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# Language Preferences of Foreign Consumers in High and Low Involvement Service Encounters

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## Abstract

This mixed method research was conducted to determine whether differences in the preference of language among foreign consumers in South Korea existed between low-involvement service encounters and high-involvement service encounters. A questionnaire was completed by 161 participants for this qualitative study. The findings indicated that all of the service encounters fell into either a high- or low-involvement in line with previous studies except for procuring a loan from a bank, which was a medium-level service encounter. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 foreign teachers in South Korea from the pool of quantitative participants. The qualitative study results indicated that foreign consumers were willing to use Korean in a low-involvement service encounter; foreign consumers in a high-involvement service encounter preferred to speak English; overall, foreign consumers preferred to use Korean over their native language; the level of Korean the foreign consumer spoke affected whether they were willing to use the language; the offer of a 10% discount would not be large enough for foreign consumers to speak Korean; and foreign consumers stated they were not willing to pay a premium for a service in English. Recommendation from the study included foreigners learning the language, for foreigners to use Korean during service encounters, and lastly, for service providers to offer more services in English.

**Keywords:** Service encounters; language; foreign consumers; language preference.

## Introduction

Historically, South Korea has been a homogenous society that was suspicious of outside groups (Froese, 2010). A greater emphasis has been placed on multiculturalism in South Korea due to the increase in the number of foreigners living and working in the country over the past two decades (Ahn, 2013; Kim, 2010). In 1995, there were 110,000 foreigners in South Korea, which increased to 1.75 million in 2015 (Kim, 2015). The number of foreigners living in South Korea is projected to be 2.5 million by 2020 and 4 million by 2050 (Kim, 2010; Korean Immigration Service, 2013).

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Research has indicated that foreigners struggle to adjust to life in South Korea due in part to communication (Froese, 2012; Froese, Peltokorpi and Ko, 2012). The interaction adjustment of foreigner consumers in Korea is complicated by their limited language skills (Froese, 2012). A foreign consumer is a person who actively participates in a service encounter where products or services are bought or sold (Holmqvist, 2011). Interaction adjustment is the manner in which a foreigner forms a relationship with host country nationals (Froese, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework and Research Questions**

Different types of involvement in a service encounter require different levels of language skills (Holmqvist, 2011). Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) stated, "Communicating in a second language is more complex than in a first language" (p. 2-3). A service encounter is the interaction between consumers and a service provider (Holmqvist, 2009, 2011). A higher level of second language skills is needed to purchase a washing machine, than to purchase a suitcase. Bank transactions involve a higher level of second language skills, than to purchase dinner at a restaurant. The willingness of foreign consumers to communicate in a second language depends on the specific situation in which the communication occurs (Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh and Gronroos, 2014).

The success that a foreign consumer has before, during, and after the service encounter can be influenced by the language that is used (Holmqvist, 2011). The determination of the level of language that is needed for high- and low-involvement service encounters has been studied by Holmqvist (2011), and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012), who found that the use of a foreign consumer's native language was more important in a high-involvement service encounter than in a low-involvement service encounter with bilingual participants. Generalizations of the results of these studies are limited to western countries, specifically from Canada, Finland, and Belgium. This research study builds on the studies by Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) and focused on the experience of a foreign consumer's language use and their preference of using their native language in a high- or low-involvement service encounter in South Korea. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of foreign consumer's language use and the importance of using their native language in high- and low-involvement service encounters through a mixed methods (a questionnaire and a case study) to determine whether the results of Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) are applicable to the case of South Korea.



Earlier studies investigated language preference and level of involvement during a service encounter (Holmqvist, 2009; Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist and van Vaerenbergh, 2012) and on foreign consumer's willingness to communicate in their second language during a service encounter in European countries and Canada. A foreigner's level of language competency was examined by Froese (2012) in terms of the difficulty with interaction adjustment. The themes of this research will focus on the willingness of a foreign consumer to use their second language, the perceived involvement of consumers during a service encounter, the language preference of foreign consumers, and the level of language competency of a foreign consumer. The language preference of a consumer is the language that he or she feels the most comfortable speaking (Holmqvist, 2009). The involvement level during a service encounter is how important it is for a consumer to speak their native language (Holmqvist, 2009). Language competency is the fluency level an individual has in a language other than their native language (Marcella and Davies, 2004).

