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An exploratory study on learner agency and second language writing practices of Korean high school students

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores Korean high school students' exercising of agency in processing and producing L2 writing. Data were collected from off-line and online interviews, field notes, and other written materials over the course of two years and analyzed from a social view of agency (Ahearn, in: Jaspers, Östman, Verschueren (eds) *Society and language use*, John Benjamin Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 2010; van Lier in *Sociocult Theory Teach Second Lang* 163:186–193, 2008). The students' engagement in varied L2 writing projects and their writing artifacts consistently showed their enhanced awareness of linguistic and other semiotic resources which resulted in their frequent and continuous use of multiple languages and other placed resources. Meanwhile, they developed their strategies and reshaped their L2 writing practices considering the given context, placed resources, and their funds of knowledge. Findings from this study provide valuable insights into the open possibilities of EFL students' exercise and development of agency, which is an increasingly necessary feature of life-long learners in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: L2 writing, Agency, EFL young learners

Introduction

Academics have paid growing attention to learner agency (Deters, 2011; Gao, 2010; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Mercer, 2011; Mick, 2011; Miller, 2014). Agency is an individual's will and capacity to act (Gao, 2010), considered as one of the most essential characteristics of human behavior. As a personal characteristic of individuals, agency is embedded in a variety of contexts (e.g., social, spatial, material, cultural, temporal, relational, and structural) where learners can grant distinctive orientations to unique agency (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). In particular, second and foreign language learners develop or restrain their social identities and negotiate their engagement in the varied contexts of interaction (Norton, 2013). Learner agency also plays a critical role in shaping their second and foreign learning trajectories (Duff, 2012; Duff & Doherty, 2015). For instance, language learners may grapple with their English language use in a school context from one agency position, while they may be able to easily adapt their interactions in English in out of school contexts from the alternative agency position. (Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

Studying learner agency has become crucial in Asian contexts due to education, policy, curriculum and instruction, and societal needs (e.g., Chen, 2019; Fujieda, 2019; Liu & Chao, 2017; Xiao, 2014). Xiao (2014) maintains that agency is essential in self-regulated learning by examining how a distance EFL learner brought his agency into play to enhance his distance language learning in terms of self-efficacy, identity, motivation, and metacognition. Liu and Chao's (2017) study reported on how learner agency manifested in classroom ecology including the sense of teacher presence and the perceivability of affordances. In the study, learner agency was encouraged through technology use and teacher involvement in the classroom. Valdez et al. (2018) investigated challenges teachers face in the Philippine education system. Using reflective teaching, their study found that teachers perceive their learners as active agents capable of regulating and monitoring their own learning. Throughout the research we can see that Asian language teachers generally see learner agency as an important aspect of teaching and learning.

More specifically, research on second language (L2) writing has revealed that agency helps increase students' self-efficacy, motivation, metacognition, as well as negotiating identities (Bhowmik, 2016; Cimasko & Shin, 2017; Fujieda, 2019; Ho, 2017; Jeffery & Wilcox, 2016; Strauss & Xiang, 2006). It is obvious that agency is a critical and decisive factor for L2 writers' agentive activities, reaction, performance, and investment in L2 writing practices and processes through their perceptions on different writing tasks, their use of various writing strategies, and their adaptation of multiple lived writing experiences (Bhowmik, 2016). Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of agency in L2 writing, only a few studies have been conducted and found that L2 learners show their writer agency while engaging in L2 writing practices, which in turn supports the ways in which they write in L2 (e.g., Bhowmik, 2016; Cimasko & Shin, 2017; Fujieda, 2019; Ho, 2017; Jeffery & Wilcox, 2016; Strauss & Xiang, 2006). L2 learners' exercise of agency is not static, but fluid along with their aims to accomplish their desired outcomes—L2 writing products readable to their audiences—reflecting their use of languages, resources, strategies, interests, and funds of knowledge within and across varied language use and learning contexts. Drawing upon the conceptual framework of agency in L2 writing practices, this study presents the following questions:

- (1) In what circumstances do learners of English express their agency in L2 writing practices and processes?
- (2) How do the learners execute their agency while engaging in L2 writing practices?

Theoretical framework and literature review

Conceptualizing agency

Acknowledging the increasing interest in the concept of agency in many fields, Ahearn (2001), in her exploration of the question "Why agency now?" (Messer-Davidow, 1995, p. 23), defines agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2010, p. 28) in a broad sense. Along with this definition, she underlines the point that agency should not be considered a synonym for either "free will" (p. 29) or "resistance" (p. 30) because of the social nature of agency that can be pervasively affected by cultural, linguistic, and social aspects of human actions, beliefs, and intentions (Ahearn, 2010).

