Blogging and Conversing: Community College Students’ Sharing Their Experiences in an ESL Writing Class

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This study used focus group transcripts and blog entries to explore the experiences of five Korean community college students in a course designed to promote second language (L2) writing development. To provide an in-depth look at this experience from the learner’s perspective, the author was “embedded” in this writing course, taking on the role of participant-researcher. Through multiple readings and coding of data from focus groups and students’ shared blogs, five relevant themes emerged from the students’ discourse: internalization; depersonalization; simplification; bonding; and approbation. From consideration of the students’ perspectives on their experiences in the writing class, suggestions for improving the experience of Korean and other L2 writing students are proposed, including use of relevant and accessible writing topics. The cohesiveness established through the discussion activities in the current study may have benefited participants’ motivational and strategic adaptation, suggesting that such sharing of experiences could be helpful for L2 writing students.

Key words: community college students, L2 writing, blogging, focus group, grounded theory

1. INTRODUCTION

As a second-language graduate student needing to build her record of scholarly publications and presentations, this author has struggled for years to become competent in “academic” English. That personal struggle drove an interest in the study of writing development in second language (L2) students who are competent readers and writers in their native language, as she was. The researcher was particularly interested in their
experiences in college courses designed expressly to promote L2 writing development. In the current study, a student-researcher was embedded in an L2 writing class to capture the L2 students’ points of view as seen in the students’ dialogues in focus groups and blog entries, in order to illuminate students’ possible difficulties and highlight their successes in adapting over time to the demands of the class.

Second language (L2) students attempting to master writing can struggle due to their unfamiliarity both with the language (i.e., English) and with the demands of putting their thoughts into writing. Clarifying where their difficulties arise could shed light on how the educational system can better support these students in improving their writing skills. Support for college L2 learners seems particularly critical, given the increasing presence in U.S. colleges and universities of both U.S. English language learners and international students (Institute of International Education, 2009).

2. CAPTURING STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES

Capturing students’ experiences in L2 writing classes is of particular interest because many L2 teachers and researchers have not themselves been L2 students. Moreover, an important component of writing development is for writers to learn how to involve themselves effectively in the literacy community (Graff & Birkenstein, 2006). Unpacking students’ perceptions of the L2 specific writing community and of L2 writing development provide valuable information regarding this critical component in L2 writing pedagogy.

2.1. Students’ Perspective

Although scholars have argued that researchers need to focus on the students’ viewpoint for deeper understanding of educational phenomena and to reduce research bias (Cook-Sather, 2002), there have been a limited number of studies of writing either in first language (L1) or in L2 that have considered the students’ perspective. The students’ perspective has been investigated with regard to a variety of topics related to writing instruction and writing development, including: peer relationships in the L2 writing classroom (Harmon, Wood, Hedrick, Vintinner, & Willeford, 2009) and peer collaboration (Harklau, 2001); the process of revision in L2 writing (Myhill & Jones, 2007); use of the Internet (Ware, 2004); and the culture of lectures (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Overall, the students’ observations on their own attitudes, strategies, and experiences were found to provide an important additional dimension to understanding of what goes on in the L2 writing classroom.
The research methods employed in recent efforts to include the students’ perspective have ranged from interviews (Harmon et al., 2009) to students’ written evaluations (Ware, 2004). However, these studies may not necessarily have elicited students’ perspective because many of them were framed from the researcher’s point of view. In two cases, the researcher was also the teacher (e.g., Ware, 2004; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006). Incorporating both the students’ and the teacher’s viewpoints is certainly not an easy process. One approach to capturing students’ perspectives more faithfully is to minimize the distancing effect of a researcher perspective by embedding the researcher as an insider, a participant-observer. Being an insider means understanding the shared culture as a group member and as a participant in the given environment, rather than standing outside and observing their dialogues or eliciting their responses (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). For second language writing students, that means not just sitting in the classroom to see what students see from that vantage point, but also sharing their student status by being an L2 learner seeking to improve one’s writing. The closer look at L2 writing students’ perspective afforded by such a technique opens the door to a richer understanding of what L2 student writers are experiencing as they struggle with the challenges presented by using another language to express themselves in writing.

