

# What Lies beneath Inappropriate English Vocabulary Use?

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## ◀ SUMMARY ▶

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This paper is an investigation of what makes it hard for Korean EFL writers to use vocabulary productively. It can be argued that sentence-level issues of writing would not be addressed appropriately unless knowledge of the building bricks of a sentence - vocabulary - is solid. With 29 Korean EFL writers, this study sought to find out what aspects of English vocabulary use by the Koreans need more work. The participants translated a Korean passage into English and then were interviewed about both the problems shown in their writings and what lies beneath the problems. The translation task showed that the Korean EFL writers have three difficulties using vocabulary productively. Their weaknesses in choosing the right word in context were evident ; their knowledge about a word's parts of speech was fairly limited ; and, it turned out, using verbs appropriately is no easy task for the Korean students. The findings suggest that Korean EFL writers also need to be aware that in contrast to reading, writing requires a thorough knowledge of the usage of each word.

*Key Words : collocation, dictionary habits, inanimate subjects*

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## I . Introduction

It appears that producing a good piece of writing requires more than just grammatical accuracy. The ability to simply generate a correct sentence may not be enough to make a text comprehensible. A sentence would not make sense in context, though it is grammatically correct, if the words that constitute the sentence are the wrong choice. Since vocabulary is the building bricks of a sentence, quality writing would not be guaranteed without adequate vocabulary skills.

In this regard, Wilkins(1972) noted that “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”(p. 111). The degree to which a sentence’s expression is appropriate would depend on the appropriateness of each word that forms the sentence. To make a text coherent, each sentence matters. And to make a sentence meaningful in the whole context, each word counts as well.

From an EFL perspective, what is important is that L2 vocabulary errors are partly L1-specific(Altenberg & Granger, 2001). Put another way, certain English vocabulary may be hard for a specific EFL group to use. Korean EFL writers, for instance, may find a specific English verb challenging to use due to L1 use. Though a number of studies have claimed that EFL/ESL writing is characterized by inappropriate language use(Severino, 1994; Silva, 1992; Zhu, 2001), few studies have attempted to recognize what type of vocabulary a particular EFL group find hard to use, and what aspects of L1 use affect L2 word use.

This study seeks to identify L2 vocabulary use problems that the Korean EFL writers have in common. In this case, an emphasis is placed on recognizing possible “Koreanness” that drives the Koreans to certain vocabulary that results in the wrong word choice. The findings of this study would help EFL writing instruction focus specifically on the particular needs of Korean students in terms of vocabulary use.

## II . Previous Studies

It has been argued that vocabulary skills are a factor in EFL writing. Severino(1994) contended that wording beats out rhetoric or mechanics in agonizing EFL writers. Analyzing the writing of Asian EFL students, she found that L2 syntactic and lexical constraints greatly affect the degree of what is said, and written, and how. Such constraints lead the students to invent unique, poetic, or cumbersome phrases that native English writers rarely use. For instance, Severino suggested that the sentence “I have never been scolded by them with big voice and violence,” which a Japanese student noted, can be sounding more conventional by switching the prepositional phrase to adverbs like this: “I have never been scolded by them loudly or violently”(p. 21).

Likewise, 10 of 13 EFL students Silva(1992) interviewed reported that their limited L2 vocabulary is a contributing factor to impairing the quality of their English writing. His study showed that inadequate vocabulary skills lead to giving up on some ideas, since lexical resources needed to convey the ideas are not available. He also found that unavailability of lexical items

affects the length of writing, compelling those students to simplify the phenomenon that would have been described in more detail in their first language. Arndt's(1987) study indicated that inappropriate L2 vocabulary skills manifest themselves in the process of writing. By having six Chinese EFL students compose aloud in both their first and English language, she found that a revising activity(making changes to the written text in order to clarify meaning) for word choice was more common in the L2 task than in the L1 task, but a rehearsing activity(trying out ideas and the language in which to express them) for word choice was less common in L2 than L1. This suggests that their limited L2 lexical knowledge caused them to question their decisions in L2 and to hesitate to try out alternatives in L2.

As far as vocabulary size is concerned, Zhu's(2001) study indicated that EFL students particularly lack vocabulary for formal writing. After doing argumentative writing, her participants reported having difficulty with words for persuasion, such as logical connectors. Similarly, Doushaq(1986) found that Arab EFL writers tend to use the ordinary language of daily life in their academic writing, damaging the formality of the genre. Besides hurting the formal writing style, the failure to choose appropriate formal academic vocabulary was found to result in less persuasive writing. It may be that informal vocabulary is less effective in "condensing more and clearer meaning into smaller chunks of language"(Stotsky, 1981, p. 320). This seems to suggest that inappropriate types of vocabulary will likely keep the reader from absorbing the substance of the writers' communication more efficiently.

Of all parts of speech, according to Power(1997), verbs are crucial for quality writing. She contended that good writing is in the verbs, not in the details writers add or delete, since the details are part of the writer's craft. Lewis(1993) noted that of all the word categories, traditional vocabulary teaching tended to focus on a specific category, noun, which leaves verbs underrepresented. He suggested that knowledge of nouns might not work in writing or speaking unless knowledge of the other words that co-occur with the nouns, namely verbs, is available.