Holmqvist (2011) investigated the use of an individual's native language during a service encounter and how consumers are influenced by language in multilingual markets (Canada and Finland) in two language combinations (English/French and Finnish/Swedish). A pre-study was done to understand the importance of customers' experience of using their first language during a service encounter in each of the four languages (Holmqvist, 2011). A bilingual questionnaire (in English/French or Finnish/Swedish) was used to ask 373 participants about how important it was to use their native language in a scenario for three high-involvement and three low-involvement service encounters (Holmqvist, 2011). The pre-study showed that all four groups rated the use of their native language as more important in high-involvement service encounters than in low-involvement service encounters. In this study, written responses and in-depth interviews were used to gather qualitative data to ascertain whether the participants would use a cheaper service in their first and second languages or if they would use a more expensive service provider who used only the participant's second language. According to Holmqvist (2011), two major themes were present in both countries across all four languages: financial reasons and comfort reasons (in Canada political reasons were also relevant in the study, but they will not be addressed here). Some participants in both countries would switch service providers to one who did not use their native language for a small discount and for comfort reasons some participants stated that they would need a large discount to change providers to one who did not use their native language (Holmqvist,

2011). A limitation of the study was that only four languages in two countries were used, thus it would be beneficial to conduct additional research with different languages in other countries (Holmqvist, 2011).

In comparison to Holmqvist (2011), Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) examined the use of language during service encounters in Belgium, Canada, and Finland to establish whether bilingual consumers preferred to be served in their native language during a low- or high-involvement service encounter in two studies. Study 1 (Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2012) involved 171 Canadian undergraduate students from two countries (Canada and Finland) who could speak English and French or Finnish and Swedish. A bilingual questionnaire was used to ask participants to rate the importance of using their native language employing the same six services used in Holmqvist (2011) on a 9-point Likert scale. Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) found that consumers preferred to be served in their native language in high-involvement service encounter. Study 2 (Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2012) consisted of 223 Dutch-speaking Belgian participants who took part in an online survey. Participants in Study 2 were asked to rate the perceived importance of using their native language during a high-involvement service encounter. Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh found that the results of Study 2 were the same as Study 1 in that foreign consumers found it more important to be served in their native language in a high-involvement service encounter versus a low-involvement service encounter (Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2012). A limitation of the both studies by Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh was that the involvement levels of participants were categorized into only high- and low-involvement, whereas it is possible that a medium-level involvement could exist.

Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013), in comparison to Holmqvist (2011) and Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2012), explored the influence of service language on consumer's tipping behavior. The findings indicated that a waiter who spoke the native language of the consumer was more likely to receive a tip, even if the waiter had an accent (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013). Specifically, no major difference in the tipping behavior was found between a Dutch waiter with a French accent versus a native speaking Dutch waiter. Additionally, political considerations were found to be a moderating factor by the authors in the relationship between service language and tipping behavior (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013).

In contrast with the studies by Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012), a study by Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh and Gronroos (2014) examined the willingness of consumers to



communicate in their second language. When consumers and service providers interact and communication between them is inadequate a negative outcome is likely (Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh and Gronroos, 2014). The language used during a service encounter may have an important role for consumers during a service encounter (Holmqvist et al., 2014). The authors used a questionnaire with nine different types of services that were chosen by participants during a pre-study to identify which kinds of service encounters were important or not important to use their native language (Holmqvist et al., 2014). The main study consisted of 223 Dutch-speaking Belgians and 138 Swedish-speaking Finns with an emphasis on Dutch in Belgium as the majority language and Swedish as the minority language in Finland (Holmqvist, et al., 2014). The authors found that the more control a consumer had, the more willing they were to switch to their second language (Holmqvist, et al, 2014). In addition, the language proficiency of a consumer in the second language led to a greater chance that they would be willing to communicate in the second language (Holmqvist, et al., 2014).

A more recent study by English (2015) contradicted the results of Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) in terms of how important it is for a person to use their native language. A case-study was conducted with 10 foreign professors at a university in the Seoul Metropolitan area (English, 2015). The author found that some foreign consumers chose to use their second language (Korean) in high- and low-involvement service encounters (English, 2015). The reasons participants chose to use Korean in low-involvement service encounters were for convenience purposes, to reduce tension during a service encounter, and because doing so resulted in being more effective in finding a product or service (English, 2015). A limitation of the research by English (2015) was that all of the participants were foreign professors in South Korea from one university, which only represented a fraction of the number of foreigners.

RQ1: During what types of service encounters (high-involvement or low-involvement) do foreign consumers speak Korean?

