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Informal Language Learning Through Mobile Instant Messaging Among University Students in Korea

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ABSTRACT

Mobile technologies and platforms that facilitate communication across different languages are increasingly relevant in a world characterised by the global flows of diverse populations and disparate digital environments. This qualitative study explores communication between native and non-native speakers of Korean, mediated through mobile instant messaging in the sophisticated digital environment of South Korea. This article reports on two studies that examined the experiences of English-speaking language instructors (Study 1) and international students (Study 2) in a private university situated in South Korea during 2012 and 2015, respectively. This is done by focusing on face-to-face and screen-to-screen communication, and the geo-dependencies arising between language instructors and international students. Between 2012 and 2015, large upgrades in the local digital environment saw the emergence of ubiquitous low cost or free high-speed Wi-Fi coverage and a near universal national adoption of a local mobile instant messaging service. The participants in Study 2 were widely found to be digitally literate and demonstrated an acuity with mobile instant messaging. They developed creative solutions for communication and language learning by blending sociolinguistic and linguistic competencies within mobile instant messaging chat rooms. This article highlights the changes that have occurred between 2012 and 2015 and demonstrates the need for further research into how mobile instant messaging services support communication between people from different language and culture backgrounds, particularly for people without access to formal language instruction.

KEYWORDS

Chat Room, Digital Environment, Digital Literacy, Global Mobility, Higher Education, Informal Learning, Mobile Learning, Sociolinguistic Competencies

INTRODUCTION

Increasing global mobility brings large numbers of people into contact with speakers of other languages. Often, this contact is temporary and people from different language backgrounds need to find ways of communicating without the advantage of formal language instruction. Globally mobile populations can experience challenges completing even simple tasks independently, such as ordering

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food, going shopping and taking public transportation. Changes in digital technologies, however, are bringing new ways for globally mobile populations to overcome everyday language and cross-cultural communication challenges.

In South Korea (hereafter Korea), the setting for this research, a growing number of English speakers from countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are arriving for work and study on a short-term basis, often staying one year or less. Usually these English speakers arrive in Korea without prior knowledge of the Korean language or its culture and do not stay long enough to benefit from Korean language courses.

This paper explores changes in cross-cultural communication strategies among English speakers in Korea that occurred over a three-year period, by examining the findings of two separate studies: one in 2012, the other in 2015. In Study 1, participants struggled to learn and use the Korean language while also adjusting to the unfamiliar Korean culture. They discovered that by joining in leisure activities of mutual interest with Korean speakers, they could improve their cross-cultural communication skills. In Study 2, large upgrades in digital technologies and infrastructure offered participants options for cross-cultural communication and cultural understanding differing from the participants in Study 1. Above all, the participants in Study 2 found mobile instant messaging a key resource for placing them in contact with Korean speakers. Mobile instant messaging enabled them to observe, use and innovate with the Korean language, blending in-person and mobile instant messaging chat rooms for communication during their stay.

BACKGROUND

In Korea, mobile technologies are widely used, are supported by sophisticated infrastructure and are largely responsible for that country's manufacturing sector's export strength (Park, Kim, Shon & Shim, 2013; Park & Lo, 2012). The export success in mobile technologies and manufacturing is dependent on transnational business partnerships in which English is the *lingua franca*, creating an urgent need for English language skills in professional contexts (Goerne, 2013; Tange, 2009). In response, the Korean government has developed strategies to recruit English speakers from around the world to assist in preparing the future Korean workforce by providing English language communication opportunities in primary, secondary and tertiary education settings (Collins, 2014; Collins & Shubin, 2015). These strategies have created flows of English speakers into East Asia as language workers and as sojourning students.

Recently, researchers have examined these global mobilities evidenced by the increase in transnational employment opportunities and international student programmes in higher education institutions (Canagarajah, 2013; Mok, 2016; Mok & Han, 2016). Studies on long-term transnational employment opportunities have investigated the intercultural adaptation of migrant workers settling into new social and cultural environments (for example, see Faez, 2012; Stodolska & Santos, 2006). Studies on short-term transnational language employment opportunities have looked at temporary work programmes, particularly those involving working tourists who are often in their early twenties and using their income to finance their travel and leisure (Chen, 2016; Goerne, 2013). While working tourists often engage in part-time, unskilled labour in their destination country, they often also pursue temporary language teaching contracts (Collins & Shubin, 2015). The growing use of English as a *lingua franca* means that many working tourists are English speakers employed as language workers and travelling to non-English-speaking countries in Central and South America, the Middle East and throughout Asia (Tange, 2009).

