

Pen Pal Activities as a Learning Tool: Learning from Student Reflections

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Abstract

This paper reports on a preliminary pen pal study with a dual-language design that involved writing two versions of the letter (one in the target language (Korean) and the other in English) at each exchange. In doing so, it discusses the usefulness of pen pal activities as a learning tool and the effects of a dual-language mode, drawing on the post-activity reflections gathered from ten English-speaking college students who were enrolled in an advanced-level Korean class in the United States. Student reflections are suggestive in the following two aspects: linguistic and cultural gain can be achieved through pen pal exchanges on the one hand and a dual-language design can be helpful in raising students' awareness of their language learning process on the other hand. Based on these findings, several suggestions are made for future studies.

Keywords: pen pal exchange, metacognitive awareness, linguistic gain, cultural gain, dual language

Introduction

In the field of second language (L2) acquisition and pedagogy, various instructional methods and tools have been examined in relation to facilitating linguistic and cultural gains in an L2 or foreign language. In this line of research, several studies have discussed the effects of study abroad and others have examined the use of media materials in linguistic and/or cultural learning for the past decade or so (Brown, 2013; Byon, 2007; Hammer & Swaffar, 2012; Herron, Corrie, Dubreil, & Cole, 2002; Kinginger, 2008; Sasaki, 2011; just to name a few). Both of these two methods could be beneficial and useful in facilitating linguistic and cultural gains in an L2, although they may not be directly comparable with each other. Media materials are more readily available to learners as well as teachers and their use can be easily incorporated in the classroom setting, not being constrained by their physical location. On the other hand, study abroad would likely provide a more authentic learning environment, in that the learner can be (fully) immersed in the target language and the culture. In this respect, study abroad creates learning opportunities that could easily involve interactions with native speakers of the language being studied in real life.

With this in mind, the present study explores the usefulness of pen pal activities as a learning tool, which would also provide a naturalistic language learning situation. In

general, pen pal exchanges involve interactions with native speakers, which take place outside the classroom setting. Needless to say, writing letters is expected at each exchange. Hence, discussion of any pen pal exchange inevitably brings up the issue of development in L2 writing ability. Important to note is that the writing process involved in pen pal exchanges presupposes reciprocity in reading the pen pal's letter on the one hand and responding to it in writing on the other. In other words, any pen pal exchange involves the integrated writing aspect, which incorporates reading as an integral part of the writing process. Although the term integrated writing task is mainly used in the context of academic writing, as opposed to writing-only task, it is clear that letter writing would not be a writing-only task, except maybe the initial letter (Bruton, López, & Mesa, 2011; Hulstijn, 2003). In addition, pen pal letters are written for social purposes, unlike academic writing, which is used for assessment purposes (e.g., term papers) in many cases (Plakans, 2010; Ruiz-Funes, 2001). Given its non-academic nature, analyzing the source text (i.e., a pen pal's letter) may not be expected in writing letters, yet understanding what is written in them would no doubt be an integral part of the writing process in any letter exchange.

In particular, the present study incorporated a dual-language format, which required the participants to write two versions of the letter with a similar content, one in their target

language (Korean) and the other in English at each exchange. The purpose of the study is twofold. One is to see if and how a dual-language mode contributes to raising learners' awareness of their language learning process. The other is specifically related to Korean language learning and aims to find out which aspect (new words, expressions, grammar patterns, etc) bears the most utility of pen pal exchange.

Metacognitive Awareness in L2 Learning

Language learning is a complex process and is affected by various factors (Oxford, 2017). Specifically speaking, knowledge and beliefs that learners have about learning an L2 or foreign language is one of the factors that affects the learning outcome. Also, what and how much learners know about their mental processes during a learning task would likely have an impact on their learning outcome. In addition, how learners decide to act on the awareness of themselves and their language abilities would play a role, as well. All these aspects are subsumed under the concept of *metacognitive knowledge* in L2 or foreign language learning, which has been widely discussed for the past thirty years or so (Anderson, 2012; Carrell, 1989; Goh, 1997; Oxford, 2017; Rahimi & Katal 2012; Raoofi, Chan, Mukundan, & Rashid, 2014; Sasaki, Mizumoto, & Murakami, 2018; Suzuki, Nakata, & Dekeyser, 2020; Wenden, 1991; to name a few).

