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Oral Communication Needs of New Korean Students in a US Busincess Communication Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In order for MBA programs in the US to prepare Korean students for international business, an international and interactive learning environment is required. This article examines the role of the interactive lecturing style in a US MBA program in influencing the oral classroom participation of five Korean students in the program. Data for this study come from formal and informal interviews and class observations over the course of one semester. Participants were three male and two female students, enrolled in one core course: business communication. The study shows that several factors informed the Korean students' oral participation in the classroom. Their English language proficiency, individual characteristics, Korean socio-cultural values, unfamiliar educational practices, and the classroom context were all interrelated factors. While the participants had cultural similarities with other Asian students in the class, the study also shows that there were unique Korean cultural features in play. Disregarding their length of stay in the US, a common thread among the Korean participants was that they felt it more of a challenge to speak in whole-class discussions than in small-group discussions. The findings suggest pedagogical implications for promoting oral participation of Asian international students, particularly Korean students.

KEYWORDS: *Chaemyon*, Korean socio-cultural values, oral classroom participation, English as a Second Language

INTRODUCTION

To participate in the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) community, members must share not only linguistic knowledge but also the socio-cultural rules and values as well as the conversational norms of that community (Hymes, 1972). US MBA programs form academic discourse communities where students are typically expected to interact orally in class discussions and share their unique work experience and business perspectives with other members (Murphy, 2005). This participation can be challenging for any

student, but it is particularly so for international students who have studied English as a foreign language (EFL) in their home countries and who come from different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds (Leki, 2001).

To date, there seems to be limited research on how these students transition into the classrooms and how they verbally interact in class discussion. More importantly, it seems that there has been even less research on how Korean international students learn to participate orally in class discussions as more and more MBA classes emphasize interactive participation. While there has been research on oral communication of Asian international students as a group (Kim, 2008) or divided into distinct language categories such as Chinese or Japanese students (Morita, 2004), this article focuses on how Korean students engage orally in a business classroom. It begins with a brief review of current literature on Asian students' oral classroom participation, followed by a description of methods and findings, and finally presents conclusions for pedagogy.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

In today's globalized business world the demands of the global market drive companies to recruit people with diverse work backgrounds who can operate in this environment. In response, US MBA program providers emphasize the international business focus of their particular course and continue to admit students from various countries around the world. This trend involves accepting a substantial number of Second Language (L2) English speakers to study in the MBA programs, thus necessitating the provision of more business communication courses specifically with these students in mind. Given the current reality of the world economy and the prominent position of American MBA programs and their degrees, many international MBA students, especially Asian students, are drawn to study and gain their MBA degrees in the US (Davis, 2000). Korean students are no exception to this global trend; currently, approximately 47% of Korean students in the US are studying at graduate professional schools (Open Doors, 2007). These students, whose native language is not English, must demonstrate English proficiency in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) tests when applying for American MBA programs. However, some critics have suggested that adequate scores on these tests may be insufficient evidence that students have the English proficiency required at the graduate level, particularly the ability to organize and share ideas in dynamic classroom situations (Ayers & Quattlebaum, 1992; Coleman, 1997).

In addition to the limited usefulness of the TOEFL and GRE tests in assessing the students' actual oral language proficiency, many scholars have also noted the difference in how students from different socio-cultural backgrounds communicate. For example, scholars have discussed how politeness and face-negotiation differ across cultures and influence verbal styles (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1971; Ting-Toomey, 1988). In Western cultures like the US, where individualism is emphasized, explicitly expressing one's opinions is generally considered to meet social expectations, whereas in Asian cultures like China, Japan, or Korea, where collectivism is emphasized, reserving or hiding one's feelings before others is usually encouraged (Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). In any US classroom, silence is often perceived to be an indication of weakness, shyness, or problems, whereas in an Asian classroom it is interpreted as an indication of respect, power, or possible disagreement (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994).

