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An Unknown World: The Academic Experiences of Korean Immigrant Students at Two Universities in Toronto, Canada

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Résumé de l'article

Bien que la participation d'étudiants immigrants de divers contextes culturels continue d'augmenter dans les universités canadiennes, il y a toujours un manque de compréhension de leurs expériences. Cette étude compare les expériences de neuf étudiants immigrants d'origine coréenne inscrits dans des programmes de sciences et de sciences sociales dans deux universités à Toronto et les ressources de soutien qu'ils ont utilisées. À l'aide du cadre de persévérance de Reason (2009), différents aspects de l'expérience des étudiants, y compris leur transition du secondaire à l'université et leurs études universitaires, ont été examinés au moyen de groupes de discussion semi-structurés et d'entrevues. Les participants à la recherche ont généralement eu des difficultés à s'adapter aux universités canadiennes et ont rencontré des difficultés linguistiques tout au long de leur participation aux cours et aux évaluations. Cela a nui à leur persévérance vers leur objectif d'obtenir leur diplôme. Les participants ont rencontré des difficultés variées selon leur domaine d'études tout au long de celles-ci. Ils et elles ont utilisé des stratégies telles que l'enregistrement audio des cours magistraux, la communication avec leurs pairs et enseignants et l'utilisation de ressources en ligne pour surmonter ces défis. Des différences dans les expériences des participants entre les deux universités sont apparues concernant les groupes d'étudiants coréens, qu'ils ont trouvés comme étant la source de soutien la plus bénéfique. Nous offrons des suggestions pour mieux soutenir les expériences des étudiants immigrants dans les universités canadiennes.

AN UNKNOWN WORLD: THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF KOREAN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AT TWO UNIVERSITIES IN TORONTO, CANADA

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Abstract

Although the participation of immigrant students from diverse cultural backgrounds continues to increase in Canadian universities, there is still a lack of a good understanding of their experiences. This study compared the experiences of nine Korean immigrant students in the sciences and social sciences at two Toronto-based universities and the support resources they utilized. Using Reason's (2009) persistence framework, different aspects of student experiences, including the transition from high school to university and their academic studies, were examined through semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Research participants commonly had difficulties adjusting to Canadian universities and encountered linguistic difficulties throughout their lecture participation and assessment completion that hindered their persistence toward their goal of graduation. The participants varied in the difficulties they encountered with the disciplinary natures of the sciences and social sciences throughout their studies. The participants developed strategies of audio-recording lectures, reaching out to their peers and teaching staff, and using online resources to overcome the challenges. Differences in participant experiences between the two universities appeared regarding Korean student groups, which they found as the most beneficial source of support. Suggestions are made to better support the experiences of immigrant students in Canadian universities.

Keywords: immigrant student experiences, Korean immigrant students, post-secondary experiences, academic challenges, student persistence

Résumé

Bien que la participation d'étudiants immigrants de divers contextes culturels continue d'augmenter dans les universités canadiennes, il y a toujours un manque de compréhension de leurs expériences. Cette étude compare les expériences de neuf étudiants immigrants d'origine coréenne inscrits dans des programmes de sciences et de sciences sociales dans deux universités à Toronto et les ressources de soutien qu'ils ont utilisées. À l'aide du cadre de persévérance de Reason (2009), différents aspects de l'expérience des étudiants, y compris leur transition du secondaire à l'université et leurs études universitaires, ont été examinés au moyen de groupes de discussion semi-structurés et d'entrevues. Les participants à la recherche ont généralement eu des difficultés à s'adapter aux universités canadiennes et ont rencontré des difficultés linguistiques tout au long de leur participation aux cours et aux évaluations. Cela a nui à leur persévérance vers leur objectif d'obtenir leur diplôme. Les participants ont rencontré des difficultés variées selon leur domaine d'études tout au long de celles-ci. Ils et elles ont utilisé des stratégies telles que l'enregistrement audio des cours magistraux, la communication avec leurs pairs et enseignants et l'utilisation de ressources en ligne pour surmonter ces défis. Des différences dans les expériences des participants entre les deux universités sont apparues concernant les groupes d'étudiants coréens, qu'ils ont trouvés comme étant la source de soutien la plus bénéfique. Nous offrons des suggestions pour mieux soutenir les expériences des étudiants immigrants dans les universités canadiennes.

Mots-clés : expériences des étudiants immigrants, étudiants coréens immigrants, expériences au postsecondaire, défis universitaires, persévérance des étudiants

Introduction

Immigrant populations in Canada have been steadily growing, representing 23.0% of Canada's total population in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Statistics Canada defines immigrants as "persons residing in Canada who were born outside of Canada, excluding temporary foreign workers… and those with student or working visas" (Statistics Canada, 2010). Reaching 40.8% of the foreign-born population, the number of immigrants from Asia has surpassed the immigrant population from European countries in the last two decades (Statistics Canada, 2022). South Korea was among the top 10 countries of recent immigrants' origin in 2017, and Koreans are one of the largest visible minority groups in Canada in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2017, 2022). This increase in the number of Korean immigrants suggests that more Koreans will arrive in Canada in the future (The Canadian Magazine of Immigration, 2020).

