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# Individual differences in online reference resource consultation: Case studies of Korean ESL graduate writers



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## ABSTRACT

With increasing availability of new types of reference tools such as corpora and search engines, today's L2 writers have a wider choice than ever in the online reference resources. To examine how L2 writers would navigate this growing variety of reference resources and exploit them to support the lexico-grammatical aspects of their own academic writing, the present study carried out case studies of two ESL graduate writers consulting eight different online reference resources including corpus tools, Google, and online dictionaries while completing an authentic writing assignment. The study particularly set out to examine individual differences in the use of the resources and contributing factors thereof.

Results revealed that the participants perceived and acted upon different affordances from the reference resources, showing wide differences in many aspects including the extent of use, problem types, query purposes, resources consulted, and their attitudes toward using such resources as writing assistance. The cross-case analysis indicated that these differences were largely caused by complex interactions of factors related to writer, text, and context. The findings suggest the effective use of online reference resources requires learner training that is contingent on individual learners' ongoing needs arising from their specific writing contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Research has shown that second language (L2) student writers devote much more time and attention to lexical searches and syntactic encoding during L2 composition than when writing in their L1s (Cumming, 2001; Hinkel, 2002; Murphy & Roca de Larios, 2010; Silva, 1993). These surface features of writing affect all levels of L2 learners since greater accuracy and appropriacy of the lexical and grammatical features in writing are both required and expected as they advance to higher levels in their studies to articulate increasingly complex ideas. However, writing support for L2 writers in these aspects is often far from sufficient. For example, in North American universities, instructors' feedback on lexical and grammatical features in L2 writers' papers can hardly be expected in content courses. Even in general language courses and academic writing courses, support for surface-level editing tends to be neglected, particularly at graduate levels, in favor of idea development and text organization under the influences of process-oriented writing pedagogy (Conroy, 2010). Furthermore, even the support L2 writers can receive from these sources is provided mostly after or near the completion of a writing assignment but not during composition.

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In this regard, linguistic reference resources (e.g., dictionaries) may be the only sources from which L2 writers can get immediate support for solving language problems as they arise. In fact, today's language learners have a wider choice than ever before in reference resources, with a proliferation of online reference resources in the last decades, made available by rapid advances in data processing power and storage capacity. Traditional reference resources such as dictionaries have now become available online, offering not only a greater amount and variety of information but also easier and faster access to the required information (Dziemiąko, 2012; Tono, 2012). On the other hand, new types of online resources, such as corpus tools and search engines, have been explored as reference tools that help L2 writers solve lexical and grammatical problems encountered during composition in ways that more traditional resources cannot, such as providing a large amount of authentic usage examples. As today's university students do most of their academic writing on computer, the increasing diversity and sophistication of online reference resources may greatly help them address the surface-level problems of their writing and thereby increase their autonomy and confidence as writers. Indeed, it has been argued that the ability to effectively utilize different reference resources separately and in combination should constitute an important part of digital literacy in academic settings (Chambers & O'sullivan, 2004; Conroy, 2010; Flowerdew, 2010; Frankenberg-Garcia, 2005; Kennedy & Miceli, 2010).

However, research on learner use of online reference resources as writing supporting tools has largely been confined to individual reference resources in classroom settings, as seen in many studies of learners' corpus tool use (for a detailed review of the uses of corpus tools in L2 writing class, see Yoon, 2011). The present study set out to examine how advanced L2 writers navigate this growing variety of online reference resources while independently completing an authentic academic assignment, and thereby gain insights into how to help L2 writers effectively use these tools for problem solving and learning. The study focused particularly on factors influencing the individual participants' perception and actualization of the affordances offered by a suite of multiple online reference resources, as understanding individual differences and what drives them can significantly inform learner training (Dörnyei, 2005; Kormos, 2012; Reinders & Hubbard, 2012) in the use of online reference tools, which has largely been lacking in L2 writing pedagogy.

### 1.1. Affordances

One construct that can offer useful angles from which to look at individual differences in reference resource use is the notion of *affordances* (Hafner & Candlin, 2007; Leńko-Szymańska & Boulton, 2015). The term *affordance* was first used by perceptual psychologist Gibson (1979) to describe a particular property of the environment that an organism can act upon or that allows it to interact with the environment. Since Gibson, the notion has been taken up and further developed in a number of fields including education, industrial design, and human-machine interaction. van Lier (2000, p. 252), based on his ecological theory of language learning, explains the nature of *affordance* as follows:

What becomes an *affordance* depends on what the organism does, what it wants, and what is useful for it. In the forest a leaf can offer very different *affordances* to different organisms. It can offer crawling on for a tree frog, cutting for an ant, food for a caterpillar, shade for a spider, medicine for a shaman, and so on. In all cases, the leaf is the same: its properties do not change; it is just that different properties are perceived and acted upon by different organisms.

In industrial design, meanwhile, a particular emphasis is placed on the reciprocal relationship between the property of an object and the characteristics of an agent in the realization of an *affordance* (Norman, 2013). Norman argues that how a person perceives and acts upon an *affordance* depends not only on the physical ability of the person but also on multiple factors such as her goals, values and beliefs, and prior experiences. Others emphasize the emergent nature of *affordances* that while interacting with artefacts over time, people discover possibilities, explore them in action, and thereby choose the most relevant *affordances* or develop new *affordances* (Haines, 2015; Stoffregen, 2003). The theory of *affordances* as noted above may thus help explain in part why learners engage with the same educational tool in different ways from each other and from its intended uses.

Hafner and Candlin's (2007) study is one that specifically looked at the use of a language reference tool to support L2 writing drawing on the construct of *affordances*. The researchers traced law students' use of a specialized corpus to support their legal writing assignments. Results revealed that even though a corpus system had been provided for language support, the apprentice lawyers tended to use it for legal document searches more than for lexical or grammar patterns. The researchers attributed this tendency to the participants' professional discourse practices—i.e., drafting from a model (or legal precedents). From these findings, the authors argue that “the *affordances* provided by corpus tools and resources are strongly influenced by the identity and disciplinary culture of the students, and their membership of that culture” (p. 305). By illustrating the variability in the purposes, for which the students used the given reference tool, with some not initially anticipated, the study suggests the theory of *affordances* can be a valid lens with which to examine learner differences in reference resource use.

### 1.2. Previous studies

There have been a wealth of studies looking into the potentials of individual online reference resource types for supporting L2 writers. Online dictionaries now offer various search options and routes with hyperlinks and multi-word search options, and allow users to retrieve a much greater variety and amount of information, including related vocabulary

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