

## **Group work oral participation: Examining Korean students' adjustment process in a US university**

Jung Yin Kim

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

---

*This study examines, from a sociocultural perspective, the factors that explain why a group of seven Korean students attending an undergraduate business program in a US university are initially labelled as silent participants when first engaging in group work, and how these factors impacted the students' overall adjustment process. Data came from in-depth interviews and group work observations. 'Discourse system' is used to categorise how they adapt over the course of a semester, with changes in expressing ideas, holding ground, and self-autonomy. The study showed that while various factors, including the students' English language proficiency, differences in sociocultural values and educational practices, and group work environment were intertwined and informed their group work adjustment process, differences in sociocultural values and educational practices played the most important role in their adjustment process. Regardless of their length of stay in the US, gender, and individual differences, all of the students felt challenged in the initial stages of participation in group*

*work. The findings suggest pedagogical implications for promoting oral participation of Asian international students, especially Korean students, when they first commence in group work.*

**Keywords:** *sociocultural features, group work, cultural interaction, Korean students*

---

## **Introduction**

The issue of cultural adaptation of adult South Korean (henceforth, Korean) students in overseas academic communities has been addressed by many researchers (e.g. Coward, 2002; Chen, 2003). Cross-cultural experience deepens the students' own awareness of the need to make changes to their study habits (McClure, 2007). Students select appropriate learning strategies based on their contextual needs which are influenced by learning discourses, peers, teachers, and institutional practices (Morita, 2004). Despite various intercultural challenges, which are often overwhelming in the beginning stage of studying in a new learning environment and culture, many students show determination to learn and are eager to adjust and develop. Not only do these students successfully survive the demands of studying in a new environment, but they also find a sense of fulfilment in such changes (Furnham, 2004).

This study examines a group of seven Korean undergraduate students, who transferred from a university in Korea to a US university in their second year to gain a business degree. In particular, the study explores the cultural background that these students were brought up in, and how this affects them when initially working with others; and examines how oral participation in group work enriches their learning strategies and leads to changes in their intercultural communication approach. Students in this study shared similar cultural and educational backgrounds. Born and raised in Korea, they were born post-1990, a cultural period in Korea when many Korean families, if they can afford to, have been jumping on the study-abroad bandwagon by sending their young children to English-speaking countries (Shim & Park, 2008; Kang & Abelmann, 2011). Though it is widely understood that culture, especially amongst young students, is constantly in a state of change, their parents, who uphold a traditional Korean Confucian culture,

continue to influence the students' outlook formation (Lee, 2008). Two research questions guided this research:

- (1) Does Korean culture influence students' initial group work participation, and if so, in what ways?
- (2) In what ways does group work in a US business school effect students' adjustment process?

## Literature review

Literature on Asian students' tutorial discussions in higher education often describes them as quiet, passive and compliant (Scollon & Scollon, 2001), who do not always welcome student-centred learning and feel comfortable with participatory activities, especially in the multicultural classroom (Lee, 2005). One notable feature of Asian students studying in western institutions of higher learning is their negative response to, and low level of oral participation in, group work due to their lack of language proficiency as well as cultural differences (Littlewood, 2000; Duff, 2002). Research shows that students' silent participation may be due to their cultural and social inheritance. Due to cultural, contextual and personal constraints, namely learning preferences, language, motivation, and group dynamics, students choose verbal silence in group learning settings (Kang, 2005; Cao & Phillips, 2006). However, one cannot claim that this is an exclusive behaviour of such students, and it is an unwarranted claim to regard verbal expression as the only means reflecting active participation in learning (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003). The essence of learning in a collaborative manner, such as shared leadership and one-on-one interaction, may collide with some values that Asian students are brought up with (Phuong-Mai et al., 2009, 858). The silence may also be a risk-avoidance strategy (Kim, 2008). Nevertheless, Korean students manage to adjust their home-country's style of learning and communication, and such adjustment, plus the value of Confucianism that places focus on hard work and discipline, help students live up to their parents' expectations (Holmes, 2004). While they are still accustomed to a teacher-centred learning environment, the students slowly adapt to an approach that is more student-centred with many of the participants claiming that learning becomes easier when learning by themselves. Rather than being culturally based, such approaches tend to be more contextual (Morita,

2004). The learning approaches of Confucian heritage students can change over time. With time, students appropriate a more pro-active approach to learning similar to that of their western peers (Grey, 2002). The students' positive attitudes about their host society and their ability to take control of their own adaptation process indicate that intercultural adjustment is a complex set of shifting interactions between social interaction, language learning, academic success, and personal growth. Nonetheless, the nature of successful socialization is restricted by the kinds of contact within the environment which they are engaged in (Furnham, 2004).

### **Group work in higher education**

Group work serves as the Korean participants' main contact with students of other nations, primarily a mix of Asian and other western students. Research shows that the importance of learning through group work, particularly in a multicultural setting, has increased significantly in higher education in the past three decades (e.g. Collier, 1980). However, incorporating group work, particularly in multicultural settings, in higher education creates both challenges (e.g. different communication skills) and potential benefits (e.g. sharing knowledge).