Adopting Flavell's (1977) concept of metacognition to language learning, Wenden (1991) noted the following three subtypes of metacognitive knowledge: person knowledge, task knowledge, and strategic knowledge. Person knowledge includes what learners know about themselves as language learners, beliefs that they have about what contributes to success or failure in their L2 learning, and their general knowledge about what it takes to learn a foreign language. Task knowledge has to do with knowledge that learners have about the demands and procedures of learning tasks, including knowing whether a learning task is difficult or easy. Lastly, strategic knowledge refers to knowledge that learners have about which strategies are effective in achieving learning goals.

The role of metacognitive awareness has been explored in different areas of language learning (i.e., listening, reading, vocabulary, and writing). Specific strategies may differ from one area to another, but overall main ideas remain the same across the board. For example, in her L2 reading study, Carrell (1989) investigated learners' self-assessment about their abilities in reading, along with their awareness of repair strategies and their perception of effective strategies. Similarly, in her L2 listening study, Goh (1997) examined learners' awareness of their role and performance as L2 listeners as well as factors that affect listening comprehension, listening input

useful for improving their listening ability, and strategies that enhance comprehension and recall.

Along with aspects or strategies that had positive impacts on language learning, these studies also examined learners' perception of aspects that were not helpful. Carrell (1989) looked at which aspects were problematic in reading and what learners thought of them. Similarly, Goh (1997) included learner's observations about strategies that did not always work for them and difficulties that they experienced in listening. It is possible that learners' perceptions may not be accurate at times, as some studies noted (Anderson, 2012). However, it would be informative to look into factors that adversely affect language learning as well as those that have positive impacts on it. The reason for this is that learners' self-awareness as L2 learners would likely influence the decisions that they make in achieving learning goals and their perception of learning strategies (whether useful or not) would likely affect the types of strategies they choose (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1986; cited in Goh, 1997).

When it comes to L2 writing, strategies such as global planning, local planning, and L1-to-L2 translation have been explored (Sasaki, Mizumoto, & Murakami, 2018). In Sasaki et al.'s (2018) longitudinal study on writing strategy use, global planning is defined as overall planning of how to compose a text, and local planning refers to planning that does not involve

the overall sense of how to compose a text. L1-to-L2 translation is self-explanatory, but it also includes searching for words, phrases, or expressions that best convey what the learner wants to express. In general, these strategies are discussed in relation to academic writing (Sasaki et al., 2018). Yet, the distinction between global and local planning can also be useful in discussing letters composed for social exchanges between pen pals, in that global planning seems to reflect a higher degree of learners' awareness about their writing process. In the next section, I will describe the participants and the methodology of the present study.

Method

Participants

Thirteen English-speaking college students residing in the United States participated in semester-long pen pal exchanges. All thirteen were enrolled in the first half of an advanced (or 3rd-year) Korean language course at a four-year university on the East Coast at the time of the study, except one who had completed the same course a year prior to the study. All participants were native speakers of English, except one who was near-native, and their ages ranged from 19 to 22. The participants' pen pals were native speakers of Korean (5th and

6th graders),¹ who were enrolled in an intermediate or advanced ESL class located in a Southern region of South Korea.

Procedures

Three letters from each side (Korea and the US) were exchanged over a semester period and they were all hand-written. Each exchange involved writing two versions of the letter (one in English and the other in Korean), which dealt with similar content. The dual-language mode was employed with the aim to see how it contributed to raising learners' awareness of their L2 learning process. It was speculated that having to write letters with a similar content in both languages would likely create an opportunity for the participants to pay close attention to things they could or could not express in the target language, given that the participants were more fluent in English than in Korean.

Regarding the content of each letter, the pen pal activity reported in this paper did not specify a topic, although a brief guideline on possible topics (e.g., hobbies, school life, etc) to write about was shared with the participants. Aside from the provision of possible topics, the length of a single-spaced one-page letter was strongly advised to adhere to. The participants were also reminded to follow proper letter writing

¹ A college student (an assistant to the ESL class) also participated in the exchanges.

protocols practiced in Korean culture, which were introduced at an intermediate level of the curriculum.