Shifting student mobilities within the higher education sector have increased international student populations in 'traditional' destination countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (Baker, 2016). In those traditional destination countries, international students enter English language-only educational, social and cultural settings. Their academic experiences are

augmented by the challenges they face with English skills and communication with English speakers (Hult & Källkvist, 2016; Kinginger, 2015). However, 'new' destination countries are emerging onto the market that offer international students a greater range of cultural and academic experiences. In East Asia, universities encourage international enrolments by offering scholarships and reduced tuition fees (Mok, 2016). These countries generally do not use English as a first language, but may use English as a medium of instruction in university classrooms (Kim, Tartar & Choi, 2014). In this way, non-English-speaking campuses are made accessible to English speakers, thereby increasing English learning opportunities for domestic students. Even so, these universities may be ill-prepared for meeting the needs of international students who are unfamiliar with the social, cultural and linguistic contexts of the destination country (Mok, 2015; Mok, 2016).

Several recent studies have explored the role that digital communication plays among international students and how it shapes their cross-cultural communication skills as they study abroad (Ribeiro, 2015; Ribeiro 2016; Robin, 2008). Typical forms of digital communication include exchanging spoken and written language and multimedia such as emoji, photos and videos, through computers, phones, tablets and other electronic devices. In this context, digital environments can be said to be comprised of the devices, platforms, applications and Internet connectivity. They enable digital, cross-cultural communication when what they offer matches the literacy of those users attempting dialogue (Lee, 2015).

What remains underreported, however, are the ways in which English speakers pursue these possibilities in a country such as Korea, which has advanced digital infrastructure and pervasive mobile technology use (Oghuma, Chang, Libaque-Saenz, Park & Rho, 2015). The several cohorts of English speakers examined in this paper arrived in Korea with limited Korean language skills. What were present were the mobile technologies, including devices, applications and interactive media that offered new possibilities for cross-cultural communication with their Korean hosts (Song, 2012; Viberg & Grönlund, 2013).

This paper investigates how English speakers who were recruited under national government language strategies, went about solving cross-cultural communication challenges. It does this while taking into account the changes in the digital environment during the periods of their stay in Korea. The analysis was guided by the following primary research question: What are the similarities and differences in communication experiences of visiting English language instructors and visiting international students in Korea during 2012 and 2015, respectively?

Secondary research questions emerged during later stages of data analysis, as differences in cross-cultural communication were identified. These secondary research questions are as follows:

- In what ways are these two participant groups reliant on their Korean hosts and how do they pursue self-reliance during their sojourn?
- How do these two participant groups experience face-to-face communication with Korean speakers?
- What are the resources available in the Korean environment for overcoming communicative breakdown and cultural misunderstandings?

Both participant groups, most staying in Korea for six months to one year, shared an inexperience with communication across cultures and the Korean language. Examining the experiences of visiting English language instructors in 2012 and international students in 2015 together demonstrates how rapid upgrades in mobile technologies influence and change cross-cultural communication possibilities and shape language learning informally during a brief sojourn period. This research is important because empirically-based insight into communication across languages in sophisticated digital environments is lacking. Moreover, the possibilities for cross-cultural communication mediated via mobile technologies and platforms is increasingly relevant in a world characterised by the global flows of diverse populations and disparate digital environments.

CONTEXT

Language Strategy in Korea 1995-2015

The studies reported in this paper were conducted in the context of two major Korean government language strategies for English language learning. The first strategy, announced in 1995, involved recruiting visiting language instructors (LI) on E-2 teaching visas who would work in the public-school system and private sector academies (Carless, 2006; Wang & Lin, 2013). Their 'visiting' status stems from their 1- or 2-year contract periods and resultant high turnover rate (Collins, 2014; Kasai, Lee & Kim, 2011). This strategy of recruiting English speakers as language instructors (LI) into Korea as classroom language instructors coincided with the release of the seventh national public school curriculum (Kasai, Lee & Kim, 2011). The language instructors' recruitment extended over a period of 15 years with the objective of placing one visiting language instructor in every Korean public school. A language instructor in primary and secondary schools would supplement the curriculum with conversation-based classes and after school activities and field trips. These classes and other activities were aimed at increasing students' interest in English language study and English language culture. The national government's language instructor recruitment programme favoured recent university graduates from Australia, Canada, Republic of Ireland, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, with a preference for those with English literature, linguistics and education backgrounds (Collins & Shubin, 2015).