The willingness to communicate in a second language is based on the preference of an individual to participate in a discussion at a particular time with a specific person in their second language (MacIntyre, 2007). Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, and Gronroos (2014) explored the willingness of consumers to use their second language during a service encounter and sought to determine if the perceived control of a consumer led to a higher willingness to use their second language and if the second language proficiency led to a greater willingness to use ones second language. A questionnaire was used

to collect data from participants via an online panel of 223 Dutch-speaking Belgians and 138 Swedish speaking Finns in which Dutch or Swedish was their native language respectively (Holmqvist et al., 2014). The authors established that consumers were hesitant to switch languages during high-involvement service encounter, but were and more willing to switch languages during low-involvement service encounter (Holmqvist et al., 2014). Similarly, the stronger the perceived control a consumer has, the higher their willingness to communicate in a second language (Holmqvist et al., 2014).

RQ2: At what level of language competency do foreign consumers in South Korea feel comfortable speaking Korean?

RQ3: How does a consumer's preference of language during a service encounter affect his/her willingness to use their second language?

## **Methodology**

The sampling frame for this study is the number of foreign teachers in South Korea, which was approximately 7,000 in 2013 (Ramirez, 2013). Foreign teachers were recruited as participants due to the ease of access and the geographical disbursement throughout South Korea. In Study 1, a questionnaire was used to assess Research Question 1 and participants were recruited through random sampling (Yin, 2011). A questionnaire was used to collect data from 600 native English native speaking teachers from seven countries that are approved by the Korean Ministry of Education for teaching English in South Korea (from the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, Canada, and South Africa, who work in private institutes, public schools, colleges, and universities. Study 2 was a multiple case-study design (Yin, 2013) that addressed Research Questions 2 and 3 and was used with semi-structured in-depth interviews (Poulis, Poulis, and Plakoylannaki, 2013) to collect data in order to gain a better understanding of the participant's own experiences on the use of language in both high- and low-involvement service encounters. Three constructs were used as an embedded unit of analysis for the multiple case study (Yin, 2013): (a) language competency, (b) the importance of the foreign consumer using their native language, and (c) the preference of language in high- and low-involvement service encounters (Holmqvist, 2011).

Study 1 focused Research Question 1 through the use of a questionnaire (see Appendix A). Recruitment of the participants for Study 1 took place through Facebook groups for ESL teachers in South Korea, emails to teachers at universities, websites for ESL teachers in South Korea, and through word of mouth. The participants were asked



about the importance of using their native language during six services that were used by Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012): (a) to buy groceries, (b) to have a medical visit, c) to visit a café, (d) to negotiate a bank loan, (e) to negotiate insurance, and (f) to buy an etching. However, the sixth service encounter from Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012), buying an etching, was replaced with ordering food at a restaurant, as buying an etching was not as commonplace of a transaction for foreigner consumers in South Korea. The results of the questionnaire are discussed separately and as part of the final results to assist in verifying the findings from the case study. The questions were measured on a seven-point Likert type scale (1= "not unimportant at all"; 7= "extremely important") (Vagias, 2006). A calculation of the average, mean, and median was reported along with the qualitative data in the study.

Quantitative data can be used in a case study to collect additional data to help explain the outcomes in the cases (Yin, 2013). A quantitative design allows more data to be collected than in a qualitative design and is more efficient for the testing of hypotheses; however, the depth of information in a quantitative design is limited as it does not offer as much in terms of an explanation (Cozby and Bates, 2014; McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). Another benefit of quantitative design is that it allows the researcher to be more objective (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015) and the numerical data from a quantitative questionnaire can be used to triangulate the findings from a case study (Donmoyer, 2008). Further, the use of a case-study is appropriate for explanatory research as it provides flexibility when the boundaries between the occurrence and the context are unclear, when control of the participants is not required, and when the events are modern (Yin, 2013).

In-depth interviews allowed the participants to express their experiences as foreign consumers. The interview questions were written for the semi-structured interview guide for Study 2 that addressed Research Questions 2 and 3 (see Appendix B). The interview guide consisted of six open-ended questions and an embedded unit of analysis was used with three questions for each of the constructs.

Prior to the in-depth interviews, a field test was conducted with three foreign consumers to establish whether the interview questions measured what was meant to be measured and whether the questions addressed the research problem (Persaud, 2010); foreign consumers who participated in the field test were not included in the study sample. After the field test was finished, the research questions were reviewed by the researcher and adjusted.

A purposeful sampling method was used to select 12 participants. Yin (2013) stated that 10 participants are sufficient enough to achieve saturation; therefore, the decision to use 12 participants further ensured saturation would be reached. However, had the saturation point not been reached upon the conclusion of the 12 interviews, additional participants would have been purposively selected and interviews would have continued until saturation was attained. The selection of a sample size in a qualitative study is typically based on the personal judgement and confidence of the researcher (Yin, 2011; 2012), thus, 12 was deemed sufficient. Of note is the issue that the recruitment of participants for Study 2 was based on the volunteers from Study 1 who expressed interest in further participation in the study.