2.2. Focus Groups

One way to capture students’ perspectives is to consider how they discuss their learning experience in their own words. In focus groups, participants are encouraged to “talk to one another, exchange anecdotes, and comment on each other’s experiences and points of view” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 300), so that focus groups can be useful in revealing values and norms shared by group members or sub-groups within the focus group. In spite of these advantages of focus groups, they have not often been used in the area of L2 writing research, with a typical use being as supplementary rather than central data (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Several recent studies using focus groups as a major research process have even focused on teachers’ perceptions (Ellis, 2010; Ismail, Al-Awidi, & Almekhlafi, 2012) rather than student participants.

The use of focus groups to uncover group dynamics may have particular importance in L2 writing studies. Group membership among students could be especially salient in L2 writing classes, because of both the social bonding or isolation related to language or culture differences and the collaborative nature of the writing activities involved. In particular, Asian L2 students have been known to struggle more in adjusting to a culturally different environment due to significant cultural gaps between the school cultures in the U.S. and those in Asian nations (Major, 2005). Although many studies
have found teacher feedback and teacher effectiveness are very important for L2 writing, (e.g., Lee & Schallert, 2008; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006), peers can also play an important role, particularly given the common practice of having students revise one another’s writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Storch, 2005, 2007; Suzuki, 2008) and also the greater distance between teacher and students in terms of shared experiences (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994). Both promotion of critical thinking through various peer-review processes that involve some level of group work (Gratz, 1990) and facilitation of students’ comfort level in class by effective grouping (Holley & Dobson, 2008) are aspects of effective L2 writing programs. The importance of interaction through peer-reviews and of students’ adjustment to the class environment suggest both the value of further attention to sources of groupness and its impact on L2 writing students.

2.3. Online Discussion

In recent years, the use of online discussion including blogs has flourished in the research on L2 as well as L1 writing pedagogy (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Brescia & Miller, 2005). Online discussion is thought to promote literacy and digital fluency and to involve students in global citizenship (Witte, 2007). A general consensus from this research is that online discussion helps students’ writing development, and that students’ perceptions of online discussion were generally positive. For example, students felt that blogging improved their writing abilities (Chin, Sum, & Foon, 2008) and that learning with blogging activities made publishing convenient and sharing easy (Tekinarslan, 2008). Smith (2008) suggested that students’ writing might develop by means of blogging because it allows them to negotiate the unfamiliar demands of college writing in a freer environment where they can express themselves. In addition, students’ development may be facilitated by online discussion because students’ bonds with each other may increase the chance of adjustment to the class environment (Holley & Dobson, 2008).

However, it is also argued that students’ observed progress in studies of writing development where blogging is used is due to the nature of the activities and other intervening factors rather than to the blogging itself (Hou, Chang, & Sung, 2007; Stefanone & Jang, 2007; Xie, Ke, & Sharma, 2008). Although this body of studies suggests a possible positive connection between social networking during online discussion and writing development, there remain further issues to be studied, particularly with regard to how such social networking might operate for L2 writers. The type of social networking and shared writing experiences offered by online peer-group discussion may be particularly salient for L2 writers for a number of reasons, including freedom to use both L1 and L2, freedom from the need to monitor the correctness of
their writing, the opportunity to write for an audience they understand and have shared experiences with, and the development of a shared perception of difficulties as well as the sharing of possibly adaptive strategies.

2.4. Study Purpose and Design

Given the potential value of investigating students’ perspectives in the area of L2 writing, the current study aimed to investigate L2 writing development from a student-based standpoint. The research question was, very simply, what is it like to be a Korean college student in an ESL writing class? I was interested in ESL students’ views of their on-going experiences over the course of the semester, as these views emerged in focus group meetings and blogging. In addition, I expected that these peer interactions might offer potential motivational and practical support for this group of L2 writers.