Its second strategy, announced in 2004 and amended in 2008, 2010 and 2012, involved recruiting international students who would study in tertiary institutions (Ahn, 2010; Choi, 2016). Later termed the 'Study Korea Project', the policy objective sought an increased recruitment of English-speaking international students who would offer informal English language interaction at universities (Huang, 2016). As English-speaking international students, they could stay for one or two semesters (4-8 months) for undergraduate study at national and private universities. Supported by scholarships covering study abroad costs, international students were required to deliver a specific number of weekly English language contact hours with Korean students. Local students used this time for English conversation and help with English-related coursework. In addition, universities encouraged interaction between international students and Korean students by placing the former in intercultural accommodation, and promoted their engagement with special events and volunteer projects. By 2012, investment in this strategy largely displaced government spending on the 1995 strategy of a visiting language instructor in public school classrooms. The language instructor numbers decreased across the country as a consequence, from an estimated 9,300 in 2011 to just 6,700 in 2013 (Lee, 2014). By 2016, international student numbers were more than 95,000, up some 12% from 2015 and roughly four times the number of international students in 2004 (Choi, 2016; Ko, 2012).

The Digital Communication Environment in Korea: Infrastructure and Capacities

Korea's digital communication environment has been evolving rapidly and it currently has one of the highest levels of fibre optical cabling, Wi-Fi coverage and mobile network speeds globally (Choi, Narasimhan & Kim, 2016; Park, Im & Noh, 2016). In particular, mobile digital technologies transformed around 2012 when the Samsung and LG conglomerates started competing with the Apple Corporation for market domination in the fast changing worldwide mobile device market (Kim, Park & Kim, 2015; Song, 2012). Locally made, top quality mobile devices including "smartphones" and tablets became widely available as telecommunication companies offered low cost monthly contracts, combining these Korean-made devices with high speed 3G data networks (Park, Im & Noh, 2016). Concurrently, local software developers responded by engineering communication applications for the Android and iOS operating systems, targeting these mobile phone platforms while avoiding data network connectivity costs. One early application, KakaoTalk, emerged as the popular mobile-only, cross-platform and free-to-use application designed for mobile devices (Oghuma, Chang, Libaue-

Saenz, Park & Rho, 2015; Yim, 2016). This kind of application became known as a 'mobile instant messenger' or MIM service. The local MIM service changed quickly by adapting computer-style instant messaging services for use on mobile devices. It exploited built-in features such as text, taking photographs and videos, sharing links, device files and on-line websites and exchanging small expressive digital icons and animations - later known as 'emoji' and 'stickers'. A user could activate these features in one-to-one or in group 'chatrooms' created by selecting one or more of their personal contacts for exchanging comments and contents by means of their mobile device screens. The local MIM service continued evolving by adding free voice and video calls through Wi-Fi connections (Choi, 2011; Lee, 2015). Currently, it is installed on more than 90% of all mobile devices in Korea (Oghuma, et. al., 2015).

METHOD

This paper draws on qualitative data sets from two separate studies in Korea. Study 1 was conducted in 2012 with visiting language instructors (n=24). Study 2 was conducted in 2015 with a cohort of international students (n=60). The data collection method for each study is explained below.

Data for Study 1 were collected in semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected via purposive sampling from one of Korea's guest language instructor programmes for public schools. The researchers invited the language instructor cohort to participate in this study at a teaching conference in the winter of 2011. The visiting language instructors later completed a short demographic survey to help determine the purposive research sample. The purposive sample identified 24 language instructors working in six elementary, nine middle and nine high schools with 13 in their first teaching contract year, eight in their second and three in their third. A breakdown of participant demographics for Study 1 is provided in Table 1. The selected language instructors had taught for at least six months prior to data collection. Semi-structured interviews took place either in-person or through a video call, using an interview guide with questions related to their teaching, social life and language use experiences. Key semi-structured interview questions for Study 1 included:

- What does the term 'language barrier' mean to you?
- What aspects of language barriers have you experienced and have these changed over the weeks since your arrival? In what ways?
- How would you describe your level of Korean language now as compared to those first few weeks in Korea?
- Do you find technologies like smartphones, social networking and others make communication easier for you? In what ways?
- Is there a device (like a smartphone) or service (like mobile instant messaging) you feel you couldn't live without for connecting with Koreans? Why is that?