Based on the literature on group work in higher education, research studies addressing challenges faced particularly in multicultural groups have focused mostly on: (1) how group members' cultural differences affect group work performance (e.g., Behfar *et al.*, 2006; Halverson & Tirmizi, 2008), and (2) how group members' cultural dimensions of behaviour affect their understanding of and behaviour in a collaborative situation (e.g., Behfar *et al.*, 2006; Halverson & Tirmizi, 2008). For example, people from collectivistic and high-context cultures prefer indirect communication, while representatives of individualistic and low-context cultures prefer direct modes of communication (Hall, 1990). Another issue researchers have often addressed is how limited comprehension between group members may be due to different English proficiencies and great variation in accents (e.g., Davison & Ward, 1999). The current study attempts to address the aforementioned challenges in terms of the relationship between them and a group of Korean international students' cultural and educational background.

## **Korean students and group work**

Indeed, there are many challenges Asian international students confront in their initial oral participation in group work. For example, Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, and Pilot (2006) argue that many Asian international students may not feel comfortable receiving feedback from their peers during group discussion; rather the students believe that paying attention to the teacher's lecture is a more efficient way of acquiring knowledge and skills. However, this study is not intended to claim that Korean students in this study are utterly unaccustomed to team or collaborative learning; they too appreciate team work and academic discussions (Li & Campbell, 2008). However, they prefer collaborative learning in a more informal environment outside the classroom, and they seem to feel uneasy in formal classroom settings among teachers and peers (Tiong & Yong, 2004). For the Korean students in this study classroom formality, showing respect for authority, saving face and group harmony present a challenge when confronted with a constructivist approach of learning that is self-regulatory in nature, and when active interactions and debate with group members are at times required (Cronin, 1995). To maintain interpersonal relations, goodwill and harmonious relations are important for these students (Williamson, 2002); thus, Korean students in this study use strategies to avoid direct confrontation, such as politeness, and face-saving strategies, which are centred on listening and implicitness (Murphy-LeJeune, 2003).

In societies and cultures where cooperation, harmony, and image are highly valued, the importance of reasoned judgment and thinking, and face-to-face confrontation may be considered as less valued tools for learning (Morita, 2004). Earlier research focusing on Korean university students indicates that they prefer assessments on individual work, since such evaluation are believed to reflect an individual's strengths, efforts and one's competitive standing amongst other students (e.g. Cronin, 1995; Kim & Margolis, 2000). According to Phuong-Mai, Terlouw and Pilot (2006), the individualistic and competitive spirit hinders cooperative learning for Korean youths, which may also be related to Korean universities' overreliance on traditional forms of instruction and examination (Lee, 2005).

## **Research methods**

In order to deepen our understanding of how a group of Korean students came to participate in group work in a US undergraduate business program, I adopted a qualitative research approach through in-depth interviews and group observations (Patton, 1985).

### ***Setting***

This study is part of a larger research. The original research was an 11 month long case study conducted in both the US and Korea. The original research included two groups of young Korean students; namely, the US group and the Korea group, with seven students, respectively. This study focuses only on the US group and reports on their cultural adjustment via one semester group work in their second year in an undergraduate business program at a mid-west US public university where international undergraduate students make up 22 % of the total population with over 10% of the international students coming from Korea. The business course observed was Marketing Management II, which was a required course for all second year students. A total of 48 students were in the class. Almost half of the students in the class were international students from various countries, including Brazil, China, Taiwan, Korea and Mexico. Nine students, seven male and two females, in the course came from Korea.

As typically required in the business courses, the coursework in the class included readings on theory, discussion of readings, seminars, and group projects. Group projects took up a large proportion of the final grade in the course; therefore, students often spent several hours each week meeting with group members to complete group projects.

In the business course, the students had various opportunities of joining American and other international students during both informal learning groups and more formal groups in their courses. The formal group meetings tended to last several weeks in which students worked together on specific group projects until the submission deadline. The informal group meetings were provisional and often met off campus for group discussions when their schedule permitted (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). In addition to the course work, students listened to lectures, which were followed by seminars where students participated

in group discussions. They also assessed one another on team work in the course, which is a common approach associated with autonomous, cooperative and interdependent learning.