Concurrent with this overall rise in immigrants is the increasing number of immigrant students in Canadian higher education. Immigrant students, especially from East Asian countries, are reported to participate in Canadian universities at a higher rate than non-immigrant students, which some attribute to the high educational expectations that immigrant parents hold for their children (Childs, et al., 2017; Finnie, et al., 2015; McMullen, 2011; Thiessen, 2009). Despite this high participation rate, there is surprisingly limited research on the experiences of immigrant students. Korean students in particular have rarely received attention in education research; however, anecdotal evidence, such as Jung's (2017) book on his personal journey in Canada, indicates that Korean communities are concerned for their students' academic success.

Among the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Korea ranked as one of the highest in public and private spending on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) throughout primary and secondary education. Korea also has both the highest percentage of tertiary-educated young adults, and of 15-year-olds who expect to attain tertiary education (OECD, 2020). There is a subculture of "family-level commitment to education" for social mobility (Oh, 2010, p. 317), and it is likely that Korean immigrants bring this mindset regarding post-secondary education with them to Canada.

With a relatively limited understanding of the experiences of immigrant students, particularly from Korea, more attention is needed to listen to their stories and better support their academic experiences. In this study, Korean immigrant students attending two Canadian universities identified the challenges they experienced and the support systems they engaged. It is important for Canadian universities to support all their students so that they may enjoy learning opportunities throughout their studies. Developing an understanding of Korean immigrant students' academic experiences can help teaching staff and student affairs professionals to enhance conditions for their academic success. Such conditions would support not only Korean students, but also all students with similar experiences and academic challenges. Following the literature review on the experiences of immigrant students in Canadian universities, I introduce the conceptual framework of the study and its methodology. After sharing the participant stories, I discuss the findings in connection to the literature and provide suggestions for practice.

Immigrant Student Experiences in Canadian Universities

Among many studies on student experiences and development in Canadian post-secondary education contexts, relatively few studies focus on immigrant university students. What these studies demonstrate is that immigrant students tend to perform more poorly than native Canadian students, as demonstrated in terms of grade point average (GPA) (da Silva et al., 2017). Similarly, students who immigrated to Canada at age 14 or older were more likely to have a higher number of incomplete courses, compared to native speakers and immigrant students who immigrated at a younger age (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012).

The relative lack of attention paid to immigrant university students often means that their learning needs are not fulfilled (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Those immigrant students who were the first in their families to attend a Canadian university usually face many unknowns about Canadian universities and their supportive resources (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). In addition, linguistic difficulties and low self-confidence lead many immigrants to perceive their language skills as not fluent enough and to encounter discrimination from their peers, many of whom conflate language difficulties as an indicator of a lack of knowledge (Quinn, 2013; Sinacore et al., 2011). Due to low self-confidence in their linguistic capabilities, Kim and Duff (2012) shared that a Korean immigrant student even gave up on their dream to pursue English literature, believing that they would not succeed in the program with their English skills. Moreover,

immigrant students encountered cultural differences that hindered them from socially integrating with their domestic peers. Friends from similar cultural backgrounds were often one of their resources in finding information, and acted as a source of emotional support in alleviating stress from cultural differences (Sinacore et al., 2011). In particular, Kim and Duff (2012) shared that Korean immigrant students felt comfortable around peers from either Korean or Asian backgrounds and found academic guidance from Korean upper-year students and peers.

Similarly, scholars reported the difficulties immigrant students encounter in the United States. Soria and Stebleton's (2013) study claimed inadequate study skills, such as not being aware of how to approach support and start their assessments, as one of the major obstacles to immigrant students' academic achievement, along with weak English and math skills. Based on the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, Stebleton et al. (2010) reported that immigrant students tend to feel a lower sense of belonging on campus than non-immigrant students. However, peer interactions positively contribute to their sense of belonging. In particular, Kim (2009) interviewed ethnic minority immigrant students, including Korean immigrants, at a university in the United States and found that the participants primarily relied on their peers for help. Immigrant students used informal guidance from and cultural connection with their ethnic peer network in navigating their university system and academic studies. This was particularly the case with Korean students who felt comfortable socializing with Koreans; however, joining the Korean peer network hindered them from expanding their peer network to non-Korean peers.

It is problematic that immigrant students' experiences are still lacking attention, despite scholars reporting these challenges. All students should be provided with opportunities for learning throughout their post-secondary education to achieve their unique goals, such as academic success, family expectations, career plans, and long-term goals. This article shares the experiences of Korean immigrant students, particularly in regard to the academic challenges they may encounter and their causes, so that Canadian universities may provide equitable opportunities for their students. The research questions included (1) What academic barriers emerge for Korean immigrant students in Canadian universities? and (2) What are the support systems available for these students in Canadian universities?

Research Design

Persistence as Conceptual Framework

To explore the academic experiences of Korean immigrant students, this study used Reason's (2009) persistence framework, which considers multiple factors that affect students persisting toward their goals (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and can help gain a greater understanding of student experiences. The three major components of the framework are pre-university characteristics, organizational contexts, and interactions with academic and peer environments (Figure 1).

