Teaching Approaches and Student Involvement in Learning to Write: Gap Between Korean Students’ Expectations and Teaching Approaches

Kyeongheui Kim

Abstract
This study examined the relationship between teaching approaches and the learning involvement of students from Korea in US college-level classes by examining what these students did to complete writing assignments required for classes and what approaches professors adopted to assist students with English writing. It also examined how and why their involvement changed from active to less involvement to withdrawal or passive involvement to active involvement. In other words, this study examined how much professors’ teaching approaches influenced students’ attitudes towards English writing. Korean students who grew up in a culture where the whole society regards teachers highly expected more from their professors and were more dependent on professors. It appears that study participants’ English language proficiency also played a role in their dependency on their professors. There was a gap between these students’ expectations for professors and some of their professors’ teaching approaches. Also, there was some professors’ bias perceived by study participants, whether intentional or not, against non-native English speaking students and minority students, which disappointed and frustrated study participants and influenced these students’ degrees of involvement in learning.

Keywords
cultural impact on writing, different communication styles, teaching approaches, learning involvement

Introduction
This study examined the relationship between teaching approaches and the learning involvement of students from Korea in U.S. college-level classes. More specifically, this study discussed how these students did to complete writing assignments required for classes and what approaches professors adopted to assist these students with English writing. It also examined how and why these students’ attitudes toward learning to write in English changed from active involvement to less involvement to withdrawal or passive involvement to active involvement. In other words, this study examined what happened to their attitude toward learning to write when they faced a certain attitude from their professors. When professors showed positive response or more constructive criticism to their papers, these students were encouraged to work harder to improve their writing skills, but when professors showed very negative response to their papers without giving specific direction to what they needed to do to improve their writing skills, they lost their confidence in English writing and were afraid or reluctant to write. Other than students’ own responsibility to learn and improve their writing skills, professors’ teaching approach was probably the most important factor in study participants’ attitudes toward learning, that is, putting more or less effort to learn. In other words, professors’ teaching approaches impacted greatly on how much effort study participants put to learn to write in English. It is also likely that there was a mismatch between expectations of professors for students and those of study participants for their professors.

The number of Korean students who come to the United States to study has been increasing and is predicted to continue to increase (Open Doors: 2005 Report on International Educational Exchange; 2004 Report of the U.S. Census Bureau Educational Attainment in the United States). Then educators, researchers, and policy makers need to know how these students get involved in the learning process and what affects their attitudes toward learning in general and learning

1Esoterica Education & Consulting, Cresskill, NJ, USA

Corresponding Author:
Kyeongheui Kim, 85 Morrell Place, Garfield, NJ 07026, USA.
Email: schumettering@yahoo.com
to write in English in particular. However, it is hard to find research on how professors’ teaching approaches impact the learning of this group of student population. There have been research studies on English as a Second Language (ESL) college-level students and Asian ESL students in general; however, those studies focus mostly on Chinese or Japanese ESL students. Asian ESL students involve many different groups and it is hard to find research on Korean ESL students and their learning process.

**Review of Literature**

To understand issues of connection between teaching approaches and student involvement in improving writing skills, it is important to examine research on how teachers respond to students’ papers and interact with students and how their response and interaction influence students’ attitudes toward learning.

**Teaching Approaches**

**Feedback.** It is important that teachers need to be thoughtful and specific when they respond to students’ writing so that their comments help students see the value and the problems in their papers to give them the motive for better written products in the future (Sommers, 1996). To motivate students to improve their weaknesses in their papers as well as have clear ideas about revision, teachers need to provide a clear and explicit explanation of what part of their papers is wrong and why it is wrong, and they also should provide clear and explicit strategies (Zamel, 1996). Rather than detecting flaws and sticking to them, teachers should look for clues to its thesis and focus (Sawyer & Smith, 1994). Comments should not overwhelm students with a sense of failure. Instead, it is more effective to offer positive support by suggesting ways to elaborate papers. The most useful comments are those that explain why the paper or part of the paper is wrong, and the least helpful comments are those that tell students they have done wrong but do not explain what is wrong, why it is wrong, and how to correct it (Bardine, 1999; King, 2000; Sommers, 1996).

Teachers, however, just try to detect problems, marking errors, than positive aspects, without giving any explanations about those problems and solutions to the problems (Bardine, 1999). They spend time “finding out and pointing out what students don’t do well” rather than highlighting and nurturing “strengths students already have” (Mittan, 1989, p. 207). Teachers’ negative and unclear comments on students’ writing may lead to students’ frustration and loss of confidence in writing.

