Understanding International Cultures: South Korea

International Student & Scholar Services
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- Korean Parents’ Sacrifices & Expectations
- Impressions of U.S. Students & Educational System
- Cultural Factors in Korean Interactions with Others
- Korean Students in the U.S.
- Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

South Korean Educational System

Junghoon Song, Ph.D. Student, Operations Management & Strategy

Learning Style
- Korean high school teachers’ primary mode of instruction is lectures.
- Students are active learners, but in a different manner.
- Learning is memorization-based.
  - Students are taught to memorize texts, which shows respect for the author.

Importance of Exams
- Educational system is exam-driven
- High school students are under tremendous pressure to obtain a high mark on the university entrance exam.
  - Results on exam determine their major and level of university they can attend
  - Failure on exam has severe consequences

Academic Integrity
- Korean high school/undergraduate students not taught about plagiarism although may be aware of it.
- They see reproducing text without error as proof that they read it.
- They have no idea how to cite sources.
- Style sheets (e.g. APA, MLA) don’t exist in South Korea.
  - Ex. As a result, Ph.D. student in U.S. copied three lines from original text in a paper. Although he cited the text, he did not use quotation marks because he unconsciously did what he had done back home. He was dismissed from Ph.D. program.
**Housing**

- Most university students live with their parents or in off-campus apartment.
- Residence halls are segregated.
  - Men and women cannot visit each other's residence halls.
- Residence hall rooms are smaller than those in U.S. and furnished with two beds, desks, etc.

**Roommates tend to become close. They tend to:**
- care about each other
- go out together
- become emotionally attached
- not merely co-exist
- They tend to be nice to and considerate of one another.

**Social Life**

- Typical leisure activities for Korean university students
  - Going out for coffee
  - Drinking
  - Playing video games
  - Playing soccer and baseball
  - Singing karaoke

**Military Service**

- Mandatory military service is a great concern for male students.
- Pre- and post-military service students tend to differ greatly from one another.
- Post-military service students tend to be more obedient and motivated about their careers.

Korean Parents’ Sacrifices & Expectations

Minsoo Kim, Ph.D. Physics
Korean Parents’ Sacrifices

- Korean parents make a lot of sacrifices for their children’s education
  - Example
    - One student’s parents worked 15-hour days to give son a better chance.
    - Plan was to move to a better place (Gangnam).
    - Son almost never saw his parents.
    - After the move, son struggled in the new school.
    - Son suffered from depression and had suicide ideation, but could not get help (family shame).

Korean Parents’ Expectations

- Korean parents want their children to get good grades and good job so they pressure them a lot. Child becomes parents’ clone.
  - In the past, oldest son was expected to support parents so was especially under pressure. Nowadays, kids are expected to support parents.
    - Ex. Student in U.S. had panic attack before Ph.D. qualifying exam because his father had died and his mother depended on him. He could not discuss his problem with anyone because other Koreans would see him as “wacko” or “psycho”.

Korean Parents’ Expectations

- Parents care about learning, but seem to care more about grades and ranking as they are major determinants for success on the university entrance exam.
  - Goal is for child to get into high-ranking university.
    - Once that goal is achieved, they don’t pressure child any more about studies. Their attitude is, “Do what you want.”

Korean Parents’ Expectations

- Korea is like a small neighborhood.
- Parents are curious about other children’s performance.
  - Ex. Parents ask, “What is your son/daughter doing? Is she/him still studying?”
- Parents boast about their children’s accomplishments.
  - Ex. “My son was hired by Samsung and sends me $3,000 per month.”

Impressions of U.S. Students & Educational System

Junghoon Song, Ph.D. Student, Operations Management & Strategy
Ji Ae Kim, Undergraduate Student, Psychology
Impressions of U.S. Educational System

- Emphasizes class participation
  - Korean students know they are supposed to ask questions and participate in class discussions.
  - But, they are trained to focus on receiving knowledge, not expressing their views in class.
  - They lack confidence in their English ability.
  - They are afraid of losing face (i.e. being seen as silly or stupid).
  - They do not want to be rude to the authority figure by interrupting him/her.

