Factors Affecting Uzbek Students’ Prewriting Investment at a South Korean University

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Abstract: This ethnographic multiple-case study, grounded in the theory of investment, examines the prewriting practices of three Uzbekistani male undergraduates in an English essay writing class at a South Korean University. It aims to identify the symbolic resources they perceive as attainable through investment and to elucidate the factors shaping this investment. Utilizing a qualitative approach, which is appropriate for capturing the nuanced experiences and perceptions of individual learners, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and an analysis of teaching documents. This study finds that these students primarily seek three symbolic resources: language skills, educational access, and social networks. Their pursuit of these resources is significantly influenced by their academic aspirations for graduate school and the pattern of prewriting discussions in the classroom. Individual perceptions and priorities uniquely shape the impact of these factors on each student’s investment. The findings suggest that educators, by understanding the diverse perceptions of symbolic resources within limited instructional time, can tailor pedagogical strategies to effectively address students’ needs and foster a more engaging learning environment.

Keywords: investment; symbolic resources; prewriting; South Korean higher education; international students

1. Introduction

The prevalence of international students in South Korean higher education is rapidly increasing, as evidenced by the enrollment figures for 2023, where approximately 182,000 foreign students were recorded, up from around 167,000 in the previous year, according to the Ministry of Education of South Korea [1]. This rise marks a resumption of the steady growth trend, briefly interrupted in 2020 and 2021 [1], and underscores the importance of this demographic in the educational landscape of South Korea. In response to this trend, the Ministry of Education of South Korea recently launched the “Study Korea 300K project”, aiming to attract 300,000 foreign students by 2027 [2]. This project not only reflects the country’s commitment to internationalization but also highlights the urgent need to address the language barriers that international students face. Tackling these challenges is crucial to the project’s success, as these students are becoming an integral part of the academic community.

Therefore, it is vital that universities implement strategies to meet the language and communication needs of international students. This involves enhancing English language instruction, academic writing support, and the reinforcement of research ethics [2]. By adopting such comprehensive support measures, higher education institutions in South Korea can ensure that equitable academic and career opportunities are accessible to all students, thereby aligning with the Ministry of Education’s strategies for fostering a more inclusive and diverse educational environment [2].

For international students, discerning their expectations and aspirations regarding English writing courses is vital to facilitating their adaptation and fostering active participation within the learning context. During an observation of an English writing class at a
Korean university, the researchers engaged with numerous international undergraduate students. A recurrent challenge they highlighted was the difficulty in effectively generating and organizing ideas in English writing (Eric’s interview, 16 November 2022). These students identified a lack of training in idea organization within their K-12 (kindergarten to 12 grade) education in their home countries and in other academic writing courses offered at this university (Patrick’s interview, 4 November 2022). Given their challenges, students opted for the writing course observed by the researchers, aiming to “learn something as new or know your mistakes after end of this class” (Patrick’s interview, 4 November 2022). In alignment with student needs, the instructor of this course intensified the prewriting phase and emphasized the acquisition and organization of writing ideas—fundamental objectives of the prewriting stage. However, student perspectives and engagement regarding the prewriting process were varied and complex. Not all students valued the emphasized techniques of this phase.

Drawing from established theories and findings, this study delves into the engagement of international students during the prewriting phase. Using Norton’s “investment” construct, the research explores how international students continuously recalibrate their relationship with both themselves and the learning context [3] during the ideation and organization of their written work. As these students engage in prewriting activities, such as brainstorming, they maneuver within a dynamic setting that includes their peer interactions. Norton [4–6] contends that such investment is shaped by the learners’ intricate identities, as well as their quest for both symbolic resources (e.g., language, education, and friendship) and material resources (e.g., money, capital, and real estate). She emphasizes that language, beyond a mere communicative tool, serves as a symbolic resource. For example, the language competence of international students in the language used in their host country or for instruction typically determines their capacity to engage with peers and professors, contribute to classroom discussions, and enter prestigious academic networks, thus affecting their assimilation and achievement in the academic realm. Essentially, this complex social practice controls access to social networks, educational pathways, and existing power structures, with language skills potentially serving as a gatekeeper to opportunities and progression [7,8].

Previous research on English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL) has consistently highlighted the intricate relationship between learners’ investment and their linguistic outcomes. Studies conducted across various geographical contexts have demonstrated that investment significantly influences learners’ progress, particularly in immersive environments. Key investigations by Norton [4] in Canada, and McKay and Wong [9] and Lee [10] in the United States have been pivotal. In non-English-dominant regions, particularly in Asia, Norton and Gao [11] examined the distinct challenges faced by English learners in Mainland China, while Sung [12,13] addressed similar issues in Hong Kong, Vasilopoulos [14], Ahn and Lee [15], and Kim and Qi [16] delved into investment and identity negotiation in the Korean EFL context. Research in Indonesia has examined the factors affecting learning investment and identity construction among students, both within [17] and following secondary education [18]. Additionally, studies have also concentrated on specific groups of English learners, including female learners in Pakistan [19] and Chinese students in Singapore [20]. Together, these studies emphasize that investment in language learning transcends linguistic proficiency, encompassing the acquisition of symbolic resources that critically shape learners’ educational and personal trajectories. However, a consistent observation is that much of this research emphasizes spoken language outcomes, frequently marginalizing the specifics of writing, and in particular, the initial stages such as prewriting.