**Interactions.** How professors in college-level classes interact with students in and outside the classroom is as important as how to give feedback to students’ papers. It probably plays a greater role in student learning, and it is especially true for ESL students (Harris, 2000). Professors’ respect or disrespect for students encourages or discourages students’ active involvement in learning. Teaching approaches and professors’ attitudes toward their students show how they view them and this in turn influences students’ learning behaviors. Especially students from Eastern Asian countries are probably more sensitive to professors’ attitudes and their perceptions of them lead them to be actively involved or avoid the involvement in learning activities, which in turn enhances or deters these students’ learning (Youngs & Youngs, 2001; Zamel, 2000). Many professors, however, show limited expectations for students from different cultures, especially linguistically different cultures (Harris, 2000; Thomas, 1983), thinking that those students belong to an ethnolinguistically “different” group and thus they are others (Nero, 2005).

**Impact of Teaching Approaches**

When teachers respond to students’ writing, they should be thoughtful and give specific comments. Improvement of students’ papers is important, but more important is the impact of teacher feedback on students’ attitude because students’ attitude toward learning may influence the whole learning process. Negative comments or lack of comments results in less enthusiasm in writing and thus less involvement in writing and learning activities. Students’ involvement has more to do with the way teachers give feedback and how teachers respond to students’ request for help, because many ESL students take negative feedback on their papers as positive if it gives clear explanations. ESL students in general take their teacher comments to their papers more seriously and pay more attention to them than their native English-speaking counterparts. They remember and appreciate their professors’ support. When they trust in their professors, they are more willing to learn, and when they know that their professors have high expectation for them, they try harder. When professors recognize and appreciate students’ strengths, they try harder (King, 2000). Especially, learning of students from East Asia might be more influenced by their professors’ attitudes, because they have been raised in the culture in which all people show obedient, loyal, and dutiful attitudes toward teachers (Adams & Gottlieb, 1993; Kang, 2005; Kim & Han, 2002; Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999; Shin & Koh, 2007).

When professors show limited expectations for them (Harris, 2000; Thomas, 1983), however, these students do not have a sense of belonging, and they feel alienated, excluded, and insecure at the same time (Nero, 2005). In many cases, students are differentiated from native English-speaking students negatively and they are silenced and excluded. Many ESL students in higher education get a subtle message that their intellectual abilities are discounted and disregarded, thereby considering themselves as “others,” and professors as members of different groups (Zamel, 2000). This probably leads them to put barriers between native English-speaking professors and themselves.
Method

Participants

This research involves five undergraduate Korean students who had been studying in college in the United States for at least 2 years at the time of this research, Yeojin, Songhee, Heesoo, Jisoo, and Sang-A. Yeojin studied sociology in Korea for 3 years and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) for 1.5 years in United States, and she was in her seventh semester as a college student in the United States at the time of the first interview. Songhee majored in English language and literature in college in Korea for 2 years and studied in the United States for one year as a college transfer student and for 1 year to prepare for TOEFL. At the time of the first interview, it was her last semester for a bachelor’s degree in psychology in the City University of New York. Heesoo finished 2 years of college work in Korea in photography and had been studying five semesters in a college in New York City, majoring in fashion marketing. Jisoo received a bachelor’s degree in fashion design and worked for a fashion company in Korea for several years before she came to the United States. At the time I interviewed her, she had been studying in college in New York City four semesters in fashion marketing. Sang-A received three bachelor’s degrees in clothing textile, management, and history in Korea and came to the United States for another bachelor’s degree in fashion marketing. It was her fourth semester in the United States.

Data Collection

Two methods were used to gather data. The primary data source was a series of in-depth semistructured interviews with all participants. The other source of data was students’ papers submitted as part of their class requirements. Of particular interest was the instructor’s feedback given to the student papers because this information helped to address the research issue surrounding teaching approach and its impact on students’ involvement in learning. As I thought it would be important to get information about what professors intended to convey in the professors’ feedback to which participants displayed negative or positive responses, I contacted four professors who made comments on the papers of study participants, requesting interviews via email first and then over the phone. Only one professor agreed to participate in the interview, but he later rejected the idea. All three other professors rejected interviews, saying that they had difficulty finding time for interviews.

