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Academic Dialogue and Cross-cultural Perspectives

**Academic Communication, Education and Social Status:
The Case of South Korea**

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Abstract: Revered for centuries as a sign of nobility, wisdom and virtue, education continues to be fervently pursued and has a central role in the dynamics of the social processes in contemporary South Korea. Based on the high achievements of Korean students studying abroad, the Korean education system is often touted as one of the best in the world, but details about its structure, philosophy and social function are little known and rarely discussed outside Korea. Despite the positive image of Korean education, foreign educators in Korea often encounter unexpected difficulties when trying to engage the students in different forms of academic communication. The current paper aims at presenting the main characteristics of the South Korean education system while analyzing them in the context of academic communication. The pursuit of education with the purpose of attaining certain social status is found to be a major factor shaping students' motivation, attitude and behavioral patterns in the classroom. The view of education as an exclusive means to achieving social recognition is shown to be of historical and cultural origins but in the contemporary society it has been significantly enhanced through the channels of mass communication as it serves certain economic and political interests.

Key words: education, academic communication, communication theory, social mobility, social status, South Korea.

Academic Communication in South Korea:

Notes on the Foreign Educator's Experience

For decades, the Korean government has been implementing various policies aimed at internationalizing the universities in the country. One of the goals has been to increase global competitiveness of Korean university graduates by enhancing their foreign language abilities and intercultural communication skills. Another major objective has been to make Korean education institutions attrac-

tive to foreign students in order to combat the negative effects of low birthrate on the financial status of the universities. As a result, over the past two decades, the number of foreign professors in Korea has rapidly increased. However, classroom interaction with Korean students has proven challenging to many foreign educators. For the newcomer professor, it does not take long to become aware of the “the wall”, a term that has been coined to denote the lack of response or the passiveness of the students. Engaging Korean students in a discussion, expecting them to share their opinions and to show curiosity about the studied material is often a futile endeavor.

The experience is in stark contrast with the international fame of Korean education as one of the best in the world. Korean students have been known for consistently achieving some of the highest scores at international tests, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Because of these results, the Korean education system has served as an example for the reform of the education systems of other countries. President Barack Obama praised the Korean education system during every State of the Union Address he gave, insisting that the United States should learn from Korea. [1]

It could take years before the foreign professor realizes that difficulties in communication stem from the students’ preoccupation with test results. If students fail to see how an activity can contribute to them receiving a good grade at the exam, they tend to not get engaged in it. Striving to present them with rich information and various points of view on a topic leads to increasing their anxiety, as they feel uncertain how much of the presented study material will be included in the exam. Often, students express dissatisfaction if the professor does not explain in detail in advance the type of questions and the exact scope of material to be included in the test. With time, the foreign instructor might learn that if he wants students to participate actively in class, he needs to inform them that engaging in discussions will be one of the criteria in forming their final grade.

Behind the described phenomenon there is a myriad of historical, cultural, social, economic and political factors. The current study aims at presenting and analyzing those factors, focusing on the various types of communication regarding education in the Korean society.

Theoretical Framework and Methods of Inquiry

In the current exposé, Korean students’ patterns of academic communication are shown to be a direct consequence of the way education is structured and functions in Korean society. An overview of the South Korean education system

is presented based on quoted previous research on the topic, and on the experience and observations of the author of this study.

The characteristics of Korean education are analyzed from the viewpoint of Communication theory. The results of the survey show that treating Korean people's attitudes and views on education as reflecting Korean traditional culture and values has been an impediment in creating effective policies in the education sphere, while interpreting the established thinking patterns regarding education as a result of mass communication opens the way for new approaches in the area.

The Education Paradigm of South Korea

Koreans pride themselves on their traditionally high regard for education. While in the past, in many regions of the Western hemisphere, education was motivated by a pursuit of knowledge about the world and desire to explain natural, metaphysical and, later, social phenomena, in Korea, taking the example of China, education was used as a means of moving up the social ladder.

In Confucianism, which became influential in Korean society during the Choson dynasty (1392–1897) the purpose of education is found in maintaining social order. Learned people of the day were well versed in the Chinese classics on Confucian ethics which emphasized observing strict patterns in interpersonal relations. Keeping one's position in interactions with the other members of the society was considered virtuous and moral as that was seen as the foundation of social harmony. Younger people were required to obey, follow and serve the older ones. Women had to follow men unconditionally. Everyone had to accept and obey the will of the ones in higher positions within the family or in the system of state administration. The only way for a man to advance in society was through passing the civil servant examination which could provide one with an administrative position. Passing successfully the state examination brought respect and honor not only to the individual but also to his family. [2]

