

SELF-DIRECTED LANGUAGE LEARNING TRAJECTORY: A CASE STUDY OF LANGUAGE LEARNER OF KOREAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The rapid development of technology in recent decades has created digital generations who have grown up using high-tech devices as an inextricable part of their daily lives (Pedró, 2006). This generation often accesses second or foreign languages (L2) through freely available open sources from an early age, motivating their willingness to learn the target L2. As digital natives increasingly populate language classrooms, their presence has led to significant changes in L2 teaching and learning contexts. The present case study focuses on a non-heritage L2 Korean learner who self-studied Korean during his teens and was placed in the most advanced language course at a university in the U.S. The study aims to understand his self-directed learning approaches and the personal traits that propelled his language development, with the goal of deriving pedagogical implications for self-directed learners. The subject was interviewed in Korean for ten hours over one semester. Initially, he was exposed to the Korean language at age seven through his sister's interest in K-pop. Later, he developed a desire to learn Korean and began systematic study around age 14.5, utilizing online resources and vocabulary tools. His progress was facilitated by the remote learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, he was able to immerse himself fully in Korean, creating his own programs for language learning. Later stages included practicing through Korean media and attending university-level Korean classes. The interview revealed the digital generation's ability to use techniques in language learning, and the lack of institutional language classes did not hinder his learning motivation. Additionally, key personality traits, such as introversion and persistence, highlighted his focus on input and time management. His self-confidence and methodical approach to learning further underscored his autonomy. The findings suggest several pedagogical implications. First, learner autonomy is crucial for successful language acquisition, requiring motivation, effort, and self-awareness. Second, the self-use of techniques by the digital generation requires new approaches in language instruction. Finally, the subject's early exposure to Korean reveals the importance of community-wide language exposure activities. While the study's subject does not represent all digital natives, his experience illustrates the potential benefits of a paradigm shift in language classroom, including re-designing language courses with more individualized sessions in higher education to better serve the needs of digital generations.

Keywords: *L2 learning, self-directed learning, learner autonomy, digital generation, learner traits.*

1. Introduction

The rapid development of technologies in recent decades has led to an emergence of digital generations who have been raised with digital technologies as an inextricable part of daily life (Pedró, 2006). These generations are often called “digital natives” (Prensky, 2012), “the net generation” (Tapscott, 1998), or Gen Z in recent years. The behaviors of these generations in second or foreign language (L2) learning are different from traditional ways of learning due to the changed environments. Most notably, learners can easily access cultural contents using foreign languages, thanks to freely available resources through domestic and international service platforms (e.g., YouTube, Netflix). This accessibility has enabled learners to be exposed to foreign language of their own interest from an early age. This shift has changed the environment in language classrooms in higher education settings, filling them with more learners who have prior knowledge of the target language. While language instructors acknowledge these learners' previous exposure and place them in appropriate proficiency-level classes, little attention has been given to their learning paths. Considering the changing dynamics of traditional classrooms, retracing the path of self-taught students is worthwhile to investigate for pedagogical implications for self-directed learners. Thus, this study aims to follow the trajectory of one subject's Korean learning as a foreign language, who self-taught Korean in his teens and was placed in the most advanced proficiency level course at the university. While the subject does not represent the entire generation, this case study is expected to provide pedagogical implications for language classes with more self-directed learners.

2. Literature review

The concept of self-directed learning is characterized by learners' autonomy and initiative in their educational pursuits. Benson (2011) suggests that a key aspect of self-directed learning is learners' ability to take charge of their own learning process, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating their understanding. Several studies investigate multifaceted aspects of self-directed learning. To illustrate, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) acknowledge the integration of social media technologies has significantly supported self-directed learning by providing tools to create personal learning environments. Similarly, Al Ghazali (2020) argues that learning philosophy needs to be modified to integrate self-access learning that utilizes online and digital resources to enhance learner autonomy, particularly in response to changes in the learning environment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Broadly speaking, autonomous learners have the authority to control their own language-learning methods and tools in accordance with their learning goals.

The role of motivation in learning L2 has been discussed widely. Schmidt (1992) underscores the importance of psychological mechanism, such as motivation and anxiety, in L2 acquisition. Sansone and Smith (2000) also argue that individuals self-regulate their motivation when completing tasks and that interest-enhancing strategies are effective. More importantly, Deci and Ryan (2000) posit that intrinsic motivation driven by personal interest and enjoyment is crucial for effective self-directed learning. Relatedly, Schiefele (2001) summarizes several studies on the role of interest in learning and concludes that topic interest significantly contributes to the text learning even when individual differences such as previous knowledge are considered. More recently, Alamer et al. (2025) conducted a meta-analysis using data from 21 primary studies and found out that autonomous motivation that includes intrinsic and identified regulation significantly correlates with language achievement.

