

Semantic and Lexical Issues In Writings by Korean Children

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1 Introduction

This paper investigates Korean children's semantic awareness within their written English, based on analysis of several pieces of writing composed by ten students (aged 12 – 13) at an English summer camp in Korea. The intention, therefore, is not to discuss the students' grammatical competence, but rather, how well they displayed semantic competence with regard to their use of written English. This involves the analysis of their word choices within their writing in order to determine if the words chosen were, simply put, a good fit for the meaning the students were attempting to create, essentially using the right word based on the context. The study has been inspired by the writing of non-native English speakers I have taught over the past decade, in which, based on analysis of their writing, I have noticed the following errors.

First, there are instances in which the student's intended meaning is clear based on the overall contextual information derived from the essay, but the word used to express the intended meaning is somewhat unusual; in other words, a more natural expression exists. Determining a word to sound unusual or unnatural, though otherwise clear in meaning, might be regarded as somewhat subjective. However, I argue that from a native English speaker's point of view, there are certain ways to communicate one's ideas which simply read more naturally than others. In this instance, while we have overall semantic clarity, stylistically speaking the overall sentence reads somewhat unusually. Example (1) illustrates this:

- (1)in each area there is some information about the animals such as the living area, number and if they are in danger or not.

Here the student is referring to the area in which animals live, as part of an animal exhibit at a museum, as the living area. The meaning is clearly understood from the essay, but when discussing animals' homes in the wild, habitat would be the more appropriate word choice.

Students can also display errors in terms of their word choice in that the meaning is not clear at all. Example (2) below reveals an overall lack of semantic clarity:

- (2) There is a kind of minority food in the world today

Even with the full contextual information provided by the student's essay, I had to rely on the student to explain what meaning she had intended to convey. She explained that 'minority food' was her way to express the idea that there are certain foods which are not generally eaten by most people in a given society.

Finally, students sometimes use a word in the wrong context, resulting in a meaning that is clear, but not the intended meaning (and one that can be inappropriate in some cases). This is seen in the example below from a student's essay describing her life in her native Japan:

(3) I fondled my cat

While example (3) displays grammatical competence, it is arguably inappropriate from a semantic point of view and not the meaning the student had in mind. Based on discussion with the student, it became clear that her intended word choice had been 'stroked'.

Therefore, with regard to the categorization of the students' word choices within the current study, I relied on the following. Category one required words to be understood semantically, but nonetheless representative of a rather uncommon/unnatural manner of expression. For category two, the word(s) used did not create semantic clarity at all, and thus, even within the context of the completed essay, it was unclear what meaning the student was trying to convey. Finally, in cases in which students used words that created a meaning that was not the intended one, such words were placed in category three.

Based on these three types of error, I analyzed the writing output of ten sixth-grade Korean children over a three-week period at an English summer camp program at a university in Seoul. Each student wrote seven writing assignments, thus a total of seventy pieces of writing have been analyzed. Each assignment was a page to a page and a half in length. Some assignments were taken directly from the students' writing textbook, while others were assigned by myself. The nature of the assignments assured a mixture of more academic, argument-based essays and writing which was more personal in nature. In terms of students' lexical difficulties, I highlighted individual words as I read their writing samples and placed the words in one of the three categories; subsequently, I met with each student to clarify their word choices. In some cases, two or more words which were written together as one expression were also included in the count. In either case, the word(s) selected represented a problem with the student's use of lexis.

2 Literature Review

Writing in English requires of course a good knowledge of vocabulary, for native and non-native speakers alike. The point here, though obvious, is that writers must know how to use words in the right context and therefore have lexical knowledge that goes beyond merely understanding word definitions alone. This is especially relevant for students writing in a second language. As Murphy and de Larios (2010:62) point out, 'In formulating their texts, L2 writers are frequently beset by language problems, many of which are lexical in nature'.

With regard to the English writing of L2 children, however, there appear to be relatively few studies which focus on lexical difficulties per se. Previous studies that do focus on ESL children within education settings tends to be broadly focused on how such students can be better integrated into the L1 classroom and the challenges they face (Bunch, 2006; Carson, 1992; Garcia, 1999; Gebhard and Harman, 2011; Villalva, 2006). Some

studies have included a focus on spelling as part of children's phonological awareness (He and Wang, 2009); global writing issues such as coherence and organization in writing (Tarone et al, 1993); and the specific needs of adolescent L2 English writers (Ortmeier-Hooper and Enright, 2011). A study by McCarthey, Guo and Cummins (2005) does, however, include a focus on rhetorical style within a developmental study of Mandarin speaking students' written English, which, though focused on essay organization and maintenance of a central focus, also includes word choice within the category of rhetorical function. While there is illustration of language use, such as a simile used by a student, she sings like a bird, we have no ultimate sense of how well the students handled their lexical choices overall.

