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An Attitudinal Profile of EFL Learners in Korea

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Abstract

Research into attitudes and learning preferences of Korean second-language learners has, until recently, been carried out mostly in ESL environments, and has yielded a particular profile of the Korean learner abroad. For learners who remain in their mother country, however, such profiles are inadequate descriptors of what and how Asian EFL students learn. This study therefore set out to make a longitudinal learning profile of a particular group of EFL students in Korea. While the results were not intended as general statements about Korean students, it was hypothesized that culture-dependent, localized characteristics would become apparent, and that these would be more indicative of intrinsic attitudes and learning styles than out-of-country research. Results collected over three semesters showed evidence of a high level of awareness in the students, regarding active learning styles and strategies. This awareness reflects recent research in Asia, and raises the "nature/nurture" question with respect to learning styles and preferences. Finally, it is suggested that more attention might be given to the learning environment as a determiner of learning outcomes.

1 Introduction

This study set out to examine attitudes and attitude change (with regard to learning) in a sample community of English language learners in Korea, based on the premise that attitudes, perceptions and beliefs have "a profound influence on learning behaviour" (Cotterall, 1995, p. 195; cf. Cotterall, 1999) and on learning outcomes (Reid, 1987). Rather than attempting to categorize students as inherently possessing certain learning styles and preferences, it was hypothesized that such factors might be a function of the learning environment and the amount of tuition and practice (in using learning strategies) that students receive. In this case, exposure to various different approaches might enable students to improve their learning abilities and thus alter their attitudes to learning.

The research was based on the premise that attitude change is driven by individual beliefs and perceptions, which represent reality for the learner (Rogers, 1951, in Pine & Boy 1977, p. 111) and which tend to be self-confirming. If a student "knows" (for example) that he/she is a "poor learner", than he/she will act in ways which make this perception true, and will cling to a belief system typical of poor learners (low self-esteem, low intrinsic motivation, anxiety etc.). The research therefore attempted to monitor changes in the belief systems of the learners, according to their perceptions of these changes. This was based on the principle from propositional logic that a set of beliefs (Bp) leads to those beliefs being seen as true (Bp → p). From a relativistic perspective, truth is relative and individual truths depend on individual belief systems. The task of the teacher in this situation is not to label particular beliefs as incorrect, but to help learners modify them in a positive and effective way, so that learning may become more efficient. In this case, perceived change leads to actual change.

Positive attitude change was researched by Mantle-Bromley in 1995, and a significant amount of research in the last quarter of the 20th century focused on identification and positive modification of affective factors in language learning (e.g. Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Arnold, 1999). Such research, however, was mostly carried out in English as a Second Language (ESL) countries, making it less meaningful in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context for a number of reasons (see Table 1).

ESL learning environment	EFL learning environment
1. ESL learners experience and perform the target language outside the classroom;	1. EFL learners do not normally use (perform) the target language outside the classroom;
2. language lessons can focus on form as a means of enhancing the practical learning that has occurred outside the classroom;	2. grammar-based, teacher-centred instruction deprives learners of opportunities for language performance;
3. a multi-ethnic mix of students is normal;	3. EFL classes tend to be heterogeneous;
4. learners need to learn English in order to study in universities and/or get jobs;	4. students need to pass high-stakes English tests in order to enter universities and to get 'good' jobs;
5. ESL teachers are living in their home country. They therefore provide consistency of instruction (and course development).	5. EFL instructors living abroad tend to come and go very quickly. Because of this, students often suffer from inconsistent, poorly-developed instruction.

Table 1: ESL/EFL assumptions about language learning

The learning environment in the EFL situation is thus significantly different from its ESL cousin (see Table 1) and recent developments in the fields of Regional Englishes (Kachru & Nelson, 2006), English as an International Language (EIL) (Holliday, 2005) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2007) promise to widen the divide even further (Graddol, 2006). Research findings from ESL contexts should therefore only be applied in different cultural and pedagogical contexts with caution. Given this situation, and in view of the lack of Korea-based research, this study set out to investigate a sample community of EFL learners in Korea, and to construct an "attitudinal profile" of those learners. This profile would describe the learning preferences, learning styles and learning strategies of a specific set of students in a specific institution, and would therefore be in essence a case study, though it was hoped that the picture gained would be meaningful to EFL educators in Korea (and in East Asia), since it would suggest culture-dependent and situation-dependent characteristics of students studying English in their mother country.