Korean society, strongly influenced by the Confucian tradition, shares many similarities with other Asian societies, such as an emphasis on hierarchy, indirectness, formalism, and face-saving (Lee, 1998). However, Korean society has also developed its unique cultural features, including the concept of *Chaemyon*, which is widely practiced in everyday life in Korea (Cronin, 1995). According to a Korean-English dictionary, *Chaemyon* refers to face-saving with respect to one's status. In Korean society, keeping *Chaemyon* is very important, especially among men, and is preserved and nurtured through a hierarchical social order that requires deference of the younger to the older. As such, *Chaemyon* has greatly influenced Korean discourse practices. For example, it is not uncommon in Korea for younger people to remain silent while older people talk, even when the former do not agree with the latter. When Koreans meet for the first time, for a business meeting for instance, it is important to establish the relationship hierarchy.

Chaemyon is also evident in Korean classroom discourse. As Kang (2005) notes, typical Korean classrooms, like those experienced by the participants in this study, employ a formal, lecture-based approach in which discussions rarely occur. Remaining silent in class, listening carefully, and taking precise notes are regarded as traits of a good student. Students can sometimes ask questions when invited by their instructor, but the purpose of these questions and answers is generally not to foster discussion but to confirm that students understand the content of the lecture. Therefore, it might be fair to say that the role of classroom talk tends to take on more of an evaluative than an exploratory function. However, the business communication course

in this study best illustrates the cultural and social difference that Korean international students encounter in the MBA class. The following research questions guided this study:

1.   What are the main factors that influence oral classroom participation for Korean MBA students in the business communication course?

2.   How do these factors influence the ways in which Korean students participate in the classroom, and what can instructors do to facilitate their oral participation?

METHOD

To get a deeper understanding of how Korean students participated orally in a business communication class, I studied the five students profiled in Table 1. Using interviews and class observations, I adopted a qualitative research approach. The study took place in an MBA program in a large public US university where 27% of the 120 students in the program are considered international students with over 3% of the international students coming from Korea. As is typical in a communication course, students were required to participate in discussions on the readings both in small groups and with the whole class.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Name	Age	Gender	Major	Study in the US	Prior English classes
Jena	26	F	Economics	1 year	1 semester in college
Jooree	28	F	Business Management	1.5 years	1 year in college
Jinsoo	31	M	Finance	2 years	2.5 years in college
Sungmin	33	M	Economics	3 years	2 years in college
Jaemin	31	M	Marketing	4 years	3 years in a private English institute

Dr. Smith (pseudonym) is a female professor in her forties and has taught this course for over 10 years. Before the class begins, she usually sets up desks and chairs in a large circle in preparation for whole-class discussions.

Sitting on one of the chairs among the students, she often initiates and leads the discussions. She has the students sit in small groups only after each online discussion, which takes place three times throughout the semester.

DATA ANALYSIS

As is typical in qualitative research, data collection and analysis did not occur in a consecutive manner. While interviewing the participants, I continued to observe class sessions, have informal conversations with the participants, and analyze the interview and observation data. Thus, data collection and data analysis influenced each other reciprocally.

The constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) guided my data analysis. After the first background interview, I transcribed the recordings, read the transcripts line-by-line, marked potentially interesting and relevant passages in different colors, and wrote key concepts in the margins. The concepts that seemed to go together were grouped and given a conceptual name so that the initial categories emerged.

While analyzing the data, I concentrated on whether the students took turns, initiated topics, or responded to questions, and on how long their talking lasted. Through this analysis process, I began to understand which types of discussion formats helped them participate in class discussions and whether the students' perceptions of discussion participation matched their actual classroom behavior.

FINDINGS

All five students were generally attentive, as demonstrated by physical cues such as nodding and eye contact; however, they rarely spoke. None of the students initiated topics related to the class readings. During small-group discussions, participation varied among the five students, but what was noticeable was that the female students tended to participate more actively than their male counterparts. Several major factors influenced the Korean students' oral class participation in the communication course.

