

Article

Settling in: Korean International Students as English Language Learners in New Zealand

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Abstract

This small-scale study examines the initial settlement period of Korean international students in New Zealand. Using Bourdieu's (2018) theory of social and cultural capital, the ethnographic research explores the settlement experiences of these students. The findings reveal that participants face significant challenges in adapting to new social and cultural practices, along with a notable lack of social support during this transition. Most prominently, they identify English language proficiency as the primary barrier to successful settlement. As both an insider and outsider, the researcher reflects on the participants' stories and analyzes them through the lens of her own experiences. The findings provide valuable insights for supporting the return of international students to countries such as New Zealand and the Republic of Korea in the post-pandemic era, with a particular focus on improving support services and enhancing sustainability.

Keywords

Korean international students, social and cultural capital, researcher's reflexivity, English language learners

Introduction

In today's globalized world, people no longer have to remain in their own countries to receive an education. Since 1988, many young children and their parents—not just graduate students—who are dissatisfied with their English proficiency, the Korean education system, or limited opportunities, have been seeking educational opportunities abroad. The Korea Trade Fair, held in Seoul on September 8, 2003, reported that about 70 percent of the fifteen thousand participants expressed a desire to immigrate, citing the intense competition in Korean schooling due to inadequate public education, the high cost of private schooling, and inconsistent government educational policies (Na, 2003). Many young Koreans venture to English-speaking countries either to study or to travel, in hopes of a brighter future. However, living abroad presents significant challenges and adjustments.

Statistics New Zealand (2022) indicates that overseas visitors numbered 134,200 in July 2022, a substantial increase of 104,000 from July 2021. Koreans ranked sixth on the list, following countries such as Australia, the USA, the UK, Singapore, and French Polynesia. New Zealand's immigration laws permit individuals with visitor visas to study for up to three months, providing easier access to English courses without needing a student visa.

Sojourners (i.e., temporary residents) who travel or study abroad often experience transaction stresses that are easily underestimated. Parents who wish for their children to improve their English skills and have better life opportunities may send them abroad, focusing only on the positive aspects. However, recognizing and addressing the stressful realities of living abroad can make the experience more worthwhile, ultimately allowing sojourners to focus more effectively on their primary goals.

Despite the increasing number of people studying abroad, research on Korean international students—particularly the initial challenges they face—remains limited. This paper specifically examines the initial transition phase of living abroad. The focus on the first few months is due to the significant cultural adjustments and conflict situations that students encounter during this period. These students face numerous challenges as they navigate a new culture with high expectations, often resulting in conflicts arising from cultural and social differences.

Acculturation is defined as the process of cultural change resulting from repeated, direct contact between two distinct cultural groups (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). Most international students experience adjustment issues, including acculturative stress, which is characterized by a marked deterioration in general health status. Acculturative stress encompasses physiological, psychological, and social aspects explicitly linked to the acculturation process (Berry et al., 1987; Williams & Berry, 1991).

The data from Education Counts (2024) shows that students from Korea represent the fourth largest cohort of international students in New Zealand, following China, India, and Japan. While the number of students has been steady, there was a significant decline during the global pandemic in recent years. However, there is a strong desire for reconnection through education between New Zealand and Korea. The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT, 2022) indicates a strong rebuilding effort for South Korean international education in New Zealand. The report highlights that 81% of Korean students in New Zealand reported positive experiences, and New Zealand continues to be a favored destination for primary and secondary education among Koreans. This highlights the importance of revisiting a small-scale qualitative study on Korean international students conducted in 2009. The research, undertaken as a personal initiative, reflects the researcher's commitment to academic inquiry as a migrant woman and an English as a second language learner. The participants' shared experiences were, to some extent, mirrored in those of the researcher. The researcher's reflexivity will be further described in the Methodology section and the Finding and Discussion section to provide more transparency of the research.

By revisiting the research conducted in 2009, this paper aims to address two key questions: 1) How do Korean international students navigate the challenges they encounter during their initial settlement period in New Zealand? 2) How does the researcher respond to these navigational processes when reflecting on the participants' stories? In the post-pandemic era, tertiary education providers in both countries need to ensure their sustainability. The findings can provide valuable insights to future international students and service providers in both host and sending countries.

