

Differences between American and Korean Culture and the Potential Impacts on ESL Teaching and Learning

¹Michael Gale, ²Lee Hughes,
^{1,2}Asia University, Tokyo, 180-8629, Japan

ABSTRACT: A significant difference between American culture and Korean culture is the fact that Americans are viewed as being more individualist, while Korean people are more collectivist. This holds implications in the EFL /ESL classroom in which teachers and instructors will be dealing with these cultural differences. It has been previously mentioned that teachers need to learn and understand about the cultures of their students in order to teach more effectively. This study has examined Korean culture through an interview to explore the differences with American culture. The aim is to use this information to allow us to find out what teachers can do to ensure teaching is done in accordance with the culture values of the nation.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we have decided to complete an ethnographic report on the Korean people while residing in Korea. We carried out an observation in two Starbucks coffee shops on March 10, 2019 at 3:03PM and 3:30PM. The outward appearance of those observed were some businessmen dressed in suits and a few younger people who were dressed more casually. Additionally, there were women wearing white or darker colored, long coats and they also had large purses. The age group at the coffee shops we observed ranged from mostly 19-32. There were very few elderly people there. The two coffee shops we went to had an average of thirty to forty people in the large room. There were also sofas where one could sit down. We knew already that Korea is a collectivist culture (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004) and this was confirmed in the coffee shop. For example, the majority of the people in the coffee shop were there in at least groups of two, and there were also many groups of five or larger. This shows a representation of a collectivist culture that values group involvement. Also, we noticed that in conversations, they were very group oriented with one person talking at a time. We think this played a large part with Korean people emphasizing the importance of (Landis et al., 2004) in-group behavior, and it seemed like everyone in the groups shared some type of salient attribute, such as values and language.

An interesting finding that we discovered was when we saw two executives leave while the other businessman sat down. Those two businessmen brought coffee for the other man sitting down. In addition, we observed this etiquette when we were in the second coffee shop. A girl bought coffee for her friend and brought back the receipt to her friend. Lastly, we observed this behavior when we saw a woman bring coffee for six people. That must have been a work out for that poor woman. Why did the other people sit down and let her do this? Is this a difference between individualist and collectivist cultures?

We noticed that people in Korea use body language a lot less than Americans do. Although women in Korea use body language when they talk, men use it considerably less. However, men did openly display their affection to their girlfriends in the coffee shop. For example, in the second coffee shop there was a middle-aged man who held his girlfriend's hand for over ten minutes. In regards to cell phone behavior, I noticed that Korean women enjoy taking pictures of themselves and also put on make-up in public. This is very different from in the West, where women do not usually engage in this behavior. This could be a very big cultural difference in regards to female behavior in Korea and the U.S. The last finding was that there were many people who had their shoes off in the coffee shop and we wondered why this was so. We have noticed that it is respectful to take off your shoes before you go in someone's home or in certain restaurants, but we do not know if this is applicable in the coffee shop.

II. METHODOLOGY

Michael Gale asked the questions. Here are the questions that he would like to engage the interviewee with:

1. I noticed that in the coffee shop there would be one person that would bring back coffee for the entire group. Why is that? Is there a part of Korean culture that makes it respectful to do this?
2. There were large groups at the coffee shop. I observed that most of the conversations were with one person talking and the others listening. Are conversations in coffee shops normally geared for one person to talk at a time? I noticed that there were very few side conversations.
3. This question is about phones. I saw many girls playing with their phones in the coffee shop. They would take pictures of themselves and of their friends. Do you think Korea is a phone society and why is

taking pictures of oneself so common? 4. There were many people doing their homework, sleeping, etc. in the coffee shop. Is a coffee shop a place to go where people kill time? 5. What is your opinion of coffee shops? Do you go there often? What do you do at the coffee shops? You have traveled to the West. Did you notice a difference from the coffee shops in Korea to the ones in the West?

The Interview: The pseudonym of the interviewee is Moon. She is a Korean female-aged 27 and working for a marketing research company. She is a thin 168 cm who is dressed in business casual clothing, wears glasses and has long black hair. The interview was arranged in a classroom after we took part in an advanced speaking course. The key questions dealt with non-verbal behaviors. They were: I noticed in the coffee shop there would be one person that would bring back coffee for the entire group. Why is that? Is there a part of Korean culture that makes it respectful to do this? Are conversations in coffee shops geared towards one person talking at a time? I noticed that there were few side conversations. Could you tell us a little bit about this? Is it a normal occurrence? Do you think that Koreans use less body language than Americans? (Questions from Interview)