English-Speaking Skills

Students strongly believed that oral participation was important in all the MBA courses and believed that their English-speaking abilities were inadequate for them to participate in the class discussion, especially in the fast-paced and interactive business communication course. Even when they noted that they could understand the topic of the class discussion and had prepared to

contribute to the discussion by reading the text in advance, they failed to fully participate in whole-class discussions because of their need to translate quickly back and forth between Korean and English and their inability to find the "right moment" to join the discussion. They perceived their lack of English-speaking proficiency as the most significant factor influencing their class oral participation. As two Korean students noted:

> I know the readings really well. I have business knowledge, but I don't feel at ease with talking in English. In the discussion, I keep thinking what I should say and how to talk. When I feel ready to talk, the discussion is already over … (Jaemin, informal interview, September 13)

> I prepare so much in advance. I have a script in my head, but when I start talking I just forget what I was going to say or I feel that I don't show them my ideas clearly. I think it is because of my poor English speaking. (Jooree, informal interview, September 13)

My observation and post-observation interviews with the five students showed that they had a level of English proficiency adequate for participating in class discussions, and that the female students seemed to be more confident speaking in English compared to their Korean male counterparts. However, between the two genders there were no apparent differences in their own self-perception of English proficiency. Excerpts from transcripts of the interviews show that discrepancies between the students' actual language abilities and their perceptions can be an indication of foreign language learning anxieties (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Cultural and Social Difference

Difference in Talk. There appear to be some notable differences in the cultural and social values about talking in Korean and American societies. For example, many of the Korean students noted that it was more important to speak when one had something essential to say, while American society values "talking" as a learning mechanism (Murphy, 2005).

> In Korea, it is better to say one or two important things rather than talk about many unimportant things. If you talk too much [with] no important point, then people will take you lightly. But in American business classes, they think talking is a tool to build and share knowledge. Maybe this is a cultural difference. (Jinsoo, interview, October 12)

> In Korean schools, if we [do] talk too much we look very uneducated. When we talk in groups, we listen first and [do] not interrupt. If the teacher has something to say, we listen and allow her [to interrupt] … Americans enjoy, it seems, [discussing] their opinions a lot. I think their values are a little different from ours. (Jena, interview, October 13)

When I shared this short segment of the interview with the rest of the Korean students, they agreed that there was a big cultural and social difference between Korean and American views on talking.

Gender and Age. Gender and age differences among the Korean participants also seem to be related to their oral classroom participation. While many of the Korean students were generally silent during the whole-class discussions, the female students were relatively more active than their male counterparts, particularly in the small-group discussions. The female students were willing to initiate topics and take turns in the conversations. For example, in a 20-minute group discussion of a case scenario, one female Korean student talked about her personal experience communicating with employees in her previous job in Korea. She spoke nine times in the group discussions during the whole academic semester in this course. An excerpt from the transcript of a small-group discussion illustrates two Korean female students' interactional pattern:

> *African female #1:* I noticed that no matter what country you work in, confronting co-workers about an issue is always a challenge. Don't you agree?
>
> *Jooree:*   I know. I know. I used to work in a company in Korea, and one of my colleague—she never [did] her job, so I [had] to do it for her. What can I say so I don't offend her? Sometimes, I feel we are in elementary school.
>
> *Jena:*   People can be irresponsible and we have to tell them or they don't understand their job.
>
> *American female #2:*   It's so sad. We're like all grown-ups. We should know what it means to be responsible. Having to tell them they're not doing their jobs right—it's just so lame, ya know?