Although human actors exercise their agencies which result in the development of their autonomy and identities, exercising agency itself does not necessarily mean active participation in language practices (Huang & Benson, 2013; van Lier, 2008). Rather, the agents can intentionally become passive in engaging language practices in order to express their agency, which also influence their autonomy and identities. By foregrounding the specificity associated with the dynamic and spontaneous nature of contexts, language, and agency, the reciprocal interdependence of language practices and structure draw our attention to agency because human actors can always respond to and (re)construct language practices and structure (Lu & Horner, 2013a, 2013b). By identifying the role of agency in language processes and practices from a social view of learner agency, we can explore how individuals can recontextualize meanings according to different contexts and how differences and sameness simultaneously occur within the power relations across time and space (Lu & Horner, 2013a, 2013b).

Agency within L2 writing practices

When engaging in writing practices, human actors naturally recognize the interaction of elements and building of relationships within social worlds. They simultaneously operate their agency, transform possible resources, and shape their social actions and structures (Hunter & Cooke, 2007; Lytra & Møller, 2011). In this regard, Strauss and Xiang (2006) reveal how the students' discourse shifted from confusion, uncertainty, and negative evaluation, both of self and others to creating discourse space to overcome challenges relative to course tasks at the university level. Other agency related studies (e.g., Mao, 2021; Matsumoto, 2021; Sung, 2022) also report that students exercise their agency in communication with others in ways that closely interrelated with their goals, social conditions, available linguistic, cultural, and contextual resources (e.g., languages, technologies), and the actions of themselves and others. In short, social actors' interaction with available resources, contexts, and other interlocutors enable and further develop their use of negotiated literacy and strategies, which in turn support the actual operation of agency.

Individual writers' acts include, but are not limited to, "negotiating, choosing to accept or deny, self-assessing, planning, questioning, and making decisions" (Saenkhum, 2012, p. 126), and their acts of agency are their choices that construct their beliefs, the actions of others, languages, contexts, and writings (Shapiro et al., 2016). It indicates that every individual has their own agency, and their exercise of writer agency aims to communicate with others in contact zones through linguistic and literate practices which involves the diverse acts of others, resources, and contexts. Hawkins and Mori (2018) also "suggest that objects and other semiotic resources have agency in shaping messages, meanings, and understandings" (p. 4) while treating human agency as emergent and mutually constitutive similar to resources, norms, and settings (Chen, 2017).

Namely, individual writers' agency can be supported or bounded by a complex web of practices, pedagogies, and conditions. Following these ideas, agency can be understood as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments [...] which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). The

existing literature shows how language learners (re)shape and act their agency in consideration of the individuals, tasks, resources interact which are vital to understanding their language and learning practices.

For instance, Ho's (2017) study investigated how Taiwanese graduate students enacted individual agency in navigating the scholarly publication process. The findings showed that the participants utilized strategies of varying effectiveness with their own individual agency, following the publication requirements of international journals written in English. Fujieda's (2019) study also showed academic discourse socialization in a Japanese EFL undergraduate student who studied the content of an English-language scholarly textbook in a research seminar course. The study revealed that the participant accomplished considerable improvement through discursive processes, immersed herself into the discourse community (e.g., a research seminar course), and eventually enhanced her agency.

As such, EFL learners show agentic negotiations and the (re)development of their agency through L2 writing practices in their daily lives, and even in performing and completing academic tasks. Yet, in educational institutions, particularly in elementary and secondary education, very limited space is allowed to show and practice their agentic moves, and very few explicit instructions are provided on how to control and evaluate any particular linguistic and rhetorical practices. That is, while learners already extensively develop communicative practices in their everyday life, their awareness and sense of control over their linguistic and other semiotic resources have been suppressed or ignored in classrooms (Canagarajah, 2013). Following these lines, this study will explore how and under what circumstances Korean EFL high school students exercise their agency in L2 writing practices and processes and the ways in which their L2 writing practices and processes affect their agency and vice versa.

Methodology

Research context, participants, and a researcher's role

This qualitative research was carried out at an all-boys Catholic high school (henceforth Salem High School, pseudonym) in the southwestern part of South Korea over the course of two years, from June 2018 to May 2020. The school was distinctive in that school curriculum prioritized the development of students' writing and presentation skills in contrast to multiple choice exams. Thus, most mid-term and final examination questions were in the form of short-answer and essay, particularly in English, at Grade 10 and 11. The school also provided diverse English programs such as a reading program for students to read and write a book report in English and a program for international exchange and cultural engagement in which students could share their knowledge with Filipino students in English. Despite the school's substantial efforts to encourage students' English use in school, Korean was mainly used as the medium of instruction in English classroom (and in other classrooms) unless special circumstances arose in which English-only practices were required (e.g., English presentation contest).

One hundred students (10th grade boys, all Koreans) and two Korean English teachers participated in a larger research project over the course of two years. Our findings derive from the project with six students out of a larger sample of 100 students. Specifically, for the focus of this study, the six students' cases, Jaemin, Jisoo, Junsang, Jonghoon,

Sumin, and Hyung-Seo, were selected via theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The student participants were explicit about how and why they used linguistic and non-linguistic resources and made use of particular interests and knowledge in L2 writing practices and processes. They also pondered possible actions and resources they could employ in a given context while excogitating linguistic and cultural differences as well as the readers of their writing.