This position of verbs in writing would seem to suggest that verbs could present more difficulty to EFL writers than any other parts of speech. For instance, the use of basic or high frequency verbs is found to be problematic for EFL writers (Altenberg & Granger, 2001 ; Lennon, 1996). By comparing the EFL texts written by French and Swedish learners of English with native English speakers' texts, Altenberg and Granger(2001) examined the use of one of the high frequency verbs<sup>1)</sup>, "make." Regarding overall frequency of "make," the French learners underused

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1) The high frequency verbs Altenberg and Granger chose include "have, do, know, think, get, go, say, see, come, make, take, look, give, find, and use."

the verb and the Swedish learners used it a bit more than the native English speakers. What is interesting is that both EFL groups significantly underused "make" in delexical<sup>2)</sup> structures. While the delexical use of "make" poses a similar difficulty to the two EFL groups, the causative<sup>3)</sup> use of "make" clearly differentiated the French from the Swedish. The Swedish learners considerably overused the causative "make" compared to both the French and the native English speakers; the Swedish used nearly twice as many causative structures as the French learners. Altenberg and Granger suggested that the Swedish fondness for the causative "make" is partly due to a transfer from the corresponding Swedish construction. For example, Swedish has the exact equivalents of the constructions such as "make it possible," "make it easy for someone to." The problem here is that the use of causative "make" is so handy that the Swedish learners tend to summarily employ such "make," ending in clumsy expressions. In other words, the causative "make" is used even in cases where a single causative verb would be more appropriate. Examples of such use are:

The use of the plastic wrap not only increases the garbage mountain, it also make the air polluted... (pollutes the air) (p. 182)  
 ...to make people come closer to each other (bring people closer) (p. 181)

Taken together, one would be led to conclude that EFL writers basically have a small range of vocabulary. A lack of vocabulary makes it hard to choose the right word for the proper expression, which ends in cumbersome expressions. L1 word use also can be a factor in inappropriate use of L2 vocabulary, which means a specific EFL group might have its own problems with L2 vocabulary. The next chapter deals with the ways in which the vocabulary problems facing Korean students are identified.

### III. Method

This study combined Korean EFL writings with semi-structured interviews(Wolcott, 1997) to understand what accounts for vocabulary problems shown in the written products of Korean EFL

- 2) High frequency verbs are often used as delexical verbs such as "make a decision." In this case, the verbs are used "with nouns as their object to indicate simply that someone performs an action, not that someone affects or create something"(Altenberg & Granger, 2001, p. 174).
- 3) Examples of causative use of "make" are "make something possible," "make someone do something," and "make someone a star."

students. Writing samples were collected from the translation task. Since the translation task requires all the participants to write the same passage in English, it allows one to see how many Koreans have difficulty using a particular word or phrase, ending up misusing or underusing it. That is, the translation task enables one to identify what type of wrong word choice is universal among the participants in expressing an idea in English. Interviews are intended to understand what causes inappropriate vocabulary use, making up for what the writing task itself does not offer.

## 1. Participants

The participants in this study are 29 Korean students enrolled in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at a university in the US. The vast majority of Korean students in the IEP are current college students in Korea; for instance, 83% of the participants went on leave two or three semesters to start the IEP, which means that those participants are expected to return to Korea after completing the IEP. For that reason, it seems reasonable to refer to the participants in this study as EFL writers rather than ESL ones. The rest of the participants are college graduates and a spouse of a visiting scholar. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 36, with a mean age of 23; included 16 women and 13 men; and had spent from two to 11 months in the U.S, seven months on average. All the participants had their primary and secondary education in Korea, and learned English only in Korea until they came to the United States to enter the IEP. As for the English proficiency, 86% of the participants came from the intermediate-level writing classes.

## 2. Instruments

### 1) Translation

Participants did a translation task by rewording a Korean passage in English. The Korean passage was my translation of an article from a NEWSWEEK<sup>4)</sup> magazine. Attention was given to making sure to translate the original English text into Korean as natural-sounding as possible, and then a few native Korean speakers proofread my translation to see if there were any appropriateness or accuracy problems. Following is the source text:

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4) The original text is on page 14 issued October 13, 2003.

① Too much sun is bad for the skin. ② But the damage from UV rays is not limited to the skin. ③ Our eyes are at risk, as well. ④ The surface of the eye is somewhat like the skin. ⑤ And it is on the surface of the eye that most damage occurs. ⑥ Overdoing it in the sun can cause inflammation of the cornea. ⑦ UV light can cause changes in the lens of the eye that eventually bring about cataracts. ⑧ While cloudy days may seem safe, that's not the case. ⑨ UV light passes right through the clouds. ⑩ So don't let a dull day fool you.