In-depth interviews were conducted with foreign consumers via Skype. Prior to the start of the in-depth interviews, the participants were provided a consent form (see Appendix C) that stated they understood the risks involved. The participants were asked to type their name and the date and email it to the researcher. Also as a part of the consent process, participants were asked for their permission to record the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to the fullest extent possible. At the start of the interview, the researcher read the informed consent to each participant and asked if he or she had any questions.

The recordings of the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim into MAXqda software and the transcripts were de-identified to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and protect their identity. In order ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, each transcript was read three times and adjustments were made as needed. Research codes were developed based on the study constructs and research questions. MAXqda was used to code the transcripts and then a cross-case synthesis was conducted to compare the data across all of the cases to find and assess themes and patterns in the data.

In order to achieve trustworthiness and creditability, the researcher provided the inclusion of contradictory evidence or views that were provided by participants to avoid bias or the appearance of bias in the study, and the research procedures were reported in an open and transparent manner (Yin, 2011). To add creditability to the study, a specific population (foreign teachers) was selected and a purposeful sampling method was used to choose participants who had experience as a foreign consumer. The validity of the findings was tested using respondent validation (also called member checking) in which participants were given copies of the transcripts to review and





correct (Yin, 2011, 2013). Member checking assisted in the verification of the findings of the study, the avoidance of bias, the avoidance of misrepresentation of the self-reported views, and increased construct validity (Yin, 2011, 2013).

In order to protect the human participant's ethical assurances were made in the research study. Each participant signed a written informed consent. The informed consent promised the participants confidentiality regarding their identity, identified any risk or harm, and let the participant know how risks were minimized (Yin, 2011). The participants took part in the study at their own free will as volunteers and did so without restrictions. By signing the informed consent, the participants acknowledged that they had read the form, understood the statement of strict privacy maintenance and confidentiality, understood the risks involved, and had the right to quit the study at any time. As an incentive, the participants were provided a 10,000 Korean won gift card (worth approximately \$10US) and an executive summary of the results. The collection of data was based on the experiences of the participants without pressure or involvement from other individuals. Raw data from the research will be protected to maintain privacy and confidentiality and destroyed after a period of 5 years.

The data for Research Question 1 was collected using a questionnaire of 10 questions on Survey Monkey. The first six questions inquired about the use of a consumer's native language in a high- or low-involvement service encounter as was done in Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh's (2012) studies. Participants were also asked to rate their Korean fluency levels, and then asked if they were willing to take part in additional research. The response rate for the questionnaire was 161 and all of the responses were useable. In addition, 58 participants stated that they were willing to participate in further research and 54 left their email address so they could be contacted.

### **Questionnaire Results**

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the participants rated three of the six service encounters as low involvement, two as high involvement, and one as medium involvement. The analysis of each of the questions included the percentage of the majority of participants as well as whether the level of the service encounter was rated as low, medium, or high-involvement. Ordering food at a restaurant was rated as a low involvement service encounter by 80.74% of the participants and buying groceries was rated as a low involvement service encounter by 86.32% of the participants. A medical visit was rated as a high involvement service encounter by

80.74%, whereas visiting a café was rated as a low involvement service encounter by 87.58%, and negotiating an insurance policy was rated as a high involvement service encounter by 70.81% of the participants. Negotiating a bank loan was rated by participants as a medium level service encounter by 63.97% of the participants, which differed from the previous study by Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh's (2012) where it was rated as a high involvement service encounter. The guidelines used for rating the level of involvement categories was 0-44% for low, 45-64% was medium, and 65% and above was high (see Appendix E).

The survey results were significant as five of the six service encounters corresponded with the results from the studies by Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012). Only negotiating a bank loan differed slightly, rated as medium-level of importance in this study, whereas it rated as high importance in the previous studies. The samples used by Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) of visiting a doctor, negotiating insurance, and negotiating a bank loan were noted as high, and ordering at a restaurant, visiting a café, and buying groceries as a low-level service encounter. The difference in the results for secure a bank loan could be that it is much more difficult for foreigners in South Korea due to the unwillingness of banks to provide credit to them, therefore it might be seen as less important.