Looking to broader coverage of L2 English writing, there have been several studies such as Cumming (1989) (1990); Murphy and de Larios (2010); Qi (1998); Smith (1994); Wang (2003); Wolfersberger (2003); and Woodall (2002), which have investigated how one's L1 works to retrieve words in the second language, with one finding being that reliance on one's native language can be more prominent for those with lower English abilities. Additional studies have focused on specific lexical challenges L2 writers face, such as difficulties with using vocabulary related to their usage of claims of doubt and certainty – principally modal verbs and adverbs – thus related to lexical hedging and boosting practices (Hyland and Milton 1997); difficulties in their understanding of how to employ formulaic phrases in essays, such as it can be seen that (Li and Schmitt 2009); the lexical proficiency involved with summary writing for Japanese students (Baba 2009); the use of modal verbs in the English writing of Asian students (Hinkel 2009); and the need for L2 English speakers to become fluent in the use of academic vocabulary for disciplinary-specific writing (Coxhead and Byrd 2007). A study by Leki and Carson (1994) also reveals that the L2 English writers regarded 'language proficiency' as an important skill, here referring to using appropriate lexis.

In terms of the lexical aims that L2 writers might aspire to, the study of Hyland and Milton (1997:200) raises the need for 'pragmatic competence', with Li and Schmitt (2009:86) referring to difficulties with L2 vocabulary use marking the writing as 'nonnative'. Coxhead and Byrd (2007:143) rightly point out that 'learning a new word includes knowing how to use the word in lexicogrammatically expected ways'. Collectively, these comments make clear that a natural usage of lexis is a determining factor regarding competence and that this is arguably a gap in the writing skills of L2 writers – essentially, the ability to choose the right word in English based on what meaning they are specifically trying to communicate.

Polio and Glew (1996) further investigate how writing under timed conditions can impact on the quality of English L2 writing, to include the quality of their lexical choices. Their results suggest that under timed conditions, students do not have time to utilize techniques otherwise employed when writing, such as planning their essay. Hamp-Lyons (1986) considers timed writing assignments to not be reflective of legitimate writing and indeed, the very nature of the writing task taught to students involves prewriting, writing, revising and such is not necessarily a component of writing under a time limit.

The literature also suggests that dictionary use can both hinder (Summers 1995) and help in the composing process (Baxter, 1980; Snell-Hornby, 1987; Thompson, 1987). Bejoint

and Moulin (1987:106) state that 'writing should precede dictionary consultation. In other words, the result will be better if the learner first tries to express his thoughts by using the words and phrases which come spontaneously to mind'. Nesi and Hail (2002) investigate the practice of ESL students' dictionary usage, reporting that some students made serious errors in terms of misinterpretation. Tellingly, Maingay and Rundell (1987) argue that dictionaries can create problems if they do not include sufficient information regarding the semantic and stylistic implications for word usage. This latter point is particularly relevant when students attempt to use words in the right context. Paikeday (1993:240) further stresses the need for dictionaries to provide examples of how to use words in context, considering this to be 'more important even than the definitions'. I would disagree, given that the definition is the starting point for a new word but clearly, illustration of how to use a new word is crucial.

Several studies regarding dictionary usage in turn present categorization of lexical problems involved with L2 writers, albeit focusing on the writing of adults. A study by Meara and English (1987) involves the formulation of error codes regarding the broad category of 'wrong word', such as incorrect spelling and grammar, further suggesting the need for students' lexical errors to be used as a guide in the production of new dictionaries for ESL students; a study by Maingay and Rundell (1987) employs four categories of lexical error: semantic, syntactic, collocational and stylistic. A more recent study by Christianson (1997) also investigates the role of bilingual dictionaries in the writing process and in doing so, investigates lexical usage and problems for L2 writers. Christianson's study categorizes word choices, which, as with this paper, also derives from her teaching experience of ESL (specifically to Japanese students over a three-year period). The study involves the writing of Japanese university freshmen composing under timed conditions and the relevant factor is that their lexical errors were categorized in order to then quantify them.

The categorization is quite expansive, including areas such as words which do not fit the context of the student's writing, involving subcategories such as paronyms or words with unintended or inappropriate meanings. Christianson's study also includes more technical errors related to spelling, word form, plural use, verb tense and uses involving incorrect articles and prepositions. The results of her study clearly indicate that the category of 'wrong word' (e.g. words with unintended meanings) is indeed where most students experienced difficulties, a total of 77 such errors compared with the lowest amount, just 11, for tense errors. In keeping with Christianson's categories (and those of other studies), the current paper also seeks to identify the category of 'wrong words', but relies on a more specific perspective to do so. This rests solely with the semantic and pragmatic implications of 'wrong words', as opposed to errors with syntax or punctuation, for example.

It is suggested that while lexical problems (e.g. unintended word choices) may or may not coincide with syntactic errors, the focus should rest largely on the words themselves and not the grammatical constructions in which they appear. This allows for a more 'pure' focus and helps to better illustrate the problems that L2 writers have in meaning making; arguably, the lexical choices themselves, in some instances at least, contribute more to correct and precise meaning, or lack thereof, than the grammatical choices. For example, if a student writes 'two slice of bread' this is indeed an error. The suggestion, however, is that while such

errors should be remedied, the sentence nonetheless displays semantic clarity. However, if a student writes an expression such as ‘the man withstood the house’ then clearly, the fact that the sentence otherwise displays grammatical competence is not sufficient; the word choice of withstood within the sentence creates an unclear meaning. Regarding the students’ samples of writing in this study, some occurred within both correct and incorrect grammatical constructions. In all cases, however, it was the word choice(s) that arguably caused the most confusion, not the grammar itself. Therefore, it is hoped that the specific focus adopted here can help to reveal more about lexical problems per se.