From the beginning of each study, for more comprehensive data, I kept my Researcher Notebook to keep track of and analyze what I perceived to be issues and problems that came up during the study. To assure confidentiality, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. Data materials from participants, including audiotapes, interview transcripts, and participants’ papers with teacher feedback, were identified by codes.

Interviews

Five to seven interviews were conducted with each study participant depending on each student’s schedule and the further questions to be addressed. I conducted face-to-face interviews with Yeojin 4 times, Songhee 5 times, Heesoo 7 times, and Sang-A and Jisoo 5 times, respectively. The fifth interview with Yeojin was originally scheduled to be face-to-face, but it was replaced by a written one because, as she was expecting, she preferred a written interview. In Songhee’s case, when I contacted her for more follow-up interviews, she was in recovery from a car accident, and she responded to questions in a written form. All face-to-face interviews were audiotaped and each interview lasted 1 hr or longer. All interviews were transcribed by me for data analysis and interpretation.

The same interview questions were used for the first interview with each participant, but they were expanded and evolved differently during each interview, depending upon each participant’s answers to specific questions and new issues that emerged out of each participant’s answers. All interviews after the first one began with follow-up questions/issues raised to clarify and/or confirm what students explained/described in the previous interview(s) as well as to expand on some issues involved in participants’ learning experiences in United States.

Written documents and feedback. In addition to interviews with each participant, I collected participants’ academic papers with teacher feedback to see what comments were considered by study participants to be positive/helpful or negative/unhelpful and also how each participant responded to those comments. I also checked to see if they understood specific comments on their papers, asking them to point out which comments were clear enough for them to understand and which were not and how they were clear or not.

Participants’ papers were also used as “a good check on information obtained from interviews” (Merriam, 1998, p. 118). As what each participant said in interviews was “highly subjective” (p. 116), reading comments actually written on their papers by professors, I checked whether their subjective accounts regarding teacher comments on their papers were reliable. Thus, both their accounts and teacher comments on their papers were compared. In short, participants’ papers were used to see if what participants said about teacher comments was really there.

Data Analysis

Materials of the study were analyzed beginning with the first interview to explore the problems, issues, concerns, and matters that were important to study participants as well as to get concrete information for further questions for the follow-up interviews. I coded participants’ interview transcripts and sorted the coded data materials. Using Contact Summary
I transcribed the audiotaped interviews verbatim and printed out two copies of each interview transcript. I read one copy of each transcript, marking with brackets and coding the passages or sentences that I interpreted as themes. I analyzed the data line-by-line “to generate initial categories and to suggest relationships among categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 42). While coding a sentence/paragraph, I kept notes of issues, themes, and/or questions emerging. After coding a whole interview, I categorized all coded segments according to issues and concerns that I identified. And I read the other copy of the transcript and took the same steps as the first one. I compared passages or sentences marked with brackets and coded.

I went through the same analysis process with all follow-up interviews and checked the discrepancies in answers of participants to specific questions in the previous interviews. While continuing to read through all data collected, I grouped coded segments into themes and divided each theme into commonalities and differences between participants. Before follow-up interviews, I asked myself, “What is it that I do not yet know?” and “What further information do I need to get?” so that I could interview each participant “with specific questions in mind” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 161).

I also made two copies of all participants’ papers collected. I read the first copy of each paper, marking with brackets and coding the passages, sentences, and/or words commented by professors. I also marked with brackets the passages, sentences, and/or words considered negative or positive comments by participants. I categorized them into several themes, and under each theme I made several subcategories. After I analyzed the first copy of each paper, I repeated the same analysis process with the other copy. I compared two copies with my analysis on them and I wrote down passages, sentences, and/or words on participants’ papers under each category/subcategory.

In the Contact Summary sheet, each participant’s answers to each interview question were summarized, and the main concepts, themes, and issues derived from each interview were also summarized. Specific part(s) of students’ papers related to answers associated with teacher feedback were attached to the summary of those answers. New questions, if any, were prepared for follow-up interviews.

In my Researcher Notebook, I recorded memos to myself about what I was seeing, what questions I had, and what ideas and patterns were emerging for me, and new questions and new issues, if any, were posed for further inquiry or information as well as the next interview. I also wrote memos for each theme to get “a general concept” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 72) and added my own interpretation to each theme. In short, in my Researcher Notebook, I summarized what I knew about the case so far and what I needed to know further about the case. After all data were collected and analyzed, in the Researcher Notebook, I summarized findings and attached supporting data to them.