Upon completion of the last exchange, a post-activity survey was conducted in order to gather the participants' thoughts on the overall effects of the present pen pal activity and its dual-language design on their Korean language learning. There are several ways to gauge learning outcomes or the learning process. A pre- and post-test design would be useful for obtaining observational data. On the other hand, a self-report design would likely help gather more introspective data, which may not be easily observed otherwise (Bruton, López, & Mesa, 2011; Scarino, 2010). When it comes to tapping into learners' metacognitive awareness in L2 learning, self-report questionnaires are the most commonly used method (Raofi et al., 2014).

In the present study, the survey was conducted in English and it included five open-ended questions. Below are the questions, and the participants were strongly encouraged to write about each question as much as they could.

1. What was the most effective element of the Pen Pal project?
2. Did the project help you improve your language ability and/or cultural knowledge?
3. What did you think about the dual-language aspect (Korean and English)?

4. Please share your suggestions for improving any aspect of the project.
5. Please summarize in a paragraph your overall comments on the project.

Results

Before discussing the survey results, a remark on the content of each exchange is in order. The first exchange was devoted to self-introduction as a natural step. The second and third exchanges were built mostly on the content of the previous exchange. As for the second exchange, some wrote about traditional or national holidays in their respective culture. For example, some of the Korean pen pals wrote about *chusok* ‘Korean Thanksgiving,’ which was celebrated around the time the second letters were exchanged. Regarding the third exchange, most of the participants in the present study and their Korean pen pals wrote about their school life or hobbies. All in all, each exchange dealt with personal experiences or topics and the content of all three exchanges remained at a personal level.

A total of 13 learners of Korean participated in the pen pal exchanges, but not all of them were available to share their reflections in the post-activity survey, due to scheduling conflicts. The responses from ten participants are reported here. As for the first question, which asked about the most effective element of the activity, four of the 10 respondents

found the dual-language mode most effective. The remaining six participants listed the following various aspects, respectively, except for the last one that was noted by two participants: learning culture through communication, the amount of the total correspondence, a chance to write about his/her own life in Korean, pen pals' matching Korean language level, and a chance to write hand-written letters.

Question 2 asked whether the activity helped improve the participant's Korean language ability and/or cultural knowledge. Regarding linguistic gains, the overall response was mostly positive. Seven of the 10 respondents indicated some gains in their Korean language ability. In particular, three of those seven responded that it was good to have a chance to practice *banmal*, an informal speech register. In Korean, there are six speech levels, which include informal and formal registers (Sohn, 1999).² Yet, learners do not normally get much exposure to informal speech styles in class, as pointed out by Brown (2013). Another three participants commented on learning new words and phrases through the present activity. However, the overall response was rather lukewarm when cultural gains were concerned. Four of the 10 respondents indicated that there was improvement in their knowledge of

² The six speech levels are as follows: deferential (*-supnita* style), polite (*-yo* style), plain (*-ta* style), intimate (*-e* style), deferential (*-ney* style), and deferential (*-so* style) (Sohn, 1999). The first two are honorific styles and the next two are non-honorific styles. The last pair is the authoritative style.

Korean culture, but the remaining six did not express much visible change.

Question 3 focused on the dual-language mode of the present study. Participants' responses were predominantly positive and only one participant indicated that s/he did not like it, expressing a preference for writing only in Korean. The majority of those who gave a positive response added that the dual-language design was beneficial for their Korean language learning. In particular, the dual-language mode made participants become more aware of their limitations in their target language, as their Korean language ability was clearly contrasted with their English ability by design.

Question 4 was to elicit suggestions that would make the present pen pal activity more effective. The most common suggestion has to do with the frequency of letter exchange. Recall that the present study involved a total of three exchanges (three letters from each side) over a period of one semester. Seven of the 10 respondents commented that more exchanges would have been desirable, although the present study was proposed as a semester-long project. In addition, several of them expressed that continued correspondence even after completion of the proposed study would be beneficial either in the same manner or via electronic communication. Another notable suggestion concerns possible provision of topics to write about, which might increase the likelihood of

participants' learning more about the differences between specific aspects of Korean and American cultures.

The last prompt was a sum-up question, which asked for overall comments on the present study. Participants' responses were mostly positive. They can be grouped in the following themes: different from a usual classroom experience (5 participants), being able to write in both Korean and English (2 participants), writing/receiving hand-written letters (2 participants), and a chance to be pushed out of the comfort zone (1 participant).