According to Reason's (2009) persistence framework, students' pre-university characteristics are based on their sociodemographic backgrounds, the quality of academic preparation in high school, and aspects of personal characteristics, such as academic self-efficacy, motivation, and aspirations. The organizational contexts include structural-demographic features of institutions and organizational behaviours, including those that are bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic. While important, these aspects tend to affect student persistence only subtly. The most influential elements are the activities and experiences of students within their peer environments (e.g., social integration) and their academic activities (both curricular and extracurricular) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This study used the framework to formulate the questionnaires designed to examine Korean students' academic experiences and persistence in working toward their goals. In my analysis, I focus on the two components that Reason (2009) claimed as being most crucial to student persistence—students' pre-university characteristics and interactions with their academic and peer environments—to explore Korean immigrant students' transition into and studies at two Canadian universities.

Research Method

A case study was conducted to understand the experiences of Korean immigrant students in two Toronto-based universities (Stake, 1995). With the anticipation that their experiences differ by their disciplines, the study included students in science disciplines and social science disciplines. The nature of inquiry, skills, and assessments involved with these two categories of disciplines differs, and such differences would affect the experiences of Korean immigrant students differently.

Figure 1

Reason's (2009) Persistence Framework
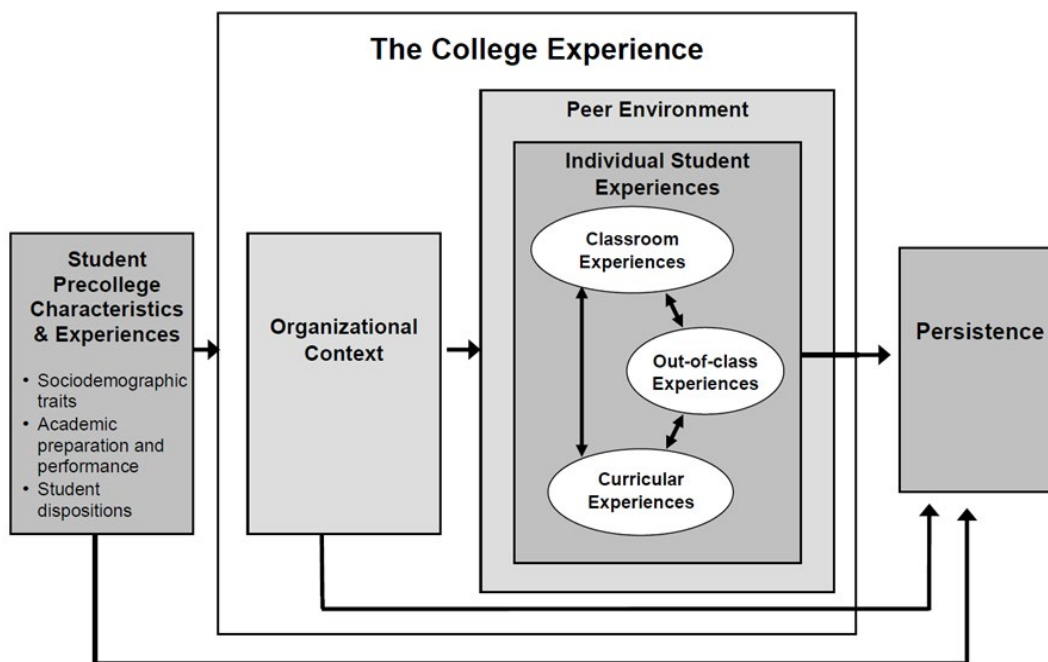
Source: Reason, 2009, p. 661. Copyright 2009 American College Personnel Association.

The study was bounded in place by two Canadian universities in Toronto, a large multicultural city. University A is a large, research-intensive institution that attracts students from 170 countries, including a high number of Korean students, and had 10 active Korean student groups at the time of the data collection. Located within walking distance from University A, University B is a newer institution that attracts students from about 150 countries, and has a much smaller Korean student population, with three active Korean student groups. These two universities were selected based on the proximity of their locations to reduce contextual variabilities in student experiences (Stake, 1995). The ethics approval letters were successfully obtained from both universities before starting participant recruitment.

Korean immigrant students in their upper years, including 2nd, 3rd, 4th years, and beyond, were recruited to cover different stages of their undergraduate studies. Following Corak's (2011) report that immigrant students who migrated to Canada at or after the age of 14 often exhibit low academic achievement, I recruited immigrant students who completed only some or all of high school in Canada. Recruitment oc-curred with the help of Korean student groups at the two universities. The information of the nine participants is presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used to respect participant confidentiality. All participants were part of face-to-face lecture-based programs with tutorials and/or lab components.

This study utilized qualitative focus groups, interviews, and online journals that complemented each other as primary data sources. In a focus group, participants "share their view, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own view in light of what they have heard" (Hennink, 2014, p. 3). With the anticipation that participants from similar disciplines and at the same institution may empathize with each other, two focus groups were planned for each type of discipline (science or social sciences). Small focus groups were formed to provide opportunities for all participants to share their stories in each focus group. One focus group was held for the participants in social sciences, as only three participants in social sciences were recruited. The participants studying sciences were further divided by institutions into two focus groups. All three focus groups occurred in September and October of 2018. Following

Table 1

Summary of Student Participant Information Including Pseudonyms, Years of Studies, and Disciplines