The author was a researcher-student in the course, kept a blog that was shared among the participants, and was the moderator of the focus group. She did not merely “look over the participants’ shoulders” (Dhaval, de Groot, & van der Veer, 2006, p. 119), but rather played a role as a participant-observer. Transcripts from focus group interactions were the primary data source, although similar threads of conversation were also extracted from blog postings. Blogging was included because it extends the range of possible student conversations; in blogs, students sometimes discuss topics far from the academic (Chiang, Park, & the D-team, 2008; Schallert et al., 1996). The blog was only accessible for the study participants, and thus could reveal pertinent cohesive activities of the students as a sub-group within the class. The focus group members were expected to become more comfortable with talking to each other (Iacono, Balandin, & Cupples, 2001) and to develop group dynamics (Kitzinger, 1995) by participating in shared blogging and developing cohesion as a sub-group in the class.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The participants were drawn from Korean college students enrolled in a community college in the Mid-Atlantic region, all taking a course created to assist L2 students in meeting the writing requirements of their academic and professional lives (i.e., Intermediate Writing Class). There were 16 Korean students, four Chinese students, and one German student in the class. All of the Korean students were invited to participate, and four agreed to take part in this study, along with the author in her role as participant-
observer, for a total of two male and three female participants. No special incentives were provided to the participants except food during the focus group meetings.

The decision to focus on Korean students was based on several factors. First, because these students and the author had the same national background, there was the opportunity to reflect on the on-going in- and out-of-class events in light of their shared culture. The students were also free to talk or blog in English or Korean, so that the expression of ideas or feelings was minimally constrained by language.

Prior to the data collection, the author collected information on the students’ backgrounds and educational goals in 30 minute one-on-one interviews. These data are presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. All of the participants except Sue, who had a master’s degree, held high school diplomas and all had been educated in Korea. They were from large urban areas in Korea, either Seoul or Busan. It should be noted that most cities in Korea are where people move in order to secure a good education or a good job. This suggests that the student participants most likely came to the class with good educational motivation and family support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Engineering &amp; Pharmacy</td>
<td>To enhance performance in pharmacy school and professional interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spanish (planning to enter Nursing school)</td>
<td>To achieve career goals and enroll in a four-year college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>To enroll in a four-year college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Visual Arts</td>
<td>To complete college requirements and enroll in a four-year college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue*</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>To develop professional writing skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sue was the researcher-participant.

3.2. Class Context

The writing class was twice a week, and was 90 minutes long. The class teacher was a white female native English speaker who held a master’s degree as a Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The central components of the class were lectures and in-class writing assignments. Typical topics addressed in the lectures included grammar, sentence types (i.e., compound and complex), basic organizational skills for writing, and writing genres. Students also used a textbook: *Write ahead: Skills for academic success* (Fellag, 2002). The students were required to write eleven in-class timed essays, with 30 minutes allowed for each, over the 15-week semester. The writing process typically involved individual writing and paired writing. In both cases, the
instructor gave written feedback on students’ initial drafts, and the students revised the essay at home or in class and received one or two more rounds of teacher feedback. In addition to this teacher feedback, in-class peer-review was also occasionally given. The essay topics were, in order: my best friend; my special birthday; how to plan a party; Disneyland; getting ready for a great trip (process writing); getting my driver’s license; best teacher; first trip abroad (narrative writing); relaxing place (descriptive writing); and celebrity salaries (persuasive writing).

In addition to these in-class writing assignments, the class included various activities such as group quiz competitions on topics such as grammar and sentence types, group paragraph writing games using given words, and center task completion activities, where a typical task was sorting flash cards with sentences to form a paragraph. Course grades were based on students’ participation, task completion, and mid-term and final exams involving timed writing.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

3.3.1. Focus groups

There were six focus group meetings, which were held right after class in the same classroom. During each one-hour meeting, the participants discussed in Korean their experiences related to L2 writing in the class. The discussion sometimes expanded further to issues related to general L2 writing. The author also participated in sharing her own experiences in the group, moderated, and later transcribed the audiotaped discussion. She did the translations from Korean to English for any quotes included here.