In the excerpt, the two Korean females take the initiative in the group discussion, using their past work experience to engage in the discussion. While the Korean females tended to be a little more pro-active even in their small-group discussions, the Korean male students, Jinsoo and Sungmin (who happened

to be the oldest in the class) rarely initiated topics even though they had been in the US longer than their Korean female counterparts. While Jinsoo seemed more attentive than Sungmin, he did not take turns during whole-class discussions. Nevertheless, when the male students were asked questions, they did respond. For instance, after a group of students gave a short presentation of the class reading, the presenters asked students to work in small groups and discuss two issues about language learners in the workplace. The two issues required students to define long-term and short-term language learners. I sat with Jinsoo, Sungmin, and a male student from Brazil. As I observed the group discussion, Jinsoo and Sungmin did not initiate conversation. However, when one of the students asked them to describe some of their English classes back in Korea they spoke. Sungmin offers the following explanation:

> After serving mandatory military service, I [went] back to school and took a business communication class in English, but it was not helpful. We only listen[ed] to [the] professor talk about [what] English idioms to use when we work[ed] in America. We never practice[d] talking, because he treat[ed] us like cadet[s]. He knew some of us in the class [had] just come out of [the] military. So, he expect[ed] us only to listen and not talk.… I can say that the class was not useful.… If I [were] the professor, I [would] invite more native English speakers who [had] real experience in American corporations and we [could] practice talking more … like this in our group. (Sungmin, group discussion)

As Sungmin was talking, Jinsoo and the other Korean male student listened and laughed a few times. Just like Sungmin, unless they were spoken to, the Korean male students did not participate in the conversation. After Sungmin talked, one of the students asked Jinsoo what the business English classes were like for him. He stated that the classroom environment was very hierarchical by age and similar to that of Sungmin's class environment.

As seen in the interaction pattern above, in addition to age and gender, the military practices Sungmin and Jinsoo had experienced in Korea seemed to influence the two male students' interaction in the classroom. Right after being discharged from his military service, Sungmin had taken English classes in preparation to study abroad in an American MBA program, whereas Jinsoo took business English classes because he needed extra credit hours to gradu- ate. Moreover, while it had been years since Jinsoo had been discharged from his military duties, the way he interacted in the small-group discus- sions reflected both Korean social and military norms. For instance, Jinsoo, who was younger in age and who had a lower military rank than Sungmin, seemed to understand the Korean social norms that required him to maintain

silence until Sungmin finished talking. Moreover, when Jinsoo was asked by other students to describe his business English classes, he simply confirmed Sungmin's description, without providing details of his own experience. What we can assume from this example is that gender and age, as well as military practices in Korea, may have positioned the two Korean male students to be less willing to participate in class discussions. In contrast, however, the Korean female students were much younger than their Korean male counterparts and had not experienced military training. Perhaps the female students felt more freedom to talk during the class discussions for these reasons.

Classroom Norms. Another common element among all the participants was their perception of the differences between Korean and US business communication classroom practices. They claimed that the business English language classes in Korea were too large to have discussions. Moreover, most of the participants felt their instructors were more knowledgeable than their peers; thus, they felt that the instructor had more responsibility to explain most of the commonly used business English expressions. For example, what they had to do in classes in Korea was to listen to their instructor and take notes for further study on their own.

The current class observations also made it clear that although these students did not speak out in class, they appeared to be alert and to take notes whenever possible. They felt that American students were more willing to raise questions and discuss them in class because they considered class discussion as an important means to understand the course materials. In an initial interview with Jena, she claimed:

> When I was in Korea, the instructor [would give the] lesson. And then sometimes we [were] invited to ask questions. But, secretly we all [knew] not to ask too many questions. If a student, however, asks difficult questions or too [many] questions, other students will think [he/she is] showing off or interrupting the flow of the class. But, in American classes, everyone talks about everything, and it seems more natural. I think here if you don't talk, they think you are not learning. And I think talking can help with learning, but I'm not used to it yet … (Jena, interview, October 20)

Other students explained the different values placed on making mistakes in Korean and American communication classrooms:

> Here, in American business classes, the students have no fear of speaking their mind, even if it is not directly related to the business topic. I think sometimes this is [a] waste of time because in [the] business world, you have

> to talk directly about [an] issue with [a] client and not talk of other things, like weather, sports.… In Korea it's different. We don't talk a lot because we are afraid to make mistakes and then it will be bad for [our] reputation. But, I think I will need to accommodate myself to this new style of talking. (Jaemin, interview, October 20)

Because of the different expectations and practices between Korean and US classrooms, the students felt that they had to reorient themselves to speak up in class.

