Formative Research Report

InKorea

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1. Introduction

Adjusting to a new life in a foreign country is difficult for anyone. It is especially difficult in Korea, one of the most homogenous countries in the world. It is to no surprise that foreigners living in Korea are faced with many challenges on a regular basis. There are huge language and cultural differences that might not make sense to a foreigner. Our project, titled InKorea, aims to help foreigners in Korea by making a platform that covers various scenarios. The platform would explain what to do in these scenarios and what sort of documentation or items would be necessary. We also plan to include common phrases and useful apps (if available in the English language).

It should be noted that our original plan to was make an aggregate platform of useful tools such as *ishomeplusopen* or *epost*, but we decided to change our project direction after receiving user feedback. The user research revealed that the root of the many issues that foreigners face in Korea arises from a language and cultural difference. Issues with housing, banking, health insurance, etc are difficult because foreigners are not comfortable enough in the language and/or culture. As such, we hope to provide the aforementioned scenario catalog to foreigners so that they could get clear and concise information on these kinds of common scenarios.

This project is designed for good, that is to say, designed to be of benefit for our target audience because we will make a platform based on the feedback we received from foreigners. There is a real need for clear and concise information written in the English language as most references and websites in Korea, to this day, do not offer quality English translations or do not have an English translation at all. Furthermore, Korean classes at cultural centers, self-study books, and blogs are introductory at best and do not cover the complex interactions required to solve the issues that foreigners face.

2. Background

Language barrier has always been one of the greatest obstacles for a foreigner living in a country where the majority of the people do not speak the same language. This problem is exacerbated in Korea as Koreans find it difficult to communicate in English due to fear of making a mistake.

The frequency at which problems that stem from language barriers occur suggests that language barriers are likely to be an obvious source of difficulties for anyone to make an attempt at solving. This, however, is yet to be solved. This is not because no one has attempted to solve them. In fact, there are a number of tools and websites that are available and are frequently used by foreigners. Google Translate[1], for example, is a language translation service provided by Google. The service supports a wide variety of languages including Korean and has the ability to to assist any foreigner to communicate with a local in their respective languages.

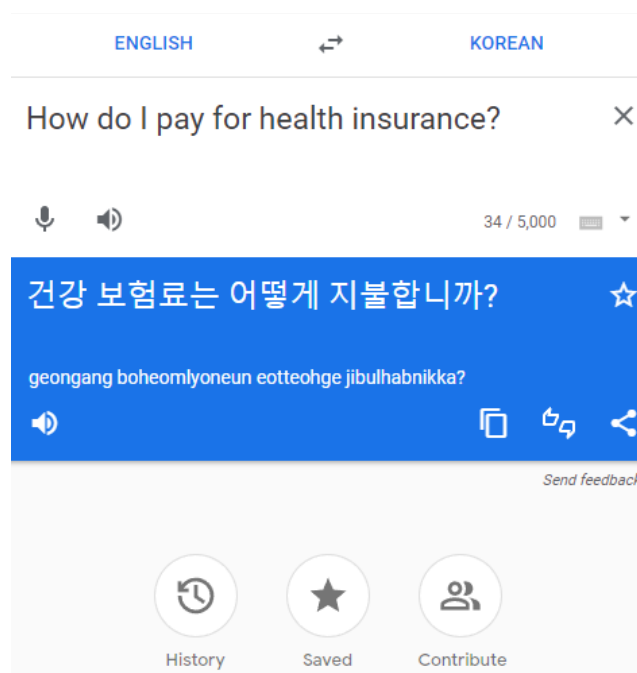[1] Google Translate: https://translate.google.com/

Figure 2.1 Google Translate correctly translating English to Korean

To use Google Translate, one would just need to either type into the input area or simply use the speech to text feature and speak into the device and let it translate what you want to say. Figure 2.1 displays how an English sentence is easily translated into Korean. The translations are fairly reliable when translating from English to Korean and vice versa, but it also has its drawbacks.

The first and the obvious drawback of Google Translate is that it requires you to take an extra step when communicating with another as you must use a translator every time a participant in a conversation wants to speak.