The Korean translation of the passage above is as follows:

① 너무 많이 햇빛을 받으면 피부에 나쁘다. ② 하지만 자외선으로부터 받는 피해가 피부에 국한된 건 아니다. ③ 우리들의 눈 또한 위험하다. ④ 눈의 표면은 피부와 어느정도 비슷하다. ⑤ 그리고 바로 그 눈표면에서 대부분의 상처가 생긴다. ⑥ 지나치게 햇빛을 받으면 각막에 염증을 일으킬 수 있다. ⑦ 자외선은 또한 눈의 수정체에 변화를 가져 올 수 있고, 이런 변화는 결국엔 백내장을 일으킬 수 있다. ⑧ 구름이 많이 낀 날은 안전하게 보일지 모르지만, 사실은 그렇지 않다. ⑨ 자외선은 구름을 통과한다. ⑩ 따라서 흐린 날씨에 속지 말도록! (명령문으로)

To facilitate the analysis of the translation, each sentence was numbered and the participants were asked to begin each sentence with the given number when translating. Several seemingly difficult words such as UV rays, cornea, inflammation, lens, and cataracts were given next to their Korean equivalents in the Korean passage. The reason is that this task is designed not to see if the Koreans know difficult words, but to see if they use common words appropriately in context.

## 2) Interview

The retrospective interview was intended to make up for information the writing task does not provide. Writing samples just reveal actual linguistic problems, however they do not tell us what caused the problems. Interviews offered the participants an opportunity to explain the reason for their choices of certain language use. The interview was useful in the opposite case as well. As Zhu(2001) indicated, certain types of problems, whether it be vocabulary or grammar, may not be noticeable in a piece of writing. But the seemingly error-free piece of writing does not necessarily indicate that the writer had no difficulty producing it. In other words, some of the writing problems may not surface, as long as the writer was fortunate enough to make a right choice about what s/he is not clear about. In such cases, interviews allow the participants to point out something that would otherwise be overlooked.

### 3. Procedures

Twenty minutes were spent on the translation task, and then the retrospective interview followed. During the translation, dictionary use was not allowed and participants were encouraged to ask any question as to the appropriateness of the Korean passage. During an interview, participants were given a copy of the English original text of the translation task and then asked to underline any words or phrases that were unfamiliar to them. Interviews were audio-taped and usually lasted one and a half hours.

### 4. Data Analysis

Analyses of student translations started with grouping sentences according to their numbers. Taking the sentence ㉠ group as an example, the first thing to do was to check whether each translation conveyed the same meaning as the original expression. Any translation that had different semantic value from the source sentence was analyzed. Attention then was paid to the word that contributed most to the mistranslation, and the word that should have been included for a better translation. Next, grouping the phenomena associated with each troublesome word followed, which was made possible by combining translations with interview data. On the other hand, the words underlined by the participants in the source text received considerable attention to see how the Koreans' unfamiliarity with the underlined words relates to their mistranslation.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, giving each participant a pseudonym. First, the mass of the transcribed data was grouped according to the interview questions. Next, the responses to a question were broken down into discrete ideas or concepts. Then, concepts that were similar in nature and related in meaning were grouped, which resulted in categorizations. In so doing, a large volume of unassimilated and uncategorized data was greatly reduced, making the raw data more manageable to analyze, as well as more intelligible in terms of the issues being addressed. A category was then supported by its subcategories that answer questions about the phenomena the category stands for. That is, a significant issue was accompanied by what explained the phenomenon such as why, how, and with what consequences. For instance, if a specific verb was found to be quite difficult for many Korean EFL writers to use, the following questions were taken into consideration: Why does the verb sound so foreign to the Koreans? And how do they misuse it? The following chapter investigates what facets of vocabulary use the

Korean EFL writers find difficult.

## **IV. Findings and Discussion**

As shown in Table 1., analyses of the translation task and interviews indicated that the Korean EFL writers have three kinds of difficulties using vocabulary productively. First, the Korean writers are weak in choosing the right word in context. The difficulty with word choice turned out to be linked to the way English vocabulary is learned in Korea. Second, the Koreans' limited knowledge about a word's parts of speech prevents them from utilizing the word as extensively as possible. And the incomplete knowledge of a word's usage is, to a degree, related to the way the dictionary is used. Third, it turned out that using verbs accurately is no easy task for the Korean writers. Modal verbs were also found to be hard to use in terms of expressing degrees of certainty. And the Korean EFL writers have particular difficulty with causative verbs, which often come with inanimate subjects. Each of the three difficulties with vocabulary use is examined in greater detail in the following sections.



TABLE 1) Frequency of Difficulty Areas in Vocabulary Use

	Word Choice	Parts of Speech	Verb Use	Spelling
# of Students	9	11	18	2

## 1. Decontextualized Word Choice

The highlight of the wrong word choice was shown in sentence ③. Nearly one-third of the students ended up with the expression “Our eyes are also dangerous” when translating sentence ③. The nine students, who chose “dangerous” instead of “at risk,” said they did not hesitate to go with “dangerous” for ③. To their knowledge, “dangerous” is the right word for the expression that actually requires “at risk” or “in danger.” What’s more, when asked to underline any words or phrases in the source text that were unfamiliar to them, 27 students indicated “at risk,” most of whom said “at risk” was rather brand-new to them. One interesting thing here is that, like CC below, all the students who underlined “at risk” knew the meaning of the word “risk” not to mention “at.” But the phrase “at risk” was not within their grasp.