Overall, survey results revealed that the majority of the participants in the present study witnessed some gains in their target language and found its dual-language design beneficial for their L2 learning.

Discussion

In this section, the following three issues will be addressed, drawing on participants' post-activity survey reflections. First, the usefulness of a dual-language mode is discussed in reference to raising learners' metacognitive awareness in their L2 learning, along with that of pen pal exchanges as a learning tool. Then, the next subsection specifically addresses the effects of pen pal exchanges in the context of Korean language learning. Lastly, suggestions are made for future studies.

The Usefulness of a Dual-language Design

As noted earlier in the Results section, about half of the survey respondents (n=10) indicated that they found the dual-language mode the most effective aspect of the present study. More than anything, it gave them a chance to become more attentive to their Korean language ability. That is, the dual-language design helped participants more clearly realize what they were able or unable to express in their target language. This aspect is echoed in a participant's response below.

- (1) I preferred that the program had the dual language aspect since it forced me to see the differences between what I was writing in English and Korean. Since I had to have letters with the same content, I typically wrote my Korean letter first to make sure that I could actually express my ideas. Once I have something written in Korean it is normally much easier for me to know how to write the same thing in English. (Participant 5)

The extract in (1) helps illustrate two things with regards to metacognitive awareness in L2 learning. One has to do with the fact that Participant 5 became more aware of a gap between her Korean and English skills through the dual-language mode. This type of general awareness of one's own target language ability is important to have (Anderson, 2012; Oxford, 2017), as it will likely guide learners to next steps including what strategies to select in completing tasks or

achieving learning goals. The other concerns a strategy that Participant 5 employed to write up the two versions of the letter. The participant figured out that writing a letter in the target language first would be a more effective way for her to successfully complete the task. In other words, some level of global planning was involved in the participant's writing process, which was likely informed by an awareness of her target language ability.

Another benefit of the dual-language mode can be found when communication breaks down. Given that the two versions of the letter addressed a similar content, learners could easily go back and forth between them when some words were not understood for their intended meaning. As illustrated in the extract in (2), one version may serve as a reference source for the other, from which learners can learn new words by trying to infer their meaning.

- (2) Also, if we weren't sure what one of us were saying in one form of the letters, we could also try reading the other one to figure out the meaning. (Participant 4)

In general, pen pal activities can create a learning opportunity that forces learners to think about how to apply what they learned in class to their interactions with Korean native speakers in real life. That is, pen pal exchanges provide an excellent opportunity for learners to practice their target language and enhance their cultural knowledge outside the

classroom in which things are likely to be controlled for the proficiency level of the students in the class. This aspect is nicely illustrated in an extract from another participant.

- (3) We had to think hard about what questions to ask our pen pals. Personally, I even had to think hard about what to ask her. I think it was a good challenge to have to consider cultural differences in our communication..... I never had to actually consider this in relation to a real student. Studying it or reading about it is very different. I would definitely say the greatest impact of the pen pal was considering and learning about culture through communication (Participant 1).

Learning an L2 or foreign language is not just about how to correctly formulate sentences learners want to say. Equally important is to learn what are appropriate things to say in specific real-life situations. In this regard, pen pal exchanges could play a positive role in helping learners figure out how to navigate interactions with native speakers by making them revisit what they already know about the target language and the culture. As can be seen in (3) above, Participant 1 had a clear understanding that learning culture in the classroom is different from learning it through interactions with Korean native speakers. Given this awareness, the participant consciously made an effort to sift through what she already

knew in order to come up with relevant questions to ask her pen pal, through which she was able to enhance her understanding of the target culture. This aspect is important to emphasize because metacognitive awareness does not just simply refer to what the learner knows or thinks about his/her L2 learning process. As Anderson (2012) pointed out, how the learner deals with what s/he knows or thinks is also another integral aspect of metacognitive awareness.

In addition, exchanging letters with a pen pal who lives in a place where English is not spoken on a daily basis obviates the possibility of having to switch to English. That is, communicating with a pen pal who lives in a place where the target language (Korean) is solely spoken and does not possess a high level of English proficiency naturally eliminates the possibility of code-switching between the two languages. In the US, especially in school settings, it may not be uncommon to encounter a situation where the learner is led to switch to English, despite his or her desire to continue to converse in Korean. In particular, this sort of situation may arise if the other interlocutor possesses some level of English oral proficiency. This situation is well versed in a testimonial from another participant.