The other disadvantage is that Google Translate may not always provide the most accurate translations. The quality of the translation may vary depending on numerous factors such as the size of the corpus used to train, dialects, and slangs.[2] Even without factors such as the corpus size and dialects, the ambiguity created by omitting case markers happen quite frequently and often tends to make the translator misinterpret certain phrases[3]. An example of this can be seen in figure 2.2. When someone is trying to say that E-mart is on the opposite side of the park, one may omit the case marker and make it sound like something is on the opposite side of E-mart park. Such ambiguity created during conversation is quite frequent in the Korean language, and Google Translate is unable to translate such phrases as they depend heavily on the context. While there are other options such as Naver Papago[4] developed by Naver Corporation, Papago also struggles to translate when there is ambiguity, resulting in inaccurate translations.

[2] Jennifer O'Donnel, "Are your Japanese translations sounding robotic? Opt for the human touch,", *The Japan Times*, (March 2022): https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2022/03/25/language/japanese-translations-sounding-robotic-opt-human-touch/

[3] Kyungsook Kim, "The influence of Case markers on the machine-translation of Korean proverbs into English", *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, (2018): doi:154, 10.24303/lakdoi.2018.26.3.139

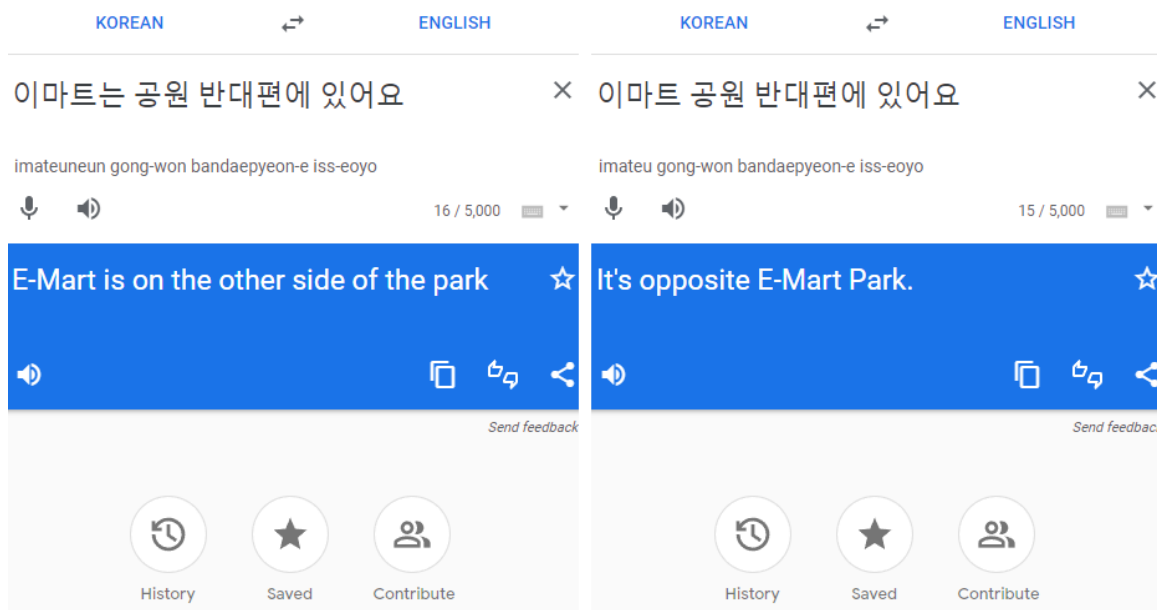[4] Papago: https://papago.naver.com/

Figure 2.2 Google Translate translating differently based on the presence of case markers

InKorea aims to alleviate such issues by providing examples of conversations in different scenarios and to let the foreigners know what they are expected to say in such situations. This certainly cannot replace Google Translate, but it can reduce the time and procedures required to communicate with a local and let the user have a more fluid conversation.

There are numerous websites such as Speechling.com[5] and 90dayKorean.com[6] that provide a range of phrases that can be used in different situations. These websites provide basic phrases that travelers can use while traveling around Korea. As it can be seen in figure 2.3, they all have the phrases organized well and explained when and how they should be used. Hence, learning such phrases through these websites may help in facilitating communication with the locals. They, however, do not include any tips or phrases that could be used by foreigners who need help in more professional situations such as paying taxes or health insurance. As InKorea will not only be for travelers, it will also include phrases that are likely used in such situations.

Asking for Help

If you're traveling in a country that doesn't speak your language, there's probably going to be several times that you need to ask for help. Whether it's an emergency situation or you're just looking for a toilet (which, okay is also an emergency sometimes), here are basic Korean phrases to ask for help.

