

# Successful Classroom Discussions with Adult Korean ESL/EFL Learners

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This paper discusses ways for teachers to enhance the effectiveness of class discussions for adult Korean ESL/EFL learners.

## Introduction

Native English speaking teachers often encounter difficulties dealing with South Korean (hereafter Korean) students who tend to be reserved and express fewer opinions in oral class discussions. Teachers lacking an understanding of Korean students may misinterpret the students' behaviors and have a hard time encouraging discussion and helping them learn and practice English in class. This paper will discuss common behaviors and perceptions embedded in the structure of Korean group dynamics and examine why Korean students tend to exhibit certain classroom behaviors. Some suggestions for tackling Korean students' group structures will be made to help teachers better facilitate group discussion.

## Common Behaviors of Korean Students in Oral Discussion

Commonly, Korean students tend not to speak much in class, appear reserved, rarely ask questions, and do not express opinions. Other behaviors include talking in Korean when there are other Koreans present and whispering things to themselves and others. These behaviors can be taken by teachers as signs of disinterest or lack of motivation. Understanding Korean culture can help resolve such perceptual misunderstandings.

## Perceptions Underlying Korean Students Behaviors

Korean students are used to viewing teachers as authority figures in class. A teacher is a person who leads the class and speaks most. Students tend to listen and take notes. When they miss the teacher's comments, students tend to believe that that is their own fault. Instead of asking questions to teachers directly, students look at peers' notes or whisper to neighboring students. Students tend to believe that a teacher is a person who knows everything. Students don't want the teacher to get embarrassed when a teacher can't answer a student's question. They tend to quietly wait to have knowledge transmitted to them. Influenced by Confucianism, students tend to value quietness, be less opinionated, and believe that they learn from elders and wiser persons who are usually represented by a teacher in class.

Influenced by hierarchical collectivism (Triandis, 1995), students tend to have a hierarchical structure generated by their age relationships. When there is an elder man in a group discussion, other younger Korean students tend to be quiet so as not to disrespect this elder's authority. And this structure tends to be fostered by the group 'togetherness' value. Korean students tend to be more comfortable when they behave in similar ways to others so that they can stay in the group boundaries that have been created. Koreans tend to value their identities more in a group than as an individual.

Since they have a strong group identity, Korean students tend to speak Korean when they are with other Koreans. Research shows that the stronger the identity a learner has toward his/her native language culture, the higher the frequency of using the native language (Norton, 2001). Korean students generally seem to have a strong identity toward their native language and this identity is fostered while staying in the Korean community.

Korean students have a fear of making mistakes when speaking English (Lim 2002). Through formal English education in secondary

school, students have been evaluated on their level of English ability by exams that measure grammatical accuracy. Students tend to monitor their utterances in class based on their knowledge of grammatical rules. When they realize that they have made mistakes, they get embarrassed. Teachers may notice that Korean students tend to speak to themselves silently when they have to speak in turn. That is one way to practice so that they can produce perfect sentences when they have their turns.

Some of the discussion topics in ESL/EFL classes do not seem to be comfortable for Koreans. Issues on abortion, world economics, politics, suicide, and the death penalty can be remote from some students' interest. Some topics are culturally not so comfortable for Koreans to discuss in public (e.g., sex).

## **How Can Teachers of Korean Students Succeed in Oral Group Discussion?**

Although a teacher may think Korean students are passive, students are busy putting the teacher's comments together in their minds and writing down notes. Since this is what they have done before, students often think those behaviors will be acceptable in their new learning environments. They don't really recognize that a teacher really wants them to say what they are thinking. Some try to speak in class but they are probably too concerned about their mistakes to dare to talk in a group discussion.

To relieve those students' concerns and encourage their speech, a teacher needs to create a safe learning environment where students can practice their English. One is to let them know that mistakes are inevitable and not to be afraid of mistakes in class. While students can do their best to produce appropriate utterances, perfect speech should not be one of the goals for beginning students in which a discussion is encouraged. Although students easily conceive of a teacher as an authority figure who corrects their mistakes all the time, teachers should note that correcting mistakes frequently can also increase the level of anxiety and discourage students' participation in group work.

Teachers may not want to have a whole class discussion early in the semester. Because most students are not used to such interactions and speaking, a whole class discussion is somewhat intimidating to students. A gradual expansion of the group number may be desirable. During the first couple of weeks of the semester, a teacher may want to ask questions to students one by one. Students probably expect being called on by a teacher. Until students feel comfortable with expressing their opinions voluntarily, a teacher may want to make sure that all students participate by directly calling on them in class. Calling on students is one of the ways of working with students' perceptions of a teacher as an authority figure.

Another way of inviting students to talk is discussing possible topics close to the students' immediate interest. If the majority are students, they might be more interested in talking about their future life plan, finding a partner, job related issues, and so on rather than politics and economics. As the students volunteer more, a teacher may want to broach other various topics and even have students choose topics that they want to discuss. Giving more control to students in a discussion can intrigue their interest and activate participation in class.

As a way of relieving age related tensions, teachers can regulate group composition in a small group discussion. If there is an older looking male in class, teachers may not want to put him in a group with other younger looking Koreans. Gender also plays an important role. Age related tensions are less prominent among women. In fact, younger women will be more comfortable being grouped with other older women than with other men.

In the process of shifting the center from a teacher to students by encouraging discussion, students may perceive that a teacher is not knowledgeable enough to lead the class or feel that they cannot learn from peers (Bae & Pashby, 2002). These perceptions are tied to the view that a teacher is a person who knows everything and transmits knowledge to students. To tackle this perception, teachers may want to talk explicitly about expectations for students. Teachers need to help students understand that they are the ones who will construct their knowledge and teachers can be facilitators or helpers in the process of students' own knowledge construction. However, to help students feel that they are learning well, teachers may want to be explicit in listing goals and achievements for activities. For example, if teachers use a game where students work with their peers, they may want to list what is expected to be learned from the activity and summarize achievements after the activity. By so doing, students can visualize where the teacher is trying to lead them in the lesson and simultaneously, the teacher can encourage the idea that students are the ones who need to actively participate in their learning.

About the issue of Koreans' using their native language, teachers may make it a rule not to speak Korean at school. Teachers may want to say it is not a suggestion but a rule that students need to follow. One of the reasons that students want to stick to using their

native language is related to the face-saving issue. When students make mistakes in front of their colleagues, they get embarrassed and hesitate to use English. Teachers, first, should emphasize that making mistakes is an inevitable process in learning a foreign language and second, helps relieve the face-saving concerns by making every student speak English in class and at school.

## Conclusion

Learning English from native English speaking teachers is more than learning a language itself. It is learning a new learning culture (cf. Ballard, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Teachers who have students from different cultures need to acknowledge the students' cultures and utilize an understanding of the cultures in a way that helps improve students' learning. Perceptions won't change immediately. They need time and effort to be reformed. Therefore, ESL/EFL teachers may need much patience and need to try things gradually and examine how students' behaviors have changed over the semester. Sometimes teachers want to be explicit about what they expect students to do and other times they need to understand students' socio-cultural values in learning and take what their students are and move it from there.

In a discussion environment, students tend to be very anxious despite a desire to learn to speak. This paper suggests that some reasons for students not being able to participate in discussion come from socio-cultural values and norms that have been rooted in students' native languages. Those patterns won't change quickly. Teachers need to understand and work around cultural constraints. By doing so, both students and teachers have more enjoyable experiences in oral discussion.

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