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interview was fascinating for Mr. Gale because Moon was his student for over four months and it was interesting to learn about her culture. He noticed her enthusiasm about meeting with him when she asked for the interview questions beforehand, and her positive attitude to his questions prior to the interview. The interview went by rather quickly when he got to discussing key questions and Moon was able to provide him with a thorough understanding of different aspects of Korean culture. We learned a great deal about Korean culture through the interview. For example, Koreans place a heavy emphasis on age. This is important even in the coffee shop where it is considered polite for those who are younger to get coffee for everyone and this is even more important in the workplace. Moon provided evidence of work related etiquette at the coffee shop. For example, Moon mentioned, "If I go to coffee shop I should make the coffees and materials for everybody because I am junior." This is an example of a (Landis et al., 2004) collectivist culture in regards to restaurant etiquette and is witnessed with Moon having to provide support for her in-group. Furthermore, we learned that if someone does not follow the norm of getting the coffee for their boss that person will be considered "not a respectable person" as mentioned by Moon.

Respect for the boss is also evident in other ways. For example, in the workplace Moon mentioned that her job was a marketing assistant, but when her boss is out of office "I should pick his phone", however Moon is not a secretary. Moon mentioned that if she were to tell human resources about the situation "people will place blame on me." The boss in Korea seems to have a lot of leeway with what they can do with employees. One would argue that the Korean workplace has a large power distance because Moon has "accepted unequal power distribution and sanctions based on rank, role, status, and age" (Landis et al., 2004, p. 220). In the coffee shop, many of the conversations were geared towards one person speaking. We wanted to find out the reason for this and after further discussing with Moon we found from her that Koreans consider it "rude if I cut or intercept their conversation." This also applies to the workplace where Moon mentioned that in "business meetings, it is important you cannot give your opinion freely especially with Korean company meeting." The communication style of Koreans would be high-text communication where there are social norms "that frame the interaction encounter" (Landis et al., 2004, p. 227). The social norm in this case would be the fact that having side conversations would be considered rude and just like if you give your own opinion in a business meeting. Moon went on to mention that foreign companies might not be as strict with expressing opinions. This is because of their (Landis et al., 2004) low context communication style where expressing their thoughts is important.

In regards to body language, Mr. Gale noticed in the coffee shop that it was used less in Korea than in America. He was curious why it wasn't used as much in the West. Moon stated, "I think we use body language less than Americans. If I do like Americans, my friends might blame me and think why are you doing this? You should be concentrated on your speaking and body languages." Body language is not even used often with men where Moon said "if a man uses body language very much they might think he is a gay." We also learned from Moon that there has only been one gay person that came out of the closet in Korea and it took him a long time to repair his reputation. This is also considered a taboo in Korean culture. Along with being a homosexual, smoking is considered a taboo in Korea. This taboo applies to women more. Moon mentioned "if I say that people might think I have a bad character, and there is a negative stereotype for women smoking." In addition, when people mention that they go "clubbing" that is also a taboo. According to Moon, women and men are stereotyped if they go to night clubs. Also, Moon added that she does not mention the fact she goes to clubs at work because they will "chat about me in the office. They might make some bad rumors about me and I don't want to be open." Lastly, Moon was able to recall a negative experience she had with someone from a different culture. In Moon's experience, an American woman stereotyped her. We know this was a stereotyped in the film *Better Together*

Than Apart Bennett talked about how “stereotypes are the application of the generalization to every single case.” In Moon’s case, the American woman assumed that Moon had an expressive behavior. Moon went on to mention “She watched a Korean soap opera and noticed this happened. She criticized me and I offense before we had 11 children and we could not take care of all of them.” Moon further explained that this does not occur anymore and that it only did a long time ago because Korean people had large families and it was difficult to manage their children, so they hit them because it had a “fast effect” on them. In conclusion, the information provided in the interview gave us a better perspective on Korean culture. The main difference between American culture and Korean culture is the fact that American are individualists and Korean people are collectivists. This also holds implications in the EFL /ESL classroom where we will be dealing with these cultural differences. Moran (2001) mentioned that teachers need to be “learners of culture” (Moran, 2001, p.3). We think this is very important in this context because Korean culture is very different from our cultures, and we need to be able to understand the differences in the EFL classroom. For example, we might use body language less to emphasize points since our students might not respond well to a male instructor using body language. Also, we will not pair older students with younger students because most Koreans prefer to work with those who are similar in age. Further research should be conducted to find more about the differences in cultures and how they can affect both teaching and learning in the classroom.