“Even though I know about the word “risk,” the meaning of a preposition noun combination such as “at risk” is not easy to produce.” (CC)

“The Korean version of the source text seems kind of tricky. The Korean word “위험한<sup>5)</sup>” led me to “dangerous” regardless of the whole context. It’s because “dangerous” is the first choice as an equivalent of “위험한.” (PP)

CC’s comment stresses the importance of collocational competence<sup>6)</sup>; it suggests that simply learning individual L2 words may not work especially in writing, which requires active vocabulary use. In fact, in L1 acquisition, vocabulary is not stored only as individual words, but also as parts of phrases and larger chunks(Moras & Carlos, 2001). Some chunks become so fixed that they are viewed as a basic unit. This sort of chunk can be retrieved from memory as a whole, which makes language reception and production more efficient. In this respect, it seems reasonable to assume that EFL writers with “good vocabularies” may have difficulty expressing themselves as fluently as native English writers unless they have appropriate levels of collocational competence. In other words, EFL writers are likely to have problems conveying an expression that requires collocational competence regardless of how many individual words they learned. It should also be pointed out that the words involved in chunking, like “at risk,” are not necessarily “hard words.” Thus, for EFL writers with “good vocabularies,” the first step in working on collocation would be to realize that the vocabularies they have already gotten are enough to make meaningful chunks. What they need to do then is to use a familiar word as broadly as they can, as Lewis(1993) mentioned, by “mastering its collocational range and restrictions on that range”(p. 119).

PP’s comment, voiced by seven students as well, proved significant in terms of the way the Koreans learn English vocabulary. Asked to recall the ways of acquiring vocabulary in middle or high school, all 29 students agreed that matching an English word to one or two main Korean equivalents is all they did. Then, asked whether they tried to use a word in context, specifically in a sentence, as a way of memorizing it, none said yes. Taking “dangerous” as an example, what these students did is merely link the word with the first meaning in an English-Korean

5) The Korean word “위-험-한” /wi-həm-han/ can be equivalent both to “dangerous” and to “at risk,” depending on the context in which it occurs.

6) Collocation refers to a group of words that belong together. Such words commonly occur together and the meaning of the group is not obvious from the meaning of the parts. Collocation can also be seen as any generally accepted grouping of words into phrases or clauses.(Nation, 2001)

dictionary. In this way, students simply acquire one or two Korean definitions of an English word and do not go further in exploring how the word is actually used in context.

The mere link between “dangerous” and “위험한” is strong enough to mislead the Koreans to pick “dangerous” when “위험한” means “at risk” not “dangerous” in the whole context. The nine students said they had no difficulty figuring out the whole context of the Korean version, which means their choice of “dangerous” for sentence ③ was not due to the misunderstanding of the context. For instance, when asked to tell the difference in the use of “위험하다” between the Korean version of sentence ③ “우리 눈 또한 위험하다” (Our eyes are at risk as well) and the sentence “이곳 교통은 매우 위험하다” (The traffic here is very *dangerous*), all the students, who chose “dangerous” over “at risk,” had no problem with differentiating the nuances of “위험하다” between the two Korean sentences. What this suggests is that even though the nine Koreans were able to tell the difference between the meanings of the Korean word associated both with “at risk” and with “dangerous,” this ability to figure out a Korean word’s subtlety does not apply to producing English vocabulary.

Interviews indicated that the failure to distinguish “at risk” from “dangerous” is largely due to the way vocabulary is learned, in which a one-to-one correlation between L1 and L2, like “dangerous” and “위험한,” is fostered. Twenty-six students said that vocabulary learning of this type usually occurs in reading, which they think is the primary way to expose themselves to English vocabulary in Korea. Asked to tell about how they learn vocabulary in reading, these students were found to have one thing in common. As shown in BB’s comment below, they tend to take unfamiliar words out of the text, and then learn them out of context. In so doing, they fail to capitalize on the context as a scaffold to learn a word, which would make it hard to figure out the context needed for a given word.

“Every time I encounter a new word, I look it up in an English-Korean dictionary and then jot down the meaning for a given context next to the English word. This kind of information on new words is usually enough to meet the urgent need for comprehending a text. Then I collect all the unfamiliar words by writing them down in a notebook and then memorize them just by linking the words to their Korean equivalents.” (BB)

Like BB, the majority of the students said once the immediate need to know a new word in a certain context is met, they do not go back to the word in order to delve into its comprehensive usage. What they come to know about the word is just a part of its whole meaning. This partial knowledge about the word may not have a harmful effect on reading, but writing can be a

different story. Nearly all the students said that writing requires a quite different level of vocabulary skills from reading, since they have to play an active role in using words, rather than passively recognizing them. Twenty-two students added that one particular difficulty of writing is to select the most appropriate word in context, and that difficulty becomes more distressing if the word is an “easy” one in reading. VV’s comment below exemplifies the difficulty with word choice in writing:

“I think writing is entirely different from reading in terms of word use. Reading allows me to guess at a word’s meaning through subtle hints in context. Writing, in this regard, is the reverse of reading, in which I cannot help but use a word accurately to create an appropriate context.” (VV)

In a similar vein, 79% of the students pointed out that certain words that cause little difficulty in reading turn into a challenge in writing. This would seem to suggest that these students might have a range of receptive vocabulary that they can recognize and comprehend in reading, whereas their productive vocabulary that they can recall and use appropriately in writing is normally limited. It seems reasonable to say that for the EFL writers, their receptive knowledge of L2 vocabulary does not ensure appropriate L2 production. One reason might be that vocabulary encountered in reading is not sufficiently explored, and then does not enter a person’s active vocabulary, which is why s/he does not know how to use a word accurately that s/he is able to understand in reading.