### **Participants**

Potential students interested in this study were approached individually. I informed them of the project's nature and objective, and they were screened in advance based on learning approaches, specifically "surface" and "deep" strategic learning, by applying Biggs' (1987) study process questionnaire (see Appendix A). Seven participants, who stated their interest in this project, were chosen. In this study, there was a relative good mixture of gender (four females and three males) and learning approaches. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the participants' privacy. Their biographical information is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Participant profiles

Name	Age	Gender	Major (in Korea)	Study in the US	Learning approach
Jenna	20	F	Business Administration	6 months	Surface
Sooah	21	F	Business Administration	N/A	Surface
Mina	19	F	Finance	N/A	Deep
Younghee	23	F	Business Administration	8 months	Deep
Minsu	22	M	Economics	4 months	Deep
Joonhan	25	M	Finance	1 year	Surface
Changsoo	23	M	Business Administration	1 year	Deep

### **Data collection**

The primary data for this study consisted of the transcripts of in-depth interviews (78 in total). Secondary data were observational notes of small group discussions in both the formal and informal groups. Each interview lasted between an hour to an hour and forty minutes. All interviews were conducted in Korean and translated into English. While certain variations in coping strategies and general evaluation of the group work were found between participants with differing learning approaches in the research, it will not be the focus of this specific study.

At the beginning of the semester, a semi-structured background

interview was conducted and audio-recorded individually with each student for approximately one hour (see Appendix B). During the interview, I began to ask the students to talk about their experiences in learning English in Korea, learning styles, their current situation, and their future plans. Then, I asked them more specific questions related to my research inquiry, including how they felt about participation in group discussions and what they considered important factors influencing oral participation in group work. The background interviews were conducted in Korean, audio-taped, and immediately transcribed verbatim.

To further support the interview data, I observed both the formal and informal group gatherings in and outside the classroom environment. During the group gatherings, sitting with other students in the circle, I took observational notes on the interactional patterns of each participant.

### ***Data analysis***

As is typical in a qualitative study, data collection and analysis did not always occur in a consecutive manner. While interviewing the participants, I also continued to observe group discussions, have informal conversations with the participants, and analyse the interview and observational data. Thus, data collection and data analysis reciprocally influenced each other.

After the first background interview, I transcribed the recordings, and read the transcripts. NVivo-7 was used to facilitate in coding and analysis of the data. Analysis began with line-by-line coding, generating free nodes. Then I grouped the free nodes of similar features into tree nodes. This process helped summarize the data and present the key points of the interviewees' responses. Thereafter, I attempted to create categories that described the connection between tree nodes in a meaningful way to explain my research questions. In this process, some of the categories were redefined and revised. For example, as I began to organize the categories, I first included English language ability as a separate theme that emerged between the categories. However, recursively analysing all the data, I found that all students repeatedly cited cultural factors as having a more significant influence in their group work participation. Therefore, while students' English language



ability is noted by the students as a factor influencing their group participation, it was not grouped as a separate theme but included as a subtheme. As I continued to go through both the integration and the refinement of the categories, themes that crystallised the relationships between the categories' were developed. A theme chart was built to illustrate the emerging essence. They are categorized under 'discourse system,' which is defined as a system of communication with a language shared by a particular social group (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). In this study, discourse system is made up of three points in cross-cultural communications, namely kinds of discourse (language and personal welfare), socialization (formal education and informal learning processes) and face systems (relationships among members and meaning of self).

## **Findings**

### ***Influence of cultural factors in initial participation***

Earlier literature of how cultural inheritance impacts students' participation points out that lacking confidence, poor language skills, different communication style, and lacking socialization with students from other cultures within and outside the class all leads to students' passiveness (e.g. Behfar *et al.*, 2006; Halverson & Tirmizi, 2008). In Confucian culture, directly stating one's opinion, being explicit about problems or situations that occur, speaking in a loud voice and asking questions not related to the issue at hand are deemed as bad manners (Cheng, 2000), which contributed to the Korean participants' silent participation when they first commence group work. This study suggests that several educational, cultural, and ideological factors hinder the Korean participants to actively participate when initially participating in group work that is conducted in English with group members of widely varying degrees of English language proficiency. The following excerpts quoted in the findings of this study are typical of the interviewees' views.

### ***Forms of discourse***

The participants reported that they lacked self-confidence when participating in a new learning environment. The lack of self-confidence contributed to the participants' silent participation in the early stages of their group work adjustment process. As commonly noted by all the

Korean students, one reason for this lack of confidence was attributed to their limited spoken English language skills. However, a more interesting finding was that the problem of second language use was not only limiting the students' ability to convey their thoughts but also impeding their communication style.

Regarding communication style, the participants reported that they often had to think twice before acting and tended to use indirect communication style. This was heightened by the students' anxiety on what to say and how to say it; concerns about having to reiterate complicated ideas in front of their peers in a second language, particularly when their ideas appeared wrong or valueless; and fear of wasting other students' time due to their limited linguistic ability.