During the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945), high school and university graduates were selected for administrative positions based not only on their academic score but also according to the prestige of the education institution where they had completed their studies, with Japanese schools and universities being preferred to Korean ones. Even after Korea gained its independence and embarked on the way to democracy the function of education as a system of discovering certain type individuals and selecting people for concrete purposes has continued to be perceived as a primary one. [3]

The perception of education as a means of achieving better social status over time has been solidified due to the constantly improving economic environment and the creation of more opportunities for the university graduates. That is why Korea is one of the countries in the world with the highest percentage of university graduates, maintaining an average of around 70%. In 2008, for example, 77% of high-school graduates entered a university. [4] However, not all universities are considered equal. The type of university and the quantified assessment of academic performance are considered by large the main criteria of academic achievement. According to the common understanding in the Korean society, the way to secure a prestigious job position with good compensation, and therefore lead a fulfilled and happy life is to emerge as a winner in the fierce competition for high test results at all educational levels. It is considered common sense that to get a good, well-paid job, one has to graduate with high scores from a prestigious university. Entering such a university, though, is commonly acknowledged as the biggest life trial for every aspiring individual. Therefore, the three years in high school when students prepare for the university entrance exams, are the time when their future life is determined. High schools with a track of high acceptance rate of their graduates to prestigious universities are hard to enter as well. Consequently, the competition for admission to those high schools leads to striving to secure a place in a middle school that can provide the student with bigger chances of attending a desired high school. In this way, often the kind of kindergarten that a child attends is considered to affect his/her chances of entering a good university and ultimately being successful and happy in life. On the road to success everything depends on the student's test results at each educational level. In Korea, it is common to rate students according to their test scores and to display lists with children's ratings on boards on the school premises. Each student knows his/her rating position compared to the other students in the class, to the students in the same grade/year, and to the students of all grades/years in the same school. Ratings are compiled at least two times per semester, at every mid-term and final exam. Moving up or down in the ratings shows whether a student is progressing or falling behind in their studies. To make sure that their children advance in the ratings or keep their leading positions, parents resort to seeking supplementary forms of education. Private education is a huge business in South Korea, with the expenditure for private tutoring in 2010 reaching 24 billion dollars and maintaining stable levels of 2.8-2.9% of the GDP. [5], [6]. As every student strives to be at the top of the ratings list, measures have been taken to limit the number of students who can have top results. Complying with the recommendations of the Ministry of Education, most high schools and universities

in Korea have introduced “relative evaluation”. Under the system, only a certain prescribed percentage of students in a group or in a class can be given maximum grades at the exams.

Famously known as “the Korean education fever”, the phenomenon of zealously pursuing high results in test evaluation affects all levels of social life. Parents are concerned with providing the best education for their children and are willing to spend considerable amount of funds on private education. The financial burden is so big that it has led to lowering the birthrate in the country. Other consequences of the high cost of private education are the increase of household debt and the diminishing volume of retirement savings. [7] On the other hand, children are under constant stress and show high levels of anxiety, sometimes leading to severe depression. [8] Additionally, they feel that they have failed their duty of being good children to their parents, as in Confucianism, achieving respect and success in society is one of the ways children pay back their mother and father for the efforts of raising them.

“The education fever” has also brought about unusual changes to parents’ roles in the family. It is the responsibility of the mother to find the most effective way for the children to achieve the desired high results at the tests. Therefore, mothers have to find information on the best supplementary private education institutions, known as *hakwon* and to make sure their sons and daughters attend them. They also compete with each other in securing the best private teachers who visit and teach children in their homes. That is how the notion of the “manager mother” came into existence.

Another phenomenon has given rise to the concept of *gireogi appa*, a “wild goose father”, referring to a man who stays alone in Korea and earns money in order to support his wife and children living abroad for the sake of the children learning English in native speakers’ environment.

Private supplementary education in Korea not only has developed into a huge business but it has also come to be seen as equally or more important than official public education. The study material covered by the official education programs is considered basic. Many students learn in *hakwons* the school material 1-2 years before they study it officially at the public school. *Hakwons* apply creative and diverse teaching methods, use advance technology in class and provide better environment for the students than schools do. [9]

On the other hand, supplementary education takes up most of the students’ time. Even homework and assignments are done under the guidance of private teachers. Students develop passive study habits. According to the Theory of Self-directed Learning, learning is most efficient when one studies on their own, but

in Korea students are heavily dependent on instructor's supervision for acquiring knowledge. [10]

The issues related to education in Korean society are constantly discussed in the public domain. They are widely researched by private and government-sponsored institutes. They are also always an important part of political campaigns. New policies are frequently being implemented in order to lessen the financial burden on families, to decrease the importance of private education, to ensure that the high education cost does not deepen the division between rich and poor, etc. Despite all these efforts, though, little has changed. Former president Lee Myung-bak is often quoted saying that if he stated that he would solve the problems with private supplementary education, even his daughter would laugh at the absurdity of his statement. [11]

Education and Communication

Getting into a prestigious university will make you happy. Getting into a prestigious university will make all your family happy and you will be able to compensate them for the great sacrifices that they have made in order to give you good education. If your son or daughter enters a medical university, you have excelled in fulfilling your duty as a parent and can be proud of it. If your son or daughter fails the university entrance exam, or manages to enter only a small provincial university, it is a shameful thing and it means that the family has failed.