Given the escalating significance of English writing in South Korean higher education, it is imperative to comprehend the nature of international students’ investment, along with the factors influencing their engagement in the prewriting phase. Such insights can enrich student experiences and guide pedagogical approaches in writing instruction. Addressing this, the present study explores the prewriting practices of undergraduates in a South
Korean writing class, and pinpoints factors impacting their investment and the pursuit of symbolic resources. In the observed classroom setting, the majority of the international students were from Uzbekistan, majoring in International Studies. Their substantial presence offered a valuable lens through which to examine their specific educational experiences within the South Korean higher education system. To deepen the analysis, comprehensive interviews and observations were conducted with three particularly cooperative and motivated Uzbek students. Their insights were sought not only for their representativeness of the broader Uzbek student community in South Korea but also because their experiences may resonate with those of international students from similar backgrounds, thereby offering a richer comprehension of academic integration and the challenges faced by foreign students in an overseas educational setting.

The ethnographic multiple-case study method, as outlined by Heigham and Croker [21], is particularly well-suited for a detailed examination of each participant’s unique prewriting process within their collective academic and ethnic context, highlighting subtle differences in investment among similar backgrounds and enriching the understanding of individual and group engagement dynamics. To address these gaps, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What do the focal students perceive as symbolic resources that result from their investment?
2. What factors informed the students’ investment in the acquisition of symbolic resources during the prewriting phase?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework constitutes a synthesis of pertinent theories that inform the researchers’ inquiry, serving both to justify and provide context for the research. Its significance emanates from its establishment of a conceptual lens that critically informs the research design and underpins the data analysis.

To explore the multifaceted dynamics of language learners’ engagement during the prewriting phase, this study draws on Norton’s [4] investment theory, a framework moving beyond the simplistic labeling of language learners as motivated or unmotivated [22,23]. It depicts the relationship between learners and the target language as influenced by historical and social contexts [24,25]. The concept of “symbolic resources”, a core element of Norton’s investment theory, mainly refers to the non-material resources (e.g., language, friendship, and education) that students expect to obtain through the process of investing themselves in the target language [4,5,23]. To be more specific, Norton [7] suggests that language skills act as a gatekeeper to new cultural communities, which in turn drives students to value their acquisition as a symbolic resource. Norton and Toohey [8] emphasize the pivotal role of both modern digital and traditional interpersonal social networks in enhancing language learning. Students are inclined to invest in the target language to secure membership within the aforementioned networks. Additionally, access to education, crucial in securing linguistic resources and skills, especially in second language scenarios, provides learners with key instruments for societal engagement, which can influence their standing and prospects within society [26].

The concept “symbolic resources” resonates with Bourdieu’s [27–29] notion of “cultural capital”, which refers to group-specific knowledge exchangeable for social value. However, Norton [6] extends this concept further. Beyond Bourdieu’s scope, Norton’s symbolic resources cover a comprehensive range of intangible linguistic and cultural capital pursued by language learners, with the goal of enhancing their social position and prospects within a community.

In the prewriting phase, symbolic resources include language skills, educational access, and interactions within peer groups or online platforms. Such skills are crucial for adept idea generation and structuring. The pursuit of educational opportunities motivates students’ active participation in prewriting exercises. Moreover, these social networks offer invaluable pathways for learners, facilitating information exchange, encouragement, support, and endorsements.
Ultimately, Norton’s investment theory serves as a vital theoretical lens in this study, elucidating the relationship between students and their peers and target languages in the prewriting setting, and further deciphers their intent to exchange investment for symbolic resources. It brings to light the pursuit of “symbolic resources” such as language skills, educational access, and social networks, which are integral to students’ investment in language learning. The framework is critical, shaping both the research design and data analysis, and highlights the importance of prewriting activities in the broader context of language acquisition and societal participation.

3. Literature Review

This section of the literature review explores the dimensions of investment in English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL).

3.1. Investment Theory and Language Learning

Norton’s [4] investment theory, originating from her seminal work, has evolved, focusing on the intricate relationship between learner identity and language acquisition. Her subsequent research, especially Norton [7] and Kanno and Norton [30], highlights the socio-cultural factors and future aspirations of imagined communities influencing learners’ investment. This theory was later expanded to encompass digital influences [6] and global contexts [22,25], always underscoring the dynamic nature of identity, ideology and capital in language learning. These foundational principles of investment theory, emphasizing the continuous interactions between learners and their context, are crucial for analyzing students’ engagement and interactions in the prewriting practices.

A considerable body of literature has explored the multifaceted factors influencing English language learners’ investment across various stages and learning contexts, extending beyond the classroom to encompass both inhibiting and facilitating factors. Recognizing English and its associated language skills as symbolic resources [17,31], and acknowledging the allure of accessing specific social networks as a driving force behind investment [10,12,20], scholars have delineated several pivotal elements that shape learners’ investment in language learning. These elements are broadly classified into contextual and personal factors.