Theoretical background

From the moment international students board the plane, they embark on a new experience and begin to learn or adapt to new knowledge. Sometimes, this involves changing their existing knowledge to accommodate new information. Learning is not a passive reception of information but an active process of construction by the learner (Piaget, 1959). According to Cole (1996), new experiences can trigger modifications to previous experiences, interactions, and beliefs, which are specific to the social and cultural context in which they occur (Cole, 1996; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005). Research on international students' experiences often highlights acculturative stress (e.g., Berry, 1980; Berry & Kim, 1988; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Sykes & Eden, 1985).

The transition to a new country can pose additional challenges due to the differing social and cultural contexts from those of their home country. The struggles they face are eased by social networks, as Collins (2010) underlines that interpersonal connections and friendships play a key role in helping newcomers navigate a new environment. However, these social networks are not necessarily directly linked to connections with the host country. Wright-St Clair and Nayar's (2020) study of late-life immigrants from China, India, and Korea, state that the immigrants' need for connectedness to combat loneliness. The immigrants found this sense of connectedness within their own ethnic communities.

The embedded cultural experiences of international students can make adjusting to a new cultural environment difficult, often leading to distress (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Pedersen, 1995; Ryan, 2005; Jordan, 1997; Ward et al., 2001). The distress experienced could be mediated by support from their social network available, namely Bourdieu's (2018) social capital (Alam, Nel, Hill, & Bulloch, 2023; Collins, 2008; Glass & Gesing, 2018; Joseph, 2016). According to Bourdieu (2018), social capital refers to:

... the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or, in other words, membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit in various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 21).

Social capital is theorized as the connections between individuals who share similar values and practices, grounded in trust within their social ties, to achieve shared goals more effectively (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). Lin (2001) offers a comparative perspective by incorporating network theory, emphasizing the importance of weak ties as critical components of social capital. These ties bridge different social groups, provide access to diverse resources, and facilitate career advancement. For international students, social capital is not inherited, as described by Putnam (1995) and Coleman (1988), but is instead developed through the cultivation of weak ties, a process that naturally require time and effort.

For international students, the goal is to achieve language proficiency not only to build social connections within the host community but also to obtain a 'certificate' for further academic advancement. Cultural capital is non-material things held and shared by people (Bourdieu, 2018). Bourdieu (2018) explains that cultural capital is accumulated over time in an embodied state, which "presupposes a process of embodiment and incorporation, involving a labor of inculcation and assimilation that costs time—time which must be invested personally by the investor" (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 18). One example of cultural capital is the overseas experience itself for international students. Also, it includes institutionalized cultural capital, such as a language proficiency certificate, which supports upward social mobility. The combination of embodied cultural capital and institutionalized cultural capital is a key motivator for many international students (Bai & Wang, 2024; Park, 2019).

Studying abroad necessitates a significant financial investment. According to Xu and Jiang (2020), economic capital encompasses the material wealth and financial assets owned by individuals or families. The scale of an individual's economic

resources is often measured by personal and family income and assets. Economic resources are closely linked to access to cultural capital, as evidenced by the ability of many international students to pursue further education abroad.

International students often lack sufficient social and cultural capital, which can lead to various challenges. Their experiences frequently involve withdrawing from mainstream social groups and isolating themselves. Jordan (1997) argues that these students encounter significant difficulty initiating interactions with culturally distinct groups. The separation from family and support systems, such as close friends, local community, and even local government, often exacerbates feelings of homesickness (Jordan, 1997, p. 44).

In addition to mental health concerns, international students often report personal challenges, including language barriers, academic difficulties, and a loss of social support (Yeh & Inose, 2003). They face traditional academic stresses without the resources typically available to them (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998; Jordan, 1997; Ryan, 2005; Reinders et al., 2006). The academic culture in their host country may differ significantly from what they are accustomed to. For example, they may encounter active questioning rather than passive auditory learning, a constructive and critical approach to knowledge, new assessment methods such as oral presentations, and different concepts of knowledge ownership. These differences can overwhelm international students who have been trained in a different educational approach from an early age. As Ryan (2005) notes, "a lifetime of learning has to be 'unlearned,' and a new set of often subtle and mysterious ways needs to replace this" (p. 150).

