Common ESL writing issues for Koreans

The following are the kinds of problems that Koreans are likely to have in writing in English as a second language\(^1\) (many of these are from Silva, 1993), and thus, the kinds of things to look for and comment on in grading papers.

**General strategies**
1. **Less planning.** Students may not plan the essay well beforehand, leading to an essay that is not well organized or inadequately developed.
2. **More laborious, but less efficient writing.** Students tend to get lost in the details, e.g., by spending more time consulting dictionaries, and less time thinking about good contents, ideas, or organization of the essay.
3. **Less reviewing, drafting, or revising.** Students should treat paper writing as a process of drafting and revising multiple times before turning in a finished product. Instead, they may do minimal revision and rush to hand in a paper.

**Grammatical and lexical errors**
1. **Simpler sentences.** Students tend to avoid complex sentences, and use many simpler sentences, which can lead to a more informal, simple tone, and less smoothness or sophistication in the flow of ideas.
2. **More strong modals.** Students may overuse stronger modal verbs like should or must, and less often verbs like might, may, could, etc. Also, Koreans tend to overuse could for past tense, when it is not commonly used as a past form of can in contemporary English.
3. **More coordination, less subordination.** Students more often form longer sentences by joining main clauses with coordinating conjunctions (and, but, so, or...), and less often with subordinating conjunctions (though, whereas, after, thereby, so that...). Writing with many coordinated sentences and few subordinate clauses leads to a more informal style and flow, and less sophisticated expression of ideas.
4. **More unmodified nouns.** Student writers may use simple noun phrases with little or no modification with adjectives, prepositional phrases, or other modifying expressions. For example, a student might write “the experiment that was successful…” instead of “the successful experiment;” or “the experiment that was done on the mice that were genetically modified” instead of “the experiment with the genetically modified mice.”
5. **Articles.** Students may use fewer definite articles (the) and indefinite articles (a, an), or make other article errors. Articles are notoriously difficult, are not so well understood linguistically, and can depend on the particular nuances that a writer wants to convey.

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\(^1\) Many of these are from Silva, Tony. 1993. Toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: The ESL research and its implications. *TESOL Quarterly, 27*, 657-677
6. **Less passive voice, and incorrect passives.** Overall, students may use fewer passive voice verbs (e.g., “was conducted”) in academic contexts where they are fairly common. Asian students tend to incorrectly make some verbs passive that cannot be passive (e.g., was existed, was appeared).

7. **Fewer transitionals.** Asian writers tend to use less variety of transitional or connective words (conjunctions and other words like though, however, while, whereas, furthermore to link ideas, words, and clauses). Asians also overuse common transitionals like but, and, so, or; they may also overuse there is / there are phrases for introducing new topics.

8. **Repetition.** Koreans may use fewer synonyms, and instead may repeat the same words in subsequent sentences.

9. **Simpler or vaguer words.** Second-language writers tend to overuse simpler and vaguer vocabulary. This may be due to a limited command of sophisticated academic vocabulary, and not knowing the nuances of more sophisticated words and how to use them in context. Some commonly overused word types are:
   - Simple verbs, such as be, have, give, do, get (for example, instead of give, one can use contribute, donate, yield, or others).
   - Informal phrasal verbs, e.g., get out instead of more formal Latin words such as remove, extricate.
   - Simple nouns like man, women, people instead of more specific terms like subjects, participants.
   - Simple adjectives like good, bad, instead of more specific, meaningful terms.

**Text features**

1. **Overall argumentation.** Some may argue indirectly for their main idea, without stating the main point (thesis) at the beginning, and without following a sequential development of claims or arguments to support the thesis. Some may instead follow a traditional Korean indirect style. However, in English essays, the writer is expected to state the thesis first, and develop supporting arguments in the body of the essay.

2. **Introductions.** A clear, specific thesis may be lacking, or may be too general to effectively cover in a single paper. The introductory paragraph may begin with overly general background information that is too familiar or not directly pertinent to the thesis.

3. **Argumentation.** Claims made in the paper may lack sufficiently convincing evidence, data, proof, examples, or other supporting information to back up the claims. Not enough claims may be presented to support the paper’s thesis. The writer may include a lot of data, without explaining the relevance of the data, or making explicit connections between the data and his/her claims – an information dump.

4. **Source use.** Students may use more terminology without properly defining or explaining the terms or concepts. They may have difficulty incorporating information from sources smoothly into their texts – there may be abrupt shifts between their ideas and source information. They may fail to make enough use of referring to primary sources to support and develop their ideas. They may rely too heavily on quotations or footnotes. Finally, they may rely too much on authority – they may rely on appealing to the ideas of a famous scholar for support, rather than providing direct evidence; they may even do so, not realizing that the scholar’s ideas may actually be controversial or not always accepted in the field.