*I guess the greatest worry would be my inability to speak fluently in English. Since I am not a native speaker, it takes a lot of effort to clearly express my thoughts. I also get so nervous, and falter in my speech . . . Sometimes, I ask myself if my comments make sense; it's all very complicated . . . Usually, I end up speaking only half of my ideas in very short sentences so that everyone can understand what I am saying. (Minsu)*

Joonhan shared a similar experience. He reported that he often could not understand his team member's questions, which obstructed his ability to think. His description of his feelings during such moments shows how such situations cause him to panic as an English as a Second Language (ESL) speaker. He said, '*In my head, I had a lot of ideas, but when my peers asked about them I was not sure how to express them; rather than having to face the difficulty of explaining all my ideas, I tell myself to make any quick comment; explain one or two key ideas and move on to another topic.*'

### **Face system**

Regarding the preferred or assumed relationships within the group, the Korean participants reported that they were self-conscious about losing face if their ideas were questioned. This self-consciousness is in keeping with the relationship between communication and culture, as communication practices are greatly influenced by culture (Hall, 1990). Communication style for many Koreans emphasizes indirectness,

formalism, and *Chaemyon* (Lee, 2005). That is, if one is said to maintain *Chaemyon*, one does not reveal everything, but attempts to maintain harmony and politeness with respect to one's status in the group (Kang, 2005). Thus, the Korean communication process generally reflects the concepts of 'amssi' (insinuation) and 'seoyeol' (hierarchy and role relationship). For example, when a group member challenged their reasoning, many of the Korean participants took it in as a personal attack. Moreover, the participants tended not to question or challenge others' ideas for fear of not wanting to appear aggressive and damage any good relationships. Another challenge they faced was the inability to notice non-linguistic cues and pauses in conversations; thus, they were not sure when it was appropriate to speak.

*I try not to stand out by saying something wrong without enough evidence. If I feel that I made a comment that is out of context, I look at the facial expression of my peers . . . When no one responds to my comment, I get a little embarrassed; I feel I could even lose face, and be perceived as an outsider. (Joonhan)*

Although a universal phenomenon and aligned with the ideology of *Chaemyon*, saving face is particularly salient in the Korean social psychology and culture. Saving face is not only a person's private affair, but also concerns the person's whole family, social networks and community at large (Cronin, 1995). Widely practiced in everyday life in Korea, saving face regulates human relationships and social communications (Cronin, 1995). It also influences communication approaches to avoid conflict situations (Furnham, 2004).

### **Socialization**

When discussing identity during their learning process, the Korean participants viewed other group members (e.g. both national and international students) as superior in terms of English language proficiency and knowledge; therefore, the participants tended to respect and follow authority when they perceived themselves to be in a weak power situation. For example, when they did not believe they stood in equal footing with other students, the participants noted that they did not feel at ease expressing their opinions. My observations of the group dynamic showed that the Korean participants' sense of equality in expressing one's opinion was not strong, and they often preferred to get

inspiration from other group members' opinions and ideas:

*There's a difference in the culture and educational background where we come from. Here [in the US] asking lots of questions is a natural part of learning; it's different. We're used to being quiet, and listening to the teacher's comments. . . [In Korea] If you must speak out you should always raise your hand, because other students will listen and judge your comments. So, usually we would think that if you are speaking out it means you must have a really important comment to make. (Jenna)*

In Korean culture not everyone is entitled to speak, a spoken 'voice' is equated with authority, experience, knowledge and expertise (Coward, 2002). Free-flowing exchange of ideas and questioning of knowledge and authority are not commonly seen in the Korean educational system (Cheng, 2000).

### **Group work promotes adaptation**

An illustration of the Korean participants' adaptation is seen from comparing their initial silent participation and later-stage adjustments. The participants appeared to see the value of pro-active participation, just as other western students. They emulated how other students participated in group work, and adapted to the new group setting over the course of the semester: they learned to express their opinions, hold ground in group conversations, and build self-autonomy and responsibility. With being exposed to different cultures during group work, the participants learned to be more sensitive to differences between cultures and various outlooks, and fit in with their new learning context.

#### ***Forms of discourse: actively voicing ideas***

One of the noticeable changes that occurred after doing group assignments via group work was that cognitively they viewed group discussions as an important part of learning. Emotionally, they became more comfortable and willing to give their input on different ideas. While many of the students were still conscious of other peer members' evaluation of their performance, behaviourally many of the students noted that they became less self-conscious of how other group

members might judge their ideas. Their determination and courage to openly discuss with and contribute to the group was promoted when group members listened to each other, and considered one another's viewpoints. Group members' encouraging behaviour helped some of the Korean participants to build more self-confidence in putting forward their views. Non-defensiveness and open-mindedness aid in motivating learners to participate in the co-construction of knowledge (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

*At first I felt shy because I worried about making mistakes and tainting the image of my fellow Korean colleagues. With effort, I came to believe it is okay to make mistakes. Maybe it is just me, but I kind of noticed that other students don't think too deeply about what I did wrong. So, it makes it easier to say what I think. (Changsoo)*

*If my group members are patient and not judging me, it feels easier to express my ideas. With peers who are stubborn and defensive, I rarely say anything because I don't want to bring negativity to the group. Still, it takes time to adjust, but here it is actually less stressful to just share my ideas than in Korea because there is less judgment. (Joonhan)*

For Korean students, group work offers them the opportunity to learn from peer members. For example, the students learn independent thinking and direct and explicit ways of expressing opinions. Moreover, in the final two months of the semester many of the Korean students realize that their ideas are equally valuable as those of other group members. In the early stages of group work, the participants easily lost self-confidence and withdrew from group participation before even attempting to convince others to accept their ideas. It appears that support and encouragement from members, particularly in group work, is proven to be quite helpful to the students. As Li and Campbell (2008) have noted, group support and communication have a strong impact on students' participation, and students view group work in a positive manner in which they are able to interact and make friends with other students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and build interpersonal communication skills.