Research underscores the significant influence of the learning context in molding students’ investment, a concept not limited to the educational setting alone. The intricate power dynamics within societal contexts, as conceptualized in the investment model [22], profoundly impact language learning investment. Instances of inequitable power relations within schools and broader society can thwart learners’ investment efforts [9,16]. Concurrently, Liu Chang and Liu Guangxiang [20] and Wu [31] have spotlighted the roles of institutional environments, local cultural values, prevailing ideological forces, and school policies in shaping English language acquisition. These findings indicate that both the proximal educational context and overarching societal norms critically influence students’ motivation and engagement in language learning. At each stage of a student’s trajectory in English language investment, these contextual factors intertwine with individual factors—such as “historically and specific needs, desires, and negotiations” [9] (p. 603)—in complex and varied ways [12,14,18,31], underscoring the uniqueness of each learner’s experience [10,16]. Additionally, within the realm of classroom instruction, the pedagogical approach and the instructor’s role emerge as critical considerations. Annisa et al. [17] and Ahn and Lee [15] illustrate how teacher-centered methodologies and the resultant communicative barriers hinder investment, posing the question of whether student-centered environments can effectively foster and safeguard students’ investment, meriting further investigation.

By synthesizing these insights, it becomes evident that investment in language learning is governed by a complex interplay of contextual and personal factors. The resistance often stems from discrepancies between learners’ needs and the opportunities afforded within their learning environments. This nuanced understanding underscores the significance
of considering both the broader educational and societal landscapes and the individual learner’s aspirations and challenges when exploring language investment dynamics.

3.2. Intermingling of Theories in EFL/ESL Writing

Resonating with Norton, some scholars have begun intersecting the notion of investment with other theoretical paradigms, including learner agency [32–34] and imagined communities and identities [35], thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of learners’ relationships with target language writing. For instance, Canagarajah [32] underscores the transformative role of agency in second-language writing, suggesting that instances of student resistance may indeed reflect a sophisticated form of engagement, a negotiation with, rather than passive submission to, dominant discourses. Similarly, Liu and Tannacito [35] investigate how English language privilege and perceived power imbalances can hinder students’ engagement in academic English writing, primarily by fostering a sense of inferiority that diminishes investment. This underscores the critical role of access to academic social networks in enhancing students’ writing proficiency and their sense of belonging within academic communities.

While the current literature provides a substantial understanding of investment in language learning, it seldom addresses the prewriting phase in EFL/ESL contexts in depth. This study, building on the evolving discourses of EFL/ESL investment research, aims to fill this gap by focusing on the nuances of students’ learning investment during prewriting activities.

4. Methods

A qualitative research approach, utilizing an ethnographic classroom research design, delineates the nuanced socio-cultural dynamics characterizing the prewriting practices of the three participants in the authentic classroom context.

4.1. Context

The context of this study was centered around an “English Essay Writing” course, scheduled on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9:30 to 11:00 and 11:00 to 12:30, respectively. This course was compulsory for students with an English Education major, but also accessible for students with other majors.

The researchers attended the writing course for nearly three semesters (November 2021–December 2022) and spent almost two semesters selecting participants. The researchers officially identified three participants in the fall semester of 2022 (September 2022–December 2022) and conducted follow-up interviews in the following spring semester (March 2023–June 2023). The main writing tasks in the course included learning the methods of writing comparative essays, cause–effect essays, opinion essays, and argumentative essays. Additionally, during the prewriting phase, students were required to discuss with partners in pairs or groups in English to gather information about the writing topic and points, organize their ideas, and complete four independent, time-limited essays each time. The results and performance of discussions and group activities were added to the participation grade, and the time-limited writing was directly counted into the grade. This aligns with the teacher’s pedagogical concept of formative assessment being more important than just evaluating written results. Table 1 below delineates the detailed evaluation criteria of this course.

The teacher advocates for the organization of extensive prewriting exercises in pairs or groups to integrate discussions with lectures. She posits that such a communicative learning environment fosters mutual educational enrichment among students, thereby catalyzing the advancement of their writing competencies (teacher’s interview, 22 November 2022). To be specific, the teacher encourages students to share their ideas with partners before writing, and sometimes complete an essay together.
Table 1. Course evaluation criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Course Requirements</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>Students need to attend every class.</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Students are expected to use English and actively participate in group or pair work activities and discussions.</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Essay</td>
<td>Students need to use the writing skills practiced in class and the information obtained from the discussions to complete the writing of each type of essay.</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause–Effect Essay</td>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion Essay</td>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate ¹</td>
<td>Students need to practice expressing argumentative viewpoints.</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final (Argumentative Essay)</td>
<td>Students need to use the writing skills practiced in class and the information obtained from the discussions to complete the writing of each type of essay.</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The debate section is the first step of the argumentative essay writing unit and consists of classroom group debate competitions designed to enhance students' argumentative strength. It spans a duration of two weeks. The competition results are not related to course grades.

4.2. Participants

This class comprised 24 students, including 13 Korean students majoring in English Education and 11 international students from majors unrelated to English. This study only included international students due to Korean students being unavailable for long-term interviews. The international students were selected based on their willingness to engage in extended communication in English with the researchers, a crucial criterion for ensuring rich, in-depth data collection through interviews. Among these students, further selection of participants employed homogeneous purposive sampling [36]. This strategy was designed based on criteria aimed at centering the sample on a specific, information-rich subgroup. It sought to strike a balance between homogeneity and diversity within the sample, thereby facilitating a comprehensive examination of prewriting practices and the nuanced experiences of this specifically targeted group of participants (see Table 2). The criteria for participant selection included the following:

- Academic backgrounds: prioritizing students from non-English-related majors allowed for an exploration of the challenges and opportunities unique to those for whom English academic writing is not the primary focus of their studies;
- Ethnic origins: the selection process aimed to capture both the shared experiences and the nuanced differences within groups of students sharing the same ethnicity;
- Experiences in learning English: considering varied histories with English ensured a breadth of insights into how past experiences influence current motivations and strategies in academic writing;
- Engagement during prewriting activities: this criterion served as a lens through which to gauge students’ active participation and investment in the learning process.