Table 1. Participant demographics of participants in Study 1

Participants	24
Male	8
Female	16
Age Range	21-28
Nationality	USA
Education	Completed undergraduate degree

Data were collected in 2012 over a 20-week period.

Data for Study 2 were collected in focus groups and semi-structured interviews. International student participants were selected from a private Korean university with a total student population of 12,000, located 85 kilometres south of Seoul. All the invited international student participants were in undergraduate programmes from English-speaking countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. They were invited to participate in this study via email, which included links to participant information, consent documentation and a voluntary questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants about their language backgrounds, campus life, mobile technology use and some demographic information. Their responses informed a purposive sample selected into four research discussion groups totaling 45 international students, who were either in their first (n=34) or second semester (n=11) in Korea. The discussion group topics focused on three challenges emerging from the initial questionnaire: 1) establishing interpersonal relationships with Korean students, 2) mingling in the various social spaces outside of the university campus and, 3) how they were managing their time as short stay international students. The 45 international student participants were divided into four groups and described challenges and solutions for daily tasks involving face-to-face interactions with Korean speakers and using mobile technologies for interactions on- and off-campus. These international students' responses were used to select participants for 15 in-depth interviews. The semi-structured interviews included questions on their formal and informal Korean language learning, their social and leisure activities and on their use of mobile technologies. Key semi-structured interview questions for Study 2 included:

- What activities allow you to use the Korean language most? What are the best locations for using Korean?
- What are your 'go-to' resources for understanding the Korean language when situations go beyond your ability to communicate?
- What features of mobile instant messaging (written messages, emoticons, stickers, sending files) do you use most when communicating with Koreans?
- Could you describe what a typical mobile instant messaging chatroom looks like when communicating with Koreans… who use English to communicate with you? Could you describe what a typical mobile instant messaging chatroom looks like when communicating with Koreans… who have limited English language skills?
- How would you explain the positive advantages of a digital space (like mobile instant messaging) for using the Korean language?

Data from these discussion groups and the individual semi-structured interviews were collected over a 30-week period during 2015. A breakdown of participant demographics for Study 2 is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant demographics of participants in Study 2

Participants	96 (Total), 15 Selected for Semi-Structured Interviews
Male	44
Female	52
Age Range	19-24
Nationality	Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and USA
Education	Completed two years of a four-year undergraduate degree

The data from both studies were transcribed to text and stored digitally. The length of the semi-structured interviews averaged 71 minutes in Study 1, and 55 minutes in Study 2. The transcriptions were then thematically coded with the assistance of a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. One key finding from this analysis was that all participants experienced obstacles in language use due to their lack of formal Korean language training and their Korean interlocutors' inexperience with English conversation. These challenges to mutual language use also limited language instructor and international students in their ability to function independently outside of their cohorts. A second theme that emerged in the analysis was the formulation of strategies for communicating with Korean speakers. These included sharing accommodation between English and Korean speakers, certain leisure activities, and, in some cases, immersion in Korean-language only settings.

Later coding identified that for the language instructors, creative solutions for enabling language use occurred when they participated in leisure activities in which Korean speakers were also interested. For the international students, further higher-level coding revealed that mobile phones, their adaptability when using new mobile phone applications, particularly MIM, and the ready availability of free Wi-Fi had combined in supporting their communication with Korean speaking students. Moreover, from the analysis it emerged that both international students and Korean students used both direct interactions and the language use possibilities offered by MIM services on their mobile devices. This created novel language resources that enabled more successful language interactions.

COMPARISON, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three key findings emerged from comparing the data analysis from the two studies. First, both language instructors and international students faced challenges transitioning from being host-reliant (i.e. depending on a known Korean speaker) to being self-reliant (i.e. being reasonably confident in unassisted limited language use) in their communication efforts. Moreover, in achieving this transition, language instructors used face-to-face interactions centred on formal leisure with hosts, whereas international students were more inclined to use screen-to-screen interactions centred on informal MIM with hosts. Second, when addressing communication challenges, the language instructors and international students responded by creatively using the readily available resources in their environment. Third, the international students demonstrated digital literacies in using MIM and digital communication within Korea comparable with those of the Korean students. Both guest students and host students demonstrated the ability to blend sociolinguistic and linguistic competencies within MIM chatrooms. This assisted them in developing their self-reliance in using communication mediated through hand held devices in screen-to-screen discourses with their hosts, which could occur at a distance or by mixing digital and physical propinquity.