Individual Differences

To name a few notable individual differences, content knowledge and anxiety among the students appeared to affect their oral participation in the class discussions.

Content Knowledge. The participants commonly believed that if they had adequate knowledge about the topic being discussed, they could more easily manage to participate in discussions. Jooree notes,

> Even if I majored in [a] business related field, when the topic is not famil- iar, it's difficult to talk. Sometime, I [have] to listen to everyone talk for [the] whole class. It is not a good experience. So if I [had] more cultural knowledge of what kind of situation it [was], maybe it would be easier. But I am from a different culture, so, for example, it is sometimes hard to understand the context of a business situation in America. (Jooree, back- ground interview, September 22)

In one of my classroom observations, Jooree did indeed once contribute to a whole-class discussion when she seemed to be especially familiar with the topic. During a discussion of contextual meanings when making business negotiations, she spoke with confidence about how one expression used in one business context may have a different connotation in another context. She provided her own example from Korea to explain the difference.

When I asked some of the participants what advice they would give to Korean students planning to pursue an MBA degree in the United States, Sungmin gave one recommendation: *that it is important to have good English ability and sufficient knowledge in their field in either Korean or English.* While Sungmin believed that students' English proficiency and sufficient field knowledge would help them adjust better to the new classroom environment,

another issue that was difficult to resolve was their anxiety as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers.

Anxiety. Although the participants valued participation in discussion as an important way to consolidate their knowledge as well as to share their ideas and opinions with other class members, they stated that talking in class in English was anxiety provoking.

> During the class discussions, when a teacher invites us to comment on readings I begin to feel nervous. I have to think about what to say, so I try not to make eye contact. (Jena, informal interview, October 22)

Some students like Jinsoo were afraid of being called on to speak, and he claimed that he felt anxious when obliged to say something in front of the whole class:

> If I prepare a script with a power point, it is easier for me. I rely on the graphs and statistics to explain my ideas. But when I am not prepared and the professor call[s] my name to explain something that has no graphs, I think my heart is going to stop. I wish that the professor [would] know about this. (Jinsoo, informal interview, October 26)

In one notable classroom observation, while Jinsoo was presenting his power point on strategic ways to communicate with difficult co-workers, the instructor intervened and asked him what he thought about the strategies from the readings and if any of the strategies worked for him. Jinsoo was unable to respond.

Jooree provided another perspective. She noted that while it was difficult for foreign language learners to contribute to oral discussions, she did not feel that her silence indicated a lack of participation.

> I think for many Koreans it is really difficult to speak out in class. But I think it is important to know it is okay not to talk when you are not ready. … that doesn't mean I do not participate. I listen to other students speak very carefully, and I learn what to say. (Jooree, interview, November 12)

She noted that she listened carefully to other students' discussion and reflected on their comments (informal interview, November 12). Her views corresponded with Miller's (1992) and Liu's (2001) contention that learners from different social and cultural backgrounds approach class discussions differently.

Different Classroom Context

The students believed that two factors greatly influenced their oral classroom participation: their class members' attitude toward their comments and the discussion formats.

Teachers and Classmates. All the students in this study believed that their teachers' and classmates' reactions to their questions or comments influenced their likelihood of making future discussion comments. They saw that the instructor's and other students' positive feedback on their comments motivated them to further participate in the class discussions. However, negative or critical comments were perceived by the students as a de-motivating factor in class participation. As Jena noted in one of the interviews:

> When I can talk clearly and my friends or the teacher supports my comments and even provide the correct expression, I feel less nervous … When I feel stuck and can't explain my ideas clearly and the teacher keeps asking me to rephrase it again or they ignore me, I don't want to talk again. It's embarrassing for me. (Jena, informal interview, November 23)

What was significant among the informal interviews was that the Korean participants felt that they were affected more by their teacher's attitude than that of their classmates. They also believed that teachers should be more responsible for generating a comfortable learning environment.