- (4) Around the school I don't have many opportunities to communicate with people in Korean outside of the classroom and the Language House. For the vast

majority these are all people who study Korean but speak English as their native or stronger language. Even if I had an opportunity to speak to someone who was a native speaker of Korean, odds are (if they're a student at our school) their English is strong too, so when they see me struggling in Korean they switch back to English or I find it too intimidating to speak to them at all. (Participant 7)

The extract in (4) clearly shows what Participant 7 believes to be an effective way to learn a foreign language. The participant believes that it would be more helpful in improving her Korean skills if the interlocutor did not speak much English. However, this is not the only thing that the extract reveals about the participant's metacognitive awareness. The participant was well aware of her learning environment (Oxford, 2017; Sasaki et al., 2018), as well, which did not give her much chance to converse in Korean in the real world. It is also possible that the participant might have been aware of its possible impact on her overall Korean learning trajectory. In addition, the extract in (4) reflects the participant's awareness about herself as a learner, who easily gets frustrated about having to insist on conversing in the target language with Korean native speakers who possess English speaking skills. Given this awareness, Participant 7 might have been even more appreciative of opportunities such as the present pen pal

activity that required the maximum use of the target language while composing the letters.

In sum, this subsection has illustrated how useful pen pal activities can be as a pedagogical tool in L2 learning settings and how a dual-language mode can contribute to enhancing learners' metacognitive awareness of their language learning process.

Linguistic and cultural gains in Korean language learning

The majority of the survey participants (n=10) indicated that the present pen pal activity was helpful in improving their Korean language skills. Due to the tight timeline of the study, a great deal of improvement might not have been observed, but most participants mentioned that they had learned new vocabulary words and expressions through the present study. A response by one of the participants succinctly sums up in what manner the activity was helpful in learning new Korean words and expressions.

- (5) There were some parts and words in my pen pal's Korean version of the letters that I did not know, so I was able to learn some new words and phrases. As well, when I was writing my letters, there would be some things I would want to express that I did not know how. I ended up figuring out how to say those new words and phrases, and now I have better knowledge on how to express myself in Korean. (Participant 4)

Another aspect of linguistic gain can be found regarding being able to practice Korean in an uncontrived manner. In particular, the participants had a chance to witness firsthand how native speakers would use Korean in a naturalistic setting. This includes a chance to practice informal or conversational Korean, which is normally under-represented in textbooks (Brown, 2010, 2013). In many cases, learners do not get a chance to practice informal speech styles enough in class, as most of the Korean language curriculum is devoted to the teaching of the formal speech register, *chondaemal* (Byon, 2007). It is normally the case that the use of the informal speech register, *banmal*, is not encouraged in the classroom (Brown, 2013). Hence, learners become more familiar with formal speech styles, as noted in another participant's response below.

- (6) ... Having to write to her in *banmal* because she is much younger than me helped since in class we normally do not have as much practice with it. It was sometimes really awkward since I knew that I was used to a more formal writing style, but that type of style was not needed for me to write to her.
(Participant 5)

In Korean, there are six speech levels required for different social settings, based on the age, social status, and closeness of interlocutors (Sohn, 1999). Given that the

participants' pen pals in the present study were younger than them, it was culturally expected that the participants would use an informal speech register in their letters. In this sense, the present pen pal activity provided an opportunity for the US-residing participants to be exposed to a social situation, which allowed them to use conversational Korean and an informal speech style, especially in writing. It is needless to say that this aspect of the pen pal activity helps fill the gap that is found in the core Korean language curriculum by exposing learners to a social setting that would prompt the use of an informal speech register, as resonated in the extract in (7).

- (7) By doing so, we learned more words and phrases that people say regularly, rather than formal Korean we learned from our textbook. (Participant 2)

Thirdly, another benefit would be that cultural gains are also possible through pen pal exchanges. As mentioned earlier, improvement in L2 cultural knowledge can be achieved in various ways including the use of media materials (Hammer & Swaffar, 2012; Herron, Corrie, Dubreil, & Cole, 2002). In the present study, many of the respondents mentioned that they had learned something new about Korean culture through the pen pal exchanges, although gain in their cultural knowledge was not as visible as gain in their linguistic knowledge of Korean. As one of the participants put it, some of this is related to the proper use of different speech styles,

which is closely intertwined with Korean culture. The existence of different speech levels may be a linguistic phenomenon, but the proper use of them requires good knowledge of Korean culture, which would help learners successfully maneuver around native speakers in various social settings.