The process of adapting to new ways of learning reflects individual agency within a broader structural context. Specifically, international students actively seek to acquire social and cultural capital. As Bourdieu (2018) argues, the accumulation of social and cultural capital requires sustained effort over time. This paper examines the initial experiences of international students in acquiring social and cultural capital during their settlement period. The study aims to illuminate the types of support and resources that can be provided to enhance the experiences of international students. This study specifically investigates the challenges faced by Korean international students while studying in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Research gap

Study of South Korean international students in Auckland, New Zealand, Collins (2008; 2010) states the importance of social network and he stresses the need to further examine students' daily lives. Since the call for further research of students daily lives, the response has been slow to none. Literature on international students in New Zealand normally situated in tertiary institutions (e.g., Cao, Zhang, Pitzalis, Chibisov, Mariavittoria Pitzalis & Sergey 2012; Yin, Y., Chik, A., & Falloon, G. 2024), their journey to become a resident (e.g., Joseph, 2016; Qun & Devine, 2018) and recently more on Chinese international students. This study can contribute to the literature on the understanding of Korean international students.

Korean international students come to New Zealand with a hope to gain 'cultural capital' as noted in the literature (Bai & Wang, 2024; Park, 2019). However, acquiring the cultural capital necessitates financial resources and the additional support of social connections to facilitate a smoother process. There is a lack of research illustrating this process, and this study aims to address this gap by examining the initial settlement experiences of Korean international students in New Zealand.

Thus, this study will contribute to the literature in two key ways: first, by exploring the journey of Korean international students in New Zealand, and second, by examining the participants' lived experiences during the initial settlement period that including the researcher's own reflection.

Research method

The Ethnographic methodology was adopted to investigate the settlement experiences of Korean international students in New Zealand. Ethnography is "the study of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organizations, and communities" (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 512). The approach is well-suited for capturing the detailed descriptions of everyday life, often referred to as 'thick description' (Hoey, 2014). Hoey (2014) further emphasizes that this approach represents both the process and the outcome of the research. Namely, this approach allowed the researcher to examine the dynamic context in which both the researcher and participants were situated—namely, a pastoral care setting for international students in New Zealand, where the researcher served as a pastoral carer and supporter while the students were learning English.

For the initial three months, the researcher observed the daily lives of the participants and provided support as needed. Following this period, the researcher approached the participants to seek their consent for using their experiences and conversations in the research. All participants agreed to have their dialogues used as data, with the assurance that their personal information would remain confidential and anonymized.

The research recruited participants through convenience sampling (Glesne, 1999), with all participants originating from the same geographical region. The study initially began with two adult female participants. Given the household setting, interviews were integrated into daily life, often taking place informally after dinner. Conversations frequently occurred over a cup of tea, naturally including comments and responses from other household members who happened to pass by or chose to

join. What often began as one-on-one conversations evolved into group discussions, as younger members eagerly participated and shared their experiences. Over time, more household members joined with an understanding of their contribution to the research. While the participants varied in age, they all came from the Republic of Korea with the shared goal of studying English and were residing in the same house during the study.

Data collection methods included interviews, questionnaires, document analysis, and participant observation. As a researcher who shared the same language and culture as the participants, effective communication and understanding of their struggles were facilitated (Sillitoe, Webb, & Zhang, 2005). Conducting the study with Korean participants in their native language allowed them to more freely express abstract ideas, feelings, and uncertainties.

Data were collected over four calendar months. During this period, a triangulation of methods was employed, including close daily observation, face-to-face interviews, informal conversations, and analysis of field journals and notes. Observational notes were recorded promptly and meticulously typed to ensure accurate representation and interpretation of the data.

To enhance data intelligibility while preserving authenticity, both Korean and English were used, translating Korean dialogues into English when necessary. Categories and themes were identified through iterative analysis, involving repeated refinement to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness.

Throughout the process, the researcher aimed to develop "dialoguing skills" to "expand the knowledge of both parties" (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005, p. 4). Narratives were used to portray the experiences of individuals who have crossed cultural and social borders, giving voice to their experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Participants

This research focused on students studying in New Zealand, whose ages ranged from seven to 37 years at the time of the study. Details of the participants are provided in Table 1. All participants had committed to residing in New Zealand for over a year for the purpose of their studies. At the time of the research, two young adults and two adults were enrolled in language courses, with plans to advance to tertiary education upon achieving the required language proficiency levels. English placement tests were administered when the participants were first enrolled in the language centers.

For confidentiality, participants are identified by the initials of their English names, which they use in their daily lives. When quoting dialogues in this paper, the initial "R" is used to denote the "researcher."