After three or four interviews with each participant, I wrote a Case Summary of each participant, which “provides a synthesis of what the researcher knows about the case and also indicates what may remain to be found out” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 79). When there was more to find out, I contacted the participant for more interviews.

**Results and Discussion**

In this section, I discuss findings in three major categories: steps to complete papers; teaching approach; and teaching approach and its impact.

**Steps to Complete Papers**

Participants of the study said that they worked really hard to produce good papers. However, cultural differences in writing and their limited English proficiency made it difficult for them to write good English academic papers. They always had to take several steps to complete a paper:

1. understanding assignments
2. coming up with ideas
3. writing their ideas/themes/supporting sentences in a Korean writing format and changing them into an English writing format
4. changing their awkward expressions into seemingly more natural English expressions
5. going to the writing center

Study participants were not familiar with the types of papers required to be written in U.S. college classes. In addition, they did not have much experience writing English papers. Even though some professors explained some key elements of the assigned papers in class, study participants often could not understand the nature of papers. They began writing a paper with a vague understanding of the requirements of the paper. In other words, when they wrote an assigned paper, they did not know much about what they were supposed to write in the paper and how they were supposed to do it.

This kind. “Needs general introduction.” To be honest, I thought I wrote this intro very generally. When I read a sample in a book, it looked like this. In the beginning, cast a question . . . but, I have no idea what exactly “general introduction” is. And here, “Needs conclusion.” I think this is a conclusion. I don’t know what he [her professor] wants. (Yeojin)
Coming up with ideas was also a new concept to them. In Korea, they were usually given ideas or what to write by professors, and this made papers written by different students look very similar in content and key points, and the only difference was a slightly different way of putting those thoughts into words. Study participants who were used to this writing practice had no ideas what it meant by “their own ideas.” Unlike English writing in which a writer’s own idea is usually a very important part, Korean writing puts more emphasis on “learned” information/knowledge, and people put together in their writing knowledge/information they already have or they get from references.

Another difficulty study participants faced was the way English texts were structured. There are many differences between Korean and English writing (Kubota, 1997) in the ways of developing the thesis and connecting supporting ideas to the thesis. In English academic papers, there are specific formats that writers should follow, developing a thesis statement, identifying supporting ideas, and a few examples, and conclusion. In Korean written texts, main ideas appear at the end, not in introduction, which causes native English speakers trouble understanding the point(s) of the whole text (Hinds, 1987; Tucker, 2003). English-speaking people can see the whole flow of an academic paper when the paper is organized under a specific format. Study participants learned basic formats of English academic writing one way or another, but it was not easy for them to follow the format. Thus, they wrote their papers in the Korean format and then reorganized them in the English format.

To the study participants, the most difficult part of writing English academic papers was how to express their thoughts in English. They had to spend time for better words and sentences. In other words, study participants tried to change their sentences into seemingly more natural English expressions because many comments they received from their professors were those on unnatural expressions, such as “unclear,” “what do you mean?” and “?.” To these Korean students, producing natural sentences/expressions were the most difficult part in English writing. Many of the English expressions in their papers seemed awkward to native English speakers and caused misunderstanding. They were fully aware of their unclear, unnatural, or awkward sentences, and they tried to make their sentences clear. The last step study participants took was checking grammar and/or content of their papers at the writing center. Visiting the writing center for every paper also consumed time.

Every semester, study participants wrote many papers for many different classes, and they had to go through a similar process for each paper. It was a time-consuming and stressful process. It was about “long frustrating moments in front of a blank page and a solitary, time-consuming process requiring long hours of finding and correcting mistakes, deleting redundancies, detecting contradictions, developing and refining ideas, rearranging text, and improving style” (Silva et al., 2003, p. 109). After about 2 years of experience writing academic papers in English in college, they found it a little bit easier to write a paper, but they still took similar steps.

**Teaching Approach**

There was a gap between what students expected from their professors and professors’ teaching approaches. All participants worked really hard, according to them, and they expected their professors to see at least some strengths in their papers. They preferred to get feedback that gave a detailed explanation about their papers. They did not mind even red-penned negative comments if the comments explained what problems their papers had and how they could be improved. They wanted to receive feedback with details so that they could improve their writing skills.