32. **Do-wa-ju-se-yo (도와주세요)**: Help me!

33. **Gyeong-chal-eul bul-eu-se-yo.(경찰을 부르세요)**: Call the police.

Figure 2.3. Article in Speechling.com suggesting phrases to use in a specific situation

Procedures of tasks such as paying taxes and health insurance are certainly described well in websites of the department in charge. For example, the website for the National Tax Service[7] is also in

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[5] Erin. E. Honigman, "101 Basic Korean Words for Travel in South Korea", *speechling.com*, (March 2020): https://speechling.com/blog/101-basic-korean-words-for-travel-in-south-korea/
[6] 90Daykorean: https://www.90daykorean.com/
[7] National Tax Service: https://www.nts.go.kr/english/main.do

English for foreigners to inquire about anything related to taxation in Korea. However, this can only help to a limited extent when having to visit a governmental office and potentially interact with people who are not fluent in English. InKorea offers guidance for foreigners stuck in such situations by suggesting what they are expected to say.

3. Target Users

The primary target users for InKorea are foreigners who have yet to acclimate successfully to a life in Korea. In particular, we will focus on foreigners in their 20s and 30s who have come to Korea for academia and/or work as a professional. This user base has very specific needs in that they are trying to set up a household with as minimal fuss as possible. Acquiring housing, making a bank account, or setting health insurance are examples of tasks that can be especially confusing if you are not familiar with the Korean language and/or culture. We chose this target base because this demographic seems to be the most prevalent in our experiences. Our product will benefit this user base because we receive feedback, and implement a platform that directly addresses the user base's needs in the form of a scenario catalog.

4. Formative User Research

We chose to conduct 1:1 interviews and to send out google forms to online communities as our methods to research how foreigners have adjusted to Korea thus far.

4.1 1:1 Interviews

Participants

We conducted interviews with foreigners that our team members were personally close to. The reasoning was that we wanted to get maximum honesty and feedback through these interviews. We would be much less likely to get in depth feedback from a survey. As such, each individual team member was tasked with interviewing one of their close friends (a foreigner). The only criterion was that these friends would have had to have lived in Korea for a substantial amount of time as the plight of a tourist is different from that of someone trying to adjust to a life in a new country.

Procedure

We aimed to conduct the interviews as professionally as possible. Each member was tasked with physically talking to each friend, either in person or via Zoom. We did not record each interview, but took notes instead on the interview questions that we had prepared in advance. While the interviews themselves were conducted on a 1:1 basis, the analysis of said interviews were done as a group over several sessions where we noted common themes and points of concern.

Results

Interviewee 1

The first interview was conducted with a former student of SUNY Korea who is now working as a developer in Korea. One thing to note from her interview was that the language barrier was at the crux of a lot of the problems she faced as a foreigner. Filing taxes or getting health insurance required a high level of Korean competency that she did not have. There were also cultural differences which caused the interviewee to have some problems. An example of such would be how major grocery stores like Home Plus and Emart close on certain days and that she was unaware of that fact when she went out to get some groceries.

Interviewee 2

The second interview was conducted with a working professional for an NGO. It had been her sixth year in Korea at the time of the interview and she also noted that the language barrier was problematic when she was first adjusting to life in Korea. She would frequently rely on friends or

tools like Google Translate to translate what she needed. She did say, however, that she was relatively comfortable in Korea right now and that she had adjusted well. It just so happens that the same could not be said for a foreigner fresh off the boat. She ended the interview by recommending that we focus on the housing market in Korea, if we were to change our plans, as she remembers getting a house in Korea was especially difficult for her as a foreigner with many unfamiliar terms and cultural differences.

Interviewee 3
The third interview was conducted with an officer in the U.S. military who had been stationed in Korea for the past five years. He noted that any issues he had while adjusting to Korea was due to the language and cultural differences. Like the two interviewees ahead of him, he would also rely on translation apps or friends when needed for language issues. He also had the same issue of not knowing that groceries stores closed on a certain date and had the misfortune to go on a date when the store was closed. Another thing he mentioned was wanting to learn more about Korean culture in general. For example, he asked why some foods are only consumed on a certain day.

Interviewee 4
The last interview was conducted with a university student of two years at George Mason. She noted that her life in Korea had been pretty comfortable until now, but that she usually relied on Korean friends for important chores like banking or managing her phone service. She noted that she also had dealt with the same grocery store closing time debacle and also that the Korean addressing system was difficult to enter into a keyboard. She is interested in getting a job and is focusing her interests and time on achieving that goal.