Disciplines	Pseudonym	Major/Minor	Year	School
Sciences	Na-rae	Life Sciences	5	University A
	Sae-ron	Life Sciences	5	
	Jin-sol	Life Sciences	2	
	Ha-neul	Architecture Science	4	University B
	Ba-da	Biomedical Science	2	
	Him-chan	Medical Physics	2	
Social Sciences	Do-rae	Commerce	5	University A
	Ga-on	International Relations	4	
	Ro-woon	Occupational Health and Safety/Politics	4	University B

the focus groups, individual interviews took place between November of 2018 and January of 2019. As interviews yield detailed and descriptive accounts of each participant's academic experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), the individual interviews involved expanding on the stories shared in the focus groups. Both focus groups and individual interviews, which lasted two to three hours each, were conducted in person and were semi-structured, using a set of questions with flexibility based on the participant's stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The questions included the following: (1) Thinking back to the time before you started university, how did you feel about starting your first year? (2) How does the learning environment in the classroom support your learning? Finally, each participant was provided a private link to an online journal to record reflective thoughts throughout their participation. No prompt was provided except for the instructions to freely share their thoughts. Four participants completed the journals, which allowed for further elaboration of their stories from focus groups and interviews.

All communications with participants occurred in Korean, and thus, all focus groups and interviews were transcribed in Korean. The transcriptions were analyzed through an iterative emergent coding process guided by the conceptual framework to identify patterns in participant stories and to categorize the data systematically into themes (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The participant stories were initially coded in Korean to prevent the loss of their original meaning. After the themes were arranged within each type of discipline, another round of thematic analysis was conducted across the two types of discipline. The major themes and quotes were translated into English by the researcher. To properly translate and interpret the participants' words, all information was carefully clarified in individual interviews and online journals.

Findings

Regardless of the field of study, participants similarly reported feeling lost in their transition into the unfamiliar environments of Canadian universities, in addition to linguistic difficulties during lecture participation and assessment completion. Many participants found supportive resources of tutorial sessions and social connections in Korean student groups. Despite the challenges, participants shared similar goals for graduation and academic success.

Difficult Transitions into a Canadian University

All participants were the first in their families to attend a Canadian university. Him-chan described Canadian university as an "unknown world" when he started. All partici-

pants recalled feeling unsupported in their transition, with no resources available on how the first year in a Canadian university would be, and they waited for someone from their universities to guide them. Participants expected their universities to provide key information for new students and recalled having difficulties finding the right information for their studies, because as Na-rae noted, "there is too much information on the website." Participants felt rather bombarded by too much information received over emails or on institutional websites. Him-chan only started to recognize the useful resources for his studies after he started his second year, and Ba-da explained that he was still having difficulties distinguishing which information suited his needs among the numerous institutional emails he received.

In particular, participants in sciences at University A expressed that they had particular difficulties with course enrolment. They could not easily find the guidelines for choosing the required courses for their programs and recognize the relevant terms and acronyms, such as FCE for Full-Course Equivalent. Jin-sol recalled, "I did not know any initials used in course codes, and I had no one that I could have asked for help." Jin-sol was waitlisted for her mandatory courses, and Sae-ron and Na-rae enrolled in courses that did not count toward their programs.

As immigrants, regardless of the field of study, participants experienced two academic transitions, the first being from a Korean to a Canadian high school, which in turn affected their next transition from a Canadian high school to a Canadian university. Compared to the competitive Korean education environments, participants found studying in a Canadian high school was less stressful, and they felt relaxed about studying. Some of the course content in high school included concepts that they previously learned in Korea, and all participants found their learning experiences in high school to be straightforward. However, Ha-neul called this a "trap," as all participants experienced many difficulties catching up to the level of their undergraduate studies, where learning happens at a fast pace with complex concepts. This change in the learning environment came as a surprise following their relaxed educational experiences in Canadian high schools. Next, I discuss different curricular challenges expressed in the two types of disciplines.

Challenges Arising from Curricular Activities

The study participants discussed challenges arising from curricular activities, regarding in-class participation and note-taking and assessment completion. They particularly perceived that their English skills were insufficient for the expected level of language in their undergraduate studies, although they completed high school in Canada. Participants developed their own strategies to overcome the linguistic challenges and low self-confidence.

Linguistic Difficulties and Different Cultural Contexts Affecting Note-Taking and Discussions in the Classroom

Science participants commonly reported difficulties in concurrently listening to and taking detailed notes on the lecture content. Ba-da described difficulties capturing unfamiliar scientific terms during lectures, saying "for me, it is more about the level of vocabulary. When the professors use a higher-level vocabulary than the simple conversational language, I cannot understand them easily." When bombarded with scientific terms, Jin-sol got overwhelmed and even misspelled a simple term like water. Three participants in the University A focus group got lost when their instructors used unfamiliar expressions that are not commonly used in their daily lives. Na-rae shared an example where her instructor used the term *braille* to help students understand a scientific concept; however, she got more confused, as she did not know the meaning of this word. The participants noticed linguistic barriers when they realized that the expressions, even if they were not commonly used, would have made sense in Korean. One common strategy that three participants found effective was audio-recording their lectures to re-listen, yet they were frustrated that it would take them longer to understand the lecture content.

Listening to lectures became more problematic with professors who have strong "foreign" accents, other than the North American accents that Koreans often consider as standard. Observing their peers who did not seem to be affected by the accents further discouraged the participants. Na-rae and Sae-ron took a course with the same instructor at different times, and they could not overcome the barrier of a strong accent even with audio recordings. Na-rae recalled crying out of frustration whenever she listened to the audio recordings for this course. Sae-ron recalled her experience:

> I want to focus on what I am hearing in English, but when the professors have accents, and I am also trying to figure out [what I am hearing] through the accents, it is very difficult to concentrate.... Even listening back to the recordings frustrated me so much that I had to drop this course.