Many of the comments they received from their professors, however, were confusing, because they were not clear in terms of what the professor tried to convey, what was problematic or wrong in their papers, and/or what they needed to do to make the problematic parts better. Such comments in their papers as “awkward” did not explain in what aspect the parts were awkward, and also comments like “delete,” or “replace” did not give any clue of why the parts should be deleted or replaced. In addition, just underlining sentences without any comments did not help study participants see problems in their papers and improve them. Some professors told study participants to check their papers for grammar without saying a word about the content of their papers. Sometimes, they just crossed out sentences or paragraphs or wrote down symbols, such as arrows, underlines, circles, parentheses, and slashes. Study participants felt that these professors did not care about their learning.

In a paper comparing two art works in the art history class, I thought I compared them. But it was not what the professor wanted and he just crossed out one whole paragraph in which I compared two art works. When I asked the professor what was the problem with that comparison, he said it was not comparison and opened the door as if he was asking me to leave. (Yeojin)

The history paper. I had my paper checked for grammar at the writing center before hand-in, but the professor commented “grammar check” on my paper. I didn’t understand it. When I visited the professor with the paper, the first thing he asked me was “Did you go to the writing center?” I said, “Of course, I did.” But he told me that I needed help from the writing center. I was upset. He put check marks in red pen on several parts of my paper and I felt he was very rude and that he did not want to read my paper. The check marks looked like scrawls. I invested a lot of time and effort in writing the paper and had it checked for grammatical errors. It was the second visit to him. At the first visit [office hour], he said that my paper was out of focus, adding that he was too busy to talk. So, I had to visit him again and he told me to go to the writing center for grammar check. I felt miserable. After the second visit, I did not visit him again and honestly I did not even want to look at him. (Yeojin)
All study participants had similar experiences. Even after several times of grammar check at the writing center, some professors still asked students to have their papers checked for grammar. It seems that they ascribed the lack of clarity in these students’ papers and/or unnatural expressions to grammatical problems without trying to look for other factors (Reid, 1989). The following is Songhee’s episode:

He [one of Songhee’s professors] insisted that my paper and K’s [her Korean classmate] were the same. We wrote papers individually. When he first talked about it, I understood him, because I gave K a lot of information about the paper. But, when he said it again, I got very upset. I did my best to write the paper. I read many books in the library. I thought that I should say something to him and I emailed him. I wrote, “You repeatedly said, K’s and my papers are the same thing. We are international students and we use the same verbs and subjects. K and I were in the same experiment group and the results were the same. That’s why you feel our papers are the same.” He said he would sue us and K was scared and cried. But, I said, “We are innocent. Sue us.” I was so upset. He would do the same thing to other international students. K’s and my English skills are limited and similar, so he seemed to think we copied each other’s papers. I compared K’s paper and mine, but I found only two words were the same. I showed them to him and said, “I hope you don’t do this to other international students.” He still threatened he would sue us and tell the dean to kick us out of school. He shouted at us, “Get out, get out.” He was like a robber without a gun. Fortunately, one professor who knows me emailed to him and defended me, and thanks to him there was no further problem. Since two lousy and negative incidents, I haven’t visited him since.

Songhee talked about another unpleasant experience with her professor:

When I received comments like “awkward,” I went to the professor for information, but he told me to go to the writing center, saying that he was a professor, not a person explaining it. So, I tried hard to redo the paper on my own, looking up references, but he got angry at the second [revised] paper. He asked, “where did you find it [some references]?” And at the next revision, I deleted the part. There were also supportive professors, however. Study participants talked about professors who were available in and outside the classroom whenever they needed help. They were supportive to students, and their supportive attitudes, in turn, encouraged and motivated students to work harder and learn more. It does not mean that they received all good grades from these professors. In fact, they received very lower grades from some of these professors, but they still felt grateful for their caring attitudes. These professors, they said, cared about everyone and their positive attitudes helped them feel confident in themselves. Professors whom study participants preferred were not those who gave all easy tasks to students, and some of the professors were strict and demanding, but they had higher expectations of their students and were supportive when they needed help. Study participants, however, rarely talked about their positive learning experience in the United States. They felt that their weaknesses were too much emphasized.