In addition, while there have been previous studies on the English writing of Korean students such as Cho (1999), Choi (1988), Eggington (1987), Kaplan (1966) and Scarcella (1984), they have tended to focus on broader issues within Korean students’ English writing, such as the delaying of the thesis statement until the end, their preferred essay structure and reluctance to express their opinion. While a study by Kang (2005) focuses on Korean students’ lexical choices, it is concerned largely with the use and frequency of function words, such as articles, conjunctions and nominalizations.

To my best knowledge, therefore, there have been no studies of Korean children’s English writing with regard to lexical problems, specifically in terms of the categorization of such problems as presented here; this is gap that this study hopes to exploit. Therefore, my study seeks to investigate lexical problems in a variety of writing assignments and a discussion of what the pedagogical implications might be for Korean children in the ESL classroom. The questions that this research seeks to address are as follows:

1. To what extent do the Korean students display the three categories of vocabulary errors previously outlined?
2. What might be contributing factors with regard to such vocabulary problems?
3. What might the pedagogical implications be for the results?

3 Methodology

Before discussing the methodological approach taken, it is necessary to first discuss the classroom instruction that students were given with regard to writing in English. To help make students aware of competent writing, I relied on a three-part approach to my instruction. Specifically, when discussing the construction of individual sentences using examples on the board (as well as how sentences combined overall within a given piece of writing), students were asked to determine if the grammar were correct (i.e. based on Standard English); if the meaning were clear; and finally, if the style were natural. This latter point is, I admit, somewhat subjective. I also concede that style is a very broad word, but I needed to use a single word which could best capture the importance of semantic (and pragmatic) awareness in students’ written work, without burdening them with a more theoretical-based pedagogy, which was not part of the program in the first instance. Moreover, for purposes of instructing the students in the importance of choosing the right words based on the context in which they are writing (e.g. academic versus creative writing), the word ‘style’ was chosen for simplicity’s sake. Deciding whether or not one’s English sounds natural is a necessary area to discuss with students, in order to help them use English

words which are more commonly used by native speakers, in speech or writing, and which sound less like the somewhat formulaic expressions seen in some textbooks.

We might consider style as being formal or informal, but the students were instructed in the ways it went beyond this. Therefore, style was the term used when analyzing written English (either from the textbook, based on students' own writing samples or using hypothetical examples) to determine if the words used not only produced clear meaning, but also fit the context of usage as much as possible. An example of how this approach was seen is offered below, taken from the first week of class in which spoken English was used to illustrate:

- (4) (a) How do you do?
 (b) I'm fine thank you, and you?

Students identified the greeting as having both grammatical competence and semantic clarity, perhaps due to their familiarity with such a construction. However, under the category of style, I explained that such a greeting was unnecessarily formal in most contexts and that for informal, everyday greetings, especially among friends, the following exchange, while not displaying grammatical competence, nonetheless displays a more natural – hence 'good' – style, certainly for American English:

- (5) (a) How you doin'?'
 (b) Pretty good.

From this background, I encouraged students to consider their writing from a perspective that they were unfamiliar with, having told me in class that their school teachers taught grammar and English vocabulary in terms of basic definitions, but never told them how to actually use the words. Therefore, all subsequent classroom analysis of written English employed the G + M + S structure, simplistic perhaps but necessarily so for the students.

To conduct research into the semantic competence of the Korean students' written English, I had first sought permission to do so. The students' level of English is fairly high, so I felt it was appropriate to discuss my research with them in class, in English, and from here, ask their permission for me to potentially use their writing samples in my paper. Students were also told to notify their parents of my research in order to obtain their consent. I further explained to the students the need to complete two questionnaires; a more general questionnaire (which I administered before the discussion of style had begun in class) and a more specific one administered in week three after the final assignment had been collected and returned to students with my comments. I further sought permission from the English camp director to conduct my research with the students.

With full permission granted, students were asked to complete the initial questionnaire during the first week of camp. This asked them general questions related to their difficulties with writing in English, if they had lived in an English-speaking country and their favourite kinds of English writing. The purpose of such questions was to provide a

broad background to the analysis of students' writing, having first identified what their writing weaknesses were and the types of writing that they might possibly engage with more (useful, given the variety of writing samples they produced in class). The second questionnaire, however, was more specific to the research per se, asking students if they believed that the pedagogic approach of having discussed grammar, meaning and style had helped their overall understanding of English writing, what their future difficulties might be in this regard and also, how often they relied on various sources (e.g. dictionaries) to instruct them in choosing the right word. This final questionnaire was written in Korean, however, with the students allowed to answer in Korean, as a means to better ensure that full understanding had been given to questions of specific depth and relevance to the study. The questions were translated from English into Korean by a bilingual staff member, who subsequently translated the students' answers into English for me (though some students chose to answer in English).

Finally, after I had read each piece of students' writing, I met with each student individually in order to clarify what their intended meaning had been in cases where I came across word choices which formed the basis of the three categories discussed earlier. This discussion proved essential to the validity of the research, as in one case it was revealed that a categorization had been incorrect; this is explained in the discussion of students' writing which follows. Otherwise, my system of categorization is reliable based on a close contextual analysis of all students' writing, with each piece of writing being read carefully twice.