2 Review of research

Early research on the relationship between learner attitudes/beliefs and second language achievement was carried out by Gardner & Lambert in the 1950s (cf. Gardner & Lambert, 1959), and later by Schumann (1975), who found a number of factors which were not conducive to learning: i) *language shock* (resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration or guilt); ii) *culture shock* (producing feelings of alienation or anxiety and rejection of native speaker values); iii) *language stress* (shame and loss of self-esteem resulting from a perceived deficiency in language); and iv) *anxiety* (due to the infantile persona necessarily projected by the language learner). Sauvignon (1976) also made the important observation that teachers have attitudes and beliefs about language learning, and that these can have a negative affect on learning:

> Not until we have taken a hard critical look at the attitudes and motivation of teachers, both individually and as a profession, will we be ready to determine what obstacles lie in the way of creating the kinds of learning environments which would be most helpful to our students. (Sauvignon, 1976, p. 296)

Bassano (1986) found that students have different needs, preferences, beliefs, learning styles, and educational backgrounds, and that imposition of change upon these factors can lead to negative reactions, while Willing (1988) showed that learners have views on the learning process and can articulate them. Dunn & Dunn (1979) identified various perceptual learning modalities (visual learning, auditory learning, kinesthetic learning, and tactile learning), and Domino (1979) showed that when these and the associated differences in learning strategies (learning styles, affective styles, and cognitive styles) were taken into account, college students scored higher on tests (in terms of factual knowledge, attitude, and efficiency). Hills (1976) further investigated the beneficial effects of matching instruction and learning styles, and concluded that 90% of students with normal ability can learn 90% of the learning content 90% of the time if the teaching methods and media are adjusted to the student's educational cognitive style (Hills, 1976, p. 3). In contrast, Hodges (1982, pp. 30–31) claimed that approximately 90% of traditional classroom instruction is geared to the auditory learner, while Hansen-Strain (1989, p. 224) concluded that teachers tend to give higher grades to students who have the same field style as they do.

Reid (1987, p. 96) reviewed ESL learning style preferences over nine language backgrounds, finding that Koreans were most visual in their learning style preferences (i.e. more visual than students from other cultures), though they preferred kinesthetic and tactile learning as major learning styles. Stebbins (1995, p. 111), however, found that "Korean students strongly preferred visual learning." Lee (1996) attributed this to the use of largely iconographic language systems in Asian cultures.

Major research on language learning beliefs was carried out by Horwitz (1985; 1999), who developed the *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (*BALLI*) to assess teacher and student opinions on a variety of issues related to language learning (1985, p. 383). This was used in three quite large-scale American studies (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995), and showed that learner/teacher beliefs differed significantly on only a few items: i) learners underestimated the difficulty of language learning; ii) they held misconceptions about how to learn foreign languages; and iii) they gave more value to accent than teachers did. Kern concluded that learner beliefs are "quite well entrenched" (1995, p. 76) and do not automatically change when learners are merely exposed to new methods, while Mantle-Bromley (1995) found that learners with realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and persist longer with study (pp. 373–375).

Further research using the *BALLI* was carried out by Peacock (1998), whose findings provided evidence (previously lacking) to support Horwitz's, Kern's and Mantle-Bromley's suggestions that incorrect beliefs are detrimental to language learning: "[a] statistically significant association was found between learner beliefs and proficiency" (Peacock, 1998, p. 150). For example, 71% of students believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, though only 14% believed they had that aptitude (Peacock, 1998, pp. 152–153). Peacock concluded that teachers should work on and with students' *representations* in the classroom, and that methodological advances in learning can only be limited without a change in conceptualization.

