

Korean Hybridity: The Language Classroom as Cultural Hybrid

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Abstract

This paper looks at the Korean language classroom as a cultural hybrid of Korean and perceived American culture. It is based around the idea of the language classroom as a subculture. Through discussions of classroom geography, Confucianism, and identity construction, the paper concludes that this hybrid subculture offers an opportunity to explore new cultural identities within a subculture without having to join subcultural groups in normal life. The paper concludes this is significant since teachers need to be prepared with accurate intercultural expectations. The paper offers that more empirical research in specific teacher/student and student/student relationships is needed, as well as looking at other cultures to see if classroom cultural hybridity is unique to Korea.

Keywords: intercultural, communication, Korean, second language teaching, TESL, teaching English as a foreign language, TEFL, teaching English to speakers of other languages, TESOL, ethnicity, identity, hybrid, culture, classroom, subculture.

Introduction

In Korea there is a subculture of learning English. This is a hobby for some, and a serious endeavor for others, but, inside the classroom, students can take on different identities from the ones they play within regular society. This cultural identity is not necessarily Korean culture, nor is it any type of English or American culture. It is heavily based around what Korean culture perceives American culture to be, but it functions as a hybrid culture in which students can take on a new cultural identity.

This is significant, since it affects the cultural expectations found within the classroom. This is not only true for both teachers and students, but for researchers as well. Teachers are trained in intercultural communication in order to understand their students. If teachers are interacting with a hybrid culture, and not the authentic culture, it means that they have (1) been prepared for a different set of expectations within the classroom and (2) they are not prepared for the real nature of the cultural exchange that they will find in the class.

The Korean Hybridity is constructed by Koreans taking on the role of the Other into a new subculture. This is done mainly through language, but Confucianism, the role of emotion, classroom geography, and social hierarchy all play a role. Through the use of Hebdige's (1979) ideas on subculture and classroom geography, Anderson's (1983) definition of nation, as well as the philosophical underpinnings of Other and Confucianism, this Korean Hybridity is explored as a new set of cultural clothes that Koreans try on within the language classroom.

Korean Confucianism

Korea is an extremely hierarchical society based on Confucian principles (Harris, 2003; Lukoff, 1978; Pratt, 2006). The hierarchical notion of teacher and student is imprinted into the five principle relations of Confucianism:

1. Ruler and subject
2. Father and son
3. Elder brother and younger brother
4. Husband and wife
5. Friend and friend

These relationships play out in daily cultural life. A younger person always pours a drink for the older person, not vice versa. Two people can not engage in conversation without knowing each other's age so they could use the proper honorific language. Family relationships are always based on titles, and not on names. Throughout daily cultural life it is impossible to speak or act without responding to these relationships.

It can not be understated that this relationship is imprinted into the very social fabric of Korean society. Since the entry of Confucian principles into Korean language and culture over 2000 years ago, Korean society's interpretation of Confucianism has been strict; so strict that, in the early days of Confucianism, Chinese visitors commented on the rigidity and inflexibility with which it was practised (Harris, 2000.) Harris defines the modern interpretation of Confucianism in Korea as follows:

"Today, it's difficult to miss the way in which Koreans conduct themselves, the way in which they speak, the way in which they hold a cup when pouring, the way they smile, and laugh, and cry - everything, in short, that defines them on a social level. Confucianism still remains an integral element in the way Koreans act much more than it does in China, for example, where Confucianism died an ugly death in the aftermath of the Communist revolution" (Harris, p. 27).

It is important to note that this case of hybridity in the classroom found in Korea is unique to Korea. Just as Harris has noted, the wane of Confucianism in China, as well as modern developments in the rest of Asia, especially modern Japan, make this interpretation of Korean hybrid culture, in relation to Confucianism, untransplantable to other Asian cultures. This should certainly not be viewed as a metanarrative that can be brushed across all of East Asia, even though other Asian cultures have Confucian histories and aspects in their cultures. However, this would not preclude other cultures from having different kinds of cultural hybridity.

Classroom Geography

Hebdige (1979) has pointed out that a whole range of decisions about what is possible and what is not possible within education have been already made, even unconsciously, before course content is ever decided. Hebdige informs that this is manifest in, for example, a lecture theatre being constructed in rows so all the students have to look at the teacher or a school being constructed of bricks and mortar. And this affects how education is taught. These environments reinforce prevailing ideological assumptions within the culture and are placed as a given, immutable. As Hebdige puts it, "The frames of our thinking have been translated into actual bricks and mortar" (p. 13).