The digital environment influenced each cohort's response to communication challenges and the solutions they sought out. On the one hand, language instructors were active and successful in Korea just before a major upgrade in digital communications, between 1995 and 2012. Thus, their use of digital resources revolved around portable personal computers, compact music players, electronic dictionaries, and social media websites, which favoured asynchronous communication when seeking assistance with language challenges. On the other hand, international students arrived after low cost high speed Wi-Fi connectivity became ubiquitous and the broad adoption of a MIM service nationwide. They adapted quickly in this advanced digital environment with its the common MIM platform that favoured synchronous language learning and improvised multi-content discourse.

Host-Reliance and Self-Reliance

Both language instructors and international students faced new linguistic and socio-cultural settings after arrival in Korea. For language instructors, there was structured support by way of a six-week training course before they began at their schools. By way of contrast, international students were plunged into an unfamiliar language setting when they took up residence in shared accommodation

on campus. At first, both groups found they were reliant on their hosts when facing day-to-day living. Language instructors could turn to co-workers at their school or their homestay family members. There were language difficulties in these settings that made asking for help stressful, as one language instructor explained:

Apart from the complications of living with a homestay, there are many problems. Like when I go to the gym and I can't sign up like a normal person signs up because I cannot read the form. Or, if I lose my cell phone, I need someone to come babysit me and fix it. I cannot even pay my own cell phone bill, because I'm a foreigner. (language instructor, female, 23)

The international students found themselves in a new linguistic, socio-cultural and study environment where they were surrounded by Korean speakers except when in the company of the few English-speakers in their 'global' programme. Elsewhere on and off campus, they made transient and limited social contact, as one international student described:

When you're outside of that environment and really interacting in Korean daily life…with Korean students who aren't in the global programme and don't have as much experience using English, that's when I feel the language barrier the most. Having trouble conveying what I want to say and not really knowing how and they might misunderstand my tone. (international student, female, 23)

For both cohorts, there were unexpected limitations when they relied on local acquaintances for help. The assistance provided often solved practical issues but without giving language learning support:

It can be a 'pro' or 'con' if you have a Korean friend with you. Maybe that Korean friend will help teach you as you go along or take you to explore places or take you somewhere and translate everything and not try to help you understand the language. (international student, female, 20)

The social and work contexts enjoyed by the language instructors eventually resulted in a move toward self-reliance. When in their homestays and in their schools, they discovered leisure activities which provided them with speech communities mixing host and guest languages. These leisure activities included recurring casual meetings or serious commitments to amateur, volunteer or hobby pursuits in the company of their Korean hosts. Leisure activities included sports, volunteering and casual socialising. For those busy with extra language learning in their spare time and with regular volunteering, there was improved confidence in their own communication, as one language instructor explained:

During the winter break, I set up a temporary residence in Seoul. I wanted to experience living on my own in a different place—put myself out there to meet new people. I feel that doing extra language classes combined with our volunteering at the refugee centre really helped lead up to this. (language instructor, female, 23)

Benefit was found in participating in regular leisure activities with hosts too, as one language instructor discovered:

The phrases that I've been able to pick up through outings with Korean friends definitely makes it easier to communicate. Basic things like preparing transportation arrangements or ordering food or bank transactions, post office transactions, stuff like that. (language instructor, female, 22)

The social and education contexts enjoyed by the international students prompted them to combine mobile device and MIM features with their face-to-face host interactions. They mixed auto translated phrases, emoticons, pictures, videos and internet links for one-to-one and group chats and for direct interactions:

I use emoticons in my messages to help me communicate more clearly and pictures to help me show what I'm typing about. It's very useful to have a chatting service because I can practice typing in Korean and because I'm typing, I can think about Korean more. I can learn more everyday Korean expressions also. Even if I don't understand them at the time I receive the message, I can always look up what I don't understand later. (international student, female, 21)

Even as they made use of handheld devices with MIM and internet abilities, international students were similar to the language instructor cohort in their ambition for greater self-reliance. One international student explained her approach:

Having something typed out can make all the difference in getting the help you need when on your own. My first try, I'd type something out myself. If that did not work, I would ask a Korean I know to type out what I need. I prefer to do things on my own and learn through experience than drag someone with me and have them do the work. (international student, female, 20)