Therefore, the analysis of seventy pieces of writing was complemented by a pre- and post-essay analysis questionnaire, as well as clarification with the students themselves several times regarding their lexical choices. Given the program's short duration of three weeks, in addition to a fairly rigid curriculum, there was not more time to probe further, such as interviewing students and conducting case-studies. However, a discourse analysis approach in conjunction with questionnaires and several individual meetings with students to discuss their writing has helped to inform the results.

4 Results and Discussion

A table is first presented, which gives basic details of the students based on the results of the first questionnaire; the results here will be used to help interpret the students' writing.

Table One Background of Students

Student Name	Age	How long studied English	Lived Overseas?	Favourite kind of English writing
Elizabeth	13	7 years	New Jersey for 14 months	Story books
Adam	13	5 years	Texas for 3 years	Poetry, comic books
Jane	13	5 years	Canada for 2 years	Academic essays

Thomas	12	2 years	New Zealand for 2 months	Stories
Marsha	13	3 years	No	Diary, speech writing
Paul	13	6 years	No	Story books, comic books, fantasy
Jim	12	5 years	No	Fantasy
Nicole	13	7 years	No	No answer provided
Olive	13	8 years	No	Fantasy stories, diary, academic essays
James	13	6 years	No	Essays, story books, comic books

When asked in the questionnaire what their main weaknesses were in English, almost all students responded with ‘grammar’, with some also mentioning spelling difficulties. Some gave further insights, however, such as Paul who wrote that he had problems ‘choosing good words to show my feelings’. Olive also wrote ‘shortage of words’, suggesting that her vocabulary is limited. Marsha wrote that ‘my word(s) can’t fit of the situations’ which specifically ties in with the dilemma of knowing which words to use in which contexts. Finally, Nicole stated ‘I can’t find the words in English.’

The table below provides quantitative information regarding the three categories of error discussed at the start of this paper, based on analysis of all writing produced by the students.

Table Two Number of Lexical Category Errors

Category One: Clear meaning; unnatural expression	Category Two: Unclear meaning	Category Three: Meaning different from what was intended
9	22	8

From the results, it is clearly the case that most students struggle to find the correct word based on the communicative context in which they are writing, specifically in terms of choosing a word that leads to a lack of semantic clarity. This suggests, though perhaps obviously, that for students writing in a second language, finding the precise words which effect precise meaning is a challenge, even amidst otherwise sound syntax at times. Table three below now breaks down the categories based on each successive piece of writing:

Table Three Description of Writing Assignments

Nature of Assignment	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Description of students' most prized possession; written in class; non-assessed	1	1	2
Academic essay arguing either for or against the wearing of a school uniform; written in class; assessed	1	9	1
Academic essay on a subject of the student's choosing; written for homework; assessed	0	2	0
Description of students' favourite person; written in class; non-assessed	3	1	1
Academic essay arguing either in favour or against the eating of meat; written in class; assessed	2	7	4
The first paragraph of a story; written for homework; non-assessed	1	0	0
Academic essay asking students to discuss why Korean children should learn English from an early age; written in class; assessed	1	2	1

Based on the results directly above, it is suggested that students perhaps do better when the writing is not inherently academic, such as producing argument essays, but is instead focused on personal topics of the student's choosing or those based on personal interest, such as discussing one's 'prized possession' (with topics in the current study ranging from soccer balls to cell phones). Though students were instructed to maintain basic academic structure for all their writing (i.e. intro – body paragraphs with topic sentences – conclusion), with the exception of writing sample six, it is arguably a more accessible task to write about subjects of personal interest or relevance. Moreover, the fact that the two argumentative essays led to students displaying a higher number of unclear word choices was perhaps based on pressure to use more formal words, as opposed to explaining one's ideas in a more informal manner, which the students might have perceived as inappropriate for such a piece of writing.

In addition, it is worth noting that most of the students expressed an interest in writing fiction of various kinds, such as fantasy stories, so that writing about one's personal life might reflect this interest more than a more typical academic essay, such as arguing one's

stand. Moreover, Carson (1992) suggests that the influence of the students' native classroom can be problematic, seen for example with the setting of argument essays for Asian students who are not used to this manner of writing based on a Confucian mindset. Also, within the study of Murphy and de Larios (2010:78), it was noted that 'the participants reliably engaged in more lexical searches and used their L1 more in the argumentative than in the narrative task'. Therefore, a more argumentative style of writing perhaps made more lexical demands on the students and this can help explain the higher number of lexical problems.

Another relevant point to mention is the implications for writing in class versus completing an assignment as homework. Assignments written in class allowed students the full 50 minutes to complete the writing task and with the exceptions of the assignments discussing one's prized possession and favourite person, all other in-class writing tasks were assessed. Overall, the two assignments written for homework (thereby allowing students the weekend to prepare them) display the lowest number of lexical problems. The fact that these two assignments gave students complete freedom with regard to the topic as well as more time to prepare, can perhaps help to explain this. The two non-assessed assignments written in class show a slightly higher number of errors, which may be due to the time limit; again, however, the subject allowed the students a degree of freedom to write about a topic with which they were completely familiar and this may have allowed for a more accessible writing experience. Regarding the remaining three assignments which were both assessed and written in class, we see the highest number of errors. This might be explained based on the following factors.