Horowitz performed a review of *BALLI* studies in 1999, including the findings of Park (1995) and Truitt (1995) on Korean students studying English in Korea. Results from these two studies showed differences of up to 39% in the responses (Horwitz, 1999, p. 568), which Horwitz attributed to individual "or current situational differences" (1999, p. 573). She then concluded (quite surprisingly) that "there is no strong evidence for a conclusion of cultural differences in learner beliefs" (Horwitz, 1999, p. 576). As Coughlan & Duff point out, however, the authors of instruments such as *SILL* (Oxford, 1989) and *BALLI* would do well to acknowledge that "behaviour found in experimental conditions is neither constant nor controllable because it is an instantiation of activity" (Coughlan & Duff, 1994, p. 175).

Wenden (1991, pp. 12–13), identified various origins for the schemata and other beliefs about language learning. These included: i) the mother culture (contrary to Horwitz's findings); ii) the family; iii) classroom/social peers; iv) repetitive experiences; and v) self-fulfilling (often negative) prophecies. Puchta (1999) added that students' attitudes to learning are directly influenced by their perception of success in learning and by their levels of expectancy; realistically high levels help to

build confidence, and low (or unrealistically high) expectations help to build incompetence (Puchta, 1999, p. 257).

Of particular relevance to this study, Widdows & Voller (1991) reported that university students in Japan have views on learning (contrary to popular wisdom), which generally conflict with the 'official' curriculum of the university (cf. Littlewood, 2000, p. 34). In addition, Littlewood et *al.* (1996, p. 77) carried out a survey of students entering universities in Hong Kong. They found that: i) confidence and proficiency was adversely affected by previous lack of practice in using the target language; ii) talking in class and engaging in pair and group work were perceived as enjoyable and beneficial; iii) error correction was seen as important; iv) English was viewed as a necessity for their careers, and was not seen as conflicting with their national identity; v) students rated their proficiency significantly higher than their teachers; and vi) students did not attribute importance to raising comments and questions in class.

Pierson (1996, p. 52), on the other hand, describes learning in Hong Kong as static and other-directed, with the teacher transmitting "correct" knowledge and students passively absorbing that knowledge, and Stevick (1976) outlines the disadvantages of this view of education, observing that in such a "Parent-Child" relationship between teacher and the learners, learning is likely to be "defensive," as learners seek to protect themselves from the possibility of being exposed or embarrassed. This would seem to mirror the traditional, test-driven teaching methodology used in Korean schools, except that Hofstede's (1986) profile of Korean interaction characteristics shows that mutual respect (even in an autocratic setting) is an important factor in Korea. Nunan (1996), Esch (1994), and Little (1996), also provide evidence that traditional learning practices and cultural traits may actually contribute to the development of learner autonomy (cf. Ho & Crookall 1995; Pierson 1996), and that "cultural differences may not be the main barrier to the promotion of the concept of autonomy in countries with a group-oriented tradition such as China" (Little, 1996, p. 46; cf. Littlewood, 1999, p. 90). Littlewood (2000), whose study included 344 Korean students, goes further to question the stereotype of the "passive Asian student":

> … the stereotype of Asian students as 'obedient listeners' – whether or not it is a reflection of their actual behaviour in class – does not reflect the roles they *would like* to adopt in class. They do not see the teacher as an authority figure who should not be questioned; they do not want to sit in class passively receiving knowledge; and they are only slightly on the 'agreement' side that the teacher should have a greater role than themselves in evaluating their learning. (Littlewood, 2000, p. 33)

Littlewood goes on to suggest that "educational contexts" are more responsible for Asian learning styles than the learners themselves, a conclusion that matches with the writer's experience with Korean university students. There is also the consideration that Korea is changing very quickly, and the gap between generations of learners of English (cf. Sakui & Gaies 1999, p. 488) is becoming more noticeable. It was therefore felt by the writer that a profile of learning styles, attitudes and beliefs held by EFL students in Korea would be a timely addition to research literature.

3 Method

This study took place in a National University in the Republic of Korea, between the years 2005 and 2006, over three semesters. Participating students (n = 224) ranged from Sophomores (2nd year students) to Seniors (4th year students) and were mainly from the Department of English Education. Aged between 22 and 24, they were mostly studying to be teachers of secondary English. The research was conducted in two or three credit courses each semester (see Table 2), using learning journals and pre/post-course questionnaires. Students were mostly different each semester, though there were a number who attended more than one of the classes, and who were able to offer impressions over a longer term than the others. Such students typically showed heightened awareness of their attitudes to learning.