Of course, it is generally accepted that extensive reading is a way to vocabulary growth ; however, EFL circumstances, as compared to L1 literacy contexts, may call for a somewhat different type of reading for productive vocabulary growth. In the L1 learning situation, a learner is exposed to words in a variety of different contexts, and able to shape a well-rounded concept of words’ meaning and use (Summers, 1988). In such cases, a word that one comes across in reading will likely reoccur in differing contexts. This, in turn, would help reinforce one’s understanding of the word to such an extent that the receptive knowledge of the word develops into productive knowledge. On the other hand, in EFL settings, where natural exposure to L2 is not available, encountering a word a few times in reading would not guarantee the ability to use the word appropriately, since there is little back-up for L2 vocabulary learning outside of reading.

It can be argued that in EFL contexts, reading should be maximally exploited to increase vocabulary skills. Reading simply for understanding a text may not be good enough for EFL writers, who have difficulty turning their receptive vocabulary into productive ones. These writers

need to stop at each unfamiliar word and examine it for their future use in writing. Also, EFL writers may come to understand unfamiliar words by contextual clues in reading, but, in this case, their attempt to learn those words should not stop with guessing at the words' meaning. Unless these writers try to obtain a solid knowledge of each word encountered in reading, as VV mentioned, using vocabulary properly to create an appropriate context in writing would be hard work. One can argue that deliberate attention to every unknown word in reading interrupts the flow of concentration. Regarding this suspicion, student interviews indicated that for the Korean EFL writers, reading should be more than reading per se. In some sense, these writers cannot afford to see reading as merely following a text; they need to make the most of the text for future vocabulary use. In doing so, they would have more and more vocabulary that causes no difficulty both in reading and in writing.

In sum, the Korean EFL writers' difficulty with word choice in context is largely ascribed to their way of vocabulary learning, which makes it hard to enhance the productive knowledge of vocabulary. Perhaps, the degree to which one uses a word productively depends on how much one knows about the word. In the next section, I explore why the Korean EFL writers fail to use a word as fully as it allows.

## 2. Limited Knowledge of a Word's Parts of Speech

Many words have more than one part of speech with different, though related meanings. But it turned out that this seemingly simple fact was not well known to the Korean EFL writers. When asked to literally translate the original English sentence ⑩ "So don't let a dull day fool you" to Korean, 11 students had difficulty with "fool," since, to their knowledge, "fool" is nothing but a noun. Only three employed "fool" appropriately in translating sentence ⑩. Twenty-three students, including the 11, conceded that they did not know if "fool" acts as a verb as well. These students added that they tend to use a word in the part of speech representing the most common meaning of the word. The follow-up interviews explored students' understanding of a word's parts of speech. I asked nine students about their knowledge of how the following 10 words are used in terms of parts of speech: *disadvantage*, *quiet*, *trash*, *feature*, *picture*, *weather*, *grace*, *quality*, *summary*, *doctor*. The nine students said that all the 10 words, which are middle school-level vocabulary in Korea, were familiar to them.

As Table 2 reveals, only two students were aware that "disadvantage" is used as a verb too, and only one said "quality" is also an adjective. More significant is that none of the students

realized that “doctor,” “grace,” and “weather” act as verbs as well. Likewise, none of the students knew that “summary” also functions as an adjective, nor did they know “quiet” performs as a verb, too. Thus, when asked to translate the following sentences into Korean, the students ended up guessing wildly:

She weathered the pregnancy with no downward spiral.  
 Thank you for gracing the cover of GQ.  
 She summarily rejects younger men.  
 They decided to doctor the jacket to do a costume reveal.

〈TABLE 2〉 Awareness of Parts of Speech of a Word

	Student 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
disadvantage	n/v	n	n	n	n	n/v	n	n	n
quite	adj	adj	adj	adj	adj	adj	adj	adj	adj
trash	n	n/v	n/v	n	n	n	n	n/v	n
doctor	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
summary	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
grace	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
quality	n	n/adj	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
picture	n/v	n/v	n	n	n	n/v	n/v	n	n
weather	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
feature	n	n/v	n	n	n	n/v	n	n	n

n. v. and adj. refer to noun, verb, and adjective respectively.

Interviews indicated that the Korean EFL writers’ limited knowledge about a word’s parts of speech is tied to their dictionary habits. Twenty-three students said that when looking up an unknown word in a dictionary, they tend to focus exclusively on the first entry of the word, regardless of its part of speech. The main reason they offered is that they see the first entry of a word as the most important definition of the word, simply because that entry appears first; they assume that the rest of its entry might not be important enough to deserve their attention.