**Teaching Approach and Its Impact**

Study participants discussed how they perceived their professors:

Some professors are true experts in their fields and they can help students with their knowledge, but the benefits are not provided to me. They seem to question our abilities. They don’t seem to trust us to do well. When we Koreans make a small mistake, they seem to think, “yes, you are Korean. They use ‘We Americans’ very often.” (Heesoo)

Professors and native students don’t know our abilities. Since our English skills are limited, they don’t know how intelligent we are. Before I show my abilities, they think better of themselves. Asian students are probably poor at speaking, but they are much better in many things. Sometimes in the classroom I feel like I am in the shadow of the native speaking professor and classmates. (Sang-A)

Professors don’t see good aspects in what we do, because we are ESL [students]. (Yeojin)

Study participants felt that their learning ability and their strength in writing were underestimated by native English speakers and they also did not consider many English-speaking students intelligent. It seems that study participants’ perceptions of some professors’ bias against ESL students in general led them to have reversed bias against those American professors and American students as well. Participants claimed that many American professors and students they met had very limited perspectives and that living in such a big country, they were not flexible and inclusive.

Despite much effort and time invested on their part, many of the study participants’ experiences in the process of completing written work were very negative. Their effort and time invested in learning as well as their learning ability, study participants perceived, were mostly ignored by some professors and only their problems, especially those in writing, their written accents, were recognized and critiqued. Their strengths were rarely appreciated. One thing noticeable is that every activity related to participants’ experiences pointed to these students’ weaknesses. Many professors laid “the blame for unsuccessful written communication on what is most immediately obvious,” saying “I can’t understand what this student is doing; I think he needs work in grammar” (Reid, 1989, p. 221). There is another possible interpretation of these students’ frustration. In Korea, they had confidence and usually knew what to do and how to do it, and they did not have to depend much on their professors. In
the United States, however, they became aware of their own limited competence in English, thereby becoming more dependent on professors, which possibly made them expect more from their professors, and when professors did not assist them as much as they expected, they were disappointed, feeling ignored.

There are possible factors that might contribute to some professors’ unsupportive attitudes. Unsophisticated English sentences and typical second language errors the study participants made possibly led these professors to be more aware of these students’ weaknesses and problems, missing strengths in these students’ papers. It is also possible that they did not like ESL students and preferred native English-speaking students, a claim made by study participants. It is likely that they considered English proficiency everything in learning, thereby losing sight of other important aspects in learning. They saw ESL students as those who “need remediation” rather than as students who have the ability to learn (Harris, 2000; Mittan, 1989; Nero, 2005; Severance, 1993). Other factors for unsupportive attitudes of professors might be their past experience with Asian students in general and Korean students in particular and their careless reading of papers. Or as study participants said, they did not even read the whole papers or it might be their nature/personality.

Even with possible factors that might contribute to professors’ unsupportive teaching approach put into consideration, experiences of study participants with some professors do not look healthy. Songhee was a student with a strong voice. She was a hard and intelligent worker, and some professors in her college in the United States were very supportive of her. With one professor’s help, the issue with the professor who threatened to sue her and her classmate was resolved without a further trouble. But, what if Songhee had not been a student with a strong voice and/or what if there had not been the professor who defended and supported her, could she still have survived the class or the college? Yeojin felt intimidated, and Sang-A was hurt by some of her professors’ seemingly assaulting attitudes. Songhee was left with a feeling of hatred and oppression, and Heesoo felt that talking to some professors was like talking to a brick wall.

Several rounds of negative experiences with professors led study participants to hesitate to actively seek information needed for revision and sometimes completely withdraw from effort to improve their papers. Their engagement in learning were influenced to a great extent, positively or negatively, by their professors’ attitudes toward them, and their interactions with professors motivated them to work harder or made them give up. Except for their own effort to learn, professors were the most influential factor for these students’ learning. There were some responsive professors like Yeojin’s sociology professor. He pointed out what was wrong with her essay, making suggestions for revision. This is probably a typical image of a teacher in Korea and probably in the United States as well. All professors, however, were not as responsive as the sociology professor.

Professors’ supportive attitudes had a psychological impact on study participants. Professors’ attitudes enhanced or deterred students’ confidence and effort to learn. Their perceptions of their professors as supporters led them to work harder. Professors’ duty is to help students learn what they do not know, not to find out students’ weaknesses and blame them for the weaknesses. A good learning environment is one where all students are treated equally and get equal attention, but it seems that there are not many classrooms in higher education measuring up to this standard (Davis, 1999; Diaz, 1994; Thonus, 2003). Who is responsible for a positive or negative learning environment? Is it professors who create a learning environment, positive or negative, for their students (Barab & Roth, 2006)? When students are not able to meet certain standards, professors need to ask themselves, “What are other explanations for students’ difficulty meeting my expectations?”