Semester	Course title
Year 1/1	ELT Methodology (n = 37) Teaching Prose Writing (n = 30)
Year 1/2:	Teaching English through Literature (n = 12) Comparative ELT Methodology (n = 23) Multimedia English (n = 17)
Year 2/1	ELT Methodology (n = 27) Composition (n = 39) Textbook Design and Analysis (n = 39)
	Student total: n = 224

Table 2: Courses selected for the research

The research was ongoing during each of the three semesters, and was integrated into course content. Since the research took place in the English Education Department, it was not difficult to include reflection on matters related to language learning, and this occurred in three main areas: i) the use of a learner journal; ii) attention to the learning environment; and iii) alternative assessment. Overall attitude change was monitored through a pre/post-course questionnaire, which examined students' feelings about their abilities and related affective factors.

During each of these semesters, students taking courses in the Department of English Education were asked to work on a learning journal (Finch, 2004) in and out of class time (an hour of class work per week, to be matched with a similar amount of individual time outside of class). This journal consisted of a number of investigative, groupwork (classroom) activities for each week, followed by individual (homework) reflection pages. Following this structure, students investigated various issues in the class and reflected upon these in their own time. Classroom interactions focused on a number of learning-related topics, and featured a number of questionnaires based on (or adapted from) published research instruments (see Table 3).

These questionnaires were reproduced in adapted form and can be viewed in the online version of the Learning Journal, which was made available to students: http://www.finchpark.com/books/lj/index2.htm. Students completed all the questionnaires during the course, either in an interview format (pairwork) or in group discussion. This was in addition to other more interactive activities (cf. Finch, 2004), which extended the relevant topics. The purpose of these questionnaires was to expose students to issues related to learning styles, learning strategies, learning preferences and learning beliefs, and to stimulate discussion of these issues in group investigations. It was thought that this would create increased awareness in the students, who would then positively alter their belief systems and perceptions. This alteration would be recorded in the learning journal.

It was stressed in the learning journal that there were no *correct* or *incorrect* answers, and that the process of exploring issues, ideas and preconceptions was most important. The discussion of the research instruments (see Table 3) occurred in class time as lesson content, so that students had plenty of time to discuss, record opinions, agree or disagree, and come to individual and group decisions. Other activities in the learning journal (such as self-assessments, deficiency analyses, needs analyses and pre/post-course questionnaires), though ostensibly individual activities, were carried out by the students in interview format. Individual reflections were made out of class time and were in diary format, encouraging students to reflect on how they saw their own attitudes and perceptions.

In the course of the duration of this study, it helped to raise awareness about pedagogical issues; in the writing class, it gave students topics for individual writing. Being part of the course, with a defined purpose of awareness-raising, the research was carried out comfortably and naturally, with no instances of the researcher imposing research instruments out of context. Students discussed the research instruments together, wrote down their opinions, discussed these with their peers, and

came to informed conclusions. In the same way, individual reflections were part of the course, and were not isolated activities.

Title	Sources
A Measure of Autonomy and Self-Direction	Dickinson, 1978, p. 26
Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)	Horwitz, 1988, p.292
Classroom Environment Questionnaire Actual (CEQ)	Fraser, 1986
Classroom Environment Questionnaire Preferred	Fraser, 1986
Classroom Environment Scale (CES)	Fraser, 1986
Classroom Learning Environment (CLE)	Pine & Boy, 1977
Deficiency Analysis	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 19
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)	Horwitz et *al*. 1986, p. 130
Language Learning Ideas	Hahn et *al*. 1989, p. 250
Language Skills Self-assessment	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 16
Learning Contract	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 18
Learning Preferences	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 19
Learning Style Inventory (LSI)	Martinez, 1997, p. 178
Multiple Intelligences Survey (MIS)	McKenzie, 1999
Self-assessment	Oscarsson, 1980
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)	Oxford, 1989, pp. 242-245
Student Perceptions About Language Learning	Willing, 1988, pp. 106-7
Students' Needs	Hills, 1976, pp. 31-32
Study Styles	Finch & Hyun, 2000a, 22-23
Teachers' Needs	Hills, 1976, pp. 29-30

Table 3: Research instruments included in *English Reflections* (Finch, 2004)

4 Results

When analyzing the results of student-discussion on the research instruments used in this study (see Table 3), a number of trends became noticeable. Due to the large number of instruments used, however, these trends will be examined in this section through description of representative results (sampling).