The six students reported that they started to learn English when they were younger (age varied from six to nine) and had little experience of writing in English before entering the high school. In speaking of their English writing experiences before high school, they stated that they wrote some phrases or sentences in response to short answer questions and fill-in-the-blanks questions in English assessment tasks; however, other than the phrase and sentence-level writing, their English essay writing was almost null. Compared to their elementary and middle school writing experiences, they reported more frequent and diverse L2 writing experiences at Salem High.

Over the course of data collection period, I played multiple roles: a host and a presenter of College Application Essay (CAE) writing workshops for the students, a teacher of a Researching and Authentic Writing (RAW) project, an informal mentor (who supported the development of their English writing practices), and a researcher. When the students asked for my help in writing English essays, I provided feedback and guidance. I also forged close relationships with their English schoolteachers in order to better understand the students' language and learning practices in English classroom.

Data collection and analysis

Initially, I collected data from one hundred high school EFL learners who voluntarily participated in College Application Essay (CAE) writing workshops in June 2018. The workshop was specially designed and developed for the students and held in Salem High School over the course of three weeks as three consecutive workshops (one workshop per week). The workshops addressed American CAE writing styles and features, asking the workshop participants to write their college application essay in English while engaging in various writing activities such as critical reflection on their CAE writing processes. Additionally, the students took a pre- and post-survey at the beginning and at the end of the workshops.

After the workshops, I conducted a Researching and Authentic Writing (RAW) project for two consecutive semesters (Fall 2018 and Spring 2019). The project aimed to have students experience academic reading and writing by reading research articles and writing a short research report in English. Each student chose his own research topic that he was apt to explore. For the RAW project, I recruited participants from the workshop. As part of the recruitment process, I posted a recruitment flyer on the school bulletin board and interviewed the students who wished to participate in the RAW project. Of the 100 workshop participants, ten students initially joined the project and six out of ten remained in the project at the end. No compensation was offered to the project participants.

In the following school semesters (from fall 2019 to Spring 2020), I conducted six semi-structured interviews with six participants who agentively took part in other school events and activities relative to English to reveal the participants' English writing

practices and processes in depth. Also, I frequently visited the school and observed their language and learning practices in the English classroom and other school events (e.g., the English presentation contest). I collected writing artifacts produced by the participants and conducted two follow-up interviews based on the artifacts. To summarize, the data for the research were collected through multiple sources: surveys, observations, fieldnotes, writing artifacts, and interviews.

The collected data were coded and analyzed inductively in order to identify salient patterns and themes “until [it reached] the level of data saturation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 150). Further, individual-level logic model was employed to specify a complex and repeated chain of events or incidents over a certain period (Yin, 2018, p. 186). The cause-effect patterns show the transitions between events along with related contextual conditions (Yin, 2018), which enabled me to explore under what circumstances and how the students engage in L2 writing practices. Additionally, to gain insights into the role of languages and other placed resources in particular contexts (e.g., the English essay contest), the six cases were examined with a case-process comparison to explore each student’s language and learning practices with a series of comparable actions they had taken during the data collection period (Miles et al., 2020). Over the course of data collection and analysis, the systematic and inductive comparative nature of the constant comparative method supports me to discover the main foci: (1) the young EFL learners’ participation in L2 writing practices in multiple L2 writing contexts, and (2) the act and (re)development of their agency as an L2 writer in EFL contexts.

In short, in order to explore in what circumstances and in what ways these Korean EFL learners agentively choose to use resources in L2 writing, this study investigates the students’ writing practices by looking at their participations in various school events (e.g., English essay contest). Since this research focuses on the Korean EFL students’ exercise of agency in L2 writing practices and processes, the data were analyzed with three main foci: (1) the EFL learners’ agentive use of multiple linguistic and non-linguistic resources, (2) their enhanced awareness of resources and actions available in a given context, and (3) their deliberate and voluntary use of funds of knowledge for accomplishing their desired outcomes. While these findings are intertwined and not separate entities, they have been divided into the three sections for convenience.

Findings

This section focuses on three major findings in terms of the six Salem High School students’ exercise of agency in the process of L2 writing and the influence of their L2 writing practices on the development of their agency. The students indicated that both linguistic and non-linguistic resources came into play in their L2 writing practices and processes. Especially when speaking of their use of linguistic knowledge in English writing, all of them acknowledged that both languages (English and Korean) played pivotal roles in crafting their essays and written responses in English. They also stated that the use of semiotic resources (e.g., images) helped them to successfully deliver their intended meanings in English to both Korean audience and speakers of other languages (e.g., English, Filipino). Further, their voluntary participation in varied L2 writing programs, contests, and activities enabled them to raise their awareness of placed resources and

available actions they could take to further develop their L2 writing practices. Lastly, the students also discovered and agentively made use of funds of knowledge which became the basis for all kinds of English learning and writing practices.