The questions for the focus group meetings were not, in general, formally planned before the meetings. Overall, the tenor of the questions changed as the focus group members built a rapport over time, because the members tended to talk more freely about their personal experiences by the end of the semester. The questions in the first focus group session were centered on students’ general writing experiences or general motivation for enrolling in the writing class. The questions included “how do you feel when you write in English in class or at home” and “what comes in your mind when you think about English writing.” In the subsequent sessions, the participants more freely discussed their difficulties when they performed writing tasks.

3.3.2. Blogs

As an extension of the focus group meetings, the participants and the student investigator built a joint blogging board using a well-known Korean website. The
selection of the website was based on its convenience and availability to the participants; each participant already had a blog on the selected website. Because it was considered helpful to give the participants additional out-of-school writing practice, blogging in English was recommended. The participants wrote in English about whatever happened that was related to ESL writing in and out of class, as opposed to what they discussed in Korean during the focus group. It is important to be clear that the teacher in the current study did not participate in the blogging; rather, the student investigator moderated the blogging discussion as she did with the focus group.

3.4. Data Analysis

Grounded theory is a type of research strategy for “handling data in research, providing modes of conceptualization for describing and explaining” (Glaser & Strauss, 1977, p. 4). The current study targeted the identification of emerging themes from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), using the grounded theory based steps of primary coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Primary coding or open coding is “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Coding began by using the elements of the Model of Domain Learning (Alexander, 1997) as the primary coding scheme: domain-specific knowledge, topic knowledge, surface strategy use, deep strategy use, situational interest, and individual interest. These codes were chosen as relevant to students’ development in writing as an academic domain. In addition to the a priori specification of the elements of the MDL (Model of Domain Learning), codes were also added to account for other concepts addressed by this particular group of participants. These additional codes were reflections on development, classroom environment, translation from Korean to English, teacher, writing tasks, and difficulty and struggle.

Our primary coding was followed by axial coding, the process of relating the primary codes to subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and selective coding, “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 143). Through these processes, the coders build critical thematic stories that flow throughout the entire dataset. Although the initial focus of this study had been on possible developmental themes associated with the MDL-related concepts, as I moved on into the axial and selective coding, the themes that emerged from the data reflected as well other aspects of the students’ perceptions of their experiences. The five relevant themes that emerged from this analysis of the focus group transcripts and blog entries are described in the results section. An additional theme (individuality) will not be discussed here.

For the primary coding stage, the author and an assistant coded a subset (10%) of the
students’ discussions drawn randomly from the focus group data. Inter-rater agreement for the coding was 80%. The author conducted subsequent primary coding, axial coding, and selective coding for all of the focus group transcripts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes emerged from rereading and interpreting of the focus group data and the blogging entries. Those themes include internalization, simplification, bonding, and approbation. Specific interpretation and discussion for each theme follows.

4.1. Internalization: Think in Korean and Write in English

The participants stated that they followed a common process typically seen in L2 writing (Uzawa, 1996): first they formed their thoughts in Korean and then translated the thoughts into written English, especially when they were conveying complex thoughts in their writing. They related the characteristics of the Korean language to the English language, such as checking aspects of English grammar and rhetoric that differ from Korean (e.g., English relies more on verbs while Korean relies on adjectives and adverbs for elaboration; English paragraph prefers to start with a topic sentence while Korean tends to end with a topic sentence), and monitored their thoughts in Korean while they were writing in English. Although they attempted to speak English as much as possible for class activities, they also tended to speak Korean when they were involved in in-class activities, particularly during the group writing with their peers. Moreover, they frequently used electronic dictionaries or a translation website.

However, over the course of the semester, the participants felt that they gradually internalized their Korean thoughts into English and became more habituated to thinking in English, as Kevin described in this quote from a November focus group meeting:

Kevin: In the past, I wrote in Korean and then translated them into English. Now thoughts pop up in English while thinking.