Both participants agreed on their preference for instructors with "easier-to-understand" accents so that they could comprehend the lessons, compared to others who are regarded as good teachers who effectively present the course content in a manner that allows students to easily grasp the concepts.

Participants studying social sciences also experienced challenges during lectures due to different cultural contexts with missing background information. Ga-on and Ro-woon were confused at first in many of their classes where their instructors verbally communicated the content with little to no lecture slides, therefore making note-taking challenging. However, once they realized that it was more important to listen and recognize the main ideas, their linguistic capabilities in capturing the lecture content did not become a major issue. However, Ga-on faced difficulties recognizing non-English proper nouns, such as "St. Petersburg" in Russia. She knew of the city in its Russian pronunciation but could not recognize its English pronunciation. She also experienced a knowledge gap in topics such as European history. Growing up in Korea, she had only learned Korean or Asian history throughout her previous schooling, compared to her peers, who had some knowledge of European history.

In addition, discussions often occurred in the classroom for both science and social science courses. When instructors provided time for their students to discuss, science participants (such as Na-rae and Sae-ron) needed more time to understand the content learned in class after rushing to take detailed notes of complicated scientific concepts, and could not actively participate in the discussions. Consequently, when the instructors gathered the class to share answers, Na-rae thought, "that takes away my opportunities to deeply think about the content to reach the answer myself." Similarly, a social science participant, Do-rae, shared that he encountered linguistic barriers during classroom discussions with his native-speaking peers, and low confidence in participating:

> I observe others speak, and they really speak well with great content. But when I am asked to discuss something that I just learned, I feel the linguistic limit then. It is not like presentations that I would have time to prepare for.

This resulted in Do-rae participating as a listener while his peers led the discussions. In completing group assessments, his group members often assigned him less work. Although he assumed their action as thoughtful considerations for his linguistic challenges, he felt undervalued for his capabilities.

Stressing Over Written Assessments and Finding Answers

Written assessments provided particular challenges for the students in this study. Science students discussed difficulties in completing lab reports, and social science students discussed challenges in writing course papers. Due to low confidence in her linguistic skills, Jin-sol (in the sciences) was constantly conscious of her writing, and trying to generate each sentence with good grammar and sentence structure was a lengthy process. Similarly, a social science student, Do-rae, described, "no matter the level of difficulty, it takes longer for me to consider whether I am writing in good grammar and sentence structure. My classmates would simply write out as they speak and proofread once." Consequently, Do-rae developed a strategy to start early and to seek help from the institution's writing centre. He found the writing centre beneficial at different stages of the writing process, from brainstorming to revising the structure and proofreading the paper. Unfortunately, Ro-woon, Ga-on, Ha-neul, and Na-rae did not have pleasant experiences with their writing centres. They recalled meeting writing advisors from different fields of studies from theirs and receiving misleading suggestions that did not improve their papers. As a result, they never returned to their writing centres.

For others, receiving negative feedback and low grades from their teaching assistants prompted efforts to improve their writing skills and the quality of assessments. Ba-da was once accused of self-plagiarism on his lab report due to his limited set of English vocabulary and expressions. His teaching assistant mistakenly believed that he was copying his own words from one report to another and gave him a failing mark. After the incident, he started searching for synonyms to adjust his expressions, though it was challenging for him to find the proper words among many unfamiliar ones. On the other hand, Him-chan had a teaching assistant who deducted a large portion of marks for grammar errors on his lab report. He thought it was unfair, since he still had good content and never received such feedback from other teaching assistants. While the incident reminded him to improve the readability of his reports, he had been getting extremely stressed in completing them. A social science student, Ga-on, also shared that, after failing the grammar portion of her paper during her first year, she lost confidence in her writing skills and took a year-long leave of absence from her program. When she returned, she developed several strategies. She sought help from her teaching assistants early on at different stages of writing

development and utilized proofreading tools online. She read several well-developed journal articles to learn how to structure a paper and expand her set of academic vocabulary. From utilizing this set of strategies, she became more confident in her writing. Similarly, Ha-neul (in the sciences) expressed difficulties in completing her architectural design reports. She often received failing grades in the writing portion of her design reports, since she struggled to clearly write out her ideas in English. As her assignments became more writing-intensive, she stressed over her writing skills and recalled, "because of my language barrier, I faced the limit of my expressive power and I always asked one of my peers to proofread my work." Thankfully, she had a native English-speaking friend who understood her challenges and helped proofread her reports.

Moreover, Ga-on and Na-rae encountered the unique challenge of finding an "answer" in their open-topic written assessments. Previously, Ga-on's written assessments were given certain topics, and she was able to easily consider what was expected of her opinions. When she was introduced to an open-topic assessment, she felt confused: "it drove me crazy when it was an open-topic assignment. Something needs to be set in place." She was uncertain of how to select a good topic to properly connect with course themes and express her opinions. Ga-on thought it could partly be due to her previous schooling in Korea, where all questions in every discipline had a set of answers. To overcome this difficulty, Ga-on benefited from reaching out to the teaching staff ahead of time to develop her paper ideas and receive informal feedback in the process. Similarly, Na-rae felt puzzled when she encountered the unique challenge of finding an "answer" when she faced an open-topic paper for the first time in her social science elective course. She recalled thinking, "why isn't there an answer?... There should be a certain standard answer," as science courses had trained her to find a set of answers. She used her skills from scientific writing, in which she always presented her ideas through the words of others using scientific data. She received feedback asking her to clarify her opinion, as she was writing an evidence-based informative paper, rather than the opinion piece that was required in her course. Na-rae used the feedback she received from her instructor to improve her next assessments, and she enjoyed the process of learning different ways of writing in the social sciences. As she was worried about the course lowering her overall GPA, she turned this course into a Credit/No Credit course, where she was only evaluated on a pass-or-fail basis, so that she could still enjoy the process of learning.