These are the messages that are directly or implicitly conveyed over and over again at different levels in Korean society. At holidays, during family gatherings, relatives never fail to wish children success in their studies. On the day of the national university entrance exam in November every year, the whole nation goes to work later, so that university applicants can move safely and on time to the exam locations. Police cars and even helicopters are available to help those stuck in traffic. The message is that the exam is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and failing it leads to life of lower quality. (Taking the exam more than once, or not in the year when one graduates from high school is also considered a failure, or rather a shameful compromise.) Mass media, advertisement, score rating announcement boards, education institutions, even family and friends are communicating the message of the interdependence of academic success and fulfillment in life.

Communication occurs through messages. In the case of the message of education's importance for a person's life, the same message gets transmitted all the time through countless channels. It constitutes mass communication on a

grand scale. The message is so omnipresent that it has become unquestionable reality.

“Does a fish know it’s wet?” influential cultural and media critic Marshall McLuhan would often ask. “The answer”, he would say, “is No”. The fish’s existence is so dominated by water that only when water is absent is the fish aware of its condition. [12]

Even when intellectuals start questioning the basis of the messages related to education in Korean society, they often explain them in terms of tradition, culture and values. Thus, the issue becomes one of national identity and tackling it could be a sensitive matter.

It is a fact that Confucian ethics that governed social relations for centuries continue to play important role in many of the contemporary societies in Asia, despite the strong influence of Western culture, the modernization of the countries and the new developments of communications and technology.

Studies have demonstrated that “with regard of the people of [contemporary] China where Confucianism originated... psychological research shows that they not only are dominated by authority minded and harmony-minded ways of thinking, being willing to take anybody who is the most senior or knowledgeable as the arbiter of truth and morality, and to choose non-confrontational approaches to conflict resolution, respectively, but also to define their identity in terms of role-based social relations, and base their happiness on the fulfillment of social role obligations”. [13] As “Confucianism still works as one of the basic elements of the Korean social structure and its cultural system” [14], the statement about the influence of Confucianism on the contemporary society of China can also provide insights into the society of South Korea.

If the Korean view on education is a part of Korean culture, it is worth asking what culture is. There are various definitions of culture but most researchers agree that culture is the learned behavior of the members of a certain group. Culture is constituted by “the socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting... Creation and maintenance of a more or less common culture occurs through communication, including mass communication.” [15]

Constant repetition of the same message over a long period of time causes response to the message to become automated. The responses are chosen earlier and stored for later use in a preprogrammed repository. [16] Only when the receiver becomes mindful of the nature of the repeated message, is he able to alter his response.

Since in Korea, education is considered an area of social life that is out of balance and efforts are constantly being made to adjust it, looking at the perception of education as a social construct and a result of mass communication could provide valuable insights for future approaches to treating the matter.

If we ask the question who benefits the most from the current state of Korean education, the answer is obvious: the private education institutions/businesses that profit from it and the elites who use it to maintain their elite status.

The message that the “Korean education fever” stems from traditional culture and is therefore related to traditional values and identity serves the agenda of those who are interested in maintaining the status quo. In fact, “practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable” [17] is the definition of ideology. Ideologies tend to overemphasize certain aspect of society and reduce social relations to that particular aspect, like Marxism focused on labour, for example, and “grounded itself in labour fetishism”. [18] Making inquiries into the possible existence of “education fetishism” in Korea also opens the way for future debates and research.

On a positive note, there have been signs that the messages concerning education have started to change. In 2018, a TV series called “Sky Castle” gained huge popularity by tackling head-on many sensitive issues and spurred significant social debate on the fundamental postulates of Korean education. In the series, the main characters get hurt and almost destroyed because of their predatory pursuit of prestigious education. In the end, they realize that climbing to the top of the social pyramid is not worth sacrificing their humanity and family relations.

Conclusion

Academic communication in South Korea and its specifics cannot be understood outside the context of the overall paradigm of the Korean education system. While overemphasis on performance at exams make Korean students competitive at standardized international tests, in the Korean society, it has given rise to a number of social issues that have proven hard for policy-makers to resolve. Treating Korean people’s attitude and views on education as traditional culture solidifies the status quo, while analyzing them from the viewpoint of Communication theory gives new insights and opens possibilities for arguably more effective approaches towards the matters of education in the Republic of Korea.

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