Table 1. Details of participants

Participants	Age	Sex	Course	Institute	English Level
PK	7	M	Year 1	Primary School	
RK	9	M	Year 3	Primary School	
HH	13	F	Year 8	Intermediate School	
BK	18	M	Language Course	Tertiary Institute (College)	Upper Intermediate
JH	18	M	Language Course	Tertiary Institute (University)	Intermediate
JK	35	F	Language Course	Private Language Institute	Upper Intermediate
HJ	36	F	Language Course	Private Language Institute	Beginner

Although the participants' ages vary, some are related to each other or to the researcher. For instance, JK is the mother of PK and RK, while JH and HH are siblings. HJ and BK are cousins of the researcher. The relationship between the participants and the researcher is further strengthened by the researcher's role as a host mother and borders, creating an extended family-like setting.

The researcher

The researcher's reflexivity in qualitative research serves as a critical tool for enhancing the rigor, credibility, and ethical integrity of the study (e.g., Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). According to Dodgson (2019), reflexivity involves describing the contextual and intersecting relationships with participants. The following provides a contextual description of these relationships.

In 2009, after completing her master's thesis, the researcher moved to New Zealand with the hope of providing better educational opportunities for her children while also pursuing her own higher education degree, with a clear intention to adopt

a qualitative research approach. During her initial settlement period, she hosted several international students, which sparked her interest in better understanding their settlement experiences. Through reading relevant literature, this interest evolved into a desire to conduct her own research. This marked the beginning of her independent research journey in her new home, New Zealand.

She is an Asian migrant who uses English as a second language. Born and educated in Korea, her mother tongue is Korean, and she has a deep understanding of Korean culture. However, her experiences traveling to various countries, being educated in Western contexts, and marrying a New Zealander have also provided her with a strong familiarity with Western cultures and proficient English language skills. Throughout her adult life, she has navigated the complexities of balancing two languages and cultures within herself. Having personally experienced—and continuing to experience—this process, she believes she can empathize with individuals who are also negotiating these dual cultural worlds.

In the context of this research, the researcher occupies both insider and outsider roles. As a Korean who was once an international student, she is an insider, sharing cultural and experiential commonalities with the participants. At the same time, she assumes the role of an outsider as a researcher with advanced English proficiency and as a mentor or caregiver, possessing accumulated cultural and social capital.

In 2024, after nearly 15 years as an Asian migrant woman in New Zealand, the researcher reflects on her journey of becoming an academic, navigating life as a migrant, a language learner, and a mother. Her path has been marked by the complex negotiation of struggles and challenges, which were echoed in the nearly forgotten stories of her research participants. What began as a tentative attempt to conduct research was made possible through the brave initiative of the researcher and the unwavering support of the participants. This social connection, which formed the backbone of her successful completion of doctoral research in 2016, ultimately contributed to her securing an academic position in 2024. Over the past 15 years, the researcher's journey has intertwined the experiences of an insider, and now, she approaches this writing from the perspective of an outsider.

Ethnography involves complexities related to insider and outsider perspectives (Gregory & Ruby, 2011). To address these issues, Gregory and Ruby (2011) advocate for focusing on "giving a voice to those people whose voices would otherwise not be heard" (cited in Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Erikson, 1999). Recognizing the power dynamics between the researcher and participants, the researcher strives to ensure that the participants' voices are accurately represented in the research through her own reflexivity (Dodgson, 2019).

Period and setting of the study

Data were collected over four months, from February to May 2009. This timeframe was selected as it encompassed the initial settlement period for the participants. By the end of this period, the participants had gained sufficient confidence to manage their new environment more effectively. Observations indicated a significant reduction in the participants' frustration and complaints after three months of their stay in New Zealand. Most participants eventually worked through their uneasiness and adapted to living and working within the new cultural context (Stroh, Black, & Mendenhall, 2005).

The ideal research setting provides "easy access, immediate rapport with informants, and direct collection of data related to the research interests" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 27). In this study, the researcher lived communally with the participants in a shared house. This arrangement facilitated regular interactions, including communal dinners and joint activities both inside and outside the house, which allowed for comprehensive observation of the participants without missing any of them. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggest that informing participants of specific research aims might lead them to alter their behavior. Accordingly, the researcher's observational role during the data collection phase was embedded in her natural interactions as a host mother to align with the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (NZQA, n.d. & Immigration NZ, n.d.). The researcher's daily role and responsibilities as a host mother prompted her to engage in deeper conversations with the participants, which later became part of the research data. Efforts were made to ensure transparency and adhere to ethical standards throughout the process. Participants were subsequently provided with consent forms for interviews, clearly informing them that the questions arose from the researcher's interactions with them in her capacity as a host mother. The consent forms also clarified that the findings from the interviews might be used for publication. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' initial settlement experiences. These conversations were a natural extension of their existing interactions, and the participants expressed satisfaction with their inclusion in the research process. They appreciated the opportunity to share their knowledge, which placed them in an empowered role as valued contributors to the study. Following data collection, participants were given opportunities to review and comment on the study's findings.