4.1 BALLI: Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory

Horwiz's *BALLI* has already been mentioned in this paper as an important contribution in the ESL literature on student beliefs. When used in an adapted EFL form (Finch 2004, pp. 26, 27) by Korean students studying in Korea, the traditional view of Korean learning styles predicted that a passive, teacher-centred view of learning as transmission of knowledge would be shown. Looking at the first question, for example, we can see that learning a language was indeed seen by most students (57%) as acquisition of a body of knowledge (see Table 4).

1. Learning a language means acquiring a body of knowledge.

	Agree strongly		Agree		No opinion		Disagree		Disagree strongly	
Total	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
224	20	8.8	108	47.8	46	20.4	52	2	0	0

Table 4: *BALLI*, Question 1 (Finch, 2004, p. 26)

However, it is also apparent that 23% disagreed with this proposition, and that 20% had no opinion. This is not the overwhelming acceptance of rote learning that might have been expected. Question 10 states the proposition in another way, making the difference between current student perceptions and the "received truth" about Korean EFL students more apparent (see Table 5).

10. The role of the teacher is to share knowledge.

	Agree strongly		Agree		No opinion		Disagree		Disagree strongly	
Total	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
224	10	4.4	76	33.6	48	21.2	66	29.2	26	12

Table 5: *BALLI*, Question 10 (Finch, 2004, p. 26)

We now have 41% disagreeing with the statement, and 21% expressing no opinion. Although questions 1 and 10 investigated traditional assumptions behind the learning that they had received in high school, students did not by any means subscribe unthinkingly to these rote-based concepts.

When more general questions about the role of the teacher were considered, it became evident that students' opinions of the place of the teacher in the classroom accorded more with the ministerial policy of *Hongik Ingan* (developing an ability to contribute creatively and responsibly to society) than with the practical realities of the test-driven paradigm. For example, question 8, which focuses on the importance of teaching learning strategies, shows 88% student agreement (see Table 6).

8. The role of the teacher is to help students learn how to learn.

	Agree strongly		Agree		No opinion		Disagree		Disagree strongly	
Total	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
224	134	59.3	64	28.3	8	3.5	10	4.4	10	4

Table 6: *BALLI*, Question 8 (Finch, 2004, p. 26)

Question 11 confirms this trend by showing that the 83% of students saw a distinctly social role for teachers (once more, agreeing with *Hongik-Ingan*, but not with the test-driven reality of secondary education) (see Table 7).

11. The role of the teacher is to prepare students for adult life.

	Agree strongly		Agree		No opinion		Disagree		Disagree strongly	
Total	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
224	50	22.1	138	61.1	14	6.2	20	8.8	4	2

***Table 7: BALLI*, Question 11 (Finch, 2004, p. 26)**

4.2 FLCAS: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

The EFL classroom has a reputation as a stressful place, especially prone to anxiety arousal (MacIntyre, 1995, p. 90), with Horwitz et *al.* (1986) finding that language anxiety can cause students to postpone language study indefinitely or to change majors, due to three related performance anxieties: i) communication apprehension; ii) test anxiety; and iii) fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et *al.* 1986, p. 127). These anxieties are common in the accuracy-based, test-driven classroom which is the norm in Korea and, as a result, Korean students tend to be extremely nervous and afraid of speaking, for fear of making mistakes.