Face-to-Face and Screen-to-Screen

Common to both cohorts was the need for progression from host-reliant communication, which they experienced following their arrival, to self-reliant communication. Each cohort discovered the means to do this within their own context. For the language instructors who faced communication challenges in homestay and work settings, this emerged largely through face-to-face interactions arising from their leisure involvements. For the international students who faced communication challenges in the more cloistered setting of a university, this emerged largely through their leveraging the available digital services, hand held devices and MIM. The face-to-face interactions in a work-related setting were complex as one language instructor outlined:

In my school, being the only foreigner, I'm surrounded by Koreans and I have to interact and communicate with other Koreans. And some social events come up and its part of my job. But outside of school, it's very, very difficult meeting other Koreans. (language instructor, male, 28)

Moreover, things became complicated if communication was not transactional, as another language instructor explained:

More often than not—even thought I am trying to use Korean—Koreans will only use English with me. This makes practising Korean impossible at times and getting to know anyone outside those I already spend my days with. (language instructor, male, 23)

Face-to-face interaction in the social setting of shared accommodation was complex too, which required attention to non-verbal communication as one international student discovered: 'In my suite I am definitely the only one who speaks English so I have absolutely no clue what they're saying. I have to observe body language to assess what's being said, which isn't easy.' (international student, male, 23)

In their shift toward self-reliance in communication, a point of difference between the two cohorts was the face-to-face interactions favoured by the language instructors and the screen-to-screen

interactions favoured by the international students. These were not mutually exclusive as cohorts could use either. For example, in a homestay setting, a language instructor made use of the family computer and in a casual social setting an international student made use of talking and observing:

Google Translate is bookmarked on the family computer (kept in the middle of the living space). If we need to communicate something—often daily plans or announcements—we type in what we need and show to the other so they can understand. (language instructor, male, 28)

Going to somewhere like a café and talking to each other is very helpful. I can share my daily encounters with Koreans and ask them for help on what to say or how to act. It's a kind of observation, to know what's appropriate…you observe 'how' you would use the Korean language and begin to pick up on basic patterns in the language and then insert your own words. (international student, Female, 23)

In the analysis, there is this modulated background where the cohorts overlap somewhat in their experiences of and approaches to their communication challenges.

Mobile Instant Messaging and Communication Across Languages

The experiences of the two cohorts shows there was a dramatic convergence of communication contexts with mobile technologies and digital services including MIM over three years (2012-2015). Considering these findings thus far, what arises is a recognition that these technological, social, and communication circumstances favoured MIM and language learning. Understanding how the international students progressed their communication through leveraging hand-held devices offering screen-to-screen MIM discourse with their hosts will be considered next.

There were several conditions that supported the international students' use of MIM for communication. First, they arrived at their host university with mobile devices that connected easily with the free Wi-Fi on campus and in the surrounding neighbourhood coffee shops. restaurants, and bars. This provided a bypass around the serious difficulties involved with obtaining mobile telephone contracts locally. Second, the host university had issued advice that students should install and familiarise themselves with the popular mobile instant messenger service, which is used on around 90% of all mobile devices in Korea (Ha, Kim, Libaque-Saenz, Chang & Park, 2015). This free MIM service uses Wi-Fi and does not rely on telephone network data services. It delivers text message chatting similar to standard short message service (SMS) with extra text and visual features. The combined ubiquities of free Wi-Fi and the popular MIM service released students from checking for messages on email or social media pages. Moreover, this put them easily in touch with one another and Korean students. Importantly, this facility was centred on handheld mobile devices and on the ubiquitous MIM platform and its chat room screen (described below).

The elements of a MIM chatroom are 1) a discourse space displaying inline text and multimedia chatting messages with 2) on-screen keyboard and feature selection icons at the top and bottom of the screen. 3) Sender messages appear on the left besides the sender's name and profile image and the 4) receivers' messages appear on the right. By default, sender and receiver messages appear in different colours. The on-screen keyboard enables text entry from any keyboard installed on the device as well as symbols and punctuation. Feature selection icons offer three primary functions: 1) chatroom input, 2) settings and 3) search. The chatroom input includes multimedia such as emoji, stickers, photos, videos and options to contact others via voice and video calls. Chatroom input also features a tag and share option, which displays the most popular news, weather and sports stories across the MIM user network. The settings menu offers ways to customise the chatroom using different colours, images, font sizes and notification sounds. The search function explores chatroom content history, highlighting each instance of the words sought or symbols. Also, MIM features a personalised chatroom for typing private memos, saving online and multimedia content and transferring information from other chatrooms for later reference.