Professors play a great role in students’ learning, especially ESL students’ learning. Interaction between professors and ESL students is the most influential factor for ESL students’ enthusiasm for as well as involvement in learning. Caring, supportive, and unbiased attitudes and availability in and outside of the classroom are all qualities of typical professors. It is the responsibility of each individual professor to create an open environment so that ESL students learn in a more positive learning environment (Harris, 2000; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 2000).

Professors’ respect or disrespect for students encourage or discourage students’ active involvement in learning. Teaching approaches and teachers’ attitudes toward their students show how they view them, and this in turn influences students’ learning behaviors (Elbow, 2000; Youngs & Youngs, 2001; Zamel, 2000). Students remember and appreciate their professors’ support. When they trust in their professors, they are more willing to learn, and when they know that their professors have high expectations for them, they try harder. When professors recognize and appreciate students’ capability in many other aspects, they try harder (King, 2000). Especially students from Asian countries like Korea might be more influenced by their professors’ attitudes because they have been raised in the culture in which all people show obedient, loyal, and dutiful attitudes toward teachers (Adams & Gottlieb, 1993; Cheng & Wong, 1996; Hurtado et al., 2000; Kang, 2005; Kim & Han, 2002; Pratt et al., 1999; Shin & Koh, 2007).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of this study was to provide some insights into what can change Korean ESL students’ involvement in learning by examining how professors at the college level responded to these students’ request for help and how students reacted to their professors’ approaches to their request. This study examined the impact of professors on the learning of students from Korea where teachers enjoy respect from
the whole society. As they grew up in a culture where the teacher is one of the most reliable and respectable, they thought of their professors as the most reliable and knowledgeable source for their learning in the United States, which led them to be more dependent on professors. However, when some professors rejected their request for help, they felt helpless. With these negative experiences, they avoided contact with those professors when possible, and this in turn resulted in these students’ loss of confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

The results of this study indicate that professors are the most influential to positive or negative experiences of college students from Korea and possibly students from East Asia. Professors’ teaching approaches and their attitudes enhance or hinder these students’ learning involvement. Professors’ ways of giving feedback to these students’ papers and how they respond to requests for help are very important to students’ learning. This study also tells that Korean ESL students may expect more from their professors and have a tendency to be more dependent on them.

With the awareness that students from Korea and possibly from East Asia have a great degree of respect for and dependency on teachers, professors would be more likely to create a responsive learning environment. Majority of foreign students who come to English-speaking countries to study, if not all, are very motivated learners and they have goals to succeed in their chosen fields. Professors’ positive attitude may boost their enthusiasm for learning and confidence in themselves as learners.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

There is a need to extend this study to more extensive studies on how teaching attitudes impact learning involvement of students from Korea, which may shed insight on what teaching approaches can enhance or deter students from East Asia who share cultural practices with Korean students and in the broader context all students regardless of their cultural properties.

There are limitations of this study: not totally new knowledge and generalizability. There have been many research studies on how ESL students in general and Asian ESL students in particular get involved in the learning process. However, it is hard to find research on how professors’ teaching approaches impact the learning of Korean ESL students in higher education. The focus of most studies is mostly on Chinese or Japanese ESL students. Even though Asian students share some cultural properties, they are different, and it is worth exploring the learning process of Korean ESL students in higher education. The generalizability of the findings is limited: only five Korean undergraduate students were involved in this study and participants were all females by chance. Male students may have a different degree of expectation and dependency and thus impact of teaching approaches may be different. There is no guarantee that the findings of this study are typical, and thus a large-scale research study may produce different results and a more variety of findings. The future research study needs to involve a variety of student populations in terms of number, language proficiency, gender, and regions of more and less diverse cultures, and it also needs to involve professors’ perspectives.

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Author Biography

Kyeongheui Kim, is an educator who teaches at Esoterica, Test Prep and Language School in NJ, USA, and has experience teaching English to diverse student populations in terms of age, socio-economic status, English language proficiency, and academic readiness. I taught at Lane College as Assistant Professor and Director of Writing Center. My research interest includes cultural impact on students’ learning and students’ perception of their professors and its impact on their learning.