By the end of the semester, the participants tended to use English more to guide and monitor themselves during their writing activities, which meant that their reliance on translation from Korean to English was also reduced over time. The fine-grained and contextualized nature of the change here could be of interest to teachers and researchers. Even a small degree of progress supported a far greater level of comfort with and possibly success in the writing tasks, because of a greater ability to allocate cognitive
resources specifically to the demands of expressing oneself in writing without as many competing demands from the task of expressing oneself in English.

4.2. Depersonalization: This Writing Has Little to Do with My Life

Unfamiliarity with the topics of the writing prompts interfered with the participants’ writing. The writing prompts assigned in the class did not include topics that were related to Koreans’ typical experiences or associated for them with ready, vivid memories. Participants had neither experienced “party planning” nor had immediately accessible memories of what they would think of as a “relaxing place.” As a result, the writers struggled to generate ideas. This perceived gap between the students’ experiences and the assigned writing prompts was evident in their focus group discourse, as in this excerpt from an October focus group:

Rachel: I imagined it [party planning] because I have never planned a party.
Justin: To be honest, I haven’t been to Cheju island although I wrote about it.
Vanessa: Are you kidding? You wrote you ate beltfish there!

Cultural discrepancy between these participants and those envisioned by the instructor who created the writing prompts was very apparent, and resulted in these Korean students struggling with the content of the prompts as much as with how to express themselves in accepted written English. The end result was that the students either struggled with a lack of readiness to write about the topic or began to invent experiences that seemed responsive to the prompt. Over the course of the semester, students seemed to become more comfortable with inventing experiences, as they more often confronted this difficulty.

4.3. Simplification: Coping Strategies, No Risk-taking

The participants expressed difficulties in capturing the nuances of words, which was observable both in their focus group dialogues about their experiences and in their interactions with the teacher during class. They also had difficulty with the complexities of English grammatical structures. The class teacher was the only native English speaker in the class, and thus was the authority on shades of meaning and on English grammar. The teacher gave extensive written feedback to the participants identifying the errors in their compositions. In order to reduce their error rates, the participants tended to move toward more basic word choices and toward simpler sentence and paragraph structures. The following quote shows how Kevin tried to cope with difficulties in word choices.
Kevin: I chose the topic of traveling for an assignment. I can use the word “pack,” but there is a synonym “bundle” in dictionary which I haven’t known before. I might have chosen “bundle” for use in past because the word sounds sophisticated, but I chose the word “pack” instead because I know it. [September 27th]

Participants’ writing became simpler, but clearer and more accurate over time. The participants, however, felt they were limited in expressing their creative thoughts due to this restricted word usage and avoidance of complexity.

Kevin: I used relative pronouns much. The teacher put red marks all over them. Gradually, my sentences became simpler. Is it good or bad? My sentences become simpler just as those of an elementary student. I only use elementary level words. I do read complex sentences, but I am not confident to use such complex sentences. If I take a writing class next time. I would like to learn complex sentences more. [December 9th]

Due to this simplification, the students’ desire to compose something creative and complex, which to them looked like an advanced writing style, remained out of their reach. They could not yet write in a way that matched the complexity of their thoughts and ideas. The following excerpt from Kevin and Rachel’s dialogue during their last focus group meeting presents such a desire for greater complexity and creativity.

Kevin: We have to make a story using the pattern in class. We must make a simple topic paragraph. We only compose two to three simple sentences. …but I also want to learn how to compose a very very long paragraph.
Rachel: If I become an advanced writer, I would like to compose something creative. Not restricted by certain formats, rules, and regulations. [November 11th]

Students’ avoidance of complexity seemed to de-motivate their efforts to develop writing that could succeed through risk-taking. Risk-taking was associated with greater possibility of errors, so that it tended to be viewed with trepidation by the students, as in this exchange from the October 25th focus group.

Vanessa: But then Justin, you look afraid to write by yourself.
Justin: I am afraid of making mistakes!
Kevin: Don’t be afraid of making mistakes!