Agentive use of multiple linguistic and non-linguistic resources in L2 writing practices

One of the major findings of this study is that the EFL students' flexible and fluid use of varied linguistic and non-linguistic resources was voluntary. In other words, without any prior guidance from their teachers, they voluntarily utilized multiple resources in L2 writing practices in order to explicitly express their intended meanings in written form in any given situations (e.g., English writing and presentation contest). Further, even under the circumstances where the students were encouraged to use L2 only, they voluntarily and agentively used other resources such as their L1 (Korean) and images.

For instance, when the students recognized L1 and images as shared resources with their audiences, they came into play. On one occasion, they created PowerPoint presentations as part of an English speech contest in school. Although their teachers advised them to use English-only, the students voluntarily included Korean definition of English words and corresponding images in their PowerPoint slides for their Korean audience (mostly their Korean peers who were learning English). The reasons for the use of L1 and other semiotic resources can be found in the excerpt below. Similar to the other students, Hyung-Seo pointed out the importance of employing Korean and images for his audiences, Korean English learners, considering that some of their peers might not be able to understand the content of his English presentation if it was offered in English only.

[Hyung-Seo: Although it was an English speech contest, I thought that informing people was the main purpose of the speech. So, I did not want to make people less informed because of difficult English words or jargons. That's why I personally included Korean definitions for some particular English words [along with images], expecting many people to clearly understand my speech. (Originally in Korean)]

The students' agentive use of L1 and other semiotic resources in L2 writing practices was also frequently observed in their performance in academic assignments (e.g., English book report). For instance, when writing English essays, the students would include summaries or the conclusions of the essays written in Korean along with images to illustrate the essay's main ideas. Yet, their reasons for providing these additions in their written English assignments were slightly different from their reasons for doing this in their presentations. The students reported that they felt the inclusion of L1 and images would enhance their (Korean) English teachers' understanding of their written works, expressing concern that their intended meanings were not being clearly expressed in L2. In other words, they were afraid that their English expressions might fail to communicate their intended meanings and ideas –showing their anxiety and hopes of influencing a grade. Thus, they included written Korean and images as a back-up strategy to ensure that they would be understood by their teachers (graders).

Likewise, the students were often asked to write a review of an English book as part of independent reading assignment for English class. In developing and presenting their book reviews, there was no strict forms, constraint, or rules to follow; however, their

English teacher highly encouraged them to use English-only for the assignment. Some (Jaemin, Jisoo, and Sumin) reported their book reviews solely in a written form while the others (Junsang, Jonghoon, and Hyeong Seo) created them in the form of PowerPoint presentations and user-created video content (UCC).

Particularly, Hyeong Seo's UCC video of book review on the English version of *The Selfish Gene* was distinctive in that he did not simply cut and paste from existing images but recorded the process of his drawing which outlined the flow of the book. To clearly present his understanding of the English book, before creating the video he first reviewed the Korean version of *The Selfish Gene*, which he had read a few years before. Then, based on his understanding of the two different versions of *The Selfish Gene*, he included Korean subtitles right below English ones in his book report video (as shown in Fig. 1). As he had done in his PowerPoint presentations before, he voluntarily made use of his L1 (Korean) along with English. Further, in order to explicitly deliver his intended meanings and ideas, he recorded himself drawing pictures following the storyline of the book. It is important to note that Hyeong Seo maintained his use of Korean and images in crafting his English book review on his own accord because he strongly believed that the use of the multiple linguistic and non-linguistic resources would help his English teacher better understand his English expressions in the book report. Namely, Hyung-Seo's L2 writing practices well indicate that he considered the purpose of his English writing—delivering an understandable message in a written form—and voluntarily and agentively used L1 and other semiotic resources as shared resources to support his readers' understanding of his message.

When giving presentations to linguistically and culturally diverse audiences, the participants made use of semiotic resources (e.g., images) adding to linguistic resources (English). Significant examples of this can be found in their L2 writing experiences and presentations in the 2018 program for international exchange and cultural engagement—a cooperative project between two Catholic schools in Korea and Philippine. When Filipino students visited Salem High School in Korea, the six students performed as the cultural ambassadors and gave presentations about their school to the Filipino high school students along with their Korean peers, introducing the history of Salem

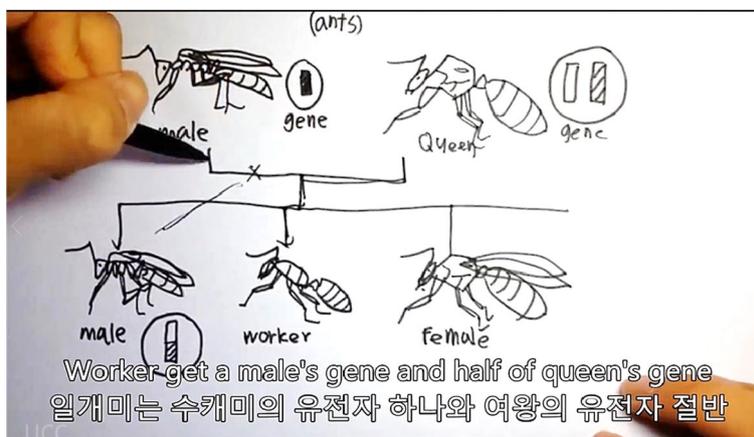


Fig. 1 Hyung Seo's use of L1, L2, and images in English book review report

High School, the school facilities, and what they had been learning in the courses they were taking.

