

COVID-19 and Changes in Education

The Role of Communication in the Online Education in Bulgarian Studies in Korea

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted universities and academic communication in them during the spring and the autumn semesters of 2020. Professors and students were faced with new and constantly changing conditions that required more intensive communication through channels that were mainly supplementary when the main interaction happened face-to-face in classrooms. Within two or three weeks established communication patterns were replaced with new unplanned communication patterns that kept reshaping in time. Communication was crucial for the existence and the survival of the academic and educational process. In this article the author examines as both a witness and a researcher the situation at the Bulgarian Studies major at HUFSS from the viewpoint of Communication Theory. The methods of cyber-ethnography and autoethnography were employed. Conclusions are drawn about the communication processes that were influenced by the pandemic.

Key words: communication, education, university, Bulgarian Studies, COVID-19.

Introduction

This article examines the role of communication in the introduction of obligatory online education at the university level in South Korea during the spring semester of 2020, and its extension into the autumn semester, in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The case analyzed is the introduction of online education in the Bulgarian Studies major at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, the leading South Korean university in the study of languages, cultures and societies of the world.

Universities, like all organizations, constantly “make sense out of all the information that bombards them on a daily basis.” [1] The COVID-19 global pandemic was a particular challenge because the new information about it was produced in an avalanche manner on an hourly basis. Also, it was something unprecedented in the lives of all living people in 2020. Universities faced unique challenges when they had to choose the form and the content of the communication they had to maintain with the students, faculty and staff. “As it becomes

more difficult to interpret the information that is received, an organization needs to solicit input from others (often multiple sources) to make sense of the information and to provide a response to the appropriate people or departments.” [2] The only constant thing is change, they say. But the COVID-19 pandemic triggered so many and so profound changes all over the world, that the way it had to be communicated by organizations and institutions around the world quickly became of vital importance for the institutions and the people in them, as they had to make constant changes in order to continue the functionalities and operations smoothly.

Starting from the working definition that communication is “the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response” [3], I will examine the messages of the university to the professors and the students, as well as the messages that were exchanged between professors themselves and between professors and students regarding the education situation vis-à-vis the pandemic situation, as well as all other relevant messages that I have become aware of. Also, since communication is “a process of relating” [4], I will analyze the content of the messages, the flow of messages and the combined effect that they have had on the professors, the students and any other relevant participants in the complex situation, as well the responses that have been elicited. I also employ the qualitative method of cyber-ethnography (as described by Rybas and Gajjala (2007) [5], Simeonov (2018) [6], Mavrodieva (2020) [7]) because of my role as a foreign professor from Bulgaria in an environment of exclusively Korean students and professors. There are no foreign students at the Bulgarian Studies major. In this respect I employ autoethnography (as described by Lunceford (2015) [8]) in order to outline the background and the relevant communication under “normal” circumstances at the university before the major event (the outbreak of the global epidemic of COVID-19). I use the empirical data of an online survey that I conducted among the students at HUFS. All empirical data from the survey is used anonymously in accordance with the basic principles of research ethic. I also analyze publicly accessible documents My approach is mainly empirical (in the sense described in West and Turner (2010) [9]) but I also make use of interpretative and critical approaches

The case of HUFS and the experience of the Bulgarian Studies major

In order to evaluate the change in academic communication that occurred just before and during the spring semester at HUFS I will present an outline of the communication landscape before the pandemic. Most of it is based on the personal experience and observations of the author (autoethnography). After that

I will analyze in more detail the communication that happened in February and March 2020 which was relevant for the organization of the education process during the spring semester. Both the form and the content of the messages will be explored, including channels of communication, languages of communication, text analysis, etc. I will use the methods of Communication theory and will apply them to the empirical material of actual emails, announcements and other formal channels, as well as personal informal conversations and other exchanges (emails, social media interactions, etc.).

Before the pandemic: the background

The situation before the pandemic at HUFS was the typical situation at South Korean universities. Formal communication among professors, students and administration was streamlined according to the tendencies of the 21st century. It was similar to the formal communication in advanced countries. At the same time, of course, it had its own South Korean characteristics.

Korea is a society where education is extremely valued. This is part of the larger Confucian tradition that dominates all countries of East Asia, including the Sinosphere, i.e. the Chinese-language societies of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, as well as Korea, Japan and Vietnam. This is a region in which classical Chinese civilization has been accepted as the main civilizing force and has not been opposed by anything else for millennia. Non-Chinese cultures like Korea, Japan and Vietnam have developed their national cultures centered on their own languages and national character but the classical Chinese language and literature has been such a strong component that it is perceived as completely internalized and non-foreign anymore.