4.2 Google Forms
Participants

The targets for our google form research method were foreigners in online communities. Facebook is a social media platform for foreigners in Korea, and we spent some time trying to get access to these communities to post our google for. The purpose for these communities are to help foreigners living in Korea and we reasoned that our research would fit right in. Some examples of the content in these online communities are people asking for help with translation or navigating through Korean bureaucracy, making a bank account account, visiting the hospital, or finding jobs. We have noted some of the most popular online communities in Korea below.
- Songdo Community (Facebook) → 6.2k Members
- Seoul Expats (Facebook) → 24.1K Members
- Expats Who Love South Korea (Facebook) → 16.2k Members
- Every Expat in Korea (Facebook) → 65.2k Members

Procedure

We created a survey using Google Forms to collect and analyze our data. The survey was designed to be as flexible and compact as possible to allow a greater response rate. The questions themselves were more general and open to interpretation than the specific questions that we had asked in our 1:1 interviews. We initially posted on the "Songdo Community" Facebook group to pilot our survey to gain some feedback. Afterwards, each member of our team attempted to post on a different Facebook group. Later, we conducted a group meeting to review the answers and analyze the results.

Results

Our original plan was to use the "Songdo Community" Facebook group as a pilot, after which we would post on other community groups. However, we were not able to post on groups other than the "Songdo Community" because our posts were not approved by the group administrators. Thus, the results of our survey were limited to 15 responses to date.

Length of Stay

Our results show that more than 70% of the participants have been in Korea for 2 years or more. This implied that most of the participants had to deal with the full extent of settling in Korea, which includes but is not limited to setting up a bank account, insurance, acquiring housing, and transportation.

Most Used Tools

The survey results show the most popular tools used by foreigners in the "Songdo Community" group were generally divided into five main categories: 1) Grocery/Food Shopping 2) Translation 3) Navigation 4) Communication, and 5) Web Browsing. We could conclude that these areas are of great interest or need to our participants, and should require more attention. Additionally, the participants' responses suggested that poor English integration - or complete lack of English integration thereof - for applications limited them from using certain tools. Below are the top mentioned apps for each category.

1) Coupang ; 2) Papago ; 3) Kakao Map ; 4) Kakao Talk ; 5) Naver

Language and Culture Barrier

Our original plan intended to aid foreigners in Korea by providing information about supermarket closing times, converting foreign addresses to the Korean format, local event details, and public transportation information. However, our survey results suggested that the majority of the problems that foreigners face in Korea are mostly language and cultural problems. In contrast to our initial project plan, the participants' responses suggested that these problems highly precede our intended solutions which we identified as superficial.

5. Conclusion

Our research results from both the interview and survey research methods suggested that the language barrier was a core problem that highly impacted the participants' interactions with daily activities. Our initial goal was to help the foreigner community by providing a web platform that combined useful tools such as providing supermarket closing times, converting foreign addresses to the Korean format, providing local event details, and listing public transportation information. However, we concluded that these solutions were merely superficial and did not accurately address the core issues that our participants struggle with on a daily basis.

After careful analysis of both survey methods, we decided to change our direction and address the language problem directly by providing a scenario catalog. The catalog would include the most common problems identified in our research results and guide users to meet their goals. For example, setting up a bank account might involve the use of a translation application, but typing everything can be lengthy and taxing. As such, our next direction is to create a web application dedicated to scenarios. In each scenario, users can select the desired action (such as withdrawing money from a bank) and follow the scenario guide to help them understand the clerk, respond, and fill out any forms they might have to fill to swiftly and successfully achieve their goal. The four categories we currently plan to target are how to open and use a bank account, how to acquire housing, how to set up health insurance, and how to register a Korean phone number. These categories come directly from our user research, and we hope to be of service to the foreigner community in Korea.

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7. Appendix

7.1 In-Class Critique

- Add a general question to the grocery section of the 1:1 interviews asking if foreigners have any issues
- Compress various questions regarding closing date and times of grocery store into one question.
- Break down the google form's first multiple choice question into more options for greater understanding of user demographics.
- Add various sub questions to interview sections in case that a user does not have an issue when expected.
- Add leading questions to soften each topic as opposed to asking direct questions straight away.

7.2 Research Materials

1:1 Interview Questions and Responses

- Link

Google Form & Responses

- Link