Finding and discussion

The findings revealed that all participants encountered some degree of adjustment challenges. Literature indicates that such challenges can vary based on factors such as country of origin, race and ethnicity, English language proficiency, and

whether individuals come from collectivist or individualist cultures (Constantine et al., 2005; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Tafarodi & Smith, 2001; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). This research identified that Korean international students experienced broadly similar issues, although each individual faced unique challenges. The common challenges were categorized into three themes:

Now knowing the Right Discourses and Practices: Adapting to new cultural norms and expectations.

Lack of Social Support: The absence of a supportive network in the new environment.

English as a Major Barrier: Difficulties with language proficiency impacting academic and social integration.

These themes highlight the key areas where Korean international students commonly struggle and provide insight into their adjustment process. Each finding section will be discussed with the researcher's own reflections.

Not knowing the right discourses and practices

In line with the literature on Asian international students (Kuo, Roysircar, & Newby-Clark, 2006; Sodowsky & Lai, 1997), one of the prominent challenges identified was acculturation stress. This stress began as early as when the students left their home countries. Fernandez (1988) conceptualizes this as culture shock, defining it as follows:

Culture shock includes all those beliefs and expectations about how people should speak and act; the social structure and organization; the relationship and rules that govern kinship systems; one's ethnicity; one's socioeconomic status; and the ideals, customs, and learned behaviour that have become second nature to a person (p. 158).

The participants in this study arrived in New Zealand with a set timeframe for their stay. Echoing Mori's (2000) observations, this time-limited stay influenced their efforts to adapt to the host culture while striving to preserve the beliefs, values, and traditions of their home country to which they planned to return. The research findings revealed similar patterns of adjustment challenges. Specifically, minors and young adults, such as BK, RK, and JH, experienced confusion due to the lack of familiar conveniences, such as high-speed internet, affordable mobile phone services, bidets, and water purifiers. These differences contributed to their difficulty in adjusting which arises from confusion about new cultural norms (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Pedersen, 1995; Ward et al., 2001).

The participants struggled to adjust to the slower pace of life and the emphasis on family-focused leisure time. Unlike their peers, who typically went home immediately after school, and with shops closing by 4:30 pm, they found themselves with an excess of unstructured time. This lack of direction heightened their feelings of isolation and cultural dissonance. Accustomed to more structured and tightly scheduled days in their home countries, they found this newfound free time to be a significant challenge.

For instance, students who attended formal educational settings frequently reported that the experience was tedious and lacked engaging extracurricular activities. They expressed frustration with the limited opportunities available after school, which contributed to their sense of isolation and dissatisfaction during their adjustment period.

HH: There is nothing to do after school.

R: Why don't you play with friends from school?

HH: They say they have to take care of siblings.

Students who experienced boredom sought various strategies to address their situation, including making new friends, creating their own recreational activities, teaching younger children, and engaging in reading. After approximately three months, the participants began to recognize and accept cultural differences more readily. This shift in perspective was evident from informal dialogues with the participants, indicating their growing adaptation and acceptance of the new cultural context.

JK: I had this frustrating but interesting experience at a gas station. A clerk was handing me a scratch winning ticket. Guess what? He literally threw the ticket to me. I was kind of uncomfortable for a while. But I thought to myself, Right, it is the way of people handing stuff. He was not angry or ignoring me. Then I felt ok. But still it is strange, isn't it?

PK was listening to the conversation nearby and added to the story.

PK: I had the same thing happen. At school my teacher was throwing a homework book onto a friend's desk. I thought the teacher was angry at something or my friend. But she was doing it to everybody.

HJ: Yes, if Korean people see these, they might think it was very rude or the evidence of showing anger.

The dialogue suggests that participants began to approach their new environment with a more rational and balanced perspective—negotiating between the new and the old. After approximately three months or more, they ceased negative comparisons and judgments, indicating a shift toward accepting and appreciating the differences in their new cultural context.