### **Face system: attempt to hold ground**

The participants found that some of the local American students in their group did well in persuasive talk. These students gave the impression that they were well-versed in defending their ideas and opinions. On the other hand, the Korean participants had the tendency to give up their ground quickly when faced with disagreements. Moreover, according to the participants, they acquiesced to the fact that other members in their group did not accept their work and ignored them. This outcome may be due to the idea that Korean students are not accustomed to interrupting, commenting, and providing critique or proposing answers (Holmes, 2004). The participants revealed their reasons for not holding ground and how they have changed:

*At first, I did not make any comments when my opinions differed from that of others. Maybe it was because my English wasn't good enough. Sometimes, some of the members did not listen to my comment because they didn't understand me. It was now or never; if I continue to stay quiet it would get harder for me to speak up. (Changsoo)*

*I was uncomfortable arguing against others' ideas, because I didn't want to appear crude. . . . Sometimes I had a hard time finding the right timing, so I just listened. As a result, members thought that I didn't make enough contributions. . . as I got used to the group, I began to understand that sharing and challenging different ideas forces me to think outside the box. . . . When I had some relevant points, I began to speak up more. Of course, I was still careful not to disclose too much irrelevant ideas because I was still being evaluated by my peers for group contribution. (Younghee)*

These representative excerpts illustrate that the focal Korean students' views of disagreeing with others' ideas, and putting forward their arguments during group discussions can change. The participants interpret the notion of confrontation in a distinct way: expressing differing ideas or disagreeing with others' arguments does not necessarily mean being rude. The participants slowly began to accept others' ideas to be valuable for teamwork rather than confrontational and personal. They also interpret the notion of confrontation at a deeper

level in the sense that in different cultures it has different implications. That is, while in one specific culture, openly expressing various opinions may be perceived as the outcome of critical reasoning and part of the practice of discussion, in another culture, it may be seen as rude or being unsociable.

### ***Socialization: learning self-autonomy***

The Korean participants' outlook towards independent learning slowly changed. They felt empowered in regards to how tasks were allocated, organizing meetings and administrative skills during collaborative group work. However, at the same time they found themselves continuously facing more challenging responsibilities in order to successfully complete team projects. For example, the Korean participants believed that instructors were potential evaluators of their knowledge rather than co-contributors in their learning process. They were taught to believe that the most crucial factor in academic success and successful learning were contingent on the instructor's guidance and input. This belief was challenged by the pedagogical approaches in the US whereby students were required to read and research independently with appropriate referencing of reading materials. Cutting and pasting information from texts without appropriate citation was regarded as plagiarism in which students learned about in the US.

Through group work, there was a shared changed view among the participants: they learned to be in more control of their studies and became more self-autonomous. This was also accompanied by their ability to take control of one's own learning, namely, they sought guidance from their instructors as well as from peer group members. The Korean students in this study believed it was important for them to build individual abilities to actively collaborate with other peer members, to respond to problems and conflicts autonomously and to contribute to group work as a responsible member. A number of the participants in their interview noted that while working in a group with a diverse group of students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they felt a sense of responsibility to act as model Korean students so that other members did not look down upon Korean students.

*I am still adjusting, but I feel I have become more responsible with my studies, because I am forced to do more reading and research alone. . . . With my assignments, I still try to receive the instructor's feedback; so when I share my work with others, I have the right answers. . . . I remind myself that for every assignment I have to do my best for myself and as a senior for the Korean juniors. (Joonhan)*

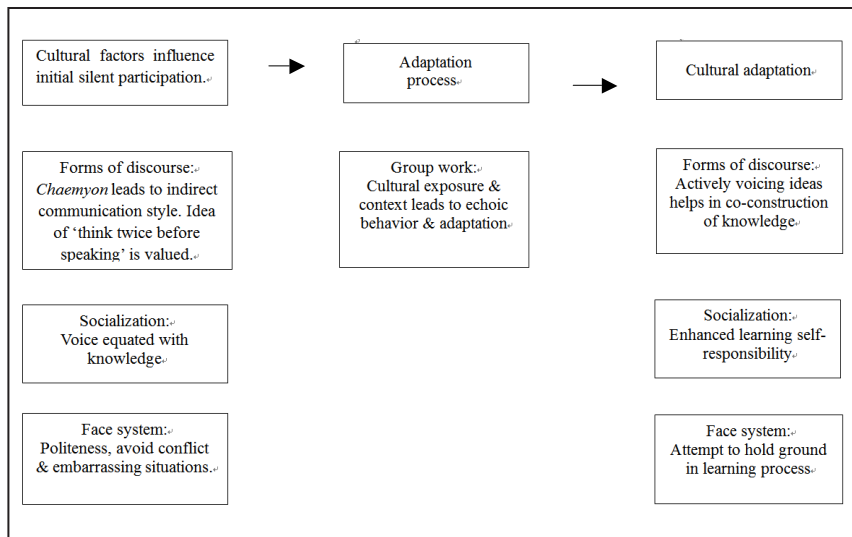
*During class discussions, I have to respond to various questions. With assignment grades, there is a rubric to follow, so the grading is stricter than in Korea, so to do well I have to manage my time and request assistance from instructors. In this sense, I can say I've made a little progress working independently. (Sooh)*