First, as students were being assessed they may have felt more pressure to choose not only the right word based on what they were trying to say, but also use more formal lexis as these three assignments were not only academic in structure but also in terms of the need for a formal tone (certainly when compared, say, with the more personal topics written about in the other assignments). The point here is that more reliance on students' electronic dictionaries was noticed for these assignments, though it should be pointed out that throughout all the in-class writing, only the boys, particularly Thomas, made use of dictionaries. In fact, while dictionaries were allowed for all but the final assignment (as this was regarded as a 'final test'), it was the boys who consistently used them in class. This is not to suggest that using a dictionary can be blamed for all lexical problems, but as the following discussion will highlight it is the case that sometimes the Korean words the students had in mind did not have a perfect translation into English and/or the students simply used the word incorrectly. Furthermore, discussing arguments regarding meat consumption and school uniforms, more so under a time limit, is not as accessible as discussing one's personal hobbies, for example. Collectively, this may help explain the higher number of problems regarding word choice for these two assignments.

However, the final assessed assignment on the subject of studying English was the only one that did not allow for dictionary usage, yet the students display a lower number of mistakes when compared with the other assessed academic essays. This might be due to the familiarity of the subject, given the students' own history of learning English within the Korean education system. While not a personal topic per se, it is a topic of personal relevance to the students' everyday lives. In addition, this essay did not ask students to take a

stand as such; rather, they were asked to simply explain the benefits of learning English in Korea. This more expository-based essay may have helped students to express themselves more easily, as opposed to having to find points of support within an argument essay. Indeed, writing an argument essay can be challenging in one's native language, but this is not to suggest that the students were being challenged beyond their abilities as their English level was overall quite proficient. Samples of students' writing are now provided, with an accompanying discussion.

Samples of Students' Writing

From the first writing assignment on the subject of one's most prized possession, an example of category three is seen with the rhetorical question below which Marsha uses to introduce her essay:

(6) What do you love even though it's not alive?

At face value, the semantic implications of this sentence would seem to be that Marsha is asking the reader to consider a loved one who has passed away. This, however, would be unusual given that the pronoun is 'it', though it is plausible that a pet could be seen as the referent. However, Marsha explained that what she was referring to was an item which is inanimate; this helped to clarify matters. An overall more clear way to communicate might therefore be 'outside of living things, what do you love?' Marsha then proceeded to discuss two such items in her essay – an electronic dictionary and a cell phone. It could be argued that I simply misunderstood what she meant; however, this is exactly the point. Given the expression, there is room for semantic ambiguity at least which separates it from the category of word choice whose meaning is unclear from an absolute standpoint. The example above, however, does suggest a specific, albeit unintentional, meaning.

An example from the third writing assignment helps to illustrate the process regarding the categorization of word choices:

(7)...she is funny and active

In the example above, Elizabeth is writing about her best friend. On the one hand, 'active' carries a specific meaning – such as 'energetic' – if used to describe people. We could therefore argue that, if follow-up discussion proves that 'energetic' was indeed the correct word, then 'active' does not necessarily represent a word choice that is in itself, problematic. However, it seemed somewhat unusual to describe someone as 'funny', which in this context is clear in meaning, and then follow it with the word choice of 'active' – a word which is basically clear in meaning, but followed by the more specific word of 'funny' was rendered somewhat ambiguous, comparatively speaking. Therefore, I was not sure what Elizabeth had meant exactly, but with the discussion afterwards, I was informed that 'energetic', indeed a more specific word choice, was the intended meaning. The word 'active' and its inclusion in category two also highlights the fact that words in this category may have differing degrees regarding a lack of clarity. For example, while the word 'active' above was not completely clear upon first reading the essay (and on the second read), a comparatively clearer picture

was nonetheless provided than with the expression of ‘minority food’ seen in example (2). Nonetheless, words which were unclear in meaning to any degree were placed in category two.

However, from the essay discussing one's favourite person, the expression ‘funny actions’ seen below, though also somewhat unclear in terms of its precise meaning, was nonetheless classed as a category one word choice.

(8)...he makes me laugh because of funny actions.

Nicole is writing about her father and while ‘funny actions’ may seem somewhat vague, its meaning is construed from not only the essay as a whole, but also from the immediate context above. In other words, as someone makes Nicole laugh, then ‘funny actions’ can arguably be clearly understood in the context, meaning something to the effect of ‘the funny things he does’ (e.g. telling jokes, making faces). However, ‘funny actions’ is not necessarily a more natural manner of communicating, perhaps because its meaning is still somewhat vague (certainly, the word ‘actions’ can refer to many things). Nicole explained to me that her father’s ‘funny actions’ refers more specifically to his habit of telling jokes. This, in comparison, is both specific and a more congruent manner of communicating.

(9) When me and my sister were born we got divided love.

The expression ‘divided love’ initially caused me to assume that Paul, discussing the love given to both himself and his sister from his parents, was unequal; that is to say, one sibling got more love than another and therefore he might be trying to describe his frustration. However, upon questioning Paul, he explained that this was not the case. Rather, he was simply expressing the fact that parental love was shared between himself and his sister, but neither received more love than the other. Based on the fact that I had misunderstood what Paul had meant I therefore re-classified this expression as belonging to category two to reflect its overall vagueness, though originally, my misunderstanding had caused me to place it in category one (i.e. an uncommon manner of expressing an unequal love given to children by parents). I had therefore initially considered the meaning to be clear, but overall a rather uncommon way to communicate the meaning I had wrongly assumed to be correct. Given my mistake, however, it seemed prudent to classify the expression as being overall unclear.

