Cultural Differences in Educational Practices: The Case of a Korean Graduate Student

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Abstract

Cultural differences in educational practices can be regarded as one of the major causes of struggle and failure. If these practices take place in foreign language settings where the medium of communication is carried out solely in the foreign language, the severity of the struggle on the part of the students rises significantly. In this study, cultural differences in educational practices are examined through the experiences of a Korean graduate student who studies in a north-eastern American university. The data is collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews which yielded to significant implications. Classroom activities, power relations, and expectations are presented through cultural lenses and how the differences in cultures affect the success of a foreign student are presented.

Key words: Educational practices, Cultural differences, Classroom activities**.**

Özet

Eğitim faaliyetlerindeki kültürel farklılıklar verilen mücadelenin ve yaşanan başarısızlığın ana nedenlerinden biri olarak kabul edilebilir. Eğer bu faaliyetler, iletişimin yalnızca yabancı dilde yapıldığı yabancı dil ortamlarında gerçekleşiyorsa öğrenciler tarafından verilen mücadelenin şiddeti önemli oranda artar. Bu çalışmada, eğitim faaliyetlerindeki kültürel farklılıklar bir kuzeydoğu Amerikan üniversitesinde lisansüstü öğrenim gören Koreli bir öğrencinin deneyimleri yoluyla incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın kaynağını oluşturan ve önemli çıkarımlar elde edilmesini sağlayan veriler yüz yüze derinlemesine görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Sınıf içi aktiviteler, güç ilişkileri ve beklentiler kültürel objektiften bakılarak sunulmuş ve kültürlerdeki farklılıkların yabancı bir öğrencinin başarısını nasıl etkilediği açıklanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eğitim faaliyetleri, Kültürel farklılıklar, Sınıf içi aktiviteler.

1. Introduction

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) define culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 4). It consists of learned values (e.g., notions of modesty, concept of friendship), patterns of behavior (e.g., gestures, facial expressions), and meanings (e.g., concept of beauty, religious rituals) which are shared by members of one group and used as a guide to organize lives. Culture shapes and defines every act of individuals and societies. Educational practices are one of them. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2006) state that "Culture provides the tools to pursue the search for meaning and to convey our understanding to others. Consequently, communication cannot exist without culture, culture cannot be known without communication, and teaching and learning cannot occur without communication or culture" (p. 326).

In this paper, I reveal the differences between American and Korean cultures in terms of educational practices through the experiences of a Korean graduate student at a US university. I argue that cultural differences on educational practices have a tremendous effect on the success of a graduate student which may not be observed directly or understood fully. I especially focus on the differences which have negative affects on the success of a graduate student and conclude with some suggestions for professors of graduate schools who can help their international students to overcome those difficulties.

2. American Culture vs. Korean Culture: Roots of Cultural Differences

Bock (1970) defines culture shock as a "disturbing feeling of disorientation and helplessness" when one is directly exposed "to an alien society" (p. ix). He also asserts that "the more 'exotic' the alien society and the deeper one's immersion in its social life, the greater the shock" (p. ix).

Cultures are identified by and examined under different dimensions which can be put into a table as follows (adopted and modified from Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2006, p. 250-266):

Table 1. Dimensions of Culture

Dimension	One Extreme	The Other Extreme
Context (The degree to which communication is explicit and verbal or implicit and nonverbal)	Low Context Directness and freedom of speech are core values. Non-verbal traits are literal meaning, specific details and precise time schedules.	High Context Indirectness and silence are core values. Non-verbal trait is the information which is embedded in the physical context or internalized in the person.
Identity (The degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships)	Individualism Individual freedom is the core value. Non-verbal traits are proximal distance, expression of emotions, etc.	Collectivism Group harmony is the core value. Non-verbal traits are proximal closeness, coordinated facial expressions and body movements.
Power Distance (The degree of equality or inequality between people in the country or society)	Low Power Distance People's equality is the core value. Non-verbal traits are more tactile, relaxing and clear vocalic cues.	High Power Distance Respect for the status is the core value. Non-verbal traits are untouchable, regulated nonverbal displays.
Gender (The degree of traditional gender role of achievement, control, and power)	Femininity Caring for others is the core value. Relaxed and coordinated vocal patterns, nurturing are non-verbal traits.	Masculinity Material success is the core value. High level of stress, loudness and aggressiveness are non-verbal traits.

Uncertainty (The degree of avoidance or tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity within the society)	Uncertainty Avoidance Core value is the certainty: what is different is dangerous. Non-verbal traits are more emotional displays and higher level of anxiety.	Uncertainty Tolerance Core value is exploration: what is different causes curiosity. Being more positive and friendly to strangers are non-verbal traits.
Immediacy (The degree of closeness, intimacy, and availability for communication)	Low Contact Core value is that public and body contacts are not comfortable. Non-verbal traits are standing apart and touching less.	High Contact Core value is that body contacts are signals for friendliness and communication. Non-verbal traits are standing closer together and touching more.

According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Korean culture is a collectivist and feminine culture which has high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance features. Compared and contrasted with the descriptions on the "context" dimension, it can be affirmed that Korean culture is also a high-context culture. On the opposite angle, we see the US culture. US culture is highly individualistic and masculine which has low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance features. It also falls into the category of low context cultures where direct communication is preferred and valued.