Confucian ethics dictates a hierarchical relationship between professor and student. The students should treat their professor with respect and deference. The professor has an obligation to take good care of the student. The school – the education institution – should treat both the professors and the students with responsibility and keep its duty toward society to produce the best-equipped young people who will serve the state and the general public faithfully and will continue the tradition. The omnipresent messages of Confucianism created problems and shortcomings in many aspects of South Korean education that were acknowledged to a great extent by society and widely discussed in the media. However, there has always been hindrances in fully exposing the scope of the problems or reaching effective solutions. As Atanasova points out, “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.” [10] National identity is still a hot topic in Korea in view of the divided peninsula and the open unsolved issues Korea has with its neighbors.

The democratization of South Korean society which started in the 1980s and 1990s and reached its maturity during the first two decades of the 21st century has influenced the field of higher education profoundly. That was to be expected since there are some aspects of Confucian ethics and the liberal democracy of the post-Cold War world that seem to be irreconcilable. It is only natural that universities will become the scene where ideologies and political theories will clash with one another.

Modes of communication between professors and students which were the norm in the early 1990s (and which I have personally witnessed back then) were increasingly frowned upon during the quarter of the century that followed, and today are virtually gone from the most forward universities in Seoul and around the country. For example, the practice to have students bring their professors tea, carrying their bags and books, writing something for them, etc., which were regarded as showing respect to the professors, are now condemned as a form of exploitation and harassment. In 2017 and 2018, following the start of the “Me too” movement worldwide, cases of sexual harassment became huge scandals that shook many Korean universities, including leading universities like HUFs.

It was inevitable that communication between professors and students would undergo certain modification in the light of the new developments. It is fair to say that the first two decades were a transition period for academic communication at South Korean universities. While standard norms, which have been prevalent during the second half of the 20th century and have been associated with the newly rediscovered national identity after independence from Japan (1945), the founding of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1948, and the Korean War (1950 – 1953), are still valid for many, there are new attitudes that have become particularly visible in the 21st century, which seek to establish more liberal and democratic social relations and accompanying communication inspired by the human rights movements and other movements in the West and specifically in the United States, where an increasing number of South Koreans receive their tertiary education. At the same time Korean universities organize ever expanding and comprehensive compulsory education for professors on gender equality, prevention of sexual harassment, and so on.

Another potential channel of communication between professors, students and administration that existed before the pandemic at HUFs but was not compulsory to use was a well-developed software called E-class which was available

on the university website. It was not widely used because classroom interaction, traditional assignment submission on paper, attendance sheets, etc., were considered good enough and a need to replicate all these again online was not felt. However, the awareness did exist that a lot of the classroom activities could be carried out online in an electronic environment using the software developed and provided by the university.

Verbal communication between students and professor occurs in the classroom, as well as on dedicated Facebook pages and via SMS/MMS on the personal smartphones. South Korean is the country of Samsung and the early adopters of mobile technology. It is considered natural that everyone should possess a smartphone and make its number available to their employers. Departments at the university have Facebook pages through which they inform the students as well as the professors about everything that is happening. It is the Facebook pages where announcements about new opportunities about specializations, scholarships, summer schools, lectures by guest lecturers, seminars, events, etc., are published. If one wants to stay informed, they have to be on Facebook and be connected to the Department.

Another key element of the professor/student interaction in South Korea before the pandemic was “relative evaluation”. As Atanasova points out, 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.” [11] In fact, professors receive detailed instructions about “relative evaluation” for each semester and each type and size of a group attending a certain course. (For example, only up to 30% of the students in a group could get an A, and so on.) Since grades are perceived to be of crucial importance for job interviews and ultimately for “success in life”, communication at the end of every semester (in the last ten or so years) between students and professors could get a bit tense and deviating from the old traditional deference associated with “traditional” higher education in Korea. This was the case even before such a force-majeure event as the global pandemic. What the COVID-19 pandemic and the online teaching added to this communication was that online-specific complaints from students started to be used by students, like individual students could not see or hear or understand a particular point during an online lecture because of concrete Internet connection problems that were experienced by the individual Internet consumer at a specific moment.

This is the communication background in broad terms that existed in HUFs at the beginning of the year 2020 when the first stories about a potentially dan-

gerous viral infection in Wuhan, China, began circulating in mainstream mass media, social media, and interpersonal communication in South Korea.