The possibility of supporting and motivating L2 writing development by providing
opportunities to write in broader, bigger ways, and to incorporate creative use of language to express oneself is a question for further research. Without such opportunities, L2 writers may continue to see themselves as outsiders, not allowed to play with the language in the way native speakers and writers can. Further, the cognitive disconnect between what developing L2 writers can think and what they can express may add to their frustrations and inhibit their potential contributions.

4.4. Bonding: Forging Group Identity

The five students in the focus group became a socially cohesive unit by the end of the semester. The focus group and blogs were originally designed to gather the students’ perspectives on their development, but these added activities also fostered group identity in the participants; their writing was influenced by the synergy from the collaborative activities. They tended to sit together, shared assignment ideas, and privately exchanged information about their out-of-school lives as well as in-class activities. As a result, the participants felt familiarized with the learning environment and benefited from these extra group activities. In particular, the activities in a small homogeneous group rather than in a large heterogeneous group seemed effective for facilitating the students’ adjustment to the environment. The five group members in the focus group gained enough cohesiveness to feel comfortable each other. Their dialogues as well as their behaviors clearly indicated cohesiveness as a result of the focus group meeting.

Justin: I think we (focus group members) became more familiarized each other because of this focus group meeting. [December 9th]

The unique setting of the grouping, with students sharing the same language and cultural background, provided students with a free zone where they could converse about their difficulties and successes and have opportunities to practice their English writing without restriction. While small group activities have been generally found to work for overall class learning (Klassen & Krawchuk, 2009), less attention has been given to how group homogeneity and heterogeneity might work differently for different situations. The effect of this type of grouping may be a take-home message for teachers who seek an appropriate type of grouping to support positive motivation in their L2 writing students.

4.4. Approbation: Striving for Approval from the Teacher

The students valued teacher feedback more than anything else. Although their striving
for the teacher’s approval was apparent throughout the semester, the frequency of participants’ questioning of the teacher increased over time. The positive or negative remarks offered by the teacher, therefore, weighed heavily in these students’ self-assessments. The Korean L2 learners believed that the teacher was their reference for acceptable standard English writing.

Rachel: The teacher told me “too much ‘some.’” I have put “some place” and “some time” [in a discouraged tone]. She erased all the “some’s” except one. [October 11th]

In the first couple of weeks, the participants hesitated to ask the teacher questions directly, but over the course of the semester, the students came to more actively ask questions of the class teacher than of their classmates. In comparing teacher feedback and peer review, the students valued the teacher’s correction to their writing above that of peers. It was their judgment that the peer-review aspect of the course was not worthwhile, in part because of the lack of consistency. Class members were concerned about being polite and seemed less competent to evaluate others’ writings. Consequently, the participants felt that they could only trust the teacher’s comments.

Justin: I doubt (the effect of peer-revising).
Vanessa: I doubt the correction by my peer.
Justin: Although I was wrong, if I insist “it is correct” then they pass it. (Justin’s partner for the day was Vanessa)
Vanessa: I was not sure. So confused. (a big laugh)
Rachel: I want to have help from teacher or the like. Someone better than me.
Kevin: I would seat an English teacher beside me, and ask her to correct my sentences. [October 25th]

This heavy reliance on teacher approval creates a high level of demand for student-teacher interaction in L2 writing courses. Thus, L2 writing teachers face a large task of giving detailed feedback, checking students’ responses, and responding to student questions. Some form of distribution of teacher authority and responsibility for feedback by making teaching assistants available and using of out-of-class learning resources might be a helpful accommodation.
5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study purpose was to describe and analyze what it is like to be a Korean college student in an ESL writing class from the students’ perspective. Some of the themes that emerged may be more specific to Korean L2 writing students or to this particular group of students, while others seem likely to have broader application. For example, unfamiliarity with the writing topics given in the class might not apply to students from some other language and cultural backgrounds. Regarding internalization, language-to-language translation could be more salient in Korean students due to the large systematic discrepancy between English and Korean. The Korean linguistic system developed from different roots than English, in contrast to other languages such as French, Dutch, and Spanish, which share same or similar linguistic roots with English. Understandably, it takes a relatively long time for Korean students to automatize their English use.