Table 2. Participant background information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Major in Undergraduate Studies</th>
<th>Pursuit of Postgraduate Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>International Studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>International Studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>International Studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the three Uzbek participants, the researchers first met Eric, and Eric enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed and introduced Brian to them. Following the three participants’ initial exposure to English during their K-12 education, they studied English to pass the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam for further studies abroad. Given that most university courses are taught in English, they require constant exposure and practice in the language to achieve proficiency.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Various types of data were collected for this study, as exemplified in Table 3. The selection and utilization of these instruments were grounded in their ability to yield rich, nuanced insights into the prewriting practices of participants.

Table 3. Types of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Records</th>
<th>Teaching Materials</th>
<th>Field Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>audio recordings</td>
<td>syllabus, rubric, attendance, transcript, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>3–4 times/person 60–100 min/time</td>
<td>1 copy of each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher</strong></td>
<td>audio recordings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>3 times 60 min/time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Semi-structured interviews: these interviews offered in-depth, personal insights, ensuring validity through meticulously crafted questions and reliability via consistent interviewing techniques across participants. Concurrently, interviews with the teacher afforded a more comprehensive understanding of the classroom’s instructional design, allowing for a cross-reference with participants’ perspectives;
- Field notes of class observations: these observations facilitated direct examination of real-time engagement and dynamics in prewriting activities;
- Course documents: analysis of teaching materials contributed to understanding the instructional context and students’ participation.

Direct observations of class dynamics and an analysis of teaching materials offered additional layers of context and corroborated the interview data, bolstering the study’s trustworthiness [36]. The triangulation of data sources aids the researchers in comprehending the participatory process of prewriting practices among participants.

Following the completion of data collection, the researchers performed coding on different types of data to identify significant themes and factors that influence students’ investment in the prewriting phase. The process is depicted in Table 4. Crucial themes discovered in the interview transcripts underwent validation through triangulation with observational data and course materials, either affirming or adjusting initial findings. Toward the final phase of analysis, preliminary findings were discussed with participants in follow-up interviews (May 2023–June 2023) for member checking [37]. This feedback loop not only validated the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations with participants’ experiences but also contributed to the depth and authenticity of the analysis.
Table 4. Sample of data coding (Eric).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Primary Coding</th>
<th>Higher Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I wasn’t thinking about my GPA... Wasn’t like checking, wasn’t like making it better for the grade...</td>
<td>shift to an attitude that focuses on GPA/grade; changes in classroom behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>But after I started really worried about my GPA... when ideas coming, I’m choosing words...</td>
<td>concerns over grade and GPA impacts on graduate program applications; in-class behavior modification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(interview, 25 May 2023)</td>
<td>student’s academic goal of pursuing postgraduate studies influences his classroom participation and behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is directly related with my grades because I talked with my supervisor I mentioned and she said don’t give up with your grades, and if you want to apply for Australia, it is better to raise your GPA, so that’s why I thought. (interview, 20 December 2022)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Italics used throughout the document indicate direct quotations from interviewees, representing the study’s data. In this table, bold text highlights key insights emerging from the interviews, serving as codes that the researchers have identified as contributing to the findings.

4.4. Researchers’ Role

At the time of this study, one of the researchers was a doctoral student in English Education, and also an international student in Korea, which fostered openness and support from the participants due to their shared identities. Normally, she served as an observer in the classroom. To maintain objectivity during data collection, unnecessary communication during class time was avoided by this researcher. It is worth noting that all the focal participants, as well as other students in the class, treated the researcher as a fellow classmate, both inside and outside the classroom. The research benefits from this equal status, as it facilitates the establishment of trust between the interviewees and the interviewers. In general, the researchers executed the comprehensive process encompassing the data collection, filtering, and analysis, facilitating the gradual emergence of the thematic focus.

5. Findings

This section delineates two critical factors influencing participant engagement in the prewriting phase, as revealed by data analysis: participants’ academic goals for postgraduate studies and the established pattern of prewriting discussion in class. The symbolic resources perceived by students as potential benefits from their engagement in prewriting activities serve as significant mediators that influence their participation in these practices.

5.1. Academic Goals of Pursuing Postgraduate Studies

Initially, the background investigations revealed these students’ strong aspirations for further graduate studies (Brian’s interview, 6 November 2022; Patrick’s interview, 4 November 2022). Subsequent in-depth interviews confirmed that such aspirations influenced their participation in the prewriting practices.