The first half of the spring semester 2020

The academic year in South Korea starts on March 1st. This is the date universities start their first (spring) semester. It lasts 16 weeks with Week 8 and Week 16 being Midterm Exam and Final Exam Week, respectively. The two semesters are evenly spread across the year for almost all universities, including HUFs. That means that the second (autumn/fall) semester starts on September 1st and similarly lasts 16 weeks. It normally finishes just before Christmas. That means that between semesters students have about 10 weeks of vacation. It was in the winter vacation when COVID-19 struck. There were sporadic news reports throughout January 2020 but things were more or less normal until the celebrations for the traditional East Asian New Year started. In 2020 the East Asian New Year started January 25th. It is celebrated for about a week usually and most people in Korea, as well as in China, visit their hometowns. It was exactly during this festive period that the situation began to be perceived as serious. On 24 January it was reported in the media that a Chinese woman was confirmed as the first case in Korea on 20 January and that on 24 January a Korean man who had arrived from Wuhan, China, was confirmed as the first infected Korean national. In the following days several more cases were reported. The messages that the media communicated to the public reflected more urgency and concern. The voices of the reporters on TV conveyed anxiety and the accompanying graphic design, e.g. excessively large letters in bright red or other colors, (visual perception) and music (auditory perception) conveyed suspense and danger. It was obvious that both public and private media were taking the matter very seriously. The messages were designed for maximum impact, reaching different senses. In those early days, when the number of the reported infected people was not that great, mass communication informed the public of numerous details about the infected persons. While their names were not released, the public was informed of their age, gender, where they live, what shops and other establishments they have visited, the number of people they have had contact with, whether the new cases were family or friends of previous cases. The so-called “Emergency Alerts” that everybody who had a smartphone received from time to time (regarding fires, landslides, or just very cold days) now started coming way too often accompanied by a siren-like sound that could not be switched off. They were informing people about cases in their vicinity, usually their city and several nearby cities. Very often the alerts contained detailed information about where and when a new

case has visited specific supermarkets, pharmacies, restaurants, etc., as well as which neighborhood they live in.

In the build-up towards the beginning of the new academic year which was to start on 2 March (Monday), there was an increasing apprehensiveness among the foreign professors living in the Foreign Faculty Residence on campus. The formal communication between the university and the professors was through emails. An Emergency Response Committee had been formed at the highest level of the university and it sent its messages through email to all professors. As early as February 7th we were informed that the university “will postpone the beginning of the new semester for two weeks until March 16th as recommended by the Ministry of Education, and review delaying the start of classes for an additional one to two weeks depending on the situation.” Matriculation and graduation ceremonies were cancelled.

On February 12th we were informed again by email that students who have recently been to China will be quarantined in a dormitory on campus for two weeks starting February 27th. On February 27th we received clear instructions how the delay of the start of the semester will be compensated during the semester. The Academic Affairs Division kept informing us by email about the situation in Korea and the world.

On March 5th the university sent an email which stated: “In response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, we have decided to move all HUFS classes online for the first two weeks of the semester. As we are making a complete shift to online learning for the first time in our academic history, some of you may find yourselves unfamiliar with online teaching tools.” This email was accompanied with a lot of information about online teaching. For example, the university stated: “To bring online classes to life on our campuses, our Education Advancement Center is now building up a cloud-based, greater-capacity, easy-to-use video content management system (VCMS). Our Office of Information Systems is also reinforcing its server and system management efforts to ensure the stable and reliable streaming of online lecture content.”

Parallel to all those formal communications, the Head of Department organized a chat group on an online social-media application with all faculty members of the Department where strategies for the online classes were discussed. We were encouraged to research well the already available E-class platform. Also, HUFS had secured an authorized use of the WebEx platform by HUFS faculty, as well as customized G-Suite for HUFS. In the days before the start of online classes we tested WebEx and G-Suite, as well as video-making abilities of PowerPoint, YouTube, etc. We were also given freedom to use other platforms, e.g.

Zoom, etc. Students had been instructed as well. From the very first days of online education (March 16th) things in our Department were smooth and rewarding. We gave feedback to the Head of Department. The coordination was at an excellent level. Both professors and students adjusted quickly to the new situation. In the first several weeks we used several channels of information. That meant the same information was communicated simultaneously through E-class Announcements, ordinary emails to students' email addresses, SMS/MMS to the students' smartphone numbers. Students also used more than one channel to contact the professors. With time communication was streamlined and most of the group communication happened in E-class with both professors and students checking their E-class accounts regularly. The online lectures were on WebEx. PowerPoint lectures, as well as Video lectures, were uploaded in G-Suite folders shared with the different groups according to academic subject. YouTube links, if necessary, were sent to E-class, so that students could watch them at their own time for best quality perception. The capacity of E-class was enhanced by the university since the demand and use grew immensely during the semester.