(10) ...but if we meet with other countries’ people, we usually speak English

Example (10) belongs to category one; even without the surrounding discourse it is suggested that ‘other countries’ people’ clearly refers to foreign people or people from another country. However, the expression as written by Jane is not how native English speakers might usually communicate. It represents, however, a direct translation from Korean, revealing that this can account for some of the more unusual expressions written in English. Another good illustration of this, though not found in the students’ writing, is the expression I ate medicine. This is how Koreans would communicate, but not English-speakers. The Korean students explained to me when I used this example in class that to

translate the English expression I took medicine into Korean would have semantic implications along the lines of I stole medicine. Likewise, I explained to students that 'eating medicine' might conjure up images of having a meal.

(11)...in natural society, it is proper.

Example (11) also represents a problem inherent in direct translations from one language to another, revealing this expression to be category two as 'natural society' is somewhat unclear in meaning, at least as used here. Thomas used this expression based on having used his dictionary to find the English translation of the Korean *cha-yon-sa-hweh*. This Korean word translates as 'natural sciences' or indeed, 'natural society'. However, without further information as to how Koreans use the latter translation in particular, it is difficult to speculate as to what Thomas meant. Nonetheless, Thomas is making the argument that meat eating is 'proper'. Perhaps he was referring to meat eating as being part of the 'natural' order (i.e. the fact that meat consumption is part of the food chain).

As mentioned, it was only the boys who used dictionaries when writing, with Thomas making use of his dictionary more than the others. This is suggested to be a definite factor in choosing words in English whose meaning, while obviously clear, might not lead to clear usage. In addition, Thomas also wrote that a ban on meat eating, 'can proscription'. Besides the obvious grammatical error, Thomas explained that his word choice of 'proscription', based on his dictionary usage, derived from the Korean word *in-gwon-bak-tal*, which itself translates to 'removal of human rights'. In this case, the word 'proscription' was perhaps too broad, however, as it can refer to many subjects; had Thomas used the expression 'the proscription of human rights', then he would have effected more clear communication. While such examples of dictionary usage are illuminating, these were the only two reported to me by any of the students.

(12)...we can easily find our troupe.

The word 'troupe' refers to a group of actors or dancers, whereas Jim's intended meaning is actually 'class' in the sense of a group of students, making the argument that if students wear a uniform, they can be more easily found if they get lost on school trips. This might also be attributed to a translation error in that troupe may have been one of many word choices that the dictionary revealed based on the original Korean word that was input.

Jim also showed confusion when I questioned him about his English usage in the essay on meat eating. He had written about the food chain, referring to it as 'big eat middle, middle eat small'. When I asked him what he meant, he became visibly frustrated and replied 'I'm confused too'. It was the case in fact that both Thomas and Jim had the most difficulties with regard to their vocabulary usage. During another meeting with Thomas, for example, I had questioned what he meant with the term 'exposure clothes', seen in the sentence 'if we wear exposure clothes, we can't introduce the honest gender'. Here Thomas was arguing in favour of a school uniform, stating that if students wear clothes that they normally wear at home (i.e. those described as 'exposure clothes') then this can be problematic. However, my attempts to construe a clear semantic picture of 'the honest gender' proved futile and when I

asked Thomas, he did not know what specific meaning he had intended either. Incidentally, the expression ‘exposure clothes’ was placed in category two given that I could not discern its intended meaning.

(13)...the ability to speak fluently...is usually open to the young people.

Discussing the ability of children to acquire foreign languages with relative ease, Olive communicates in a manner which suggests a different meaning. If something is described as ‘being open to the young people’, it would mean that it is available/on offer to them, or that it is permissible (e.g. the film is open to young people). While we wouldn’t normally express language learning ability in this manner in the first instance, I nonetheless placed this expression in category three in that it does suggest a meaning different from the one intended (albeit a meaning that is somewhat incongruent with the subject of language learning).

In discussing the wearing of a school uniform, James explained in his essay that this was based in part on the Japanese colonization of Korea during which time they exerted a lot of control over Korean people. The sentence below illustrates his response to this control, demonstrating, however, a category three error:

(14) We have to get rid of the Japanese formula

The word ‘formula’ would refer to something entirely different than the intended word of ‘influence’. Whether used in a congruent manner (the Japanese have developed a new formula for Coca Cola) or in a metaphorical sense (the Japanese formula for success needs to be emulated), ‘formula’ is clearly not the intended word choice given the essay’s topic.

Finally, an example of Adam’s writing is presented below. Here he discusses the food chain within the essay on meat eating:

(15) ...the food chain will be wrong

Here Adam is arguing that if nobody ate meat it could lead to an imbalance in the food chain. While this may be seen as a rather hyperbolic claim, the word choice of ‘wrong’ expresses his view nonetheless but is classified as category one given that a more accurate (and natural), and perhaps less direct word choice would indeed be seen with the word ‘imbalanced’ or ‘in danger’.

Results of Final Questionnaire

A table is first provided which gives quantitative information regarding what sources students rely on most when needing help with their word choices, prompted by the question ‘what sources do you rely on when trying to find, and choose, the right word(s) for your English writing?’. In addition, information is provided regarding the frequency with which the various sources are relied on per week.