While Korean classrooms tend to be immutable, with students focused on teachers, the teaching environments that English teachers often find themselves, in the adult education context, are often non-traditional environments, with, of course, the exclusion of universities. Schools are often housed in buildings that would otherwise be offices, and hence classes become circular spaces. The shift of geography from all students looking at the teacher directly to being able to see most other students is important; it is not simply cosmetic. Students certainly continue to focus attention on the teacher, but being able to see all the other students opens up a new realm of equality.

Hierarchy

Korean hierarchy comes to the fore in a story told by Harris (2000), who describes teachers as "God-like figures" (p.207) in his experience. Harris had enrolled in a Korean language course taught by a colleague whom he had already known socially. On the first day, when he asked a question about verb conjugation in class, her response was very negative for simply having asked a question and later told him that questions like that were not to take up class time.

It is also important to note that Korean grammar reinforces Confucian hierarchies by using grammatical endings based on Confucian relationships (Harris, 2000; Suh, 1978). For example, if one were to say excuse me to someone of equal or lower social position they would simply say *shill-ae*, but to someone of higher social position one would say *shillye-hamnida*. In addition, there are seven different *speech levels* that can be used depending upon social position. Every verb that is conjugated, as well as many

nouns that may be stated, have to be interpreted through the principles of Confucian social position. It is not possible to speak without reinforcing one's position within society.

In English, this reinforcement does not exist. By changing the language, students no longer have the necessity to organize their language through Confucian relationships. As well, students feel comfortable addressing others by their names when speaking English, a right reserved only for those born in the same year when speaking Korean. It can not be understated what this does to the identity of the speaker. Within Korean society, Confucian relationships are made every minute of everyday, as Lukoff (1978) has pointed out, "The [Korean] speaker judges the addressee as a social identity relative to himself [or herself]" (p.269). By removing the Confucian honorifics and other language elements, language is no longer reinforcing the five seminal relationships. Students are now free to explore other identities, not simply outside of their traditional cultural norms, but outside of the basis on which they have built their social identities.

Role of Emotion

When Korean students go into the classroom they are presented with a new realm of both limitations and possibilities. They not only shed some hierarchical notions, but the whole expression of emotion is affected by the structural differences between the languages. The expression of emotion is important in the discussion of how Koreans negotiate meaning when speaking English. Kim (1978) notes that, in Korean, it is not grammatically correct to use a word relating to emotion in the second or third person while speaking in the present tense; one is only permitted to use the first person. The very idea of attributing emotions to another person is totally unwarranted. One can not say, "He is unhappy;" however, one can say, "That man looks happy" (p. 259). Of course the difference being that the second is an indefinite opinion; the certainty of another person's emotions is not expressed.

Kim (1978) also discussed the difference in the very nature of the Korean lexicon as juxtaposed to the English lexicon. Kim compared 27 categories of emotion based on the Korean and English lexicons by doing interviews with native speakers of both languages. Although he did find many base emotions were similar in both languages, there were a few important differences (pp. 266-267):

1. Kim's survey found 12 words for sadness in English, but 28 in Korean.
2. In Korean, loneliness forms a different category from depression, with 6 separate words for loneliness.
3. Shyness and shame overlap in Korean while they are separate in English.

The fact that Kim (1978) found such a considerable difference in the size and shape between the Korean and English lexicons is not surprising. What is significant is that when Korean students enter a classroom, just as speakers of many other languages, they enter with a whole new realm of possibilities. They are more restricted in the nuances of sadness and loneliness that they can express, not because of their English level, but due to the nature of the English language. They now have the ability, or even the permission, to refer to how another person is feeling at that present time (p. 250). This opens up a new realm of possibilities that can allow a student to form new identities within the language classroom.

The Role of Other

New identities are constructed through playing the role of Other. In Kumaravadivelu's (2003) discussion of Said's view of Orientalism, Kumaravadivelu describes how the colonial West has essentialized colonized people in Asia by stereotyping Asia as a mass single entity and not communities of individuals. This view, however, is not one sided; Asia is looking back. Just as essentializations have been made by colonialists, so they have also been made by the so-called 'colonized.'

Pratt (2006) has commented that the Korean search for identity was a major theme throughout the twentieth century. While the nation is split into two states, from a colonial perspective, America lives on as Other. Korea may be divided, but most South Koreans view the nation in terms of two states, fitting Anderson's (1983) definition of nation as limited, sovereign and community. But in order to maintain statehood in the South, there has been a bargain made with the U.S.A. for protection. American culture being so prevalent in South Korea, having to search for identity in relation to the Communist North, and

having the specter of Japanese colonization from the first half of the twentieth century, remain contributors to the formation of identity in South Korea.