5.1.1. Eric’s Perspective

Eric was a senior International Studies student from Uzbekistan during the study. When queried about his active participation in prewriting practices, he expressed aspirations to pursue advanced studies in a specific policy/exhibition domain in Western nations, implying a need for high grades and a competitive GPA for university applications (Eric’s interview, 25 May 2023). Eric perceived the postgraduate study opportunity as a symbolic resource [5], indicating his readiness to exert effort to secure the access of this opportunity. This drive for higher grades, which he equated with admission to graduate school, propelled his diligence in the writing course. Coupled with Eric’s recurrent references to the challenges of ideation and organization in English composition, as articulated in
interviews (Eric’s interview, 16 November 2022), his endeavors within the writing course were directed towards engaging in discussions with his peers. His specific efforts in the discussions were manifested in the following:

I wasn’t thinking about my GPA… Wasn’t like checking, wasn’t like making it better for the grade. . . . But after I started, really worried about my GPA… when ideas coming, I’m choosing words, you know, academic words, like suitable words… when I’m choosing more academic words, more like constructing my ideas related to the structure, related to the English grammar like this. (Eric’s interview, 25 May 2023)

This shift from a passive approach to actively choosing words and organizing ideas indicated a more engaged relationship between Eric and his prewriting tasks. More specifically, Eric’s reconfiguration of his connection to the practices of specific prewriting discussions [3] was ostensibly driven by the pursuit of better grades. Essentially, such an investment aimed at securing the symbolic resource associated with gaining access to graduate education.

5.1.2. Patrick’s Perspective

Despite being a junior from Uzbekistan majoring in International Studies, Patrick, who is a year older than the other two participants, has shown a keen ability to articulate his opinions with well-supported details, as observed by the researchers in both interviews and class discussions. Patrick’s aspirations for postgraduate opportunities manifested differently than Eric’s. Compared with Eric’s predominant emphasis for course results and grades, Patrick prioritized the language skills of generating and organizing ideas cultivated during the prewriting discussion process, which he found lacking in all other educational contexts (Patrick’s interview, 4 November 2022). When interviewed about the significance of class discussions, Patrick alluded to the assistance these discussions provided in formulating the “study plan”—a requirement for master’s program applications. He underscored that the skills developed in these discussions are directly instrumental in formulating detailed study plans.

Study plan is the plan which you are planning to learn in the university. What are motives, background information and strengths and weaknesses of personality. Writing class help me to write more detailed study plan… Not structure itself but the way of discussing one idea. I’m standing for two both sides for, those for positive or negative. For agreeing with, disagree parts can be important… Because for study plan you are required to write down your weak points. In this way you can see yourself in a critical viewpoint. That’s why course can be useful. (Patrick’s interview, 26 May 2023)

The data segment underscores the significance of balancing perspectives—such as positive versus negative or agreement versus disagreement—as a cornerstone of the prewriting practices for the argumentative essay unit in the course syllabus. Active participation in these discussions provided Patrick an avenue to hone his argumentative skills, bolstering his preparation for study plans and graduate applications. This association suggests that Patrick’s graduate study aspirations intensified his motivation to harness the language skills fostered by in-class prewriting discussions. Essentially, Patrick’s investment to these prewriting exercises was anchored in his pursuit of two symbolic resources: language skills and educational access [7,8]. Notably, of the two, language skills exerted a more pronounced influence on classroom participation.

5.1.3. Brian’s Perspective

As a senior, Brian consistently expressed concerns about his “future career” in ongoing interviews. He emphasized the importance of writing skills, noting their significance not only in his studies but also in job-seeking (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023). Regarding his progress in discussions, Brian stated that the ability to generate and organize ideas—key language skills—are crucial, providing an edge in the graduate application process, especially when crafting “study plans” and “CVs” (curricula vitae) (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023).
In response to a query regarding the assistance of prewriting practices in drafting a study plan, Brian underscored his enhanced verbal output regarding idea organization.

*Actually I try to participate active in her [the teacher’s] class as much as I tried. I try to give more explanation, more reasons for that idea, more examples. In oral. Actually, she taught also in oral language. First of all, she just asked about our ideas. I could give information on that time.*  
(Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023)

The skills highlighted pertain specifically to idea generation and organization. This directly correlated with Brian’s admission in an interview that he struggled to develop and systematically arrange his thoughts on complex writing topics, especially on “hard topics” (Brian’s interview, 20 December 2022). Terms such as “explanations”, “ideas”, and “examples” were all reiterated from the teacher’s lecture. As Brian stated, “it [the class] helped me to organize ideas and to give more examples, more examples on my structure. Professor’s [the teacher’s] class really increased me to reach my academic goals” (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023).

Brian’s active classroom participation, particularly in generating extensive explanations about arguments, stemmed from his belief that such practices would enhance his ability to organize ideas for study plan compositions and benefit his future graduate writings (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023). His engagement in the prewriting discussions was driven by a desire to acquire the symbolic benefits of writing skills [7], viewing them as valuable not only for postgraduate applications but also as affordances for his advanced studies [22].

In summary, the three primary participants’ engagement in prewriting discussion practices was driven by their goal of pursuing graduate studies. This aim motivated their active participation and diligence in the learning process to secure higher grades for their graduate applications and to improve their language skills for composing application materials and future academic writing tasks. Language skills and access to postgraduate education were considered symbolic resources that they were eager to acquire, motivating them to invest in prewriting activities.

5.2. The Pattern of Prewriting Discussion in Class

The instructor of this course emphasizes peer learning, incorporating numerous collaborative prewriting discussions in her teaching methodology. Such discussions, recognized for their importance in this research context [38–40], prioritize the prewriting phase. It specifically emphasizes the prewriting phase, allowing students to engage in interactive exchanges, generate and structure ideas on given topics, establish writing objectives, and acquire background information from their peers [41,42]. Thus, collaborative prewriting discussions served a dual function within this course. They not only established the context for student investment in the prewriting phase but also significantly shaped this engagement.