The findings illustrate that the Korean participants' outlook on their learning process gradually changes and their communication skills improve as they meet a wide cross-section of people. The changes were most notable in the final two months of the academic semester. In examining the participants' adjustment process, data showed that they have grasped the value of autonomous learning, taking responsibility for self-motivation, and acknowledging opinions of their peers (Aronson & Osherow, 1980). Cultural diversity, plus negative stereotyping, may make team experience quite complicated, yet can be valuable (Ford & Chan, 2003).

As already discussed in the findings, three aspects of intercultural communication (forms of discourse, socialization, face systems) explain the silent participation behaviour of the Korean participants in their initial group work participation (Figure 1). The figure illustrates the three developmental stages in their adjustment process via group work. In the first and second stage, as students are exposed to a new learning context and culture (via group work), they emulate and echo the learning patterns of their peers. In doing so, in the final stage of their adjustment process (final two months of the academic semester) the students show noticeable response patterns, such as being more proactive in voicing ideas, learning self-responsibility, and holding one's ground.



**Figure 1:** Group work adjustment process



## Discussion

The recursive analysis of the data led me to conclude that the student's perceptions of their language level, and differences in sociocultural values and educational practices were intertwined and strongly influenced the participants' group participation and overall socialization process.

Two notable factors are commonly used to explain Asian international students' reticence in group work participation: lack of adequate language proficiency (Ferris, 1998) and differing sociocultural norms and values (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Indeed all seven Korean students in this study identified both factors as influencing their group participation. They perceived their language skills as inadequate for effective participation in group discussions. As previous studies on Asian students in US higher education (Liu & Littlewood, 1997) have indicated, this perception appeared to lead them to feel uncomfortable talking among their peers and to be greatly concerned about how their instructors and classmates might evaluate them as competent students. However, in this study it was particularly interesting that the Korean

students' evaluation of their own language proficiency was generally lower than I would have ascribed, based on their presentation skills, and participation in the small group discussions. While it would be erroneous 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 important roles in their group work adaptation process.

It is also important to note that, as Vygotsky (1978) has emphasized, language is learned and used within a particularly sociocultural framework. Thus, addressing the first research question, all of the participants identified sociocultural differences as playing the most important role in their lack of group participation. Broad sociocultural differences between Korean and US culture regarding the value of speaking out and role expectations between the two cultures were evident in the patterns of group work participation. In particular, although the participants had studied in academic fields closely associated to the field of business in Korea, the students seemed to be influenced by the Korean social conduct, *Chaemyon*. Their effort to meet Korean social expectations seemed to keep them from actively participating in group discussions.

The second research question addressed ways group work effects the participants' socialization process in a US business program. Findings from my data analysis showed that factors related to specific differences in their current peer group practices also impacted their socialization process. For example, the participants worried about peer assessments due to their limited language proficiency and sociocultural and educational differences in group participation. Moreover, for international students to participate in group dynamics in the particular context of a US educational institution, they need not only proficient language abilities but also knowledge of and experience with the discourse norms (e.g. peer members as active co-contributors of meaning) in peer group practices. As the Korean students negotiated between their prior sociocultural and educational practices (e.g. saving face system and silent participation) and current discourse norms of peer group dynamics (e.g. peer members as active co-contributors of meaning) by which they had to operate, they had to rethink their conceptions of the roles of instructors, peer group members, language,

and their own participation. They also had to learn how to navigate turn-taking signals occurring quickly among peers during group discussions. I found that the students blended expectations from the two distinct discourse practices and often switched between viewing group work as heuristic tools and an evaluative process. On the one hand, they believed that group work offered them a valuable means of learning. Yet they also seemed to retain some of their cultural habits of the Korean educational and sociocultural practices, as evident in their valuing the instructor's response and knowledge over those of other students and in the belief that the instructor and peer group members were not always responding as co-contributors of meaning but as evaluators of their knowledge and ability.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

The Korean participants' responses in their interviews may not represent that of all Korean international students in the US. Factors, such as individual skills, gender, personality, motivation, and prior experience residing in the US, may influence the students' cultural interactions with other international and local native English speaker students, who may also show cultural and learning variations. Moreover, the participants' experience interacting with group members, time spent during group work, participants' interaction with students' of different nationalities will influence their overall experience, and thus, their socialization process in a US educational setting. Also, it is worth noting that culture is not bipolarized: culture is complex, rich, dynamic and diverse. As De Vita (2000) has noted, "Subcultures and regional cultures within and across a national culture can differ diametrically and from the national culture" (De Vita, 2000, p. 172). Nonetheless, by understanding the cultural context of a group of Korean students in this study, my intention is to help educators avoid a few common stereotypes of Korean students as rote and passive learners, and why they are regarded as silent participants.