- (8) We wrote about a page each of every day lingo, allowing us to spread our knowledge in a cultural aspect as well. As many know, in Korean, the language can be used in a formal way, and an informal way. In these letters, the younger children spoke to us in a formal way while we replied in an informal way. This allowed me to understand the Korean culture of respecting your elders better. Even though my pen pal did not know me or know how old I was, he still respected me and spoke to me with respect. (Participant 2)

Alongside exchanging letters, cultural gain can also be achieved through the direct contact with target cultural goods (Scarino, 2010), which was the case in the present study although exchanging cultural goods was not originally planned in the proposed pen pal study. After the self-introduction at the first exchange, goods made in Korea such as Korean cookies and individually wrapped small coffee-mix bags were sent to the participants, along with the second pen pal letters. Given that most participants in the present study had never

visited Korea prior to the study, these Korean goods came as a pleasant surprise. Also, reading the labels on these items, which were written in Korean, turned out to be a refreshing cultural experience, as well.

Upon receiving unexpected gifts from their Korean pen pals, it was felt that the participants in the present study would have to reciprocate the surprise. As a follow-up gesture, the participants sent Christmas cards together with their third pen pal letters, if the third letter was not written on the card. The third pen pal letters were mailed out to Korea some time before Christmas, which was to mark the official conclusion of the proposed pen pal study. However, more surprises were on the way, as the Korean pen pals sent a set of a traditional Korean game in order to express their gratitude for the participants in the present study. Upon sending a set of a traditional Korean game via mail, the Korean pen pals created a video clip with the help of their ESL teacher, which demonstrated how to play the game they had sent. Given that the video clip was recorded in Korean, an effort to understand what was said in the clip turned out to be another valuable learning experience for the participants in the present study.

Overall, the participants' learning experience was enriched by these added exchanges of cultural goods, though *ad hoc*. They also help showcase how a pen pal activity can be modified in different ways as a pedagogical tool.

Suggestions for Future Research

In this subsection, suggestions are made in hopes to enhance the effectiveness of a pen pal activity that may or may not employ a dual-language design. As noted earlier, suggestions are made based mainly on the participants' overall feedback on the present study.

Firstly, the positive effect of the present pen pal study was widely attested by the majority of the participants.³ Yet, caution should be exercised in deciding when to incorporate pen pal exchanges as a class activity, as having to write a single-spaced one-page letter in the target language presupposes that participating students possess a certain level of proficiency in their target language.⁴ Recall that the participants in the present study were advanced learners of Korean, although

³ A reviewer asked if "being a native vs. non-native learner of Korean would make any difference in learners' linguistic and cultural proficiency." It is not clear what s/he meant by this, but it appears that there is no clear-cut answer to the reviewer's question.

⁴ Matching with college students in Korea may be preferred when the maturity level is concerned. In fact, one of the participants voiced this sentiment, indicating that it was hard to communicate due to the age difference, but she was happy to be pushed out of the comfort zone learning Korean culture (Participant 1). However, there were participants, who mentioned that it was a great way to communicate with native speakers of Korean at the same proficiency level (Participant 3), which suggests that they felt more comfortable exchanging letters with younger native speakers whose Korean proficiency level they perceived to be closer to theirs. The remaining participants did not seem to be bothered too much by the age difference, as another participant (Participant 7) noted that she and her pen pal found similar interests to write about, despite their age difference.

On a separate note, the college student participant in Korea wrote more than a page at one or two exchanges whereas many of the remaining participants (the 5th/6th graders) wrote just a page. Yet, a couple of participants from the latter group also wrote more than a page. This being said, it will be interesting to see if matching with different age groups plays a role.

their writing proficiency was limited mostly to classroom settings.⁵

Secondly, according to the survey results, most gains were observed in the lexicon, and gain in the cultural knowledge was not as visible. Given this, the provision of an assigned topic on certain aspects (e.g., holidays, school systems/life, and hobbies) of Korean or American culture may increase a chance for more gain in those areas. In a similar vein, gain in certain grammar patterns (e.g., conditionals, relative clauses, etc) might also be achieved if a topic was chosen in such a way that target grammar patterns were to be used throughout the letter. This would likely ensure the repeated exposure and/or use of the selected target pattern if the activity were intended to have pedagogical impacts.