Table Four Sources of Students' Help for Vocabulary

Student Name	Dictionaries	Ask parents	Ask teachers	Other
Elizabeth		Once a week		
Adam	2 – 3 times a week	2 – 3 times a week	Less than once a week	
Jane	2 – 3 times a week			
Thomas	Daily	Daily	2 – 3 times a week	Ask cousin, 2 – 3 times a week
Marsha	2 – 3 times a week			
Paul	Daily	Daily	2 – 3 times a week	
Jim	Daily	Once a week	2 – 3 times a week	
Nicole	2 – 3 times a week	Daily		
Olive	2 – 3 times a week	Daily	Once a week	
James	2 -3 times a week	2 – 3 times a week		

From the results of the table, dictionaries are clearly the most relied upon source for students when trying to find the words they need for their writing. This is perhaps an unsurprising discovery, yet it belies the fact that for the classroom assignments at least, the girls did not rely on their dictionaries at all. Nonetheless, perhaps for English homework assignments from regular school at least, dictionaries are relied on for all but one student, and on a fairly regular basis. Elizabeth, however, is the one student who does not rely on dictionaries and asks her parents instead for assistance regarding her word choices. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that Elizabeth's mother studied at London University in a graduate program and therefore speaks a high level of English (confirmed when I met her at graduation); in this instance, perhaps Elizabeth's mother is indeed a more reliable source in terms of vocabulary and its usage. Furthermore, the writing of Elizabeth, Jane and Adam, perhaps based on their residing in Canada and the USA, displayed the least problems regarding word choices. Thomas, however, displayed more frequent errors with regard to the meaning he was trying to construct, which may help explain his reliance on dictionaries in class. This in turn may help to explain difficulties encountered with vocabulary which does not always translate comfortably into English.

While the students' parents are overall a relied upon source for help with their word choices, the students had no other outside source to help them during the English camp other than their teachers and their dictionaries. During the in-class writing assignments, however, even those that were not assessed, students never asked me for clarification regarding word

choice, only for help with their spelling. As mentioned, only the boys, notably Thomas, relied on dictionaries in class for their writing assignments. Whether the girls relied on dictionaries for written homework assignments is unknown, but such information would have added to the findings, as well as perhaps clarifying why the girls did not appear to feel the need to use dictionaries for in-class writing assignments.

Regarding the more qualitative information gleaned from the final questionnaire, students were asked to provide information with regard to their current difficulties in trying to find the correct word(s) for their English writing and if their understanding of using the right word in the right context was now somewhat easier following classroom instruction. Students were finally asked if any increased understanding of style (as the term was applied in classroom pedagogy) would help them write better in the future. Though students were allowed to answer in Korean, some used English or even a mixture of both.

Paul explained that ‘some words that aren’t in the dictionaries my parents don’t know’, suggesting that he might have to rely on his own abilities in situations like these in which other sources of help are not reliable. Jane wrote that her current difficulties were simply ‘to find the correct word’; Olive agreed, explaining that ‘sometimes, it is difficult to find appropriate word in that context’. Elizabeth wrote that ‘I’m confused how can I make sentences with ol-barun tan-noh’, the last two words being written in Korean and translating as ‘right words’. Adam said that ‘sometimes I can’t find the letter I want’, though perhaps ‘words’ was the intended meaning of ‘letter’. Marsha, however, gave a more detailed answer than others, in both English and Korean. She explained that if students were to use a dictionary to find the English translation of the Korean mal-hada, the results would come up as ‘tell, say, speak, call, etc’. This points of course toward a variety of lexical choices for L2 writers when sometimes perhaps only one or two will fit the context that bit better than the other words at their disposal. Marsha goes on to explain that because she’s not a native speaker, she can’t ‘divide’ the expressions, perhaps meaning ‘distinguish’ or knowing which is the more correct word to use based on the context of communication, and she further stated that ‘if we are native, we could do (i.e. distinguish the word choices available) but we are not, so we can’t’. Indeed, I had mentioned to students that having a native ability in any language usually assures the speaker (or writer) of having, partly at least, an intuition which determines which word sounds better based on the meaning he or she is trying to communicate.

James further wrote that ‘when I see many words with the same meaning I don’t know which word I need to use for better style’. Jim wrote something quite similar, confirming that when he sees synonyms, he doesn’t know which particular word is more natural. Nicole explained on her questionnaire that ‘when I look up a word in a dictionary there are so many words. I have difficulty in choosing’. This points again to a potential issue with bilingual dictionary usage, in that confronted with many lexical possibilities for the single Korean word the students have in mind, it can sometimes be a guessing game of sorts in choosing the word which works best.

When asked in the questionnaire if the instruction had proved useful, students collectively believed that they had learned more about using the right words in their writing, confirming this with statements such as ‘yes’, ‘I think so’, ‘yes, it helped me’ and ‘yes. It

was very helpful for me. Also, style class was great!'. The response to this question from Nicole is especially telling. She writes that 'usual English language schools only teach grammar and meaning but this classroom instruction teaches style. Therefore, I have a better understanding'. This last comment echoes what I had been told by students previously in class; namely, they are taught in school the meanings of words but not specific ways in which to use them or ways in which they are used by native English speakers.

In terms of future ways in which increased understanding would assist them in their writing, students generally explained a need to write more in English and be more aware of stylistic conventions: 'read a lot of books and look for other styles'; 'I think it's good to read many English books'; 'keep studying grammar, meaning & style'; 'I want to learn more about style. Style was very helpful for me and I was like...Native'; 'I think reading good style and grammar of writing will be helpful'. Nicole also wrote that 'like this class, if the future class is combined with grammar, meaning and style I can understand better.'