In the process of making and offering the PowerPoint presentations, they all stated that they attempted to limit their L1 use while mainly utilizing L2 (English) as they perceived English as a shared linguistic resource between Filipino and Korean speakers (Fig. 2 below). Further, they voluntarily made use of multiple images in their PowerPoint to clearly show the audience what they intended to talk about. Figure 2 below shows Jaemin’s PowerPoint presentation on “hydrogen peroxide decomposition with catalase” which he learned in science class. In terms of his use of L2 and images, Jaemin said, “I thought... I might not be able to express my science knowledge, which I learned in Korean, [...] exclusively in English. So, I included images so that both Korean and Filipino students could [better] understand my presentation” (originally in Korean).

The pivotal point here is that Jaemin, just like Hyung-Seo, seemed to perceive “making his presentation easily accessible and understandable” as the most important aspect of a successful act of presenting. Thus, rather than crafting his PowerPoint merely in English (L2), Jaemin strategically made use of images in order to explicitly deliver his knowledge in English to Filipino and Korean learners of English. Clearly, his statement indicates his voluntary and agentive act in choosing and employing multiple resources reflecting on the shared resources, audience, and a presentation space in the development of his PowerPoint.

Their voluntary use of multiple resources in L2 writing practices indicates that they do not merely employ L2 to complete or present their L2 writing products. Rather, they exercised their agency to look for more available resources and actions in a given situation for meaningful communications with the speakers of other languages (Korean and Filipino) and for the aim of academic accomplishment (e.g., book report), even under the circumstances where English-use-only was encouraged.

Enhanced awareness of possible resources and actions in L2 writing practices

One major finding is that the students frequently and continuously reflected on their out-of-school L2 writing experiences when engaging in L2 writing practices in school, which heavily influenced their awareness of available or limited resources in English classroom. To be specific, beyond school walls, the students seemed to utilize rich and varied resources such as online search engines (e.g., Google), translation apps, and

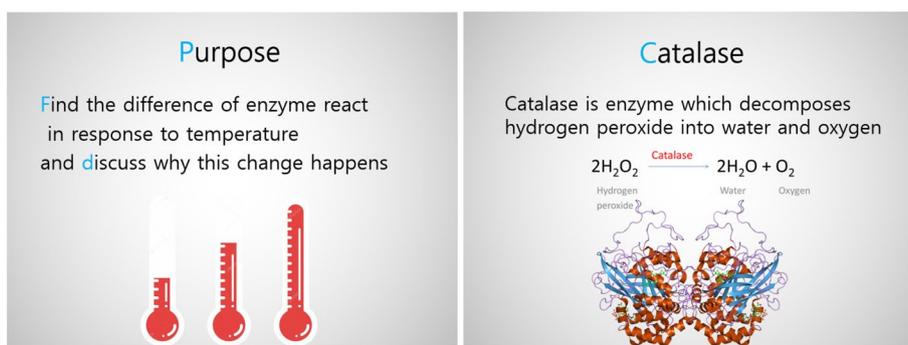


Fig. 2 Jaemin’s use of L2 and images for the international exchange program presentation

proofreading and grammar apps. However, because cell phones were banned in school, students' access to the Internet and online resources was limited. Thus, in order to write in L2 (English) for English writing tasks, the students had to rely heavily on help from their teachers and peers and needed to have paper dictionaries or the English hard-copies of the books were using (e.g., *The Selfish Genes*).

The participants acknowledged that a wide range of online resources in out-of-school environments were useful in their L2 writing practices and processes while showing frustration with their resource-limited school environments. Despite this, they did not quit writing in L2 but (re)developed their agency to facilitate their L2 writing, even under very challenging, resource-limited contexts. One such context was an English essay contest. For the English essay contest, an English-Korean dictionary was the only resource allowed to the contest participants for the preparation of their essays. All six students in the study participated in the contest. Hyung-Seo in particular mentioned that the English-Korean dictionary seemed useless because it only gave Korean definitions of English words, rather than English translations of Korean words. When working on English essays, particularly in out-of-school settings, Hyung-Seo (and the other students) was accustomed to using various online resources to look for how Korean expressions could be translated and properly expressed in English. Yet, the students could not apply this more dynamic and flexible online L2 writing practice when preparing their essays for the contest. Hyung-Seo expressed frustration and admitted to a sense of failure during the context due to this situation.

Yet, Hyung-Seo did not stop writing the essay but found new strategies to further develop his L2 writing within the restriction of the contest. Specifically, he used the strategy of circumlocution to express his ideas in English when he could not find the words he needed (and did not have access to his online resources). Further, with permission from his teacher, Hyung-Seo included a summary of his English essay in Korean to address and clarify the main points of his writing that might have lacked precision in English because of his use of circumlocution. It is important to note that the resource-limited environment pushed Hyung-Seo to find, evaluate, and implement resources and acts available in a particular situation which shows the exercise of his agency in L2 writing practices and processes.