“I usually concentrate on the first two entries of a word in a dictionary, since I think those entries are the ones that represent the word most.” (FF)

“I don’t think the entry of a word that comes fourth or fifth is as important as the first entry. If not, why do they come later?” (PP)

The point here is that the emphasis on the first entry of a word will probably lead the Korean EFL writers to summarily underrate the rest, keeping them from using the word as fully as possible. BB's comment below illustrates this:

"Weather' is a word I learned in middle school. But I have not realized its verb aspect. Probably, 'weather' as a noun is too familiar for me to think it could be used differently." (BB)

Efficient use of a single word would be made possible by a thorough understanding of the word. Without comprehensive knowledge of a word, one may not be able to manipulate it in order to create a clear and neat message. And the prime way to gain such vocabulary skills in EFL settings may concern dictionary use, in that EFL contexts do not afford rich, contextualized, naturally occurring L2 in daily life. Given little natural exposure to the L2, EFL writers need to make the most of dictionaries, since there are few "human dictionaries," which are able to offer dictionary quality explanations for new words to those writers.

As for dictionary use, it can be argued that the Korean EFL writers' ability to utilize a word depends, to some degree, on the way they deal with the word in a dictionary. To the extent that students do not move beyond a word's first entry to the second or third in a dictionary, they miss out on some usage of the word that may be of great use in expressing certain ideas. The Koreans in the study need to be taught that just because a certain entry comes second does not necessarily mean it has less utility than the first; each meaning has the potential for conveying specific ideas or feelings. This is not to say that students need to memorize all the entries of a word. Rather, simply checking whether a word has more than one part of speech would be helpful; for instance, when searching the word "further" in a dictionary, it would be better to go further down to the verb usage of "further," which usually comes later than its adverb usage. This sort of search is especially important in writing, which calls for accurate vocabulary use to create a particular context, rather than in reading, which allows readers to infer words' meaning by contextual clues.

It seems that using words appropriately in writing requires detailed information about each word, not to mention knowledge of a wide range of vocabulary. Especially, if a word has its own grammar<sup>7)</sup>, the word might be trickier to use. For the Korean EFL writers, one such word category turned out to be verbs, which is discussed in the following section.

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7) The term "grammar" in this case refers to verb patterns, verb forms, plurality, comparatives, etc.(Moras and Carlos, 2001).

### 3. Difficulties that Verbs Cause

#### 1) The Grammar of Verbs

When asked which part of speech is the hardest to use, verbs garnered 18 votes(62%). According to the 18 students, using verbs requires a bit more attention than other parts of speech, largely due to the various verb patterns. The 18 Koreans said that their pet peeve is to wonder if a certain verb is followed by a gerund, an infinitive, a clause or a noun. Student translations, on the other hand, showed another type of confusion English verbs cause the Korean EFL writers. When translating sentence ⑤, “And it is on the surface of the eye that most damage occurs,” five students misused “occur” as follows:

- \* If the sun shines too much, it will occur inflammation. (CC)
- \* Being supplied too much sunshine can occur an inflammation to our cornea. (DD)
- \* Most wounds are occurred in there. (FF)
- \* UV rays can also cause the change of lens, which might occur cataracts. (VV)
- \* Generally, majority of damage are occurred around the eye surface. (WW)

As the examples above reveal, these students mistook “occur” for a transitive verb. This kind of misuse indicates that knowledge about a verb involves the grammatical possibility of the verb, not to mention its basic meaning. It seems that the five students were aware of the meaning of “occur,” but their awareness was not good enough to understand that “occur” is an intransitive verb. Also, 17 students underlined “occur” in the source text, several of whom conceded that they gave up on “occur” when doing sentence ⑤, because they were not sure about the verb’s usage. These students added that “occur” would not have been problematic in reading. What they mean is that since they know the basic meaning of “occur,” they would understand “occur” in a text without paying much attention to its grammar. The following responses are about the differences in an awareness of verb usage between reading and writing.

“Verbs are the ones that damage my writing most. Picking a right verb is not all I find difficult. It is not easy to use a familiar verb accurately. I think familiarity with certain verbs usually comes from reading. When reading, I feel I overlook each verb’s use because I pay a lot of attention to follow a text’s flow.” (FF)

“Sometimes I find it frustrating that verbs I have little trouble with in reading give me a hard time in writing. I think writing calls for a specific knowledge of verbs. While



reading, I even tend not to attend to whether or not a verb is transitive because reading usually goes smoothly without paying much attention to such an aspect of verbs.” (WW)

These responses suggest that just because these EFL writers encounter a verb when reading does not necessarily mean they come to know how to use the verb appropriately. To ensure the proper use of the verb “occur” in writing, the writers need to go further checking whether the verb is used transitively as well. This suggests that more information is needed for encoding than for decoding. On the surface, distinguishing transitive verbs from intransitive ones can be a little task. But an awareness of which verb is transitive or intransitive or both may require conscious learning since such information is not hinted at in the verb’s form. Thus, the detailed grammar of verbs is the one that EFL writers need to grasp in order to guarantee accurate verb use in future writing.