5.2.1. Eric’s Experience

The researchers frequently observed Eric actively expressing himself during the prewriting discussions, engaging in and responding to his partner’s contributions. In interviews, Eric articulated his appreciation for the discussion-centric teaching approach, highlighting its value in “putting you into the groups, because you can share ideas, exchange some skills” (Eric’s interview, 20 December 2022). In subsequent discussions, he elaborated on what he meant by “skills”:

*I like to make some point to debate…when you’re debating with your partner, you are refreshing your knowledge you know. They’re taking something new from them.*  
(Eric’s interview, 25 May 2023)

Eric perceived the discussion activity as a means to hone “debating” and “discussing” “skills”, as well as to gain “refreshed knowledge” within this educational setting. The collaborative prewriting discussions were instrumental in establishing social networks among peers. Within the context of this course, these peer social networks were regarded as symbolic resources [3,8] that granted students access to language skills and prewriting practices. These resources, intrinsic in the course, reflected Darvin and Norton [25]’s concept that
investment in a target language constitutes a continuous and dynamic interplay of communication within the learning community, extending to all its members. Eric, who placed high value on social interactions with peers, recognized that these discussions, offering significant learning affordances as described by Darvin and Norton [22], were crucial in cultivating his academic identity and skills.

Moreover, he exhibited a stronger inclination towards participating in a writing process that includes such a prewriting collaborative discussion session compared to writing independently:

So we are working harder, you know, related to the one that you are working alone. So you have to be kind of smart to cooperate with your partner. Working harder means you have to lose some points that you that you are going to write. You have to like reject some of your points and pick up the best one to prove to your partner that your point is good. So we have to pick this point... so it will be kind of competition, like small competition between you and your partner. (Eric’s interview, 25 May 2023)

In the provided data, Eric elucidated how the prewriting discussions intensified his engagement compared to working individually. His use of terms, such as “competition”, “smart”, “pick up the best one”, and “prove to your partner” collectively painted a picture of Eric’s active engagement, negotiation, and deliberation during the prewriting discussions, epitomizing deeper and more rigorous participation. The chosen points emanated from Eric’s classroom investment in the prewriting phase, influenced by interactions within the social networks formed with his writing partners.

5.2.2. Patrick’s Experience

Patrick also noted that the pattern of collaborative prewriting discussions in class influenced his participation. Furthermore, Patrick’s appreciation of this pattern was evident earlier than Eric’s gradual perception of it during the course. In an interview dated 26 May 2023, Patrick mentioned that he had consulted the syllabus before the commencement of the semester (fall, 2022). He recognized the value of this teaching pattern for “exchanging skills and ideas” via interactions with peers. Notably, he expressed a preference for group tasks, particularly because some of his peers hailed from English education majors, allowing him to garner more “experience in academic writing, academic speaking” (Patrick’s interview, 4 November 2022). Upon immersing himself in the class during the semester, Patrick noted that the reality of the course aligned with his initial expectations. This pattern significantly facilitated his learning, stimulating point generation and fostering critical thinking and judgment within student interactions. When probed further regarding the significance of this teaching method, Patrick elucidated as follows:

Because we always had two, two groups at least. But sometimes we had five or six groups. We just change our place, change, change. Yes, that’s why. It forces you to learn, to listen other person and we are seeing and rewrite your ideas based on... It will be a mixture of ideas from other students because you took points you can use or you don’t use but cannot use. But at least it can be important for your thinking for the next time. You can use this idea when you’re writing. (Patrick’s interview, 26 May 2023)

The mixed group discussions consistently introduced Patrick to new partners, fostering dynamic social networks through the prewriting discussion activities and broadening his exposure to varied perspectives from his peers. This setup necessitated his sustained engagement with a rotating set of partners, thereby ensuring both the depth and duration of the discourse. In other words, these continuous interactions within the classroom community amplified the influx of ideas and organizational strategies from different writing partners to Patrick. Consequently, for Patrick, the social networks with peers—facilitating a consistent flow of input—have undeniably become valued symbolic resources for Patrick, as conceptualized by Norton and Toohey [8]. These resources were not simply pursued as a reward for class participation but were also pivotal in supporting his proactive engagement in the prewriting phase.
5.2.3. Brian’s Experience

Conversely, Brian’s perspective within the same class markedly differed from that of Eric and Patrick. Brian contended that the prewriting discussions were less effective in stimulating the generation and organization of writing ideas compared to his independent preparation.

Brian: I Think Her Method Influenced Me Negatively

Brian demonstrated that the complexity of his ideas was rather limited, insufficient to support his arguments in such prewriting practices (Brian’s interviews, 20 December 2022; 30 May 2023). Brian noted that the elaboration of arguments he presented in discussions was “shorter” than he had anticipated, and he provided fewer examples than within his capacity (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023).

When presented with the challenge of participating in mixed group discussions and reaching a consensus within a stipulated timeframe, Brian was hesitant to embrace or integrate the perspectives and information shared by his peers into his own frame. Brian articulated this sentiment by saying the following:

I really like individual work... because I don’t wanna discuss with another person. I don’t wanna get ideas. Because if you, for example, if you give me ideas, I couldn’t use that. So it’s better for me to use my own ideas... They are always arguing while writing the essay. I tried many times actually for collaborative writing also and discuss some writing and individually but for me it’s the most effective one is individual work. I think, I think her method influenced me negatively. (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023)

Based on classroom observations and interviews, it was evident that the arguments Brian articulated in his essays were primarily rooted in his “own ideas” and not significantly influenced by the contributions of his peers. This incongruence with the course’s collaborative prewriting discussions led Brian to perceive these discussions as less “effective” compared to individual efforts.