These international students showed an acuity for blending their face-to-face communication with mobile technologies and digital services. It is noteworthy, however, that this process relied on a reciprocal adeptness among the Koreans with who they engaged. Some international students arrived with a predisposition to these conditions, as one student described:

I'm a big gamer and so I've been using a lot of different technologies my whole life. Gaming in Korea is big, though most common with males. Mobile phone games are becoming popular with female Koreans. Gaming gives us one more possible conversation outlet and shared interest. (international student, female, 23)

Generally speaking, the ubiquitous MIM service was embraced quickly:

I use mobile devices every day, both phone and tablet. I don't have a data plan so I run all devices off Wi-Fi. My top apps are KakaoTalk and I downloaded a Korean keyboard as well. I also use LINE [another MIM application] depending on if I have friends that prefer it. I used KakaoTalk in the States because I had friends there who used it. Having use of MIM saves me from purchasing data or needing a Korean phone number. (international student, female, 21)

As a consequence, quickly after arriving in Korea, the international students were involved in MIM chatroom communication sometimes one-to-one and often in groups:

There's a lot—more than 10 used actively in a given week and sometimes upward of 20. Many are group chats with a blend of exchange and Korean students. Five chats are almost exclusively in Korean and these help me use different aspects of the Korean language. (international student, female, 19)

The MIM chatrooms provided a means for exploring and experimenting with intercultural discourse, as one participant outlined:

There's a range of English when chat-rooming with Koreans and international students. If they're good at English, we will use mostly English. Maybe we'll send pictures to one another or links from the internet. Those that don't know English that well—the messages are mostly in Korean. For example, in my suite, my roommates don't really speak English so the conversations in person are in Korean. That filters into the phone chats as well. In person I'll just be sitting there listening and trying to figure out what the words mean. On my phone I can look up what I don't know quickly or check on it later. Conversations through MIM can range from casual topics about having eaten, weather, classes, fatigue… to scheduling plans or trips… going to have dinner together. (international student, female, 20)

Unless deleted, these chatrooms persist so all previous text and visual media are saved within a member's chatroom, with the most recent communications displayed first. By scrolling back and forth through a chat room or with the search button, a member can review previous content. The usefulness of MIM chatrooms could benefit all participants:

A lot of incorrect grammar gets exchanged—either our Korean to Koreans or English to international students and so the chat space can be both a place of deciphering, simplifying and correcting. I try to keep things easy to understand and no doubt Korean students do their best to make their Korean understandable to me. Over time you get used to certain patterns—you can see it, review it in the chat room. (international student, male, 23)

What makes these MIM chat rooms engaging is the range of elements that can be uploaded, displayed and mixed. In turn, these chat room elements, individually and combined, offer sociolinguistic and linguistic dimensions to the communication 'chat' taking place, which is reinforced by scrollable and searchable functions. In effect, the MIM chat rooms became a synchronous communication context and an asynchronous language learning resource. The range of MIM elements available meant that chat room members could creatively mix text and visual content when communicating in real-time and then study these interactions at a later time:

I've found I have to both reply back to typed messages and I need to use emoji and stickers with Koreans. Even if the Korean only sent a sticker or emoji, I should reply. If I don't they will say something when we meet. Emoji and stickers help confirm understanding or to show that I've read the message. This also gives us something to talk about because the written sounds we use in English–hahaha–are different that in Korean–kakaka. (international student, female, 21)

Blending Sociolinguistic and Linguistic Competencies

The analysis revealed MIM elements offered sociolinguistic and linguistic possibilities in successful communication between international students and Korean speakers, which were unavailable for the language instructor cohort. Familiarising and experimenting with these sociolinguistic features provided a gateway to linguistic features that introduced written and spoken language into the MIM chat room. The sociolinguistic features include multimedia chatting, links with previews and a gift shop accessible within the chat room. Multimedia chatting involves an exchange of emoji, stickers, photos and videos that enable screen-to-screen discourse without written or spoken language. Emoji and stickers represent digitally rendered facial expressions and body language and are a substitute for vocabulary and expressions in picture form. Similarly, photos and videos help contextualise chat room discourse, allows the sharing of interesting media and enables the documentation of social gatherings. Links with previews are website addresses with an accompanying image offering access to online content outside of the chat room. The auto-generated preview image allows time to assess content relevance and the potential language skills needed to engage with the content. Also, the gift shop sells digital vouchers for everyday items such as coffee, ice cream and movie tickets. Digital vouchers can be redeemed online or shown screen-to-face to a participating retailer. The linguistic features include text chatting, surveys and voice and video calls. Text chatting, similar to SMS or 'texting' on mobile devices involves typed one-to-one or group exchanges. Unlike SMS however, MIM does not limit message length. Another linguistic feature, surveys, offers event planning and scheduling, and records and displays results in real-time. Voice and video calls enable free, local or international calls to MIM contacts through Wi-Fi. If a call is unsuccessful, a message is sent to the chat room showing the time and number of call tries. Further, voice and video can be recorded and sent as notes to contacts or the personal chat room.