In view of this situation, the *FLCAS* (Horwitz *et al*, 1986, p. 130) was included in the learning journal, in order to investigate the perceived anxiety level of the students, since "affective variables are probably more powerful in influencing strategy use than intelligence and aptitude" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992). In the adapted form of the *FLCAS* (Finch, 2004, p. 74) there were 20 questions relating to nervousness and anxiety in various classroom situations. Answers (representing results of group discussions) were recorded on a 1–5 Lickert scale, with "1" representing "strongly agree" and 5 representing "strongly disagree."

The learning environment of the classes investigated in this study had been set up with a view to reducing affective filters and providing a facilitative base of learning affordances through the use of self-directed, task-based group activities, and classroom-based absolute assessment (portfolios, self/peer-assessment, projects, etc.). Results from the *FCLAS* reflect this non-threatening atmosphere. Rather than being worried about accuracy and negative evaluation, students on average answered in the middle range ("3"), or even in terms of disagreement. Thus, question 15 ("In pair-work I worry if my partner is better than me at English") received a mean of 3.82 ("slightly disagree"), as did question 12 ("I worry if the teacher corrects me in class"). The highest scores in terms of indicating anxiety were in fact 2.55 ("slightly agree") (question 6: "I feel self-conscious when speaking with my teacher") and 2.7 (question 8: "I feel that other students are better than me at speaking"). In general, students seemed happy with the learning environment, and did not feel stressed by it. Such results seem to challenge the findings of Horwitz (1987) and others. They suggest, in fact, that the stress normally associated with English language learning might well be a function of teaching style.

4.3 LSI: Learning Style Inventory

Results for *LSI* offer interesting comparison with the findings of Reid (1987) and Stebbins (1995), regarding the learning styles of Korean ESL learners. This study agreed with Stebbins' findings, showing a strong preference for Visual learning (VPS) (60%), compared with Auditory learning (APS) (30%) and Tactile learning (TPS) (1%) (n = 161). In addition, 9% of students responded with equal scores for VPS and APS. These results are in stark contrast to Reid's claim that Korean students are TPS-oriented, and have important implications for educators. If we accept Hodges' (1982, pp. 30-31) claim that approximately 90% of traditional classroom instruction is geared to the auditory learner, along with Hansen-Strain's (1989, p. 224) findings that teachers tend to give higher grades to students who have the same field style as they do, then it becomes apparent that the majority of high school students are being taught in a manner which is inappropriate for their learning style. However, it must be noted that the students in this study were studying English Education in a university teachers' college. In other words, they represent successful students from high school English classes. It is quite possible that a similar study of high school students might show different results when the learning styles of students at all levels are taken into account. In this case, an LSI needs analysis would seem to be advisable for every high school English class.

4.4 SILL: Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

Oxford's SILL (1989, pp. 242–245) is another important instrument that was included in this study. The six categories in this instrument deal with: i) remembering more effectively; ii) using all your mental processes; iii) compensating for missing knowledge; iv) organizing and evaluating your learning; v) managing your emotions; and vi) learning with others. Students had high scores on all six of these (averaging 3.5 out of a maximum 4), marking themselves most strictly (3.1) in terms of category i). Once more, these results can be attributed to a learning environment which focused on consciousness-raising. By the time the students arrived at this instrument (Finch, 2004, pp. 68 – 72) they had already performed many consciousness-raising activities, and were familiar with concepts regarding effective management of learning. We might well ask whether the results describe the students or their learning context.

4.5 MIS: Multiple Intelligences Survey

A popular development in recent EFL pedagogy has been the identification of Multiple Intelligences (MI) (Gardner, 1983). In similar manner to the LSI, this instrument shows students that different learners can be expected to approach learning in different ways, depending on their MIs. This activity (Finch, 2004, pp. 43–46) was found by the participants to be one of the most meaningful in the journal. Students discussed questions relating to the various different intelligences in groups and then made their own profiles in their books. "Intrapersonal Strength" proved to be the most frequently identified dominant intelligence, scoring an average of 6.8, on a scale from 1 to 10, while "Interpersonal Strength" scored the lowest average: 4.68. Individual scores also ranged widely on intelligences such as "Musical" and "Logical," though these evened out over the results as a whole. These findings would seem to suggest that the students in this study were strongest at self-management, and weakest at social skills (relations with others).