Prior to the beginning of the in-depth interviews, each of the participants was asked seven demographic questions. The questions covered nationality, age, length of time in Korea, if they were married to a Korean, if they had permanent residency (an F-5 Visa is a permanent resident), the highest level of education, and their first spoken language. The nationality of the participants was 10 Americans and two Canadians. The average age of the participants was 36. There were eight males and four females. The average length of participants' stay in South Korea was 8.5 years. Five participants were married to a Korean and two were permanent residents. The educational level of the participants was seven bachelor degrees, four master degrees, and one doctoral degree. All of the participants were English native speakers (see Appendix D).

### **In-Depth Interview Results**

The results are based on the 12 in-depth interviews with participants conducted via Skype. Six open-ended questions were asked of each of the participants. Nine codes were used to code the transcripts: (a) low-involvement, (b) high-involvement, (c) willingness of foreigners to speak Korean, (d) foreigner's ability to speak Korean, (e) language competency, (f) language preference, (g) Korean's ability to speak



English, (h) discount for speaking Korean, and (i) premium service in English. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add and if they had any questions.

The first interview question asked about the participant's experiences with language use during a service encounter with services like grocery stores or cafes. Seven participants stated they use Korean during low-involvement service encounters, such as grocery shopping or visiting a café. Participant 7 said, "As far as languages in Korea, I have typically tried to speak Korean." Conversely, Participant 12 stated, "I always approach a situation speaking Korean." The participant continued by saying, "If it turns out that their English is amazing, I will just continue in English, but the case is usually me speaking better Korean than their English, so I just do most of it in Korean." Lastly, Participant 8 remarked, "In general most exchanges are in Korean and they require rather simple requests for the most part, so there's usually not any problem during the interaction."

Interview question two focused on a foreigner's experience with language use during a service encounter that involved banking or a medical visit. Seven of the 12 participants interviewed stated that in a high-level service encounter, such as a bank or medical visit, they preferred speaking English. Participant 7 stated, "I try to use English and communicate with the doctor, if possible, so there are no miscommunications." Participant 3 remarked, "The doctors are for the most part, we understand enough of each other to get the point." Continuing on the participant stated that, "The hospital is the main thing I'd like to have more English in or English communication, of course." Participants also remarked that most of the doctors in Korea could speak some English though. Discussing their doctor's ability to speak English, Participant 2 said, "I found to him not just to speak English, I felt he was very bicultural." Participant 2 continued, "He picked up on body language, there was a lot of different ways that he communicated that I felt were more kind of related to culture of knowing how to communicate to an American." Similarly, Participant 8 shared, "Most of the medical professionals speak some English or at least they speak medical English, and so those medical terms are easy to communicate back and forth."

Banks were often found to be more difficult due to the terms used, but most branches of a bank have at least one person who can speak English. Participant 9 stated,

*It [banking] was a little bit of a challenge because I had to go to a different bank, but I was able to find*

*one in my local area that has an English speaker who was able to walk me through it.*

On the same note, Participant 11 said, "For banking, I've only gone to the bank a couple of times, and usually they speak English." Lastly, Participant 5 said,

*Banking has been positive. The bank that I use...I've been to several different branches and the person who greets you at the door always asked me if I need help in English and then there usually is one person on staff at one of the teller windows that speaks English and I've never had a problem there or never had any stress as a result of that.*

The third interview question focused on the situations where a foreigner would use Korean instead of their native language during a service encounter. Six of the 12 participants stated they would use Korean in most situations most of the time. Participant 6 stated, "Almost always, I very rarely use English. I try not to use English whenever possible." Participant 7 said, "I would say anything, but medical. Medical I try to use English and communicate with the doctor if possible so there is no miscommunication." Lastly, Participant 4 stated, "In most situations when I have a service encounter, I don't expect the people I'm dealing with to speak English. So in almost every situation I expect to speak Korean."

Interview question four asked participants how they felt during a service encounter when the person they needed to talk to does not speak English. The 12 participants were evenly split between feeling fine and feeling nervous about interacting with someone who has low English ability. Participant 4 stated, "I feel fine. Again, I don't expect them to speak English, so I feel comfortable. I don't feel that they should have to speak English because of me." Participant 12 stated, "It doesn't bother me too much." Lastly, Participant 10 stated that he had "no problem."

Of the participants that felt frustrated, Participant 3 stated, "Well frustrated of course, but you know usually just frustrated. I call my wife to help, but that puts a strain on our relationship." Participant 9 said, "It can be frustrating and sometimes it gets to the point that I'm unable to actually participate or do my purchase because I'm unable to communicate effectively." Lastly, Participant 8 stated, "Simply nervous - I guess because I'm not able to communicate my needs as well maybe."