South Korea was the second country, after China, that was impacted seriously by COVID-19. In the beginning the situation was serious in the south and not in the region around Seoul. Nevertheless, on March 20th HUFs extended the period of online education for an additional two weeks by an emailed message which stated that offline classes would start on April 13th (Monday) at "the earliest", hinting that the online period could be extended. Three days later the university sent another email with a very personal message from the President of the University. In it he explained the situation and how the Emergency Response Committee responded to it. This email contained all typical elements of such vertical communication, i.e. the President addressing all "Faculty, Staff, and Students". At the same time, it was longer than usual and included some deeply felt remarks.

The University continued to upgrade the hardware across campus. All routers in the rooms of the residence halls were changed to new upgraded 5G-enabled routers **XXX**. Despite the heavy use of the Internet, the connection was as fast and as stable as ever. The Academic Affairs Division kept sending emails asking for feedback regarding technical or other difficulties that might have appeared in online education.

We also received great support from the colleagues at the department who shared their own experiences in the online conversations. They also provided links to useful information online regarding different possibilities of online teaching and learning. In all messages that were exchanged formally and informally on

the Internet there was a sense of solidarity with all colleagues. Several important decisions were also communicated, e.g. that “relative evaluation” has been cancelled university-wide for the spring semester. (It continues to be cancelled for the autumn semester.)

The role of mass media communication

Despite all the concessions that were made to the students, several mass media outlets published sensationalist “news reports” about perceived “irregularities” across universities in South Korea. I will explore two typical examples.

The first example [12] is a video news report by SBS, a major Korean TV channel and news distributor. In it the anchor and the reporter speak in a loud emphatic voice usually reserved for reporting serious crimes that are expected to spark indignation among the public. The message has all the attributes of Korean TV reporting of high-level corruption or dangerous criminals, including blurred faces and mechanically distorted voices of “whistleblowers” in order to “protect” them. The report was published on March 23th, barely a week after online classes started at most universities. It starts with a report on a class that was supposed to last for 50 minutes but instead it was “only” 33 minutes! Then it proceeds to report on a professor at Yonsei University who showed video lectures and TV documentaries but according to the journalists they were too old (e.g. 5 years old). The report shows a deaf student who says she was “surprised” that the teacher wore a mask and there were no subtitles on the video. At the end of the report there was a student who had the intention to file a “constitutional petition” because there are no laws or regulations allowing the students to ask for reduction of the tuition fee because the lectures are online.

The second example [13] is a publication on March 25th in the online business news outlet bizHankook. It reports a case of a professor who inadvertently has allowed pop-ups of their private chat on a social network to show on the screen while they recorded a video lecture. The report says the students were “surprised” to read parts of the professor’s personal correspondence.

Reports like these were numerous from the very start of online education. Their messages were perceived as controversial. They also put additional pressure on professors and universities. The tone and the content of such reports by private mass media were in contrast with the internal communication within universities which was characterized by solidarity and compassion.

These messages helped create a sense of anxiety and paranoia among some professors (judging from personal communication). Some professors were apprehensive not to finish their classes five or six minutes too early. They tried hard

to create new and original video content all the time. Typically, classes are taught two hours a week for 16 weeks. Provided there are two exam weeks, that means that professors give about twenty-eight 50-minutes' lectures per class. And a professor usually teaches four or five, sometimes up to seven, classes.

The second half of the spring semester

On April 3rd an email from the University informed the professors that with “the continued spread of COVID-19, the university has felt the need to extend online classes for the safety of faculty and students. Online classes will continue indefinitely until the COVID-19 situation stabilizes. If and when it is determined that offline classes are indeed viable, the university will provide you with notification approximately two weeks in advance to allow for any necessary preparations.” Also, “the university recommends that midterm exam not be held.”

It was not clear how the first half of the semester will be completed. Some decisions were left entirely up to professors, e.g. whether or not to hold midterm exams. As for the second half of the semester, the communication became more mediated. The university leadership communicated their decisions to the departments heads and concrete decisions were left to the discretion of the department heads or the individual professors. This enhanced the feeling of mutual trust between administration and professors. At the same time many departments held surveys among students regarding their desires regarding the second half of the semester. Online classes were allowed under strict observance of the social distancing rules imposed by the Government.

The online survey

The professors at our department were encouraged to hold a survey within each course we taught, so that we get a clear picture of what exactly our students want.