Korean Student Groups as Supportive Resource

Participants found Korean student groups beneficial in alleviating the difficulties they encountered during the transition and throughout their studies. Yet, individually, their experiences with Korean student groups differed based on the availability of the groups, rather than their disciplinary programs. Eight participants attended various sessions offered by Korean student groups, and five participants were actively involved. The groups that the participants participated in included the biggest Korean student group at University A, one group targeting Korean students studying the life sciences at University A, another targeting those studying commerce at University A, and a science-focused Korean student group at University B. The groups regularly host information sessions with practical tips and guidance about selecting courses, studying for exams, and completing lab reports, as well as cultural events. These sessions also included social events, both to meet upper-year students in similar disciplines who could act as informal mentors for strategies in studying and adjusting to university life, and to socialize with other Korean peers who became the participants' close friends.

The Korean student groups in University A frequently host tutorial sessions in Korean for some courses, especially in sciences and commerce, that were popular before exams to help students understand difficult concepts. All participants in University A benefited from such academic support sessions, except for Ga-on, who studied international relations. There were no tutorial sessions for Ga-on to benefit from, and it was even difficult to find Korean upper-year students pursuing her field of studies, as it is not a preferred field among Korean students. The groups at University B, which were still new, did not yet have such an academic program. Still, the participants at University B benefited from the information sessions and social events that provide opportunities for Korean students to connect and support each other informally. Only Ha-neul at University B had not participated in the activities of the Korean student groups, as the groups at University B were not active during her studies.

Graduation as a Priority Goal

All participants had a common academic aspiration to excel in academics and had *successfully graduating* as their shared priority goal. This included passing all their courses

and earning satisfying GPA scores. However, participants elaborated differently on their definitions of successful graduation. Those planning on pursuing further studies wanted good grades and a deep understanding of their disciplinary knowledge, while others who were close to graduation aimed to secure a good career or expand their options for the next steps. Despite the challenges that participants faced, they persisted toward their goal of successfully graduating with good grades. Na-rae shared a common saying in Korea, "students with heavy butts win," meaning, students who can sit for a long time to study will earn good grades. Other science participants in her focus group empathized with this strategy of investing time to focus on studying to overcome the challenges they encountered while successfully completing their courses.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of Korean immigrant students at two Toronto-based universities and asked the questions of what academic barriers emerge for Korean immigrant students and how they overcome them. Among the components of Reason's (2009) persistence framework, students' pre-university characteristics and interactions with their academic and peer environments significantly affected the experiences of Korean immigrant students. All participants encountered difficulties in navigating school websites during their transition from high school to university. They particularly indicated their English skills as a key element in capturing lecture content and completing written assessments, yet such experiences differed based on the nature of their disciplinary activities. For example, the need to capture detailed content in the sciences caused difficulties in note-taking for science students, and the open-topic assessments in social science courses created unique challenges for seeking an answer. Despite these challenges, all participants were persistent in seeking different strategies, including finding support from Korean student groups, to overcome the challenges toward a common goal of successfully graduating with good grades.

Students' Pre-University Characteristics and Transition into University

Korean immigrant students recalled encountering two transitions: first, from the Korean education system into a Canadian high school, and then from a Canadian high school into the unknown world of a Canadian university. Many scholars have already discussed the transition difficulties of domestic students from high school to university (Briggs et al., 2012; Meehan & Howells, 2018; Robson et al., 2018); however, the transition experienced by the participants in this study differs from that of their domestic peers. Participants, regardless of their field of study, recalled the Canadian high school environment to be more relaxed than education-intensive Korea. This perception of a relaxed Canadian education affected the participants' academic preparedness and was seen as a trap that caused confusion as they transitioned into a Canadian university, which was more rigorous than their high schools.

Participants also had difficulties navigating the institutional websites for course enrolment. As institutional websites hold a vast amount of information in English, the participants had difficulties finding the correct information. This often led to missing key information, being waitlisted for required courses, or taking courses that did not count toward their programs. Without targeted websites or resources for new students, universities seem to consider all domestic students to have the same linguistic capacity to find the right information on the website. It is also possible that students with linguistic difficulties are not able to fully comprehend all information on the website, especially when they are already overwhelmed by the wealth of information provided and lost in the unfamiliar culture of Canadian university. Sinacore and Lerner (2013) and Quinn (2013) already pointed out that a lack of information about Canadian universities and their culture contributes to the transition difficulties for immigrant students. This relates to the hidden curriculum or assumed practices within the university environment that affect student experiences (Gable, 2021; Koutsouris et al., 2021). Hidden curriculums are often described as "tacit rules of educational practice" (Gable, 2021, p. ix) that insiders in one context consider as natural, while others, including first-generation students and immigrant students like those in this study, would not easily recognize. As a result, they perceive themselves as less prepared for new educational contexts than their peers. Moreover, these students often lack the awareness that they could reach out to the appropriate department and support staff for help with the questions and concerns they have about registration and more. This calls for a rethinking of ways to bring key information to new students, uncover the hidden curriculums of university culture, and provide additional information and resources to support their transition into the unfamiliar environments at Canadian universities.