Interview question five asked participants whether they would use a 10% discount for speaking Korean during a service encounter instead of their native language. The participants were almost evenly split on whether the discount would motivate them to speak Korean with five admitting they would take the discount, four stating they would not, and two relating that it would depend upon the situation of the service encounter. Participant 3 stated, "10%, it's not that much to me, so I really wouldn't care. I'd probably stick with the English, less hassle." Participant 2 said, "You know 10% is pretty small to me because of my limited to Korean because I would have to bear the onus of understand. I don't think it would be worth it."

Interview question six asked participants whether they would pay a premium for a service offered in English. Seven of the 12 participants stated they would not be willing to pay a premium for a service in English. Participant 3 explained, "Then if I had to pay a premium then probably I would stick to...then I would be asking my wife or Korean friends to go the cheap way route." Similarly, Participant 12 stated, "I would feel a bit cheated. I would definitely try to find a loophole." Finally, Participant 5 stated, "I wouldn't find that to be valuable at all. I'd find that to be like counterintuitive."

## **Analysis**

Similar to the findings of Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012), the findings of this study indicated that foreigners were willing to use their second language in most instances in low-involvement service encounters. Holmqvist (2009) discovered likewise that a consumer's native language was of low importance during everyday service encounters where no special vocabulary was needed and the consumer had limited involvement. Contrary to the current study, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) found the tipping behavior of consumers was affected by whether or not the service provider spoke their native language. The motives of foreigners to use Korean in a low-involvement service encounter included less of a risk and place the person who was helping them during the service encounter at ease.

Similar to the findings by Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) on high-involvement service encounters, the findings of this study indicated that foreigners prefer to use English instead of Korean. Additional validation of the findings of this current study was provided by Holmqvist (2009) who determined that foreigners preferred to use their own language during service encounters with high levels of consumer involvement. Foreigners' motives to use English instead of Korean included a greater risk of

uncertainty during the service encounter, avoiding miscommunication, and a lower level vocabulary.

### **Findings of Analysis**

This current study found that half of the foreign consumers were observed to use Korean versus their native language. These findings reinforce those by English (2015) who noted that some participants used Korean during both high and low service encounters for convenience purposes, reduction of tension, and a greater effectiveness in locating the product or service they required (English, 2015). In contrast, Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012) discovered that language influenced foreign consumers during a service encounter, but their second language skill and the desire to use their native language had a weak correlation. The motives of foreigners to use Korean versus their native language included convenience.

The willingness of foreign consumers to speak Korean depended on the level of control they had over the service encounter (Holmqvist et al., 2014). In contrast, findings in this current study indicated the participants' willingness to speak the language had more to do with the level of Korean they spoke and how comfortable they were speaking the language. Those who spoke Korean fluently indicated they had no problems, while those who did not speak fluent Korean stated they were more frustrated with communication. Froese (2012) supports this finding that participants' Korean proficiency has a positive effect on a foreigner's interaction adjustment.

The motivation of the participants to speak Korean in return for a discount was found to represent about 50%. In contrast, Holmqvist (2009) examined whether a discount should be given if the consumer had to conduct the service encounter in their second language and discovered that price discounts were demanded in both high- and low-involvement service encounters. The current study used a price discount of 10% and only gave participants a choice to accept or reject the discount compared to Holmqvist's (2009) study wherein the amount of the discount was determined by the participants who responded that on average a 38% discount would be acceptable. Motives for participants rejecting a discount to speak Korean included the discount being too small, it was unfair to Korean consumers, and the participants would rather speak English to ensure they understood.

Holmqvist (2011) found that consumers were willing to pay for a service encounter in their own language during a high-involvement service encounter. Contrary to Holmqvist (2011), participants in this



study were not willing to pay extra. Participants stated that they would find ways around having to pay a premium, like asking a spouse or friend and or changing services to one which required speaking Korean. The major motivation of participants was the extra cost involved. Although it is noteworthy no exact cost (or percentage of the price of the service) was given in the question.

## **Conclusion**

The current study examined foreigners' experiences during low- and high-involvement service encounters and confirmed that foreigners were willing to use Korean in low-involvement service encounters, had an overall preference for Korean, and was more willing to speak Korean if they had a stronger ability to speak the language. In addition, foreigners rejected the idea of receiving a 10% discount for speaking Korean and also rejected paying a premium for a service provider who spoke English. The latter two findings may indicate that money is not a factor in what language is used. Future research in the area of how discounts or premiums affect the language choice of foreign consumers would possibly bring clarity as whether a relationship between the two factors exists.