- Hypothetical Psychology Test Example
  In Korea, would be expected to summarize four psychological models.
  In U.S., would be given a scenario to which student must respond:
  “A child is having behavioral problems in school. He does X and Y. What do you think his problem is?”

Impressions of U.S. Students

- More independent than Korean university students
  - Tend not to live with parents
  - Tend to support themselves through employment and federal financial aid

- Seem focused on academics, not just getting a job
  - Ex. U.S. female students – casual dress, no make-up

- Focus on their studies throughout the semester
  - Some Korean students typically study little during the semester. Instead, they cram during the month (or even 24-48 hours) before final exams because:
    - They work 2-3 part-time jobs (40 hours per week) due to high cost of tuition.
    - Ex. teach in cram schools, work in fast food, do private tutoring
    - They don’t want to go to college, but were obliged by their parents.
Perspectives on Korean Students

- Challenged by time management.
  - Pushed to study in elementary and high school by others
  - Time was structured for them by teachers and parents
- Used to being given a plan and following directions. Feel it disrespectful and inconsiderate not to follow professor’s suggestions.

Impressions of U.S. Students

- Many have good time management and lead balanced, healthy lives.
  - Balance studying, eating, socializing, etc.
  - Engage in healthy activities (e.g., hiking) in free time
  - Ex. Observed U.S. female student study in library until 5:00 a.m. and then go for a jog
- U.S. parents surprisingly involved in child’s higher education
  - Ex. Drive child to college
  - Ex. Attend child’s dissertation defense

Impressions of U.S. Students

- Don’t show respect as Korean students do
  - Korean students do not look their professors directly in the eye as that would be seen as a direct challenge.
  - In the U.S., they try to make eye contact as U.S. professors may think they are lying or slackers if they don’t.
  - They also sense that U.S. professors don’t like it when they avert their eyes.

Cultural Factors in Korean Interactions with Others

Woongsun Yoo, Ph.D. Student, Finance
Influence of Confucianism

- Parents, teachers and “seniors” must be respected.
- One must not point out a senior person’s mistake.
- One must not disagree with a senior person. One should always agree with him/her because of his/her position.
- If a senior person gives a task or assignment, one must take it as an order.

Cultural Factor: Status

- Age, rank and title are key considerations in interactions with others.
- Rank can be determined by social class, school, profession, etc.
  - Ex. Korean students may
    - feel they have to bow when they see their teacher
    - hide their cigarette when they see their teacher
    - find they are incapable of calling their teacher by his/her first name
    - not participate in class because older Korean classmates will object
    - feel intimidated and hesitate to ask questions when a senior person presents a paper

Cultural Factor: Status

- Age and rank influence behavior and expectations of Korean students when they interact with other Korean students.
  - Ex. Older Korean students may want younger Korean students to bow to them when they meet. If not, they will say, “You guys ignored us. I saw you in the cafeteria, but you didn’t bow. Why not?”
  - Ex. Americanized Koreans may have trouble getting along with “Korean Koreans.”
Cultural Factor: Status

- Korean students are confused about what to do when their teacher is younger than they are or their student is older than they are.
- If there is tension in a situation and an American tries to defuse it (e.g. “Take it easy”. “Don’t worry”. “Leave it alone”. “Let it go.”), Korean students may feel more offended because the situation isn’t being taken seriously, and the student’s ego and esteem are affected.

Cultural Factor: Status

- In Korea, students sometimes care more about human relationships than their studies.
- If a student can’t get along with other students, people will say, “He’s not successful.”
- Studying in the U.S. gives them freedom from such pressures.

Korean Students in the U.S.