REFERENCES

1. Bennett. *Better Together Than Apart. Differences in Cultural Behavior.* Retrieved April 14, 2010, <http://online.apu.edu/re/DotNextLaunch.asp?courseid=4040714>
2. Bennett, J., Bennett, M, and Landis, D., (Eds). (2004). *Handbook of intercultural training.* 3rd edition. Sage Publishing.
3. Moran, P. (2001). *Teaching Culture: Perspectives in practice.* Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Appendix: Interview Transcript

Date of Interview: March 17, 2019

Time of Interview: 1:00 PM

Location of Interview: Seoul, South Korea

Interviewee: Moon

I noticed in the coffee shop there would be one person that would bring back coffee for the entire group. Why is that? Is there a part of Korean culture that makes it respectful to do this?

I think so its respect for others and a good gesture.

Is there an age difference for why people bring back coffee? For example, I noticed a group of three businessmen and one of them sat down. The other two businessmen brought him back coffee.

If I go to the coffee shop I should bring the coffee for my and when we go to restaurant I should set chopsticks and spoon for them. It is a kind of respect I think. If you don’t do that, people will think you are not a respectable person. Korean respect very strictly and in the office we should respect our boss.

In what ways should you respect the boss in the workplace?

I should say like hello first and when I go to the restaurant and coffee shop I should bring back the materials and set the table first. When we prepare the meeting, I should make the coffees and materials for everybody because I am junior. When he is out of office I should pick his phone, and list who has called and what he or she demands.

Isn’t this secretary type work, but you’re a marketing assistant?

Yes, but I could place blame on HQ headquarters, but if I don’t people will place blame for me. Another thing, I will bring back the coffee, but the boss will pay for it.

Does the respect for age difference play out at home as well?

Yes, I cannot start eating the meal alone. Grandmother/father start first, then mother/father, then I can start. It is home education. You should wait when invited by a Korean family.

Are conversations in coffee shops geared towards one person to talk a time? I noticed that there were little side conversations. Could you tell us a little bit about this is it a normal occurrence?

This is a kind of etiquette we should wait and listen while the others talking. It is a kind of respect. We don't accept while others talking it is a kind of intercept. If I have an opinion about the conversation, I should wait and then ask "Can I ask or say something?" They accept and When they let me express my opinion I can say it could be rude if I cut or intercept their conversation. If someone say something while others talking, we say stop and wait. We say it is side broadcasting and we hate that. We think it is rude and we. Especially girls. Business meetings is important and you cannot give your opinion freely especially with Korean company meeting.

I noticed that many girls were playing with their phones in the coffee shop. I noticed many women taking pictures of themselves and their friends in the coffee shop. Why is taking pictures of oneself so common and what is the reasoning?

Do you know Cyworld (Korean type facebook)? They upload their pictures on the Cyworld and her friends might leave the comments like "You look more beautiful than before" "Wow you look fine" Wow you have good relationship "with boyfriend." When they get that compliment they feel very happy and it is kind of showing off. Especially when we travel abroad we don't only take scenic pictures. We upload big picture showing off the person's face larger than the scenic picture. It is kind of showing off like I'm rich and Korean people really like that. That's why people would like to buy BMW and Benz than Hyundai and Kia motors. In elementary, they ask how big is your home? It is separated by their home and the wealth of parent's. It is Korean character I think. They would like to be chic and show off about their daily life. They do it after work with photoshop and make their pictures look more beautiful and shiny an they put the pictures on the Cyworld for their friends. This is only for women and not men.

I noticed in the coffee shop and saw that women did their makeup out in the open and not in the bathroom. Why is this? In the West, you don't see this often. Is there a reason why women do their make-up out in the open in Korea?

We don't have any space for doing makeup. The interesting thing is we share some makeup tools among the friends. I bought this Chanel eye shadow "I would like to use this" and we share the make up tools in the coffee shop. It is a kind of playing and is a kind of showing off. Not every Korean girl they doe makeup openly in the coffee shop openly it is mostly university students who would like to show off the product they bought. They just try a little bit and don't do their make up. Moreover, there is no bathroom space.

There were many people doing their homework, sleeping, etc. in the coffee shop. Is the coffee shop a place to go where people kill time?

We go to coffeeshop for talk to each other because in Korean restaurant we should eat very fast. I don't know why but we go to coffeeshop to chat together and it is like "let's go dessert for coffee and we go for over an hour. It is a kind of fashion now especially for women. In Korea, there is no space for talking each other and we don't have many parks or museums. So, we should go to cofeeshop for conversation, and that is why we stay there for a long time. The Internet is free in Korea and that's why we bring the laptops and you work very well. That's why the date pattern is the same in Korea. We go to the cinema, dinner, then coffeeshop. Everyone does the same thing.