4.6 CEQ: Classroom Environment Questionnaire

The learning context is extremely important in controlling, stimulating and facilitating learning (Finch, 2001). For this reason, a number of instruments examining the learning environment were included in the learning journal. Of these, results for the *CEQ* (Fraser, 1986) are mentioned here. In this activity, students first decide on their preferences regarding the statements in the questionnaire to be true (E.g. 1: "Students come early to class"). They do this on a 1 – 5 scale, ranging from "1 = We would be happy if this never happened in class" to "5 = We would be happy if this always happened in class." Having recorded their preferred version, they then examine the same statements in terms of how often they actually occur. Responses now range from "1 = This never happens in class" to "5 = This always happens in class."

Since the statements on this instrument mostly describe positive, student-centred events and outcomes, it is not surprising that the "preferred" results showed many average scores above 4 ("We would be happy if this often happened in class"). The highest average score (4.55) went to "1. Students come early to class," followed by "19. The atmosphere of the room is friendly" (4.54) and "13. The teacher is friendly to the students" (4.49). The statement scoring the lowest average (1.93) was "4. The teacher decides where students sit in class." Punctuality and friendly teacher-student relations were apparently very important to these students.

When comparing the results of the "preferred" *CEQ* with the "actual" version, it is to be expected that reality will not match up to desired conditions, since 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.' In this respect, most results did show a slight downward trend. Item 2, for example ("Students talk in English before the teacher arrives") scored 3.99 in the "preferred" version and "2.55" in the actual version, showing that this activity did not occur as frequently as the students wished. Item 7 ("Students choose which tasks to do") also moved down, from 3.51 to 2.99, showing that students would like more autonomy in choosing and sequencing tasks. Some items, however, did not show significant differences between the two versions. Thus, item 4 ("The

teacher decides where students sit in class") moved from 1.93 to 1.92. On the other hand, a number of items showed a reverse trend. Item 8 ("Students work together in groups") moved from 3.7 to 4.07, and item 10 ("Students are responsible for the assessment in this class") moved from 3.78 to 4.01, showing that students were asked to work in groups and to assess each other more than they wanted to.

Finally, a number of instruments in the journal asked students to self-assess themselves, investigating their perceptions of confidence, motivation and participation. Results of these instruments proved to be quite high, raising the question once more of the extent to which learning styles and perceptions are flexible and are modified by the learning context.

4.7 Pre/post course questionnaire

The results so far have described an average attitude profile over three semesters, but have not documented any growth or modification. Because of this, a pre-post course questionnaire was used as an indicator of attitude modification (see Table 8).

1.	How do you feel about your language skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing)?
2.	How do you feel about your study skills (remembering, concentrating, note-taking)?
3.	How do you feel about self-assessment and peer-assessment?
4.	How do you feel about your confidence?
5.	How do you feel about your motivation?
6.	How do you feel about your independence as a learner?
7.	How do you feel about your future?
8.	How do you feel about taking part in this research?
9.	(Post-course) Has self/peer-assessment helped your learning?

Table 8: Pre/post-course questionnaire

Students performed this activity in an interview format, asking the questions to each other and summarizing the responses on the questionnaire form, thus participating in the identification of changes in perceived affect and attitudes. By the end of each semester, students' attention had been focused on educational issues for 15 weeks, and significant differences in pre/post-course responses had appeared. Some sample responses from individual students are presented below (see Table 9).

Pre-course	Post-course
Q1: How do you feel about your language skills? *Poor. All of them are poor.*	Q1: *Anxiety disappeared.**
Q3: How do you feel about self-assessment and peer-assessment? *This assessment is not objective.*	Q3: *Self-assessment is useful to reflect my learning attitude and peer-assessment makes us critical.*
Q8: How do you feel about taking part in this research? *Doubtful about the result.*	Q8: *This makes me think of the classes until now and how I have improved through the course. I learned of responsibilities. I have to go on and do my best.*

* Student responses are in italics.