Thirdly, a remark on the duration of an activity is in order. The pen pal study reported in this paper was proposed as a semester-long project, and this duration could not be extended due to scheduling constraints. As noted by a couple of participants, long-term effects might have been observed if the activity had been conducted over an extended period of time, say, over an entire academic year or longer.⁶ In this case,

⁵ Overall, the participants in the present study were advanced learners of Korean, but their oral skills were better than their writing skills in many cases.

⁶ There is no doubt that more exchanges would have yielded more data to examine. However, due to the communication method (traditional letters) adopted by the proposed study, this was not possible. In addition, the majority of the Korean pen pals were no longer available after the proposed time frame (a semester).

more detailed planning would be required. In particular, switching to another mode of communication (e.g., via electronic mail) would be an issue to consider (Sasaki, 2011), as continuing communication is likely to yield prolonged effects of pen pal exchanges.⁷ In addition, incentives such as giving course credits for completing an activity could be employed to ensure the participants' continued interest in the study, as one year is a long time to invest in a project that requires writing letters on a regular basis (e.g., bi-weekly or monthly).

Lastly, the present study utilized a self-report survey method to gather participants' reflections on their L2 learning experience.⁸ This may be the most widely used method in collecting introspective data on how the learning process takes place and how much learners are aware of it (Raoufi et al., 2014). Yet, the inclusion of quantitative measures (e.g., pre- and post-tests) would help obtain a more balanced look at how much gain was achieved in the participants' knowledge of the

⁷ The use of electronic mail may be another useful way to collect data. However, traditional letters were chosen mainly because it was easier for the participants in Korea to exchange letters that way. In addition, some US participants noted that it was a nice break from electronic communications (Participant 7).

⁸ It could be useful to look at the reflections from the participants in Korea, as well. However, they were not included mainly because the focus of the present study was on learning Korean by US participants. On a related note, it may also be helpful to include sample letters from both sides, which the author hopes to do in future projects.

target language and the culture, along with qualitative measures (Sasaki et al., 2018).⁹

Conclusion

The present study has investigated the effects of dual-language pen pal exchanges that required the participants to write letters both in English and Korean at each exchange, utilizing a post-activity questionnaire survey. According to the preliminary survey results, the majority of the participants found the dual-language mode beneficial for their Korean language learning, which gave the participants a chance to revisit and reflect on their target language ability and cultural knowledge on the one hand and to become more aware of their language learning process on the other hand.¹⁰ These benefits could be further enhanced through a prolonged exchange of letters and the

⁹ The inclusion of the instructor's assessments on the students' writing progress could help strengthen the findings of the study, as noted by a reviewer. The present study focuses mostly on student reflections, which the author hopes to remedy in future projects.

¹⁰ As a reviewer suggested, the findings of the present study can also be discussed from various other pedagogical approaches including modes of communication, the standards-based approach, intercultural communication, and reflective learning. However, it should be reminded that the aim of the present study was to assess the efficacy of dual-language pen pal exchanges in raising learners' awareness of their own language learning process. To that end, participants' post-activity reflections were examined in the context of metacognitive knowledge. Nonetheless, it will still be useful to preview how the results of the present study can be interpreted with regard to some of these approaches. For example, learning cultural uses of a word, an expression or a concept may be focused on, as Yu (2007) did in the cultural conceptualization study on the Chinese word *xin* 'heart' in an L2 context. Also, the findings of the present study can easily be framed in a standards-based study, in that any learning activity would have learning goals and the assessment element (*ACTFL Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers*, 2002; Colville-Hall & O'Connor, 2006). Lastly, the findings of the present study can also be discussed from a reflective learning perspective, as reflection practices (e.g., through audio-taped journals or reflective writing) could be quite beneficial to language learning and they are very relevant to the theme of the present study (Chau & Cheng, 2012; Dantas-Whitney, 2002).

provision of topics to write about, which could elicit the repeated use of specific words, grammar patterns, or cultural aspects.

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