institution should also provide more opportunity for students become involved in activities in the community.

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