Even after 15 years of living in New Zealand, the researcher continues to navigate the dissonance between the cultural discourses of her 'home' and her 'new home.' She finds particular difficulty in adapting to practices such as the ritual of morn-

ing tea—characterized by tea, sweets, and seemingly superficial small talk—which contrasts sharply with her Korean upbringing in a highly competitive society focused on productivity. The lack of apparent functional purpose in these rituals remains a challenge. As Gonzalez-Mena (2005, p. 5) emphasizes, it is impossible to “separate culture from all the different aspects of diversity” as “everything is culturally embedded.” Over time, the researcher’s cultural awareness has deepened, enabling her to see the complexities and challenges inherent in both cultural frameworks as participants critically reflect on the differences they encounter.

Lacking social support

Social support emerged as a significant challenge for the participants, with its impact varying across different age groups. Younger participants, who typically maintain close relationships with extended family members in their home country, frequently reported a notable lack of social support, especially from relatives. The following dialogue, which took place in the dining room, illustrates the experiences of RK, PK, and JK, who are family members, highlighting their struggles with the absence of familiar support networks.

RK: (Looking at the calendar on the wall) I have been here for more than two months already.

R: Do you want to go back to Korea?

RK : No, I am just saying.....

His younger brother next continued.

PK: I'd like to go back.

R: I assume you don't like it here.

PK: There is family in Korea.

R: Do you miss your relatives?

PK: Yes.

Another dialogue reflects a similar issue. Even though initial family members are all in New Zealand, they still perceive close relatives as an integral part of their support network. This perception contributes to a heightened sense of homesickness, as they continue to feel the absence of the familiar, extended family connections they no longer have in a foreign city and country.

RK: Aunt! there is something better in New Zealand than Korea.

R: Emm, what is that?

RK: Teachers don't hit students, and girls don't hit boys as well.

..... (Omit)

R: Then what is better about Korea?

RK: There is family.

Korean students typically rely heavily on social support while studying, often participating in study groups where peers and teachers provide substantial support. Socializing within these groups is a common practice. However, in New Zealand, such study groups are less common, especially for international students, requiring them to actively seek social support rather than receiving it naturally, as in Korea. It is believed that the difficulties international students face in adjusting to a new culture are partly due to their temporary engagement with the host society (Ferguson, 1989).

The results of this study corroborate this view. Outgoing and socially oriented participants expressed a strong desire to form friendships both at school and beyond. Despite their efforts, they struggled to connect with native New Zealanders. Similar to findings reported by Ong (1989), Asian international students often isolate themselves by primarily interacting with other Asian students. This study revealed that young adult participants predominantly formed friendships with fellow international students at their language centers, and in some cases, exclusively with other Korean students. This aligns with the findings of Wright-St Clair and Nayar (2020), who highlight how individuals seek social connections within their own ethnic communities to address and mitigate their struggles. However, as time progressed, the participants began to join extracurricular groups and expand their social networks. Their determination to seek and establish social support became more evident over time.

After a two-week term break, HH said with a stern voice that she wouldn't be a 'quiet and shy girl' anymore at school.

After approximately three months, the younger participants began inviting friends over to socialize and were also invited to birthday parties. The adults, while somewhat slower in expanding their social networks, gradually started to go out with friends, take short trips, and join clubs.

The researcher observed a persistent lack of social connections throughout her personal and professional life. She noted that New Zealanders tend to maintain close-knit social circles and are often slow to welcome newcomers. This dynamic became particularly evident in her workplace, where she was frequently perplexed by the hiring practices—new staff members were consistently referred by existing employees. This practice underscored the high value placed on personal references, often surpassing the recognition of previous cultural capital or professional experience. In recent years, she came to understand the significance of references as a fundamental element of trust within society. The researcher's own social, cultural, and historical frameworks emphasized verifying social ties and valuing quantifiable cultural capital, such as test results. However, these perspectives were challenged in this new context, leading her to reconsider and appreciate the merits of a system that prioritizes personal connections. She now acknowledges that this approach is not without its value. This underscores the importance of cultivating weak ties (Lin, 2001) for migrants, including international students, to facilitate their successful settlement.

English as a major barrier

International students who lack proficiency in English face unique challenges not encountered by native English-speaking students. Furnham and Alibhai (1985) state that difficulty in speaking the host language with confidence discourages individuals from engaging socially with the local community. Research has consistently shown that students' ability to communicate effectively in English significantly impacts their social experiences and adjustment (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Pedersen, 1991; Stoyhoff, 1997). For international students from non-English-speaking countries, insufficient English proficiency is often the primary obstacle and a major source of frustration (Mori, 2000; Selvadurai, 1998). Roth and Haram (2000) further argue that "using an unfamiliar language may cause vulnerability and distress, making the experience of using a second language a deeply uprooting, self-transforming process" (p. 763). Participants in this study frequently expressed frustration stemming from their lack of confidence in the host language.