Within the classroom, new identities are formed by playing the role of Other. One example is through names. Koreans rarely call each other by their names; relationships and hierarchies are always present. One's brother is always older brother (*Hyoung-neem*) or younger brother (*Dong-Saeng*); one's teacher is always called teacher (*sunsengnim*). Inside the classroom, many Koreans take on a new name. This is often an alias, a name typically found in American culture. This can also be a shortened form of their own name, like Jin Ho being shortened to Jin, which would not be a common way of addressing someone in conversation in Korean. This could also be a completely different name like Alex or John. These aliases are significant because they represent (1) a way of seeing others without traditional hierarchical structures and (2) a way of becoming Other.

Subculture

To Hebdige (1979), Western culture has viewed subculture as a way of resistance, as opposition. In Korea, the view of the language classroom can be seen as one of becoming, as taking on the rituals and essence of what is perceived as American. The idea of what being American is presents an elusive concept. English speaking is often equated with perceived American stereotypes, and becoming American, or what is perceived as such, is a new identity that can be played out in the language classroom. No other place in Asia has had half of its population convert to the same religion as the United States (CIA world factbook, 2007). No other place has considered outlawing, and fining the speaking of, the native language of the country in a certain district in order to make it an English only area (Korea to set up English-language towns, 2006). It is important to note that this is not an authentic American identity, nor is it an attempt for Koreans to become Americans. This is a new identity played out in the classroom outside of Confucian identities.

Being in the language classroom and speaking in a foreign language is akin to the out of body experience of being on-line. A user name in a chat room is very similar to taking an English name in a classroom. Both are the donning of an alias. Wilder-Bassett (2005) has argued that written computer mediated conversations allow out of body experiences where "critical acts where we name identities in CMC [computer mediated communication] move us outside of pre-established categories. Any language and culture learning invites us to get in touch with our desires for establishing voice and identity" (p. 637). Wilder-Bassett goes on to describe how in her own classes exploring narratives that construct the Other fit well into CMC due to the distance presented by the medium.

Although it is difficult to argue that the language classroom exists in a space that is as untraditional and different from traditional classroom spaces as CMC, the very notion of speaking another language, as well as the alternative classroom geography that Koreans often find themselves in, produces a different medium. This change is not being required to organize via Confucian hierarchies and taking on a new identity through an alias allows students to move through the classroom as something other than Koreans. In Hebdige's (1979) study of various youth subcultures in Britain, he notes that the symbols of the subculture are "tokens of a self-imposed exile" (p. 2). And while Hebdige was discussing how a safety pin, pointed shoe or motorcycle are symbolic of youth culture removing itself from the mainstream, the nature of English grammar, and the attachment of an alias, divorce the student from the culture. But the student is not taking on American culture. Often the desire to take on a different name is to avoid Confucian hierarchy. This is also not the desire of the student to have a cultural transformation. For the time in class, the student exists separate from both dominant cultures, in a unique position to define himself or herself.

Just as in youth culture it might be doubtful that a young person might stay in the youth culture permanently, so this practicing of hybrid culture is not necessarily transformative. Just as an immigrant child may practice one culture in the home and move into the dominant culture in the school, so a Korean adult may fully participate in Korean culture and then put a new set of clothes upon entering the language classroom; a form of cultural code-switching.

Conclusion

It is important to fully realize just how different the social experience of the ESL classroom in Korea is when juxtaposed against living as a Korean in South Korean society. Speaking English changes the nature of what emotions can be expressed; it debunks the need to organize oneself by standard social hierarchies; it cuts off several lexical ideas; the language of the USA, which stands for power since it has been protecting South Korea since the end of the Second World War, is being spoken. All of these elements are significant.

An additionally significant consideration is how this is affecting programs that prepare instructors to teach in Korea. If teachers are learning about Korean culture, this will be significant in their daily lives, but without learning about the subcultural elements existing in the language classroom, teachers will not grasp what is needed in terms of intercultural communication.

Considering the classroom geography, living outside of Confucian hierarchies and taking on a new identity outside of Korean culture, the language classroom in Korea functions as a subculture within Korean society. This is not a subculture that is attempting transformative change within Korean society; rather, it exists as a theatre to put on the clothes of Other and explore identities that might be difficult to explore within Korean society.

More exploration is needed of an empirical nature to see how this affects the relationships between students in the class and the relationships with teachers. Research is needed into how intercultural education is taught to teachers to see if it is reflecting the overall culture as a whole or the subculture of the ESL classroom. Additionally, there lies the question of if this classroom subculture is unique to Korean culture or if this is something that is occurring in other monocultural environments.

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