It is suggested that the sessions on style were helpful in that students report a collective increased understanding about choosing the right words for their writing; however, increased attainment in one's writing needs more time to develop. The responses also suggest that having been made aware of stylistic differences in class, students are more conscious of this aspect of their future English reading and writing. I had pointed out that increased reading can expose students to a variety of stylistic devices, such as the use of slang and dialect, even taboo words, within the context of creative writing, for example. From these experiences, the students are hopefully more prepared to consider their written English from additional perspectives, more than just syntax, important though this is, but also choosing words which, from a pragmatic point of view allow the students to communicate in a manner which is overall more natural.

In terms of pedagogical implications, it is suggested that Korean students should be exposed to more naturalistic examples of vocabulary usage. This need not be tied merely to their written English, however. In both speech and writing, there is a need to develop the kinds of communicative skills that will allow students to sound more authentic and not, bluntly speaking, sound like a textbook. While English textbooks do include examples of more authentic expressions, such as greetings, more can be done. In fact, rather than rely on textbooks, native speakers of English might be relied on in class to demonstrate to Korean students how different the textbook advice and authentic communication can sometimes be (as seen with examples (4) and (5)). While native speakers of English are routinely employed in Korean schools at several levels, there appears to now be a push, in Seoul at least, to employ fewer native speakers within the high school system in the near future, and perhaps elementary level also. Whichever way the pendulum swings, English teachers, Korean and native speakers alike, might consider the importance of teaching students to sound like a native in their communicative output. As Christianson (1997:37) states, we should 'cover the basics first' –grammar, for example – and then move on the next level.

The three research questions are now presented with a short summary, based on the results of the current research.

To what extent do the Korean students display the three categories of vocabulary errors previously outlined?

The three categories were represented in the writing of the students, with unclear meaning the most common problem. Overall, however, it is clear that the broad issue of not knowing which potential word choice sounds the most natural within a particular passage of writing has an overall impact on writing in English. Therefore, this in turn leads to all of the three problems regarding one's lexical choices, essentially a by-product of lacking more advanced awareness of word usage. Despite this, Jane's writing was by far more in control of her lexical choices and despite a few grammatical errors, was the most similar to a native writer. Given her time in the Canadian school system, this is perhaps unsurprising. Overall, it has to be said that the five girls displayed better control of their writing in terms of lexical choice than the five boys, though only two girls had lived in English-speaking countries. It should be pointed out that the girls were better behaved in class than the boys and paid more attention to the class. This may suggest previous, and current, classroom behaviour in Korean schools and one reason why they performed better academically in the summer program.

What might be contributing factors with regard to such vocabulary problems?

It was clear, especially from Thomas, that dictionary usage is a contributing factor to some of the students' lexical problems. In particular, when students are presented with a choice of potentially right words to use, there exists a 'righter' word choice to use within a specific context. Beyond this, however, is the fact that the students, without the intuition of a native speaker to guide them further, are essentially left to decide for themselves which word is the best one to use. This can result in guesswork at times which is obviously not the best source to rely on when making lexical judgements. While dictionary usage has not been a focus of this paper per se, it is impractical to exclude it from the discussion given the fact that the students did make use of dictionaries in class, albeit only the boys and Thomas more so.

However, the nature of the writing task perhaps contributed to lexical difficulties also. When students were writing for assessment, especially the more demanding task of an argument essay, this perhaps created more pressure to find the right word with which to express their opinion even more precisely. In writing tasks which were on inherently personal subjects, the results suggest that students felt more in control of their lexis given that they were writing on a subject with which they had firsthand knowledge.

What might the pedagogical implications be for the results?

Clearly, more inclusion of real-life English would be a useful component of classroom instruction, perhaps starting just before students enter junior high school. In this manner, students can have the basic components of syntactic and semantic provision complemented by a focus on pragmatics – clearly, not from any theoretical standpoint but from a practical one. As example (5) demonstrates, such an approach can help students to realize that overall communicative competence need not always rely on grammatical competence.

5 Conclusion

From the feedback provided by students in my summer class it appears that the focus on style, and the knowledge that the students' communication was more authentic, was well received. While this study has produced only small-scale results, it is nonetheless suggested that the implementation of a similar focus in English teaching in Korea might help students to see English in a new light and arguably give them more natural communication skills. Moreover, the fact that the students have been given food for thought regarding this otherwise new dimension to their study of English also suggests that they might now seek out further information on style in their English communication and continue to ponder this aspect of their English in the future.

In conclusion, there is a need for English teaching, not only in Korea, to incorporate instruction on developing a natural style, in both speaking and writing. This should not be considered a 'one-off' but rather, instruction that runs alongside the other aspects of the curriculum. It is acknowledged that this kind of instruction may already be a part of some ESL classrooms, but it is not necessarily an aspect of teaching nationwide. Having said that, it may also be the case that English teachers, both Korean and non-Korean, may have strict guidelines regarding their teaching material and coverage. Nonetheless, based on the results of this study, it is suggested that to include a focus in class on a more natural manner of communication (largely based on choosing the right words), students can be helped that bit more to communicate better and may even appreciate the presumably new direction taken by their teachers.

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