Brian: Instead of Discussing about the Idea, She Would Better Give Us Three or Four Minutes to Search from the Internet

Furthermore, during the course of the interview, Brian indicated that online research constituted a valuable method for him to acquire information.

I think it’s a little bit hard discussing one by one... Instead of discussing about the idea, she would better give us three or four minutes to search from the Internet. I would better search more information than discussing my partner because she will give just, just the point... But if I search from the Internet I could search from the reason example, other detailed information. (Brian’s interview, 30 May 2023)

This evidence further underscored Brian’s relative detachment from the discussion sessions. While Brian acknowledged the importance of honing skills in generating and organizing ideas in writing classes, he remained unconvinced that the pattern of prewriting discussions is an effective avenue to acquire these skills. For him, interacting with peers in given social networks in the classroom yielded limited insights and information compared to individual online research. In essence, Brian invested in the prewriting phase to access symbolic resources, such as social networks [8,20], from which he could derive writing concepts, organizational skills, and information. Among these resources, he assigned the greatest importance to modern digital social networks, as opposed to the peer-based social networks formed within the classroom.

Such a stance intensified Brian’s frustration stemming from the limited insights and examples he garnered during prewriting discussions. His disinclination to adopt his partner’s perspectives further restricted his expression, leading to constrained and inadequate outputs. The course’s structure, which emphasizes prewriting discussions, aims to mitigate issues such as plagiarism, foster independent thought, and enhance interaction among students in the prewriting stage (teacher’s interview, 22 November 2022). However, this
pedagogical choice inadvertently hampered Brian’s engagement, as it conflicted with his preference for seeking information through online searches.

To summarize, the pattern of the prewriting discussion itself had an impact on the students’ investment. The extent to which the provided social networks, a key symbolic resource in this context, aligned with student expectations was crucial for their active engagement. Students such as Eric and Patrick, who valued these networks, tended to participate more actively. In contrast, students such as Brian, who did not connect with these resources, showed limited participation. This dichotomy highlighted both the positive and negative impacts of the prewriting discussion pattern on student investment.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the learning investment of three Uzbek undergraduates in prewriting practices at a South Korean university. The researchers tracked the students’ learning trajectories during the prewriting phase to identify valued symbolic resources and the factors influencing their investment in these practices. The findings indicate that symbolic resources significantly mediate students’ investment, which is further impacted by personal factors and the classroom’s instructional design.

6.1. Perceptions of Symbolic Resources

In accordance with Norton [3], the study found that participants were inclined to invest more positively in prewriting activities when they perceived a gain in symbolic resources. Norton and Toohey [8] describe these resources as language skills, social networks, and educational access. The analysis showed that the participants, Brian, Patrick, and Eric, saw these resources as educational opportunities, direct writing skills derived from the prewriting activities, and social networks for gaining writing knowledge. More specifically, the social networks referred to here may include face-to-face interactions with writing partners, which are predominant in this course, as well as modern virtual social networks on the Internet. The students’ desires for language skills and social networks, viewed as benefits of their investment, also echo the research of other scholars. For example, Annisa et al. [17] emphasize students’ desires for language skills in English investment, while Sung [12] highlights students’ desires to gain access to previously unavailable social networks and relationships when investing in the community.

However, the participants’ interpretations of these resources’ significance varied. In the context of prioritizing between writing skills and access to graduate studies, Eric placed greater emphasis on the latter, viewing education access as a more direct and important resource. The data analysis revealed his focus on course outcomes, specifically grades, which were crucial for graduate school applications, as opposed to writing skills. Conversely, Patrick and Brian argued that proficiency in writing was essential for improving educational access. While both acknowledged the importance of writing skills, Patrick specifically focused on their role in crafting materials for graduate applications, whereas Brian highlighted writing skills’ broader impact on learning and professional development.

Regarding social networks, all three participants acknowledged their role as symbolic resources in the prewriting activities, but their perceptions differed. Contrasting with Eric and Patrick, Brian did not value the prevailing social network among the classroom peers, preferring instead to focus on Internet-based resources.

6.2. Influencing Factors

The data analysis indicated that one of the motivations for the participants’ engagement in prewriting activities was their goal of pursuing graduate studies. This goal drove their active participation and focus on securing higher grades for their graduate applications and improving their writing skills for composing application materials and future academic writing tasks. This aligns with McKay and Wong’s [9] emphasis on the close relationship between individual students’ needs and desires and their investment in English.
In addition, the pattern of the collaborative prewriting discussions [39,43] influenced their investment. How closely the instructional pattern matched the students’ expectations was key to their level of active investment. For instance, Eric and Patrick, who appreciated these networks, were generally more involved. On the other hand, students such as Brian, who did not resonate with this teaching pattern, showed lower levels of participation. Although the three students demonstrated varying levels of investment, all performed better overall compared to the teacher-centered method that lacked student social interaction, as highlighted by Annisa et al. [17] and Ahn and Lee [15]. This method clearly inhibits student investment, underscoring the importance of providing opportunities for student collaboration and communication in the classroom.