RK: My brother was in trouble at school today. He fought with a friend and the teacher found out. Teacher asked PK, "PK, you say sorry." My brother said to his friend, "You say sorry".

HH: Friends at school say things to me, but I can't understand. It is very frustrating.

HJ: My teacher and classmates tell me to say something. I personally love to say, of course. Who wouldn't? But the words are only in my head and they don't come out in time. It is really hard.

HH: Close friends talk to me slowly so that I can understand but other kids? They talk too fast for me to understand.

McCormack (1998) discovered that Asian American participants with limited English proficiency were more likely to self-segregate compared to those with higher language fluency. Factors such as speaking English with an accent and belonging to a visible racial or ethnic minority group can exacerbate the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, leading to increased feelings of homesickness and longing for family and friends in their home countries (Poyrazli, 2007). Consistent with these findings, the participants in this study reported significant stress related to language difficulties, particularly with conversational English.

HH: I was embarrassed today at school. I was talking and they didn't understand. They finally understood after repeating five times.

Overall, the host language emerged as the most significant challenge faced by participants living in New Zealand. Numerous studies on international students corroborate these findings, indicating that language proficiency is a major hurdle. As Poyrazli (2006) notes, "host language fluency plays a key role in successful academic performance" (p. 770). Stoyhoff (1997) also found a positive correlation between TOEFL scores and academic success. Asian international students, in particular, experience substantial difficulties with English, often viewing it as a major obstacle (Abu-Ein, 1993; Stafford et al., 1980; Lin & Yi, 1997; McCoy, 1996; Yeh & Yang, 2003). The following dialogue illustrates the significant stress that Korean international students encounter due to language barriers.

BK showed the signs of stress for a while, increasing time spent in bed, going to sleep late, loss of appetite and not talking much. I assumed that it was due to the recent break up with a girlfriend. He was sitting in front of the fire place looking at the flames intently.

R: Do you have anything bothering you these days?

BK:

R: What is the most difficult one living here?

BK: English.

Research indicates that a lack of assertiveness and initiative is a significant issue for some students from Asian cultures (Althen, 1991; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992). This issue is particularly pronounced among Korean students, whose culture is influenced by Confucianism, which traditionally emphasizes respect and deference, discouraging them from voicing their opinions and speaking openly to teachers. Consequently, participants in this study often remained silent and refrained from asking questions, even when they struggled to understand the teacher's explanations or the content of the class.

RK: I feel so frustrated in class. I like to ask teachers that I don't understand but I don't know what to say. I just copy what others do.

R: Do you fully understand the class?

HH: No..... Once I didn't understand what the instructions at math quiz was.

R: So what did you do?

HH: I just marked any number.

The findings underscore that proficiency in the host language is crucial for adapting to the new culture, obtaining social support, and comprehending the academic environment. As the participants progressed, they began to recognize that their language skills were not as deficient as they initially believed. Some participants noted that their vocabulary knowledge was often superior to that of their peers, and their reading skills were comparable. They moved from feeling entirely out of their depth to understanding their own strengths and weaknesses more clearly. This growing confidence was evident when they were able to understand and effectively use the host language in various contexts.

HH: Now I understand what my friends say. And the other day my teacher told me that I did well on my assignment.

JK: I think the most difficult one is writing essays. Sometimes, I can't even write in Korean. Even in Korean, I wasn't used to writing.

HH: There is a friend who can't even count.

R: Really? What do you mean 'can't count'?

HH: Yes, he doesn't know 12. And there are many students whose spelling is worse than mine.

Undoubtedly, relocating to a new country brings about a degree of discomfort due to cultural differences. More importantly they need to navigate the differences with English. The journey of migrants as English language learners was the main theme of the researcher's doctoral research (Lee, 2016).

Even though the researcher has a sound communication in English, as a non-native English speaker, the researcher also often feels self-conscious about her use of the language. Early in her tenure at the university, she was required to engage with diverse stakeholders, some of whom directly commented on her accent and others on the perceived abruptness of her writing style. She continuously navigates this discomfort while striving to balance her academic qualifications earned in New Zealand with her efforts to assert an authentic voice, albeit unintentionally influenced by these external perceptions. In alignment with Bai and Wang (2024), the researcher navigated these challenges by actively seeking and leveraging any cultural capital she possessed.