Students' Interactions with their Peer and Academic Environments

The students in sciences and social sciences differed in curricular activities due to the different natures of the two disciplines. Linguistic difficulties were not a major challenge for social science students in lecture participation, as they only needed to capture the broader concepts. Science participants struggled with linguistic challenges while trying to take detailed notes of their lecture content and commonly utilized a strategy of audio-recording and devoting time after each lecture to fill in any missing content. Listening to instructors who have strong "foreign" accents made note-taking and understanding the lecture content more demanding. Linguistic discrimination toward professors based on accent is an issue that scholars have discussed (Orelus, 2020; Sembiante, et al., 2020). However, from students' perspectives, if they are not able to understand due to their instructors' accents, they are not gaining any knowledge from their courses. This is a critical issue that needs to be considered in teaching practices to facilitate better student learning. Beyond the lecture participation, the curricular experiences of the participants in the sciences and social sciences involved common challenges in classroom discussions and assessment completion.

Participants experienced cultural differences from the unfamiliar expressions that are not commonly used in their daily lives (e.g., braille) or unfamiliar pronunciation of proper nouns (e.g., St. Petersburg). When these words were introduced during lectures, students were confused when they were used without any contextual information until they researched the expressions. This indicates that some instructors might assume that all students from diverse backgrounds have the same cultural knowledge to fully understand the lecture content.

Participants felt their capabilities were undervalued due to linguistic difficulties, especially during classroom discussions and assessment completion. Compared to their native-speaking peers, participants could only passively participate in group discussions. Trying to express their ideas took a long time, as they had to process the lecture content first. Na-rae and Sae-ron in the sciences felt frustrated at not having enough time to critically think about discussion questions themselves before the instructor discussion. Do-rae in the social sciences was not able to demonstrate what he was capable of, as he lacked confidence in sharing his opinions, and his classmates assigned him easier tasks due to his linguistic difficulties. The participants' academic abil-

ities were hidden behind their linguistic challenges and low self-confidence (Quinn, 2013; Sinacore et al., 2011).

More linguistic challenges were commonly encountered with written assessments for participants, although the type of written assessments differs between the sciences and social sciences. In addition to taking a long time to complete their assessments, Ga-on (from the social sciences), and Him-chan and Ha-neul (from the sciences) failed the grammar portions of their assessments while receiving good grades in content, and Ba-da (a science participant) was even accused of self-plagiarism. These incidents led them to feel their knowledge was devalued in assessments (Quinn, 2013). Consequently, participants used strategies including online resources (such as proofreading tools and a thesaurus), reading many journals to expand their vocabulary, and seeking help from their peers or institutional writing centres.

In particular, Na-rae, a science student who took a social science course as an elective, and Ga-on, a social science participant, encountered an additional common challenge of looking for answers in their assessments for social science courses. When assigned open-topic assessments, Na-rae and Ga-on were puzzled due to the uncertainty of what the expected answer was for their papers, in comparison to their previous assessments, which had clear expectations. This challenge resembles Soria and Stebleton's (2013) claim that immigrant students' inadequate study skills are an obstacle. Na-rae and Ga-on attributed this challenge to their previous schooling in sciences and in Korea, specifically, where they always had specific answers to look for. It is unique that these two participants from two different disciplines had a similar experience with open-topic assessments. This challenge needs further investigation regarding its prevalence among undergraduate students and the strategies needed to support students.

All participants had a priority goal of successfully completing their courses and graduating with good grades. This may not be surprising for undergraduate students; however, it is unique that all participants expressed this as their number one goal and highlights their educational aspirations for academic success that is rooted deeply in their cultural values (Oh, 2010). Although the challenges they encountered during their transition into and throughout their studies were discouraging, these immigrant students were persistent in seeking different strategies, including the support of Korean student groups.

Although linguistic challenges throughout the participants' academic studies hindered their effort to persist, they

found having Korean student groups as their peer network to be beneficial in navigating their university lives. These Korean student groups were academically focused and provided spaces for Korean students to socialize with Korean peers and senior students who shared informal guidance with new students. The groups also supported Korean students academically by hosting tutorial sessions for popular science courses. Scholars have already pointed out that ethnic peer networks are valuable sources of support for immigrant students (Kim, 2009; Kim & Duff, 2012; Sinacore et al., 2011). These Korean student groups are unique in that they integrate social and cultural comfort among Korean students with academic support. It is possible that Korean students' academic aspirations became the motivation for developing such academic support for Korean students to work together to help each other with a common goal of successful completion of courses and graduation (Oh, 2010).