This study does not address the power relations and ideological inequalities [16,20,22] in schools or society as significant factors of investment. This is due to the unique relationship between the participants and the learning context in this study. The setting of this study was a student-centered English-mediated curriculum, which placed both local Korean students and foreign international students at a relatively equal positioning in the use of English. In this context, English was a foreign language for all the students in the classroom, and no native language dominated, whether Korean or Uzbek. As a result, the power dynamics typically observed between native speakers and language learners in English immersion settings, as discussed in other studies [9,35], are not as pronounced. Therefore, exploring the power relationships and their interactions between students from different backgrounds and their impact on English learning warrants further investigation.

6.3. Individual Differences

In the comparison of the three participants’ investment during the prewriting phase, it was noted that Brian, similarly to the others, possessed a strong motivation to study. Yet, upon assessing his own involvement in class, he stated that the outcomes fell short of his expectations, contrasting with the positive evaluations from the other two participants. This discrepancy in self-assessment of investment, despite similar external influences in the same classroom setting, raises intriguing questions about the underlying reasons for such differences.

As Norton [3,6] illustrates, investment is a dynamic process where students continually reshape their relationship with the target language learning context. All three participants diligently engaged in the prewriting practices to acquire the symbolic resources they valued, constantly redefining their engagement with the prewriting discussion context. This process is inherently complex and dynamic [4]. The variance in the symbolic resources recognized by students, and the differing significance attributed to them, results in distinct levels and approaches to participation. For instance, Eric and Patrick, as previously noted, prioritized language skills and educational access differently, leading to distinct investment strategies. One focused on adapting his language for active class participation, while the other emphasized developing and refining his argumentative skills.

Brian’s limited involvement in prewriting discussions mirrored this pattern of differentiated participation. Brian opted for a conscious detachment from certain prewriting activities in the classroom. This implies that similar influencing elements, when applied to different students, can yield varied outcomes based on subtle differences in their perceptions of symbolic resources, especially the most valuable social networks. As Darvin and Norton [22] note, Brian’s approach to the investment process was dynamic, enabling him to engage with or disengage from his specific prewriting practices. His disapproval of the prevailing instructional pattern (social networks with writing peers) in the classroom facilitated his freedom to selectively participate.

This also elucidates why high motivation does not always translate into high investment [3,23], as seen in Brian’s case. The ever-evolving relationship between students and the learning context [5] means that a student’s perception of symbolic resources and inherent qualities of the context continually impacts their investment. Although Brian was driven by strong ambitions for graduate school, his self-reported outcomes indicated that
his investment and outcomes in the classroom fell short of his expectations. The confluence of various factors influencing learning investment is complex. While academic goals have a positive effect, they do not always outweigh the influence of instructional design and interactions with classmates within the course. However, this is not a uniform outcome for every learning scenario of Brian’s, given the dynamic nature of his relationship with the prewriting discussion context. Future research could benefit from a more segmented and detailed analysis of the complete learning process, considering these ongoing changes.

7. Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how language learners’ perceptions of symbolic resources as mediators significantly influence their investment in prewriting practices. Students mainly hope to obtain three types of symbolic resources: language skills, educational access, and social networks. The investment in obtaining these resources, particularly during the prewriting phase, is chiefly influenced by two factors. The first is the academic goal of pursuing postgraduate studies, and the second is the pattern of the prewriting discussion in the classroom.

In terms of research implications, this study highlights the necessity of comprehensively understanding individual students’ perceptions of attainable symbolic resources in the classroom setting. The findings suggest that the implications extend beyond mere learning motivation; they encompass the essential resources that can be accessed within the classroom environment. This is true for all students, regardless of whether their learning motivations are similar or diverse. Therefore, grasping the full scope of students’ perceptions of symbolic resources is key to fully appreciating each individual’s needs and expectations in learning a target language.

The findings could have significant pedagogical implications, particularly in fostering students’ investment in language learning classrooms and providing support for international students at host country universities. Firstly, it is vital to understand students’ expectations and needs in the classroom and to deeply explore the symbolic resources that influence their cognition. For instance, teachers could employ questionnaires or written diary tasks to continuously monitor students’ thoughts and changing dynamics. Since students’ ideas may vary from class to class, regular and consistent attention is essential. Secondly, the use of collaborative prewriting discussions in this study represents a novel and practical approach to encourage student participation. To address the conflict between students’ online research needs and classroom management, feasible suggestions include adjusting the teaching rhythm to allow more time for topic information search tasks outside the classroom. Mixed group tasks in the classroom effectively ensure student participation and communication, linking learning inside and outside the classroom.

Additionally, increasing the use of educational technologies that facilitate collaboration is recommended. Tools like Google Docs and Google Drive support multi-person collaboration, information sharing, and real-time synchronization, allowing teachers to monitor and review students’ learning outcomes effectively. These technologies can be particularly beneficial in writing classes. They not only enable students to continuously and anonymously update their class expectations and needs, aiding teachers in understanding these expectations, but also allow teachers to track students’ progress and ensure task independence. Integrating these technologies with educational practices can meet students’ needs while accommodating teachers’ instructional planning.

One limitation of this study is its focus on the perspectives of only three participants regarding their investment in prewriting discussions. Given the dynamic nature of the course structure, where students regularly interact with a variety of partners, these interactions could significantly influence their investment and lead to varying patterns of engagement. Therefore, a valuable direction for future research would be to conduct a more detailed investigation into how these three participants engage in prewriting discussions with different peers. Such a study could provide deeper insights into the nuances of collaborative dynamics and their impact on students’ investment in the learning process.
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