Ultimately, self-directed learning is a multifaceted process that relies on learners' autonomy and the effective use of resources while being fundamentally driven by learners' motivation and interest. As the learning environment continues to evolve, particularly with the integration of technologies, discussions on how to implement self-directed learning in higher education become increasingly essential.

3. Methods

The present study adopts a case study to understand a longitudinal and holistic exploration of a complex phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The subject of the present study visited the Korean program at a university in the U.S. to take a language placement test. His name was Keith, a pseudonym of his own choice. He was an English native speaker and a 20-year-old majoring in Computer Science. He was about to enter his senior year and wanted to take Korean courses before graduation. The placement test in the program consisted of answering multiple choice questions after reading, semi-formal oral questions, and writing. His test results showed his ability to take the highest proficiency level course. It should be noted that the purpose of the placement test is not to obtain any standardized proficiency score but rather to find the most appropriate class for the participant among the courses offered in the institution, considering the participant's holistic language skills. The university offered one grammar course per semester from Year 1 through Year 4, totaling eight courses, in addition to two content-based advanced courses taught over two semesters in Year 5. The advanced courses deal with various social issues and focus on advanced language skills such as oral discussion on social issues and writing argumentative essays. Keith was placed in the advanced level course. Since his placement in the most advanced class is not a popular path for non-heritage learners who haven't taken any Korean classes, it was worth understanding his learning trajectory. He gladly agreed to participate in the study and to share his experiences. We had regular meetings for about one hour per week for ten weeks. Various topics were covered including both his language learning process and his personal traits, such as strengths, weaknesses, plans, and hobbies. All the conversations were conducted in Korean, per his preference, and there was no time limit for answering the questions.

4. Findings

4.1. Self-directed learning progress

4.1.1. Initial exposure. Keith's first experience with Korean was through his sister when he was seven. His sister, who was seven years older than him, was a fan of K-pop songs. She taught him a few idiomatic expressions such as *annyeonghaseiyo* 'hello' and *ce-nun Keith-yeyyo* 'I am Keith', as well as a few easy words like *aisukhulim* 'ice cream', an English borrowed word. He also gradually practiced *Hangul*, the Korean alphabet, incrementally. Even though he did not consciously focus on learning, he was exposed to the language over time without realizing it.

4.1.2. Foundational scaffolding and intensive vocabulary acquisition. When he was about 14.5 years old, he decided to ‘study’ Korean in a more structured manner. He believed that learning grammatical structures was critical, so he watched free instructional video clips that taught Korean grammatical patterns through platforms like YouTube. At this stage, he would turn on Korean podcasts to create an immersion environment while resting. He began keeping a diary in Korean after about six months of learning.

After one year of pattern practice, Keith moved on to vocabulary learning. It was during his summer vacation, so he spent all his time memorizing Korean new words. He selected new words from K-pop lyrics or comments left by Korean users on cultural content, such as chat boxes in online games, news, and entertainment shows. Often, he would read comments without watching the clips or playing the games. He used digital platforms that allowed him to create his own Korean-English (K-E) flashcards as a tool to memorize vocabulary. He remembered that there were always thousands of new words to memorize. When the vacation was over, he could allocate about two hours per day for Korean. He used one hour for reading comments and choosing words, and the other hour for memorizing the words. This period lasted about one year.

4.1.3. Monolingual learning. When he was 16.5 years old, his school switched to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He frankly enjoyed this mode as he could manage his own time for schoolwork and Korean learning. By this time, after one year of grammar practice and one year of vocabulary training, he observed himself progressing to a different stage. He had little difficulty reading comments and realized that he had made significant improvements. For about six months until the school returned to in-person learning, he made Korean-Korean (K-K) flashcards, writing his own definitions of words. For instance, to memorize *kananhata* ‘to be poor’, he wrote *ton-i epsese sanyhal-i elyepta* in Korean which means ‘(someone’s) living is hard because the person doesn’t have money’ instead of using the English translation ‘to be poor’. This way, he could connect previously known words such as ‘money’ and ‘to not have’ with *kananhata* and associate the target words with other commonly related words. For this practice, he used space repetition systems (SRS). SRS is an online system that shows the cards the users made at pre-set intervals. For example, if a learner creates a card, the system will show it randomly in 2 days, then in 8 days, and again in three weeks, etc. The system included pre-made K-E decks, but Keith created his own decks to understand Korean words through Korean explanations and to connect with related words. He often inserted related pictures into his own decks.

4.1.4. Consolidation through authentic affinity spaces. He was 17 years old when he went back to school. At this time, he could not spend as much time practicing Korean as before because he had to prepare for college entrance exams. Despite not ‘studying Korean hard’, he continued to engage with the language through authentic affinity spaces. He played online games with the language mode set to Korean without English subtitles and watched Korean news or entertainment shows. Additionally, he began to read more advanced passages written in Korean. He searched *Namwu-wiki*, the Korean version of Wikipedia, for topics that interested him, such as mushrooms, and read the explanations there. He looked up some new words in these passages and created his own decks, but he recalled that he did not have much difficulty reading them and could easily connect the new words with other words he knew. After entering college, he continued this practice for three years. One change was that he started using a new SRS system, which was much user-friendly than the previous one, and he would write whole sentences in his deck when he encountered new words.