While the generalizability of the study findings to ESL situations in Korean environment might be somewhat limited due to the small and relatively homogeneous sample and the environment where the study was conducted (i.e., a community college in the U.S.), I did find that the extra out-of-school small group activities of focus group discussions and blogging appeared to be related to some positive trends in the participants’ writing development. One possible aspect of this relation could be that the mood the four participants and the researcher-participant shared during class might be beneficial. Although some previous research has shown skepticism about discussion among novice peers (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Yule & Macdonald, 1990), based on the author’s experience in this class, added interest from blogging and focus group meeting was positively related to the participants’ motivation for writing. The participants were more likely to attend the class compared to other class members and played leading roles in various class activities. The six regular focus group meetings and blogging among the participants were carried out in a stress-free and student-favorable environment. The participants could share not only their thoughts about writing development and relevant events but also their daily routines and past experiences. They could freely choose what to write about, and could practice writing in English to an interested audience that was relatively forgiving of errors. Finding out that other people were having similar difficulties and experiences might change their attributions and their feeling of control. Such collaboration seems to have benefits for facilitating good quality L2 writing (Watanabe & Swaine, 2007).

Another possible positive aspect of the grouping of participants could be the psychological stability that might have been established for them early in the semester (Holley & Dobson, 2008). The four students and the author had more opportunity to
manage stress from the unfamiliar class environment and form collegial relationships by participating in the additional group discussion activities. The participants’ online and off-line discussions seem to have facilitated bond-building. The motivational and practical support offered by this early settling into the class enhanced writing development. While the discourse analyses could not capture all behaviors of the students, it was noteworthy that the five participants often gathered during break times and shared various experiences, such as how they managed difficulties from class and homework. This gathering began early in the semester when other students were still floating around in a few sparse cliques of classmates. In sum, these particular L2 writers kept finding and sharing ways to manage their difficulties and stresses from a lack of knowledge about English language and culture.

Despite the growing population of L2 learners (Kargbo & Yeager, 2007), the nature of L2 writing development is yet underdeveloped compared to other areas of L2 studies. As an effort to provide better understanding of the L2 writing students, the current study involved consideration of five Korean community college students’ perspectives on their shared experiences in an ESL writing class. While there remained many issues to be further studied, there are several important take-home messages that can be gleaned from the themes relating to student experiences in L2 writing class that were identified in the current study.

For one, establishing cohesiveness through small group activities seemed beneficial for fostering the students’ initial motivational adaptation. Shared experiences among the students may lessen stresses from acquiring a new language as well as from culture shock, as seen in this particular group of Korean L2 students. The motivational adaptation should be highlighted, as increased motivation has strong and direct relation to high level of L2 writing performance (Chae, 2013). It also seems critical to consider the appropriateness and accessibility of the writing topics used in class. Students’ difficulties with writing increased when the topics did not allow easy access to memories or relevant experiences.

For internalization of English, students’ use of dictionaries for Korean-English translation may need to be reconsidered. It has been found that a simple L1-L2 translation can help adult students with low levels of proficiency in L2 to develop their ideas in their texts (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1994), but weaning students away from reliance on dictionaries as they become more proficient may be advisable. For students’ avoidance of complexity over time, it may be helpful for teachers to provide explicit examples of appropriate levels of sentence simplicity and clarity at the outset. The students were often frustrated with teacher feedback on their first few drafts because the feedback was mostly eliminating their ideas, even though the writing seemed satisfactory to them. It seems also desirable to provide either teaching assistants or additional
supportive learning facilities as an alternative to the necessity for teacher feedback. There was a noticeable gap between the students’ need for teacher feedback and the actual teacher feedback provided to the students.

Consideration of student perspectives in the current study allowed us to capture critical issues in the L2 Korean writing students’ learning experiences. Their shared perceptions of their classroom experiences gave us a first-hand look at the difficulties, successes, stresses, and accommodations engaged in by these students who are having a classroom experience that their instructors have probably never shared.

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