While international students regularly used linguistic features with members of their cohort, this varied when contacting Korean speakers as text chatting and voice and video calls demanded more of their language resources than sociolinguistic MIM features. Interestingly, international students blended that with linguistic MIM features, Korean speakers preferred using the Korean language when text chatting but preferred using the English language when making voice and video calls. Frequent exposure to Korean language text chatting helped international students acclimate to the Korean alphabetical script, Hangul, and forced them to reply using a Hangul keyboard within the MIM chat room. Likewise, Korean speakers used voice and video calls to practice English conversation and left asynchronous voice notes to receive feedback on their English pronunciation. In this novel communication context, the international student cohort responded positively as several explained:

It's very useful to have a chatting service because I can practice typing in Korean and because I'm typing I can think about Korean more. I can learn more everyday Korean expressions also. Even if I don't understand them at the time I receive the message, I can always look up what I don't understand later. (international student, female, 21)

and:

We send messages to one another to meet up or ask for help or just to check in and see what the other person is doing. Then we hang out and hear each using some words or expression we've been chatting with—the language sticks whether it's just from talking or messaging or sharing jokes. With new words I can teach my Korean friend the English and they teach the Korean translation and then we've both learned something. (international student, female, 20)

Theoretical discussions around the concept of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980, Canale, 1983) posit different types of competency related to being an effective language user. Two types of competency often discussed in this context are linguistic competence—knowledge of the language code—and sociolinguistic competence—knowledge of how to use that code in different contexts. The findings of the studies presented in this paper suggest a possible shift in the relationship between these two types of competence. In the earlier study, participants followed a more linear progression of needing to develop linguistic competence before they could apply that knowledge through the development of sociolinguistic competence. In the latter study, the sociolinguistic competence of participants was employed to overcome shortfalls in linguistic competence. The multimedia capacities of MIM in particular afforded participants with the means of communicating effectively without fully developed linguistic competence. It may be that this shift creates opportunities to enhance the development of linguistic competence, through enhancement of learner self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). This potential pedagogical application was not the focus of the studies discussed in this paper but may warrant further investigation.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a perspective on a convergence of communication and mobile instant messaging. It does this by comparing the similarities and differences between cohorts of international language instructors and international university students in Korea in 2012 and 2015 respectively. It also examines how these international students responded with MIM for communicating with Korean students and for studying the Korean language. It found that when moving from being host-reliant to self-reliant in communication, the language instructors relied on face-to-face interactions whereas the international students relied on screen-to-screen interactions with their Korean acquaintances. Both cohorts, however, creatively used the available resources to facilitate communication with language instructors making use of in person leisure activities and international students leveraging the affordances of hand-held mobile devices. Moreover, it found international students who were active in 2015 benefited from ubiquitous free Wi-Fi services and the common use of a proprietary MIM service, which were not readily available in 2012. International students also demonstrated an acuity with MIM which generally was reciprocated by Korean speakers. Together they experimented with communication possibilities in this advanced digital environment by blending sociolinguistic and linguistic MIM elements and by mixing digital and physical propinquity in novel ways.

One of the limitations of this research lies in the social and educational status of the study cohorts combined with the advanced digital technologies and services in Korea. These are uncommon among many transient populations in some countries and the transferability of this research may be compromised as a result. However, this paper does highlight that rapid change in digital communication

technologies and new MIM platforms that are well-suited to hand-held devices can prompt innovative and unexpected solutions for communication challenges.

In a broad view, further research into how communication and MIM services are combining in settings that are undergoing rapid social change such as with large migration inflows would be fruitful. This might include research into the use of mobile technologies and MIM among refugee populations in Europe. In a narrow view, further research could identify and compare the vernacular use of MIM elements in differing communication contexts and how these creative combinations aid language learning. Finally, there is a need for further understanding of how global flows of individuals and groups are using varying commercial digital infrastructures and MIM platforms for achieving practicable communication solutions, which are happening outside pedagogical guidance or settings.

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