Discussion Formats. All the participants agreed that the type of discussion formats influenced their oral participation and that some discussion formats facilitated their participation. All participants except Jena said that they felt more comfortable in small-group discussions than in whole-class ones.

> It's harder to speak in a big class discussion. If I speak, everyone will look at me and I feel that if I make a mistake it will make me more nervous… If I participate in small groups, I feel more comfortable. I can be myself and not feel nervous [about] making mistakes. But when the instructor comes to visit the group, again, I get nervous. (Jooree, informal interview, November 23)

Both classroom observations as well as the transcripts of small-group discussions showed that Jooree felt more comfortable in small-group discussions, where she interacted actively with other students. On the other hand, Jena claimed that although she did not feel comfortable speaking in whole-class discussions, she preferred them to small-group discussions because she was able to hear multiple perspectives from her colleagues.

Discussion

It was difficult to determine what factors led to the participants' silence in class and what factors played a greater role in their discussion participation. However, recursive analysis of the data led me to conclude that the students' perceptions of their language level, differences in socio-cultural values and educational practices, individual differences, and the classroom context were all intertwined and influenced the oral classroom participation of the five Korean students. The students in this study demonstrated many cultural similarities with other Asian students, but they also revealed distinctive Korean cultural characteristics, such as *Chaemyon*, especially when the male students interacted in class discussions.

Two distinct factors are commonly used to explain Asian international students' reticence in US classrooms: lack of adequate language proficiency (Ferris & Tagg, 1996) and differing socio-cultural norms and values (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Indeed, all five Korean MBA students in my study identified both factors as influencing their own verbal participation in class discussions. They perceived their language skills as inadequate for effective participation in class discussions. As a previous study (Tsui, 1996) indicated, this perception seemed to lead them to feel uncomfortable talking in class and to be greatly concerned about how their teacher and classmates might evaluate their language ability. However, it was especially interesting that the students' evaluation of their own language proficiency was generally lower than I would have thought, based on their interviews, classroom presentations, online discussions, and participation in small-group discussions. While it would be wrong to minimize the role of language proficiency, it does seem important to distinguish between actual language proficiency and self-perception of language proficiency, with both playing major roles in students' oral participation in the business classroom.

CONCLUSION

While the study was limited by the small sample size, it contributes to an understanding of how a group of Korean MBA students in a business communication class attempted to actively participate in classroom discussions. While Asian students are generally perceived to be less vocal than others about their opinions, which is often attributed to their lack of language proficiency, this study suggests that their discomfort with the English language is only one of the many factors that influence the students' verbal interaction in class discussions. What has become evident thus far is that students' language proficiency, different socio-cultural values and educational practices, individual

differences, and classroom context are all interrelated factors that contribute to the complexity of students' oral participation. In this study, in particular, the two male students, who were the oldest in the classroom and who had experienced hierarchical military practices, appeared to be influenced by Korean social expectations more than the female students. They were more reluctant to speak in class unless directly spoken to. These results suggest that business communication classes could do more to help Asian international students in general to more actively participate in class discussions.

To support international students in the MBA program, many universities focus on providing language training courses (Dunnet, 1985), offering workshops on critical thinking skills and resume writing, and even providing "buddy systems" in which international students are paired with native speakers within the program. However, "the success of cross-cultural communication largely depends on mutual understanding between communicators" (Liu, 2001, p. 192). To reduce misunderstanding between communicators and to help international students more successfully function in MBA classrooms in general, teachers should further examine classroom discourse skills as well as the dynamics of classroom participation. For example, teachers should clearly address the classroom objectives, the expected participant roles, and classroom discourse strategies, such as turn-taking rules. In addition, knowing that these students may underestimate their oral proficiency, or fear that their classmates and instructors will evaluate their performance, it would be helpful for business communication classes to explicitly address foreign language learning anxiety.

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