I conducted an online survey in all classes that I was teaching. The questions were as follows (I give only the English-language version below):

1. Please express generally your opinion/position on online classes/lectures and classroom (face-to-face) classes/lectures. Please write five or six sentences in English or Korean.

2. Choose one answer from the three answers below. What would you prefer about the online education at this moment?

- A. I prefer the online education to continue.
- B. I prefer classroom classes to start.
- C. I am not sure.

All of the students had answered the second question. Almost all students had answered the first question. What was really interesting to me was that, unlike in routine surveys about classes, this time students had written more than just two or three sentences. They had tried to answer the question as thoroughly as possible, revealing their intimate thoughts and feelings about the pandemic situation. The tone definitely conveyed their concerns and their apprehensiveness in an unprecedented situation. It is widely accepted that cultures like South Korea and Japan are “cultures of the precedent”, i.e. they are comfortable with situations that are similar to previous situations but extremely uncomfortable with situations that are new and not similar to previous situations. It was normal to expect that their responses will be different in tone from “routine answers”. In fact, the tone departed significantly from the usual formulas aimed at maintaining harmony and non-confrontational resolutions, and expecting the decision to be made at a higher level and only be implemented conscientiously at the lower level.

As for the answers to the second question, about 93% of the students chose A (continue online) and they had written long explanations as answers to the first questions to support their choice. The remaining 7% were almost evenly divided between B and C. This also showed the tendency among Koreans to quickly and efficiently reach an almost full consensus on a topic.

In their answers to the first question, student wrote openly and sincerely about their reasoning. Here are unedited excerpts from their real answers in English: “I hope to have an online class. Because I think there is still a risk of coronavirus infection. I think it is dangerous to have face-to-face classes with this anxiety”; “If we take the way face to face lecture, we feel insecure everytime, every moment. This is irresponsibility. Don’t rush to face to face lectures”; “face to face lecture only if the news says there are 0 people who got infected + 2weeks”; “As most of students use public transportation to get to the school, it would be almost impossible to keep the social distance. It seems that it’s a bit too early to restart the face-to-face lecture when there’s neither vaccine nor medicine”; etc. The ones that wrote in Korean also mentioned anxiety and apprehensiveness especially if they have to spend hours on crowded buses. Online education actually kept them away from potentially dangerous environments and saved them a lot of time. For some of the students that meant saving up to four, five or, in extreme cases, even six hours of commuting per day.

The students’ messages were important feedback to me. They confirmed that “communication is a reciprocal and ongoing process with all involved parties more or less engaged in creating shared meaning”. [14] Their statements

helped us a lot in making the tough decisions we had to make for our classes. They also taught us that responsibility is more often than not a shared value.

So, we ended up completing the spring semester online. We started the autumn semester online but, since there was a steady decrease in the daily number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea after spikes in August and early September, the second half of the autumn semester started as “hybrid education”, i.e. both of-line and online at the same time. That meant that professors were in classrooms for every class but the students “rotated”, i.e. they came every other week or even rarer, if they felt so. Professors taught to the students in classrooms, sometimes in empty rooms, and simultaneously broadcast the lecture online for the students who had not come to school. That meant that professors had to acquire even more additional technical skills. It was a good learning experience for both professors and students. The “hybrid education” lasted for four weeks. For the last four weeks of the semester the university switched back to online classes since the number of COVID-19 cases rose with the cold weather in the second half of November.

Conclusions

The analysis of the empirical data collected for this article, as well the observations of the period immediately preceding the outbreak of COVID-19 and the period of the 2020 academic year that had to be carried out during the development of the pandemic, showed that the communication during the pandemic, as experienced at the Bulgarian Studies major at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, was characterized by its timeliness, effectiveness, and a high level of solidarity and compassion.

The general principles coming from the specific dominant culture in the Korean society were put to the test and even strained but they proved resilient enough. Despite the different aberrations, the tone of the communication was more or less in the norms typical of the culture: maintaining harmony, avoiding direct confrontation in the resolutions of issues, a high level of patience and solidarity. For example, nobody in Korea would even think of protesting against face masks. At the same time, it was also obvious that when directly asked for their opinion, students would open up to reveal what they honestly think about the situation. That is an indirect indicator that the seriousness and the severity of the health crisis had been unambiguously conveyed through the formal and informal messages that circulated in the university and the society at large. The Bulgarian Studies major managed to mobilize both professors and students through successful communication using different channels, virtually all of them Internet-based.

The study of this case confirmed the strength and the enormous potential of the academic communication systems in the developed world today. It also proves that communication is crucial in the fight against the global pandemic all over the world.

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