## 2) Modal Verbs

In translating sentence ⑧: “While cloudy days may seem safe, that’s not the case” into Korean, great care was given to the modal verb “may” to make sure the meaning of “may” in ⑧ is well expressed. Only two students used “may” appropriately and 12 students underlined “may” in the source text. According to the students who marked “may,” modal verbs tend to be underused, largely due to a lack of knowledge of the utility each modal has. They said that they feel their use of modals is fairly basic, as shown in KK’s comment below:

“I don’t feel I have problems with “must,” “can,” and “may” in expressing necessity, ability and permission respectively. But I find myself hesitant to use modals in terms of degrees of certainty. Especially, I am not clear about the use of the past form of modals in expressing degrees of certainty.” (KK)

Like KK, 13 students expressed their discomfort with the past form of modals, such as would, might, and could. Student essays also show the lack of the past forms of modals; only four essays include such modals. According to the 13 students, telling the slight differences between the modals is no easy task since such differences are based not on distinct referential meanings, but on the subtleties of feelings. For these students, it is one thing to feel how sure they are that something is true, and it is another to find the modal that best reflects the extent of their certainty. In such cases, using a modal can be a guessing game, until the students gain the sense of possibilities each modal provides.

Rather than using “may,” 11 students chose the expression, “it seems / looks,” eight of such expressions were not correct grammatically. Examples include:

- \* In cloudy day, it looks like safe, but it's not (KK)
- \* It looks safe at cloudy day, but it isn't. (LL)
- \* It seems like to safe on cloudy day, but it doesn't. (TT)

The 11 students mentioned that they did not think of “may” when translating sentence ⑧ and had rarely used “may” the same way as sentence ⑧. They added that the structure “it seems ~” is their first choice to produce expressions such as sentence ⑧.

The maximal use of modals would be made possible by a complete knowledge of their utility. Conversely, if modals' utility is not adequately appreciated, their use will decrease. Unfortunately, the Korean EFL writers' understanding of modals is so limited that a significant portion of the function of each modal becomes inactive. And the very latent utility of modals, i.e., expressing degrees of certainty, seems crucial for the Koreans to write as delicately as they would like. Students need to be helped to realize that modals are an effective tool in expressing their feelings as skillfully as they do in Korean.

### 3) Causative Verbs

When translating sentence ⑩, “So don't let a dull day fool you,” none of the 29 students used “let” and student interviews revealed that no one even tried to employ “let.” All the students said they have not used “let” in the way used in sentence ⑩. Their familiarity with “let” was found to be quite limited; for instance, when asked to tell about the usage of “let,” 96% of the responses centered on the two meanings : making suggestions, i.e., “Let's go to the park” and offering help, i.e., “Let me do it.” All students added that they were not comfortable with a meaning of “let” allowing something to happen or to do something. It turned out that the students' discomfort with “let” stems from the difference in the treatment of inanimate nouns between English and Korean. When asked to translate sentence ⑩ into Korean word for word, every student stated that to Korean ears, sentence ⑩ sounds awkward. What makes sentence ⑩ sound unnatural is:

“It seems that using “let” leads to personifying “a dull day.” This personification makes “a dull day” a subject, which is uncommon in Korean.” (PP)

“In Korean, such an expression as “I did it” sounds more natural than “something made me do it.” (DDD)

These responses, shared by 25 students, suggest that for the Koreans, “The nasty rain drives me crazy” may sound unnatural, as compared with “I got crazy because of the nasty rain.” After all, central to the unnaturalness of the former is the use of inanimate things as a subject. And this kind of subject often comes with the verb “let.” When asked why “let” is hard to use, several students related the difficulties “let” causes to their way of English writing.

“When it comes to English writing, I cannot help but first think about my intention in Korean, and then the intention literally switches to English. In doing so, there is no chance that “let” occurs, because my original intention does not include any expression that needs “let.” That is, “let” has no place in the direct translation from Korean to English.” (KK)

“To produce an appropriate expression in English writing, I tend to try out several options. But I usually put aside expressions that sound weird when translating into Korean. “Let” is one that leads to such an expression.” (CCC)

For this reason, 13 students responded to sentence ⑩ with “Don’t be tricked / cheated / deceived by cloudy days.” These expressions reflect what the Korean EFL writers think an imperative sentence should look like. Such expressions are also nearly the same as the Korean imperative form except for word order.

The absence of “let” in student translations indicates that of all types of English verbs, causative verbs, such as make, have, or force, pose particular difficulty for Koreans by requiring switching the Korean way of thinking to Americans’. As shown in Altenberg and Granger’s study (2001), while the Swedish construction similar to the causative verb “make” leads the Swedish to overuse make,” the absence of the expression that lets something do something in Korean makes it difficult for the Korean EFL writers to utilize English causative verbs. This type of difficulty with causative verbs, which is seen as Korean-specific, suggests that more effort needs to be given to causative verbs in future vocabulary teaching. Above all, the Koreans in the study need to be guided to deal with a feeling of unnaturalness that causative verbs evoke. Rather than resisting that feeling, the students should appreciate that causative verbs are such an important element in making their English writing sound more “English” than their attempts to adjust to those verbs are worth the effort.

## V. Implications

Student translations indicated that the Korean EFL writers are weak in using the right word in context. Their failure to find the right word for the proper expression is ascribed to the way they learn English vocabulary. L2 vocabulary knowledge, acquired through a mere link between English words and the Korean equivalents, is of little help in writing that requires using vocabulary productively. Such a simple link between English and Korean vocabulary misled the Korean writers to literal translation equivalents, which proved the wrong choice in context. Student interviews revealed that the students' narrow use of a word in terms of its parts of speech is related to their dictionary habits, in which their attention tends to be limited to the first definition of the word. This type of dictionary use led the Koreans to assume that "fool" is used solely as a noun.