Table 9: Sample responses from pre/post-course questionnaires

4.8 Analysis of written language

A sample of responses cannot claim to be representative of overall attitude change. It was therefore decided to examine the language used by the students in their responses to the pre/post course questionnaires, on the principle that attitude change would be reflected in the choice of vocabulary, and that positive attitude change would be shown by a shift in perspective, from the pessimist's "the glass is half-empty" to the optimist's "the glass is half full." This approach would focus on the student's perceptions of their abilities. Instead of looking at *what* the students were saying, the writer focused on *how* they were saying it. This approach resulted in a quantitative inspection of qualitative data (affective and comparative vocabulary in the pre/post course questionnaires). Appearances of 45 positive words such as 'can' and 22 negative words such as 'can't' were counted. Results obtained from analysis of the questionnaires showed that the ratio of positive/negative words over each semester changed from 68%/28% to 82%/18%. Not only were students more fluent and expressive in their answers to the questionnaires (see Table 9), but their choice of words was also more positive.

5 Conclusion

The students in this study showed a general movement away from traditional views of language learning and teaching (*BALLI*), along with high awareness of learning needs and learning strategies (*SILL*). They expressed a growing comfort in and with the language classroom (*FLCAS, CEQ*) and were mostly visual learners (*LSI*), conscious of the importance of confidence and motivation, strong in intrapersonal intelligence and weak in interpersonal intelligence (*MIS*). An ability to reflect meaningfully and autonomously on their learning was evident in their individual journal reflections and self-directed class discussions. Finally, the pre/post questionnaire showed evidence of positive attitude change.

In the light of these observations, this study would seem to confirm Littlewood's (2000) suggestion that educational contexts are more responsible for Asian learning styles than the learners themselves. This in turn leads to the conclusion that performance skills and preferences of students depend on (or are greatly influenced by) the learning environment. Given that the students who were the subject of this study displayed sincerity, diligence and a sophisticated awareness of component factors of learning issues, the question must be asked to what extent previous research on Korean learners reflects the teaching styles and the learning environment of that research.

Although this study has provided a profile of a particular group of EFL learners in Korea, the formative nature of the research has raised a different (and no less important) issue – the flexibility of learning styles and preferences. To classify learners is to implicitly assert that these traits are unchangeable, being inherent either in the nature of the learners themselves, or in their culture. According to this nature-over-nurture reasoning, the teacher simply needs to identify the learning styles and preferences and incorporate them into the lessons, in order to produce the most effective learning. If we follow this line of argument further, it can lead to the popular myth that students who have learned all of their lives using the rote-learning paradigm actually prefer that method of learning, and should therefore continue to use it. As Williams & Burden (1997) point out, however, learning strategies:

> … may be used consciously or unconsciously, and they are amenable to change. In other words, they can be learned. Strategies can be cognitive, that is, they can involve mental processing, or they can be more social in nature, and their effective use is enhanced by metacognitive awareness.
> (Williams & Burden, 1997, pp. 112–113)

It must be acknowledged that the students in this study were advanced, in that they were studying English Education and could comprehend and discuss the research instruments in English. However, it is also important to accept that they were Koreans living in Korea, and that their characteristics are more representative than studies carried out outside this country. They did not

enter the courses with heightened awareness of learning-related issues, however. Such consciousness-raising occurred during the courses and is here attributed to the presence of a non-threatening, student-directed, interactive, facilitative learning environment.

It was inevitable that the ongoing nature of the research influenced the perceptions of the students involved. The fact that attention was continuously being brought to specific issues meant that students talked about them, researched into them, and consequently modified their viewpoints. The post-course comments indicate that students had performed a great deal of investigation into these topics – a process that they might not otherwise have experienced. Because of this, it is evident that perceptions and attitudes were modified, and that the research formatively affected its subjects. This was not a propositional "snapshot" investigation of isolated factors, but an attempt to explore Korean learners by involving them in the process of exploration. If the research positively influences the participants, then a case might be made for carrying out the research all the time.

The implications of this study for teachers and researchers in Korea are i) that Korean students can acquire learning strategies if given appropriate exposure to them and practice in their use; and ii) a non-threatening learning environment can promote the positive modification of attitudes to learning. Such positive attitudes then lead to more effective and efficient learning.

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