I noticed that some people take off their shoes in the coffee shop (I really hate that). Why is this and is this a certain aspect of Korean culture that permits this? In the house it is considered respectful to take off ones shoes does this apply in public places, too?

Normally, we take off shoes at home and we feel uncomfortable when we wear shoes. We feel relaxed at the coffee shop because it is cozy. We want to feel relaxed when in the coffee shop so we take off their shoes. There are two types of tables and there is one for taking off shoes. When I wear jeans and pants, I prefer to go to the area where you can take off your shoes.

What is your opinion of coffee shops? Do you go there often? What do you do at the coffee shops? You have traveled to the West. Did you notice a difference from the coffee shops in Korea to the West?

Coffee shop is kind of like sharing daily life with others. I go to especially on Sunday I go to coffee shop alone

for studying foreign language and doing internets. I can more concentrate on my stuff and that's why I prefer to go to quiet coffee shops. I like to Yeoiudo alone because it is quite peaceful there. Starbuck's is a little expensive than the US because we have to pay an emotional fee for music and mood because it is more chic. That is why Starbuck's in Korea is more expensive than in the US. We call it emotional fee. Because it is a chic coffee shop they don't want to down price because it is a symbol of chic. When I am drinking Starbuck's coffee people think I am a working woman, chic, and rich. That's why Korean women do not want to buy Mccafe. In Korea, we go to coffee shop with friends and I noticed in Western countries they go to coffee shops alone. In Western countries, people go to coffee shops on purpose like for reading books and memos. In Korea, we go to coffee shops with others more than alone. I think it is a big difference. The interesting thing is we order Café Latte and Americano we don't order a Café Latte with soy skimmed milk and sugar. Americans order very complexed and it was very interesting. Two people was in front of me and I waited ten minutes because they ordered very complexed. If you do that in Korea, they would be surprised if you ordered complexed and they would think you should make it alone.

I noticed that women used more body language than men in the coffee shop. Would you say compared to the West is body language used less in Korea?

I think we use less body language than Americans. If I do like Americans, my friends might blame me and think "why are you doing this" "you are such a child" and "you make me dizzy like this. You should be concentrated on your speaking than your body languages. Normally men they doesn't use body language very much. If a man uses body language very much they might think he is gay. From th TV programs, mainly gay characters use a lot of body language and maybe other Koreans will think he is gay.

Can you recall an example when someone from a different culture did or said something that offended you or bothered you?

Before when I was child it was normal that parent's give physical punishment to their child. It is very normal situation that parent's slap their children at the supermarket when they do something very childish like crying. We have very strong education for strong punishment. Normally, if Americans do physical punishment they will arrest them. In Korea, it is very normal. In America, someone asked me why are you very aggressive character because you slap your children very easily and you give physical punishment to your children. She watched a Korean soap opera and noticed this happened. She criticized me and I offense before we had 11 children and we could not take care of all of them. It is a fast effect physical punishment. We could not hold children and talk to them in thirteen minutes. Our home education is very strict and it is very normal for us to slap and give physical punishment to children. Nowadays, it is not as common in Korea when I was around 14 my parent's stopped giving me punishment. Children are not as hit as much because we have less children. I think parent's care about their children and it makes them feel shame when they are slapped in public space. Parent's think it respects their children anymore and parents over respect their children now.

What taboos (topics that should not be discussed or behaviors that should be avoided) exist in your culture?

Women smoking and if I say that people might think I have a bad character. There is a negative stereotype to smoking. If I say I went to Itaewon club and I gathering with friends over night people might think I am not a good character. At the office, I am not a very open person. I keep secret my private life. Sometimes I go to clubs with my friends. Mainly my friends are smoking at the clubs. It is very easy to smoke there for women. But, I don't want to say to my boss or colleagues because they will chat about me at the office. They might make some bad rumors about me and I don't want to be open.

Homosexuality is considered a taboo if a person admits to this they should quit their job. Their parent's will be very upset about this. There was an actor in Korea who was a homosexual. I was attended his conference and he should quit all the things. He was very well known. He should stop for seven years because he was coming out that (I am) he was gay. Now he restarted doing movies and dramas. He is like a symbol of homosexual for Korea. I think he is the only person who did coming out in Korea. He is a very brave person, I think. People might have told him what's wrong with you. Clubbing is a taboo for men and women. For men, they might be considered a playboy. I really like clubbing because I can listen to a lot of music, which I haven't known. I like the atmosphere and is really active. IT is really fun, but my parent's would be upset. I don't tell my parent's and it is easy for me because I live by myself. That's why I studied a lot to come to Seoul when I was a high school student.