Like Hyung-Seo, four other students, Jaemin, Jisoo, Jonghoon, and Sumin also experienced difficulties in producing natural English when engaging in L2 writing practices with limited access to resources in school. Yet, such challenges did not prevent them from achieving successful outcomes in L2. For example, since they already knew that online resources would not be allowed in the contest, in advance of the contest they searched for English articles online at home. They searched for articles were about the latest news topics, such as self-driving cars, on the assumption that the essay topics would be related. Then, they memorized English expressions from the articles that they thought would best help them when writing their essays later. These four students said that these agentive and strategic moves helped them to better express their ideas in their essays.

Additionally, Junsang was often troubled with his grammar when involved in L2 writing practices in English classroom. Since he had perceived grammar, particularly the use of conjunctions, as his weak point in his L2 writing, he used to ask for

feedback from his peers to overcome the challenges. Yet, since there was no channel to seek peer feedback during his participation in the English essay contest, Junsang had to figure out another way to enhance the grammatical aspects of his L2 writing. When asked about why he felt troubled with English grammar and how he addressed his difficulties during his participation in the essay contest, Junsang said: “Because I could not ask for help from the more advanced peers, particularly during the contest, [...] and... because it’s tricky [for me] to use connectives... like relative pronouns and conjunctions... I avoided using them as much as possible [...] attempted to express my ideas without using them” (originally in Korean). His statement shows that the resource-limited context thwarted his efforts to receive peer feedback. Nevertheless, he decided to finish his essay by structuring his writing to avoid the problematical grammar, which itself was an expression of agency. All six students were not provided with a clear guidance on how to utilize placed resources in school and what acts they could take to further develop their writing. Further, the school environment constrained their flexible and fluid use of multiple resources. Despite the resource and time constraints, they reshaped their agency through the selective use of resources to produce their desired outcomes despite the suboptimal conditions for exercising agency, which elevated their awareness of placed resources and acts in a given context.

The exercise of their agency was also found during the students’ participation in the College Application Essay (CAE) writing workshops. After writing up their first draft of a college application essay, the students read a good essay example which was written by an American student. Then, they were asked to provide written responses to the reflection questions before moving on to their second draft of the essay. The reflection questions were mainly about their perceptions of the important aspects of the good American college application essay and their own comparisons between their essays and the essay example. While answering the questions, they seemed to grab a clearer sense of the actions and resources they could utilize to develop a good college application essay, which applied to their second draft later.

Specifically, as shown below (Fig. 3), Jisoo’s response shows his recognition of the differences and similarities between the example essay and his first draft of the CAE written in English. Jisoo started his response by addressing the strength of the good essay example, and later he pointed out what he missed in his essay reflecting on the good example. Jisoo’s written response indicates how he came to realize the strong points in the example which in turn helped him to recognize the weakness of his

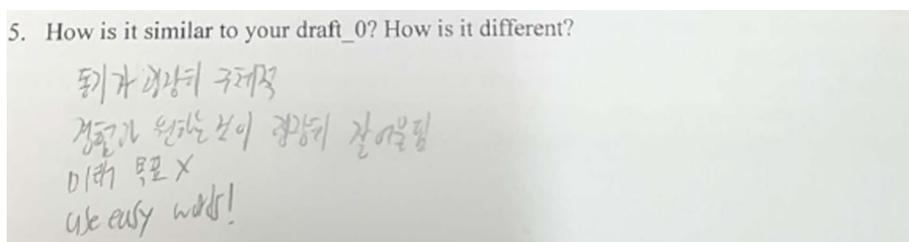


Fig. 3 Jisoo’s increasing awareness of the important aspects of a good application essay

essay. His growing awareness enabled him to (re)develop his essay. This example suggests the importance of the providing more resources (e.g., good L2 writing example, reflection questions) for students' L2 writing practices, particularly in educational settings, which may lead to them to recognize, decide, and utilize available actions and resources.

[Translation]

5. How is [the American college application essay example] similar to your [first draft]? How is it different?

The essay writer's motivation for applying college is very specific.

The writer's experiences addressed in the essay are well aligned with [the writer's goal].

[I did] not demonstrate my future goal.

[I may need to] use easy words [like the writer].

The (re)development of agency through using funds of knowledge

Although there was not much explicit guidance for their L2 writing practices and processes in English classroom, all the six students brought up their previous experiences of using various resources (e.g., online search engines), knowledge, and skills while reshaping their L2 writing practices accommodating on the resource and time constraints. Particularly in searching for the content of their L2 writing, they agentively made use of their personal interests reflecting on their former reading and writing experiences. The best examples were found in the students' participation in semester-long projects, an English book report and Researching and Authentic Writing (RAW) projects, which uncovered their agentive actions grounded in their interests and knowledge.