4.2. Motivation

In addition to language learning, the conversations covered Keith’s personality. The most salient strength of Keith was his determination towards his interest. According to him, once he got into something, he could not stop until he fully understood the subject. He used to spend hours acquiring knowledge about topic of his own choice. As he was not a competitive person, he did it not to outdo others but purely for self-satisfaction. He described himself as introverted and having a high level of academic curiosity. He did not enjoy physical outdoor activities; instead, he preferred staying indoors, learning, practicing, and repeating the knowledge he acquired. Regarding his Korean learning, he identified “input” and “immersion” as the major factors influencing his learning. That is, after the initial stage when he studied Korean grammatical patterns in English, he emerged himself in Korean language environment by listening to and reading authentic Korean materials, making K-K vocabulary cards, and writing journals in Korean. Overall, it seems that Korean language became his primary interest, and he delved into it until he was satisfied, placing himself in an immersive environment.

5. Discussion

5.1. Personality and learner autonomy

The findings suggest that the subject's personality plays a significant role in the development of Korean language proficiency. His self-description as non-competitive and driven by self-satisfaction highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation. In addition, Keith's strong academic curiosity and introverted disposition encouraged sustained progress toward the goals he set, contributing to a highly focused learning style. His intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of learning further illustrate how personal interests can facilitate meaningful language acquisition (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Notably, he independently structured his learning pathways, monitored his progress, and adapted his study methods appropriately (e.g., shifting from K-E to K-K cards) without formal guidance. Through this process, he developed effective learning strategies and learned how to learn. His learning trajectory exemplifies learners' capacity to self-manage their learning by adjusting strategies over time and demonstrates how autonomous learners can achieve their goals independently.

5.2. The power of digital affinity

The emergence of technology has expanded opportunities for autonomous learning behaviors. The use of freely available resources, such as YouTube and Korean-language podcasts, suggests the importance of accessible tools and platforms in self-directed learning. Learners of digital generation, who are accustomed to navigating online resources, can benefit substantially from these technological developments, as they enable exposure to an immersive language learning environment through a vast range of authentic materials. This shift can enhance learner motivation and foster a sense of belonging that is often difficult to achieve through traditional instructional materials, as illustrated in Keith's case. Although he lived in a community where the target language was not commonly used, he was able to encounter authentic language use through online affinity spaces that offered contextualized and practical engagement with the language. These spaces helped create a rich and immersive learning environment, allowing him to develop a sense of connection to Korean society.

5.3. Re-evaluating instructors' role and community connection

The presence of learners with previous knowledge of the target language as non-heritage language users has changed the environment of language classrooms in higher educational institutions. When instructing learners who have followed the institution's curriculum, instructors know what their students know and what they don't. However, when learners come to class with previous knowledge of the language, instructors must address their language skills (e.g., speaking, vocabulary) and understand their goals. In this regard, the role of instructors as guides is more important than ever. Keith had meetings with one of the Korean program instructors during her office hours for about two hours per week for one semester. During the interview for this study, he reiterated several times that these office-hour meetings were far more productive and meaningful for him than classroom sessions. This implies that allocating more in-person sessions and providing individualized feedback and appropriate resources for each student may better serve students' needs. Considering the practical limitations in each institution, such as limited number of faculty members and classrooms, redesigning current language courses to include more independent sessions will be helpful.

Additionally, establishing a network with the community will become a critical responsibility of language programs of higher educational institutions. Keith was fortunate to have a sister who was interested in the Korean language and culture. This early exposure to Korean significantly impacted his motivation and learning. As seen in his case, digital generations may be more accustomed to finding their own ways of experiencing foreign language and cultures through the consumption of cultural content. Providing more opportunities for young people to be exposed to the target language and culture during K-12 school days or through extracurricular activities will help foster a population interested in the target language. This connection between higher education and the community will ultimately achieve the goals of language education, which are to equip students with language skills for life tasks and to fulfill learners' needs.

6. Conclusion

The present study is a case study; Keith does not represent the entire net generation or all self-taught learners. Some factors that influenced his learning, such as the degree of his determination and having a sister who were interested in Korean, are unique. Thus, the findings are not generalizable but rather illustrative. However, his case reveals that digital generations have easy access to foreign language contents these days and they utilize available sources as they wish. The environmental changes in learning L2, including free resources and useful platforms, and learners' way of using them need to be acknowledged to design curricula that guide each learner to their own goals and set up learner-oriented classrooms for

digital-friendly generation. Follow-up studies on comparative cases of learners with different personality types, integrating affinity spaces into a curriculum, and training instructors to be effective mentors for autonomous learners will invite richer discussions.

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