A Difference Across Two Institutions

Differences in the experiences of Korean immigrant students were due to institutional contexts, rather than their fields of study. With a large Korean population in University A, there were several established Korean student groups where participants utilized tutorial sessions and mentor–mentee relationships. However, Korean student groups at University B were still new at the time of data collection and lacked academic support, although they offered social and cultural support that the participants still found helpful. Although eight participants from this study found support via Korean student groups, some Korean students may not choose to reach out to Korean student groups, and some universities may not have active Korean student groups. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that all Korean students at Canadian universities have access to and can use targeted resources for racialized students. Thus, an enhanced understanding of their linguistic challenges and navigation of the unknown world of Canadian universities is needed to support these students to thrive in their academic studies. Future research may explore how the experiences of Korean students differ between those who participate and those who do not. Furthermore, future research can explore the benefits of targeted student groups for students of different ethnic backgrounds. This study demonstrated a difference in the support available from the Korean student groups at the two neighbouring institutions. I recommend further investigation into how the institutional differences based on their location or their cultural contexts influence student experiences differently.

Implications for Practice

This study adds a meaningful understanding of the specific academic challenges arising from linguistic barriers that nine Korean immigrant students faced in two Canadian universities. Participants shared the difficulty of finding information on institutional websites and linguistic difficulties in lecture participation and written assessments. While this study was of only nine Korean immigrant students, recommendations in this section may benefit the learning experiences of other undergraduate students, especially those who struggle with linguistic difficulties as non-native English speakers.

The participants of this study were impacted by the hidden curriculum of Canadian universities. In particular, a lack of information about Canadian universities, their expectations, and course enrolment requirements were obstacles for the study participants' transition into their first year. Institutional websites should more easily organize accessible key information for first-year students to prepare for their transition into the new world of university. As many diverse students pursue university, including immigrants who may be the first in the family to attend Canadian university, universities should not assume that all domestic students come with some level of cultural knowledge about Canadian universities. Providing additional information about Canadian universities and academic culture would greatly benefit the preparation of new students with the transition into their first-year studies. Many universities provide a checklist for newly admitted students, including administrative items for registration. The welcoming webpage for first-year students should easily connect to course information, including any terminologies that students need to understand in the enrolment process, and emphasize that there are support staff who can provide the answers to any questions they may have. In updating the websites, student feedback is crucial. I suggest that institutions regularly collect student feedback after the first year to explore how the websites and communications can be improved to welcome first-year students with information and resources that can support their transition experiences. Providing these resources would help not only immigrant students, but also first-generation students and international students, who share similar challenges (Jones, 2017; Kenyon et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2019), to gain a better understanding of Canadian universities, such that all students can start their first year with confidence. A focus group of different students from these backgrounds would also benefit the feedback process.

Based on the difficulties that participants faced in their classes, more professional development sessions for teaching staff involving student perspectives are suggested for the teaching support offices at Canadian universities to consider. The sessions should include various students' stories, from feedback and research, to acknowledge and discuss diverse strategies for accommodating the challenges students encounter in class. The issues of not understanding foreign accents and unfamiliar expressions arise from the assumption that all students have the same level of linguistic capacity and cultural knowledge, and these issues can be alleviated with a better understanding of these students' challenges. Instructors need to regularly reflect on their andragogy and receive feedback so that their lecture content can be understood by students as intended. Uncommon expressions should be clearly elaborated on for all students, and the instructors who receive feedback on accents should consider reassessing their teaching practices to complement their verbal lessons. This may involve providing supplementary resources, such as more detailed lecture notes or external sources, that students can utilize as extra sources of learning. With assessments, participants in both sciences and social sciences especially struggled with low or failing marks on grammar. While grammar is an important element in written assessments, it is also as important to arrange a clear expectation for the level of communication skills required at the beginning of the year and provide additional resources that students can use, such as proofreading tools or institutional resources for improving writing skills.

As students persist to make the best of their learning, universities should also continue providing appropriate resources for their teaching staff to reflect on their andragogy and to provide equitable learning opportunities to their students. This is particularly important as there has been a consistent increase in the participation of students from diverse backgrounds, and a better understanding of student challenges can support the university by facilitating a better condition for their learning. Many Canadian universities already provide additional professional development sessions for supporting faculty members in accommodating the challenges of international students. It would be beneficial to provide more information and resources that can assist teaching staff with how to support all students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Conclusion

This article shared the transition difficulties and linguistic challenges in curricular activities that Korean immigrant students encountered at two Toronto-based universities. These students are resilient individuals who strongly aspired to achieve academic excellence and developed strategies to overcome the challenges that hindered their learning. While differences between the two disciplinary areas appeared in different lecture styles and written assessments that varied in their contribution to the participants' linguistic challenges, participants encountered similar linguistic challenges with their curricular activities. The demographic characteristics of the two institutions showed differences in the availability of support programs within the Korean student groups at each university.

The stories of nine Korean immigrant students were shared to develop a better understanding of their experiences and missing supports. Further studies are needed to better understand the experiences of Korean immigrant students of diverse backgrounds and in different university contexts. However, linguistic difficulties were a key element in the experiences of Korean students in this study. Therefore, the specific academic challenges shared in this study, along with the suggestions to alleviate them, may strengthen the understanding of not only Korean students but also other non-native English-speaking students. When immigrant students are better supported, they can enjoy and appreciate their learning experiences to a greater extent as they work toward their goal of academic achievement. As more immigrants are expected to arrive in Canada, it is important to recognize that immigrant students are persistent individuals who can be competent in disciplinary knowledge and practices beyond their language barriers and are capable of achieving academic success with adequate support.

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