The negotiation process remains ongoing, as the researcher reflects on the participants' struggles as language learners and their optimistic belief that language proficiency would resolve all challenges. This perspective troubles the researcher, as she continues to navigate her own experiences within an English-speaking world, demonstrating that language skills alone cannot address all issues. Discussions with young adult university students about three published news articles on immigration (Lyons, Madden, Chamberlain, & Carr, 2011) revealed underlying perspectives on what it means for immigrants to be 'truly' settled in New Zealand. These perspectives suggest that true settlement requires immigrants to assimilate into 'one society,' demonstrating not only English fluency but also adopting the appearance and identity associated with being New Zealand European, thereby marginalizing individuals of Asian descent.

Compared to Lin's (2001) emphasis on the importance of cultivating weak ties, the theories of social and cultural capital by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) offer additional insights. They suggest that the key to addressing fundamental marginalization may lie in establishing a shared goal with the community that sojourners aspire to settle in. In an increasingly interconnected world, making this shared goal apparent to all community members has the potential to mitigate the marginalization of newcomers or culturally and socially distinct sub-groups. A clearly defined shared goal could enhance the mobility of diverse and rich social and cultural capital among members, ultimately contributing to greater community sustainability.

Conclusion

The research identified three primary challenges faced by Korean international students in New Zealand: stress associated with not knowing the right discourses and practices, feeling of lack of social support, and lacking communication skills in English.

Settling in a socially, culturally and linguistically different country raised a range of issues, from adjusting to local road rules to adapting to different social customs. Social support emerged as a significant concern, with students struggling to maintain connections and find support in a new environment. However, the most critical challenge was English proficiency. The participants viewed mastering English as a key factor in their ability to integrate, secure social support, and ease the acculturation process. Unlike other challenges, students felt they had a degree of control over their language skills. Consequently, they increasingly focused on improving their English to achieve success, becoming more goal-oriented and adaptive to cultural differences.

The stress induced by dissonances encountered by Korean international students often led to a range of behavioral responses, including insomnia, social withdrawal, excessive talking, aggression, and indulgence in food or alcohol. Such stress-related behaviors, if prolonged, could significantly impact their quality of life. To address this, it is recommended that stress-relief resources and support mechanisms be established before students embark on their international journey.

Many prospective students and their families rely on resources available in the internet or private agencies for information about studying abroad, which can sometimes present extreme positive or negative perspectives. Providing comprehensive resources, such as booklets or a dedicated hotline, and online public communities could offer more balanced information. For example, Korea's toll-free support line for foreigners demonstrates the potential benefit of having similar services available for international students and their families.

The study also identifies a gap in English education in Korea, emphasizing the need to shift from a focus on academic to practical communication skills. Effective communication, particularly in speaking and listening, is essential for successful adaptation and integration into a new environment. In light of the rapid development of language tools, the emphasis should be placed on fostering social connections both within students' own communities and with host communities. To support this, greater promotion of social activities is recommended.

Furthermore, multicultural education should be more emphasized in schools to foster a greater understanding of diverse cultures. This awareness can help students approach cultural differences with an open mind and reduce the stress associated with adjusting to new environments. Such programs can also focus on globally shared goals, encouraging students to find common ground across cultures.

Local community support is also essential. While religious groups often assist, promoting a variety of community activities—such as music, sports, and counseling—could enhance the support network for international students. Lin (The tragic case of a Korean family in New Zealand in 2010 (McKenzie-McLean & Van Beynen, 2010), as an example, who faced severe isolation and financial strain, underscores the need for diverse community programs that could have provided critical support during their difficult time.

Limitations of this study include its focus on a single household setting, which may have shaped the nature of the challenges observed, and the diversity in participant ages, which could have contributed to variations in cultural adaptation experiences. Additionally, the researcher's personal background as a Korean living in a different cultural context may have influenced subjective interpretations. However, measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness and credibility throughout the research process.

Future research should consider age-specific studies to better understand the unique challenges faced by different age groups and incorporate in-depth interviews to explore deeper, more nuanced struggles. Comparative research is also recommended to examine the impacts of societal and educational changes since 2009, the expansion of globalization, and the rising popularity of K-culture. Employing mixed methods that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges experienced by international students. Furthermore, investigating students who have lived in foreign cultures for extended periods whether that can align with the researcher's reflexivity could yield valuable insights into their long-term adjustment and integration processes.

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