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Namsook Kim, Ph.D. Foreign Language Education; Clinical Assistant Professor & Assistant Director, Center for Comparative & Global Studies in Education, Educational Leadership & Policy

Classroom Experiences

- Group Work
  - Ex. Teacher assigned pair work. Usually there was an even number of students, but one day there was an odd number of students. He was only one without a partner. Professor worked with him.
- Class Presentations
  - When Asian students present, U.S. students ignore them when their English is weak.

Making Friends with Americans

- Had seen lots of American movies before coming to the U.S.
- Wanted to make lots of friends, but found it difficult to do so in English
- Found that he had little in common with American students
  - Ex: Korean students don’t know about U.S. football, proms, stand-up comedy, etc.
  - Exception: Guys share interest in girls, video games, sports and drinking.

Life in Residence Halls

- Had fun in residence halls
  - Found them noisy, but studied in library so didn’t mind.
  - Heard a lot of bad language, but didn’t mind
  - Not a cultural difference except that young Koreans don’t use bad language in presence of superiors
- Roommate sold drugs and had girls spend the night.
  - Would put something on door so Korean roommate knew not to enter.
  - Girlfriend occasionally slept over when both guys were there
Language Barrier

- English classes in Korea are taught in Korean. The focus is on grammar and reading.
- Korean students in the U.S. are very concerned about speaking in English.
- They are afraid of making mistakes in English and losing face.
- They tend not to participate in class as much as they would like.

Class Participation

- Korean students in the U.S. use alternative ways to participate.
  - Active listening
  - Detailed note-taking
  - Intensive reading before class
- These alternative ways may be misunderstood as lack of class preparation or interest in learning and participating.

Class Participation

- Korean students may choose to be silent in class.
  - Modesty as a cultural value: Silence is golden. Talk is silver.
  - Silent participation can be mistaken as ignorance or lack of interest.

Suggestions for U.S. Faculty

Namsook Kim, Ph.D. Foreign Language Education; Clinical Assistant Professor & Assistant Director, Center for Comparative & Global Studies in Education, Educational Leadership & Policy

Clear Academic Expectations

- Be clear about your expectations of students
  - Verbal / Non-verbal class participation
  - Assignments
  - Citations/references (e.g. APA style)
  - Provide detailed rubrics in advance

Clear Academic Expectations

- Emphasize importance of academic integrity.
  - Mention it on the class syllabus and remind students about it from time to time. If you don’t, Korean students may conclude that it doesn’t matter in your class.
Differences in Classroom Culture

- Understand diversity in the ways of active participation
  - Silence
  - Active listening
- Avoid assumptions
  - Lack of fluency in English ≠ academic incompetence
  - Avoidance of eye contact
  - Less use of small talk in English

Linguistic Differences

- Be aware of linguistic differences
  - Ex. Confusing responses to negative questions
  - T: Don't you understand?
  - S: Yes.
  - [Yes, that's correct. I don't understand.]
  - S: No.
  - [No, that's not true. I do understand.]

Differences in Communication Style

- Double-check understanding by
  - Paraphrasing, giving extra time to speak, assigning turns to speak, etc.
- Be aware of differences in turn-taking style, namely long wait times.
- Check to see if anyone has anything to say, but is patiently waiting for a turn.
- Wait a short time before beginning a new topic.

Ways to Promote Communication & Learning

- Create diverse bridges to enhance communication with students
  - Electronic communications
  - Invitation to one-to-one dialogue during office hours
- Avoid using U.S.-centric examples.
  - Ex. NFL, local politics, American pop cultural figures

Creating an Inclusive Community of Learners

- Help students feel included
  - Reach out to Korean students in and out of class by showing cultural interest
    - Ex. “What holidays do you observe?”
    - Ex. “I enjoyed watching Ms. Pak play in the LPGA! I wonder if Korean girls learn golf in high school.”
    - Ex. “Yuna Kim is amazing. I see something distinctive in her skating style. Is it ballet?”

Thank You for Coming!