For the English book report project, their English teachers instructed the students to read English books and create a book report in English in any form (e.g., video, Power-Point). Yet, the teachers did not provide detailed guidelines such as how to search for books online or on the assumption that their students might have more knowledge of online searching and the books that they would like to read. Further, because the project aimed to have the students expose to extensive reading, not L2 writing, the teachers did not expect the students to submit polished book review report but to share their understanding of the readings and knowledge with other peers.

In searching for books in English for the project, the students did not often search for new ones but the English version of the books they previously read in Korean and felt interested in. To be specific, Junsang embarked on the project after reading the English version of his favorite manga series, *Your Lie in April* by Naoshi Arakawa, which he read in Korean during his middle school years. He stated that his interests in the particular manga drew his attention to the English version of the manga series because he believed that he might be able to "fully understand the English texts without [frequently] looking

at dictionary definitions of new English words,” which might hamper the flow of reading. Also, he further stated that his familiarity of the Korean versions of the books led him to want to read the English version.

Similar to Junsang, other students also said that they chose to read English versions of books they had read in Korean before. Jonghoon talked about how he came to read *Harry Potter* in Korean and English respectively, saying “When I first saw the English version of Harry Potter books, [...] I certainly wish to read it. But... I was a bit overwhelmed by its thickness and the large Harry Potter series..., so decided to read the Korean version Harry Potter first... to get familiar with the story before reading the English version.” Here, Jonghoon made use of the Korean Harry Potter version in order to reduce his anxiety toward and to gain familiarity with the English Harry Potter series, which also enabled him to delve into writing an English book report about it. Junsang’s and Jonghoon’s choices of how and what they read for the book review project showed their exercise of agency in applying their funds of knowledge for the development of their English language skills and for the achievement of successful outcomes of their English writing tasks –executing their agency for the fulfilment of their needs.

In the Researching and Authentic Writing (RAW) project, which asked the students to write English summaries of research articles, the students chose their own research topics considering their current interests and future majors. Then, they were instructed to search for at least five research articles that best fit into their research interests through search engines such as Google Scholar and Research Information Sharing Services (RISS)—an academic article search engine in South Korea. As it happened, I introduced Google Scholar to the participants while they suggested RISS. It was because they were familiar with using RISS, having used it for social science projects in the past. After obtaining the articles and reading them, the participants were asked to write summaries of the articles in English and uploaded them to Google classroom. At the end of the program, they commented on each other’s summaries.

Although this was the first time the students had read academic articles and written summaries in English, they seemed very excited to participate in the program. It seemed that their pre-existing funds of knowledge and English learning experiences reinforced their awareness and beliefs in their own L2 writing skills. For example, Jonghoon’s research interest centered around vaccines for Ebola, and Jisoo focused on articles about a heart defibrillator. The research articles they found seemed difficult for them to understand; however, they brought to the project all the knowledge they obtained from their Korean readings on the same topic. Further, they searched for more articles in Korean and English respectively, and they even reached out to experts and professors via email seeking help in understanding the specific concepts from the articles.

As such, they prioritized and focused on understanding the articles because they saw their summaries as condensed versions of the original readings. They believed that they would have little chance writing a good summary if they did not understand the article in its entirety. To better understand the content of the articles, the students focused on reading comprehension first. Then, they skimmed through the texts several times while summarizing them in Korean prior to writing up an English summary to examine the

overall organization of their writing. Their L2 writing practices reveal that their agentive actions in summary writing had evolved from their funds of knowledge—their previous experiences of several writing projects (e.g., social science project).

Discussion

This study attempted to address under what contexts and the ways in which the high school students exercise and (re)develop their agency through L2 writing practices and processes. The findings of this study showed the students' agentive and voluntary participation in diverse L2 writing projects which enabled them to use more diverse linguistic and non-linguistic resources. Although they were not provided with clear guidance on how to locate and use placed resources for their successful L2 writing, they could advance their awareness of multiple resources and actions available in a given context of their own accord. Clearly, L2 writers' agency is not static but evolved through diverse writing activities, leading them to adopt and utilize multiple lived experiences and various resources in composing (Bhowmik, 2016).

Most importantly, the students accommodated themselves in a range of ways to different contexts, from Korean English classrooms to linguistically heterogeneous environments (e.g., the international exchange program), which reshaped their use of resources and actions in L2 writing practices and processes. Although students were not explicitly guided or encouraged to use Korean and other semiotic resources, they employed their L1 (Korean) and images as shared resources to successfully deliver their messages to Korean peers and teachers. Conversely, when presenting their works to linguistically diverse audiences, the students made use of non-linguistic resources and L2 (English), not their L1 (Korean).

Secondly, the participants developed and implemented their agency with growing awareness of linguistic resources and actions, even under challenging and resource-constrained contexts. They acted more agentively under the circumstances where more resources and possible actions were available, such as in out-of-school environments. Despite their ability to exploit resources in out-of-school settings, when in situations with very limited access to resources, as in the English essay contest, the students' outcomes often revealed their struggles in transferring their knowledge in L1 (Korean) into L2 (English) writing practices.