## **Limitations**

A limitation of the current study is that the participants were only located in South Korea. This limitation is mitigated by the fact that the results from current study corroborate the prior research by Holmqvist (2011) and Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2012). Another limitation of the current study was the focus on teachers at private or public schools, international schools, universities, and hagwons (private tutoring schools), thus limiting the population of the study which could affect the generalizability of the study.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations from this study include a greater effort is needed on the part of foreigners to learn Korean, for foreigners to use Korean on a regular basis during service encounters, and for service providers to offer services in English. Regarding the first recommendation for foreigners to make an effort to learn Korean, newer methods of learning have become available in the past few years, including online classes. In addition, universities and local governments also offer Korean classes in person. The second recommendation, using Korean on a regular basis during service encounters, could create goodwill between the foreigners and the Korean service provider. In turn, the service provider will possibly feel at ease and be more likely to help and negotiate meaning when difficulties occur in communication. The third recommendation for service providers, especially in medium and high-involvement

encounters, such as hospitals and banks, to provide services in English would be wise in terms of providing services in the consumer's foreign language, which was also recommended by Holmqvist (2011). Banks, like the Korean Exchange Bank (KEB), had at least one staff member who spoke fluent English (Note: as of last year KEB is now KEB Hana Bank). According to the participants in the study, banking was one of the most challenging services when an English speaking staff member was not available.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

For each of the following questions below, please circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the statement, where 1 = not important at all, 2 = low importance, 3 = slightly important, 4 = neutral, 5 = moderately important, 6 = very important, 7 = extremely important.

How important is it to be able to....	Not Important At All	Low Importance	Slightly Important	Neutral	Moderately Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
order food at restaurant in your native language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
negotiate a bank loan in your native language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
buy groceries in your native language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
have a medical visit in your native language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
order at a café in your native language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
negotiate insurance in your native language	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7) On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 indicating having no fluency and 10 indicating being fluent, how would you rate your level of fluency in Korean?

8) What type of school do you work at?

9) Are you interested in participating further in this study?

10) If you marked yes to Question 9, please leave your email address and you will be contact shortly. All the information is confidential and if you provide an email address will be kept separate from the answers to the stud



## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Demographic Questions

1. What is your nationality of birth?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you lived in South Korea?
4. Are you married to a Korean citizen?
5. Are you a permanent resident or citizen of South Korea?
  - 5-1. If yes, how long have you been a permanent resident or citizen of South Korea?
  - 5-2. What is your current visa status?
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
7. What is your first spoken language?

### Interview Questions

RQ2: At what level of language competency do foreign consumers in South Korea feel comfortable speaking Korean in high- and low-involvement service encounters?

Interview Question 1. What has been your experience with language use during a service encounter that involves services like grocery shopping or visiting a café?

Interview Question 2. What has been your experience with language use during a service encounter that involves services like banking or a medical visit?

Interview Question 3. In what situations would you use Korean instead of your native language during a service encounter?

RQ3: How does a consumer's preference of language during a service encounter affect his/her willingness to use their second language?

Interview Question 4. How do you feel during a service encounter in which the person you need to talk to does not speak English?

Interview Question 5. How would you feel if you were offered a 10% discount for having to use a service in Korean versus a service in English if no discount were given?

Interview Question 6. How would you feel if you were offered a service that was complex (visiting a doctor or investment services) in English, but you had to pay a premium?

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Language preferences of foreign consumers in high- and low-involvement service encounters in South Korea

What is the study about? You are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences of language preference as a foreign consumer in South Korea. You were selected because you responded to an email or Facebook post about the study. There is no deception in this study.

What will be asked of me? You will be asked to answer some questions during an interview about your experiences of language preference as a foreign consumer in South Korea. It is estimated it will take 30 minutes for the interview and you may be asked to take part in a follow-up.

Who is involved? The following people are involved in this research and may be contacted at any time: David A. English 010-8441-4679 or (davidenglishresearch@gmail.com).

Are there any risks? Although there are no known risks in this study, some of the questions might be personally sensitive since some of the questions ask about your experiences living in a foreign country. This can be distressing to some people. However, you may stop the study at any time. You can also choose not to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable in answering.

What are some benefits? There are no direct benefits to you of participating in this research. As a token of appreciation for your participation in the study, you will be given 10,000 Korean Won gift certificate and an executive summary of the research. The results will have scientific interest that may eventually have benefits for foreign consumers in South Korea.

Is the study anonymity/confidential? The data collected in this study are confidential. Your name or personal information is not linked to data. Only the researchers in this study will see the data.