Interviews indicated that of all parts of speech, verbs are the most challenging for the students to use. Part of what makes verbs hard vocabulary is the details of their grammatical side, i.e., verb patterns. For this reason, "occur" was misused as a transitive verb. Modal verbs are the ones the Koreans in the study tend to downplay, since their understanding of the whole usefulness each modal has is quite limited. Particularly, what modals do about degrees of certainty is not made clear to the Koreans. Last, English causative verbs, such as let, turned out to be what the Koreans find particularly difficult to use, since such verbs often come with inanimate subjects.

Based on the findings described above, the following implications may be drawn in terms of future efforts in the EFL writing instruction. Given that writing calls for accurate vocabulary use, EFL writers need to take a proactive approach to learning vocabulary in order to ensure their receptive vocabulary becomes active enough when writing. To do so, vocabulary learning should be in its right place in the EFL writing class; that is, the EFL writing class needs to be a place where EFL writers' vocabulary skills are fostered. This is not to say that EFL writing classes are responsible for developing the overall vocabulary skills of EFL writers; rather, EFL writing classes need to provide an opportunity for these writers to convert their receptive vocabulary to a productive one. In a sense, what is expected of EFL writing teachers is to tailor their vocabulary instruction to meet the particular needs of EFL writers. One such need of the Korean EFL

writers identified in this study relates to word choice in context. When the Korean EFL writers find a certain word hard to use, help teachers can offer might go like this: Teachers first provide contextual as well as definitional information about the word(Stahl, 1985), and then provide both examples and non-examples of the word use. Students then practice the word by using it in a sequence of sentences, rather than using a single decontextualized sentence. This sort of instruction would help the Korean EFL writers figure out how the word is used appropriately in context.

One specific way to enhance a productive knowledge of a wide range of vocabulary would be to create one's own English dictionary through the Internet. When reading a newspaper article on a web site, it is recommended that EFL writers collect what appear to be useful and important words. The point here is that those writers need to move the whole sentence that contains the chosen word to MS Word by copying and pasting it. What follows is to type the chosen word as a headword in front of the pasted sentence, arranging headwords in alphabetical order. This sort of dictionary would be of great help, since it allows EFL writers to look at how a specific meaning of a word is conveyed in a particular context. What is more, the fact that the example sentences in this dictionary are from today's newspaper articles written by native English writers, would give EFL writers confidence in using the vocabulary they chose in terms of appropriateness and currency.

The fact that some vocabulary that rarely causes difficulty in reading proves hard for the Koreans to use in writing, suggests that reading for writing should be part of the EFL writing class. What teachers have to do is to carefully choose a text that includes a wide range of vocabulary in terms of parts of speech. While reading the text, students underline any words that they feel unsure of how to use, even though they manage to understand those words in reading. Next, dictionaries are to be involved in their vocabulary learning. Students look up each of those words in the dictionary. What is important here is that teachers encourage an exhaustive search for each word, from the first entry of the word to the last. Dictionary use of this kind would provide a scaffold to learn the grammar of the word. Further, a comprehensive knowledge about a word's usage acquired that way would allow one to use the word as extensively as possible, whether it is an easy word or not. This type of dictionary use might seem time-and effort-consuming, but would be a sure way to help the Korean EFL writers to produce what they try to say as appropriately as they would like.

The limitations of this study suggest some directions for future research. First, the corpus of this study was relatively small; future studies should look at larger numbers of texts. Second, it

should be noted that though the source text, NEWSWEEK magazine, served as a yardstick against which student translations were checked, this does not necessarily mean that the source text is the only correct answer. A different yardstick might identify different types of difficulties with vocabulary use. Last, the data of this study came only from translations, so future research needs to employ different types of writing samples, such as essays, in order to discover what the translation task does not say about.

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## 초 록

### 한국 EFL 학습자의 부적절한 영어 어휘 사용의 이면

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본 논문의 목적은 한국 EFL 학습자의 영어단어 사용에 있어서의 애로사항을 살펴보는 데 있다. 29명의 한국 EFL 학습자를 대상으로 한 본 연구에서는, 참가자들이 한국어 지문을 영어로 번역한 뒤, 번역에서 드러난 문제점과 그 문제점의 원인에 대한 인터뷰가 이어졌다. 번역작업은 한국 EFL 학습자들이 공통적으로 세가지면에서 단어사용에 어려움을 겪고 있음을 보여준다 : 문맥 안에서 전체 흐름에 알맞은 단어선택에 서툰고, 단어가 갖는 품사에 대한 지식이 제한적이고, 마지막으로 동사사용 특히 조동사와 사역동사 에 어려움을 보였다. 본 연구가 시사하는 바는, 읽기와 달리 쓰기에서는 각 단어의 용법에 대한 확고한 지식이 필수적이라는 점과, 쓰기에서의 올바른 단어사용 능력은 읽기를 통해서 쌓아질 수 있다는 것이다.

주제어 : 병치단어, 사전사용, 무생물 주어