The study suggests that instructors can do much to help Asian international students orally participate in group work more actively. To better equip students in this learning process, instructors should not completely exclude the importance of instructor intervention, particularly in specific stages of building team work. For instance, in

the initial stages of team building, many of the participants reported the need for the instructor to intervene in allocating groups. The participants believed that a few native English speakers were reluctant to be in the same group with international students because native speakers feared that international students' limited English proficiency would negatively impact group communication and final grades. Moreover, unguided multicultural groups may not always provide much learning potential and may even raise anxiety among students. Such groups might also create a sense of uneasiness in the group dynamic, less commitment, and even negative stereotyping among students (Ledwith, Manfredi, & Wildish, 1997).

To address such issues that may arise in team building, pedagogic scholars in adult education (e.g. Allen & Higgins, 1994; Collier, 1980) argue that cooperative learning skills need to be taught the same way as academic skills. Particularly in multicultural settings where intercultural challenges exist, students need explicit on-going training in skills that facilitate teamwork among students from different cultures. For example, the participants in this study would benefit with additional training on group learning, such as how to set goals, share roles, and adopt strategies for conflict resolutions, and communicate face-to-face (Collier, 1980).

In this study, Korean students' adjustment in this new cultural and educational setting show that 'culture of learning' (Murphy-LeJeune, 2003) is not fixed, but is dynamic and changing under various contextual influences. The significance for the students is that they move from mono-culture to multi-culture; and from single experience to diverse experiences, which is a process of enriching their learning experience.

## References

- Allen, A. & Higgins, T. (1994) *Higher education: the international student experience*, Leeds: Higher Education Information Services Trust (HEIST) in association with UCAS.
- Aronson, E. & Osherow, N. (1980) 'Cooperation, social behaviour and academic performance: experiments in the disintegrated classroom' in L. Bickman (ed.) *Applied social psychology annual*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 163-196.
- Behfar, K., Kern, M. & Brett, J. (2006) 'Managing challenges in multicultural teams,' in Y. Chen (ed.) *Research on managing groups and teams: National culture and groups*, 239-269.

- Biggs, J. (1987) *Study process questionnaire (SPQ) users' manual*, Hawthorn, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Cao, Y. & Philp, J. (2006) 'Interactional context and willingness to communicate: A comparison of behavior in whole class, group and dyadic interaction,' in *System*, 34, 480–493.
- Chen, T. (2003) 'Reticence in class and on-line: Two ESL students' experiences with communicative language teaching,' in *System*, 31, 259–281.
- Cheng, X. (2000) 'Asian students' reticence revisited,' in *System*, 28, 435–446.
- Collier, K.G. (1980) Peer-group learning in higher education: The development of higher-order skills,' in *Studies in Higher Education*, 5, 55–62
- Coward, F. L. (2002) *The challenge of "doing discussions" in graduate seminars: A qualitative study of international students from China, Korea, and Taiwan*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Austin: University of Texas.
- Cronin, M. (1995) 'Considering the cultural context in teaching and learning for Korean tertiary students by western teachers,' in *A Focus on Learning*, 53–56.
- Davison, S. & Ward, K. (1999) *Leading international teams*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- De Vita, G. (2000) 'Inclusive approaches to effective communication and active participation in the multicultural classroom: An international business management context,' in *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 1: 2, 168–180.
- Duff, P. A. (2002) 'Pop cultural and ESL students: Intertextuality, identity, and participation in classroom discussions,' in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45, 482–487.
- Ferris, D. (1998) 'Students' views of academic aural/oral skills: A comparative needs analysis,' in *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 289–318.
- Flowerdew, J., & Miller, L. (1995) 'On the notion of culture in L2 lectures,' in *System*, 29, 345–374.
- Ford, D. & Chan, Y. (2003) 'Knowledge sharing in a multi-cultural setting: a case study,' in *Knowledge Management Research in Practice*, 1: 1, 11–27.
- Furnham, A. (2004) 'Foreign students: Education and culture shock,' in *Psychologist*, 17: 1, 16–19.
- Grey, M. (2002) 'Drawing with a difference: challenges faced by international students in an undergraduate business degree,' in *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7: 2, 153–166.
- Hall, E. (1990) *Understanding cultural differences*, Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Halverson, C. B. & Tirmizi, S. A. (2008) *Effective multicultural teams: Theory and practice*, New York: Springer Science.
- Holmes, P. (2004) 'Negotiating differences in learning and intercultural communication,' in *Business Communication Quarterly*, 67: 3, 294–307.

- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. & Cope, J. (1986) 'Foreign language classroom anxiety,' in *Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125–132.
- Johnson, D., Johnson, R. & Holubec, E. (1994) *New circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom and school*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Kang, S. (2005) 'Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language,' in *System*, 33, 277–292.
- Kang, J. & Abelman, N. (2011) 'The domestication of South Korean pre-college study abroad in the first decade of the millennium,' in *Journal of Korean Studies*, 16: 1, 89–118.
- Kim, D. & Margolis, D. (2000) 'Korean student exposure to English listening and speaking: instruction, multimedia, travel experience and motivation,' in *The Korea TESOL*, 3: 1, 29–53.
- Kim, S. (2008) 'Silent participation: East Asian international graduate students' views on active classroom participation,' in *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 19, 199–220.
- Ledwith, S., Lee, A., Manfredi, S. & Wildish, C. (1997) *Multi-culturalism, student group work and assessment*, Oxford: Oxford Brooks University.
- Lee, C. J. (2005) 'Korean education fever and private tutoring,' in *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 2: 1, 99–107.
- Li, M. & Campbell, J. (2008) 'Asian students' perceptions of group work and group assignments in a New Zealand tertiary institution,' in *Intercultural Education*, 19: 3: 203–216.
- Littlewood, W. (2000) 'Do Asian students really want to listen and obey?,' in *ELT Journal*, 54, 31–36.
- Liu, N. & Littlewood, W. (1997) 'Why do many students appear reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse?' in *System*, 25, 371–384.
- McClure, J. (2007) 'International graduates' cross-cultural adjustment: Experiences, coping strategies, and suggested programmatic responses,' in *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12: 2, 199–217.
- Morita, N. (2004) 'Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic community,' in *TESOL Quarterly*, 38, 573–604.
- Murphy-LeJeune, E. (2003) 'An experience of interculturality: student travellers abroad,' in G. Alred, M. Byram & M. Fleming (eds.) *Intercultural experience and education*, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Nonnecke, B., Preece, J. (2003) 'Silent participation: getting to know lurkers better,' in C. Lueg (ed.) *From unsernet and cowebs*, London: Springer, 110–132.
- Patton, M. (1985). Quality in qualitative research: Methodological principles and recent developments. Paper presented at the invited address to division J of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL (April)

- Phuong-Mai, N., Terlouw, C. & Pilot, A. (2006) 'Culturally appropriate pedagogy: The case of group learning in a Confucian Heritage Culture context,' in *Intercultural Education*, 17: 1, 119-140.
- Phuong-Mai, N., Terlouw, C. & Pilot, A. & Elliott, J. (2009) 'Cooperative learning that features a culturally appropriate pedagogy,' in *British Educational Research Journal*, 35: 6, 857-875.
- Scollon, R. & Scollon, S.W. (2001) *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shim, D. & Park, J.S. (2008) 'The language politics of 'English Fever' in South Korea,' in *Korea Journal*, 48: 2, 136-159.
- Tiong, K.M. & Yong, S.T. (2004) 'Confucian heritage culture learners' and instructors' expectations and preferences in collaborative learning: Convergence or divergence?' *Proceedings of HERDSA Annual Conference*, 47 July, Sarawak, Malaysia: Curtin University of Technology.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Williamson, D. (2002) 'Forward from a Critique of Hofstede's Model of National Culture', *Human Relations*, 55:11, 1373-95.

## Appendix A

The Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1987) is a 42-item questionnaire used to measure students' approaches to learning. Based on the results of the questionnaire, the process of students' learning is categorized as either 'surface', 'deep', or 'achieving.'

**Table A-1:** *Difference in motivation and study process of surface, deep, and achieving approaches to study*

Approach	Motivation	Process (strategy)
Surface	Fear of failure	Rote learning of facts and ideas
	Desire to complete course of study	Focus on task in isolation
Deep	Interest in the subject	Relate ideas to evidence
	Vocational relevance	Integration of materials across courses
	Personal understanding	Identifying general principles
Achieving	Achieving high grades	Use techniques that achieve highest grade
	Competing with others to be successful	Level of understanding patchy and variable

## **Appendix B**

1. Where did you learn English?
2. How do you evaluate your English ability?
3. Describe the most/ the least successful participation in a group environment.
4. How do you prepare to participate in group discussions?
5. How do you feel when you talk in a group environment?
6. What factors do you think are important to participate in group discussions?
7. What suggestions would you give someone who may be struggling to adjust in group learning?

## **About the Author**

***Jung Yin Kim*** currently works as a visiting professor at University of Seoul, South Korea. Her current research interest lies in examining the interrelationship between student discourse and learning using theoretical frameworks from sociolinguistics and second language education.

## **Contact details**

*Dr. Jung Yin Kim*  
*University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign OR*  
*Bupyung-gu, Bupyung 1-dong, Dong-Ah APT 28-703*  
*INCHEON, SOUTH KOREA 40376*

*Email: Lujjanny07@gmail.com*