Yet, the students did find their ways to overcome the challenges and demonstrated their agency to produce English essays under time and resource constraints. Specifically, upon hearing about the contest rules and guidelines, they all recognized the restrictions that they needed to overcome to achieve their goals. Then, they considered, examined, and decided upon the best resources and actions for their successful L2 writing practices. Namely, the resource and action-limited environments stimulated the exercise of strong writer agency to produce L2 writing in a successful manner. This shows that individuals are capable of changing how they explore and use placed resources and possible actions when such resources and interests are situated in environments varying from resource poor to resource rich.

Similar findings can be seen in prior research on agency and L2 writing. For example, in Prasetyawati and Ardi (2020), the first-year EFL Indonesian undergraduates productively addressed challenges where the solution was not clear cut when engaging in L2

writing projects on Instagram. In this new learning environment (Instagram), they took actions on their accord (e.g., asking their peers, browsing and checking English words on the Internet) in order to find solutions to overcome the challenges in L2 writing practices and processes. Having enriched their L2 writing experiences, they came to consider target audience and simultaneously increasing their awareness of how to create, develop, and post their writing projects on Instagram.

In the same line, the Salem High School students expressed their agency based on their previous language experiences relative to funds of knowledge. In dealing with given tasks, the EFL learners brought their current interests and its related knowledge into their L2 writing projects to achieve their desired outcomes. Their previous language learning experiences also came into play in exercising their agency and devising their writing strategies for their successful L2 practices and processes.

The students showed the agentive and voluntary use of multiple resources concurrently with the enhanced awareness of linguistic and non-linguistic resources and utilizing their funds of knowledge. The (re)development of their agency were encouraged by their participation in various L2 writing projects which enabled them to express their agency through the exploration of possible resources and acts in a given context. The important point is that despite the suboptimal conditions for agency (Shapiro et al., 2016), they all agentively participated in L2 writing projects. It implies that L2 writers are capable of recognizing the differences and sameness across time and spaces and recontextualizing resources and agentive activities from their previous experiences (Lu & Horner, 2013a, 2013b).

The overall findings show the plausibility of agency development through multiple and diverse L2 writing practices. The EFL students' agency leads them to voluntarily explore, examine, and decide linguistic and non-linguistic resources to use, to develop their awareness of plausible actions and resources in a particular L2 writing context, and to adopt funds of knowledge in composing. As Prasetyawati and Ardi (2020) note, "Agency is associated with students' contributions to the improvement of the learning environment and the quality of instruction" (p. 43). It implies that their agency promotes L2 writing, which in turn empowers them to become more agentive learners as "it determines how L2 writers act, react, perform, and invest in a given writing task" (Bhowmik, 2016, p. 282). The findings of this study imply that agency is critical in many aspects of learning as it can provide ways to manage their life-long learning path considering the learning circumstances in the post-pandemic era.

Conclusion

This study suggests that L2 learners' engagement in writing practices can be promoted by the broader network of linguistic and non-linguistic resources in L2 writing tasks. Also, it is important to recount that their growing interests and increased awareness in working on diverse writing tasks heavily affected the act and (re)development of their agency later in their L2 writing practices. It suggests that successful participation in school L2 writing projects, despite limited resources in educational settings, can be better facilitated when the L2 learners have a sense of L2 writer's agency that they can fall back upon. Further, given that young L2 writers' sense of agency establishes the boundaries of their writing space, agency with and in L2 writing implies that young L2 learners

are not deficient but agentive language users with full capability of using knowledge, practices, and context of writing to develop their identities as L2 writers.

Although the findings extend previous research on these topics, there are a few limitations to this study. First, data was collected from a limited group of students that may not entirely represent Korean EFL learners' act of agency with regard to L2 writing practices in the current research context. Perhaps, a study on more participants with a longer research cycle may reveal the exercise of L2 writer's agency more in depth. Also, since the research was conducted before and at the beginning of the pandemic, the availability of resources in educational settings may have been changed which requires additional exploration in future studies.

The findings of this study hold important pedagogical implications for EFL researchers and educators in L2 writing field. First, the examples from the six Salem High School students implies the vital role of multiple and dynamic L2 writing experiences in relation to EFL learning for the formation of L2 writer's agency. Namely, the students' acts, obtained either in L2 writing projects or from their language and learning practices, are essential for learning and promoting L2 writing. Also, it might be helpful for teachers and students if they can negotiate the boundaries of authoring space and resources early in their L2 writing projects. For instance, language teachers can introduce a list of online sources and websites for L2 writing and provide more detailed guidelines for L2 writing projects (e.g., asking students to employ their L1 and L2 writing experiences from the beginning of the writing project). It may support and enable the students to clearly envision and employ best resources available to produce well-developed L2 writing products, which in turn increases their sense of agency. In short, L2 writing educators can assist young learners by encouraging them to freely negotiate and develop their L2 writing and agency by offering more diverse L2 writing activities and projects which allow fluid and flexible use of multiple multimodal resources.

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Author contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection and analysis, and manuscript preparation. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent is obtained in writing from the participants for their participation in this research and for the publication of their writing samples and other related data in this case report.

Competing interests

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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