Can I stop participating the study? You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You can skip any questions on during the in-depth interview if you do not want to answer them.

What if I have questions about my rights as a research participant or complaints?

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, any complaints about your participation in the research study, or any problems that occurred in the study, please contact the researchers identified in the consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## Appendix D. Quantitative Survey Results

**Table 1.** Question 1. How important is to be able to order food at restaurant in your native language

Level of importance	Percent
Extremely important	2.48%
Very important	2.48%
Moderately important	5.59%
Neutral	8.70%
Slightly important	8.07%
Low importance	23.60%
Not important at all	49.07%

Note. N=161.

**Table 2.** Question 2. How important is it to be able to negotiate a bank loan in your native language?

Level of importance	Percent
Extremely important	30.43%
Very important	23.60%
Moderately important	9.94%
Neutral	6.21%
Slightly important	4.35%
Low importance	9.32%
Not important at all	16.15%

Note. N=161.

**Table 3.** Question 3. How important is it to be able to buy groceries in your native language?

Level of importance	Percent
Extremely important	2.48%
Very important	1.24%
Moderately important	3.11%
Neutral	6.83%
Slightly important	7.45%
Low importance	24.22%
Not important at all	54.66%

Note. N=161.

**Table 4.** Question 4. How important is it to be able to have a medical visit in your native language?

Level of importance	Percent
Extremely important	31.68%
Very important	24.84%
Moderately important	24.22%
Neutral	2.48%
Slightly important	4.35%
Low importance	2.48%
Not important at all	9.94%

Note. N=161.

**Table 5.** Question 5. How important is it to be able to order at a café in your native language?

Level of importance	Percent
Extremely important	1.86%
Very important	0.62%
Moderately important	4.97%
Neutral	4.97%
Slightly important	4.35%
Low importance	24.84%
Not important at all	58.39%

Note. N=161.

**Table 6.** Question 6. How important is it to be able to negotiate insurance in your native language?

Level of importance	Percent
Extremely important	24.22%
Very important	26.71%
Moderately important	19.88%
Neutral	7.45%
Slightly important	2.48%
Low importance	5.59%
Not important at all	13.66%

Note. N=161.



## Appendix E. Summary of Quantitative Results

### Question 1. Restaurant

Extremely important	2.48%	4
Very important	2.48%	4
Moderately important	5.59%	9
Neutral	8.70%	14
Slightly important	8.07%	13
Low importance	23.60%	38
Not important at all	49.07%	79
<b>Low</b>	<b>80.74%</b>	

### Question 2. Bank loan

Extremely important	30.43%	49
Very important	23.60%	38
Moderately important	9.94%	16
Neutral	6.21%	10
Slightly important	4.35%	7
Low importance	9.32%	15
Not important at all	16.15%	26
<b>Medium</b>	<b>63.97%</b>	

### Question 3. Groceries

Extremely important	2.48%	4
Very important	1.24%	2
Moderately important	3.11%	5
Neutral	6.83%	11
Slightly important	7.45%	12
Low importance	24.22%	39
Not important at all	54.66%	88
<b>Low</b>	<b>86.32%</b>	

**Question 4.** Medical visit

Extremely important	31.68%	51
Very important	24.84%	40
Moderately important	24.22%	39
Neutral	2.48%	4
Slightly important	4.35%	7
Low importance	2.48%	4
Not important at all	9.94%	16

**High 80.74**

**Question 5.** Café

Extremely important	1.86%	3
Very important	0.62%	1
Moderately important	4.97%	8
Neutral	4.97%	8
Slightly important	4.35%	7
Low importance	24.84%	40
Not important at all	58.39%	94

**Low 87.58%**

**Question 6.** Insurance

Extremely important	24.22%	39
Very important	26.71%	43
Moderately important	19.88%	32
Neutral	7.45%	12
Slightly important	2.48%	4
Low importance	5.59%	9
Not important at all	13.66%	22

**High 70.81%**





**Question 7.** Korean Fluency Level

1	8.70%	14
2	18.63%	30
3	22.98%	37
4	17.39%	28
5	8.07%	13
6	4.97%	8
7	8.07%	13
8	5.59%	9
9	2.48%	4
10	3.11%	5

**Question 8.** Type of Employment

hagwon (private institute)	25.47%	41
private school	3.73%	6
public school	14.91%	24
college or university	44.72%	72
international school	24.84%	4
Other (please specify)	8.70%	14

**Question 9.** Willing to participate in further research

Yes	36.02%	58
No	63.98%	103