The cultural distance between one's own culture and the new culture (for example, degree of individualism and/or collectivism, structure of relations within family, relatives, friends, at work, at school) plays a very important role in determining the degree of distress in the adaptation process: "The differences in values (social, moral, work, and so on) that exist among many cultures have been used to account for the misunderstandings, distress, and difficulties experienced by cross-cultural sojourners" (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 56). In their review of literature on the relation between the mental health and academic success

of foreign students, Kim and Gudykunst (1987) reveal some striking data as a support how deep culture shock can affect students studying in foreign countries.

Taking these ideas into consideration, I studied the cultural differences on educational practices and how they affect a graduate student studying at a US university through her experiences.

3. Description of the Study

The data in this study came from interviews (a total of four and a half hours) conducted with a Korean graduate student studying in one of the US universities. When this study was conducted, Eu-gine (pseudonym) was currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program but had moved to the US three years ago to pursue an MA degree in Education which she had completed successfully a year ago.

Although Eu-gine got her masters degree in Korea, she decided to enroll first in the masters program at UB as she thought her MA degree would not be accredited and thus she would not be accepted to the Ph.D. program. As she was a graduate student in Korea and is one here in the US as well, she was a perfect candidate who could compare and contrast between the cultural differences on educational practices at graduate level. She agreed to be my participant and we met three times for the interviews. During the first interview I focused on her educational background and tried to learn as much as about how it was like being a student in Korea at the undergraduate and graduate levels. I let her recall memories and tell stories and asked for more details whenever possible. In the second interview I focused on how she decided to study in the US, when she moved here, and what her first experiences were like as an international graduate student. She mostly talked about the differences between her feelings she had during the masters and doctorate program. She mentioned that she was feeling comfortable in master classes as there were a lot of international students and that she started to feel alienated in the doctorate courses. That is why I focused mostly on her experiences as a Ph.D. student during our last interview.

4. Findings: I Didn't Know How to

As we have seen above, American culture and Korean culture are quite different from each other. These dimensional differences are reflected in education as well. It is my aim to

reveal and present those differences through Eu-gine's personal experiences as a graduate student. During our interviews on educational practices of Korean and American graduate schools, Eu-gine pointed out some important differences which are crucial for the success of the Korean students studying at the US universities.

4.1. Discussion vs. No Interaction

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) states that in high-power distance cultures like Korea "the educational process is teacher-centered…with the teacher initiating all communication" (p. 53). Eu-gine describes Korean graduate classes as ones where "there is no interaction at all" and where "the teacher lectures for two hours." However in American classes there is a lot of discussion which requires her to speak up:

> **E:** At the first time.. Yeees.. confusing. Isn't it confusing? In Korea reading a lot and being quiet can be seen as being a good student. If I read a lot and just sit and have patience to listen to the boring lecture and then I did good with the test then it means I am a good student. But here I should speak up. I should contribute to class and it's not like, you know, teachers are just giving me some knowledge.
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> **I:** So was it hard for you to get used to it?
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> **E:** yeah, yeah, very much…It was very frustrating. I wanted to speak up but I could not. Sometimes it is hard to join the discussion. Sometimes it is hard to find time, a right time or appropriate time to speak up. I don't know when I can speak. I don't know what I can speak and how.

For Eu-gine, it was hard to take the floor and speak up during the class as it was not something that she was "trained" to do so. She was so used to sitting in the class "quietly" and "absorbing" the knowledge presented by the professor that she did not know how to contribute to the discussions. Remaining silent is valued in Eu-gine's culture whereas American culture has a tendency to treat quiet students as "problematic" (Cazden, 2001, p. 86).

Coming from a culture where the teachers are holders of truth (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) who must be listened and followed carefully, Eu-gine struggled a lot during classroom discussions in the US:

> Here discussion seems to be regarded as learning. But at that time I felt like it's waste of time. Just like chatting. I didn't feel like learning anything from discussion. … It doesn't happen [in Korea]. I felt like.. I didn't feel like learning anything from the chatting. … I felt like discussion doesn't lead to learning. … I wanted to learn from more experienced person.

The difference between the values attached to the students' verbal contribution to the subject during the classes in two cultures is striking. Believing that she should not speak until she has a "brilliant" idea, Eu-gine considered discussions as "chatting" and hesitated to contribute during her first year at the Ph.D. program. When she had the courage to speak up, this time she did not know how to. Once one of her professors asked her why she does not speak in class and said "it's so easy, just speak up." She sounded very upset when she said "it is so simple to say that. For me, it was very hard." She was not used to "communicate her ideas effectively" because of "affective barriers" even though she did the required readings and had a good idea.

4.2. Critical Thinking vs. Summary and Memorization

One of the cultural differences on educational practices which caused difficulty for Eu-gine was abandoning her habit of summarizing and memorization in Korea and trying to get used to the critical thinking expected in the US:

> What we have to do is remember.. to memorize what the professor said in a class so if I follow that way then I can get a good grade. It does not mean anything. It's like memorizing what the teacher said. The difference is in Korea I just memorize some knowledge and I thought that's the truth. The true knowledge. And that's why I memorized it. … Here they criticize every point. Every research has weaknesses. It's not like this paper proves something. It tries to prove something but it has some weaknesses.

Being trained to memorize and summarize what is read is also reflected on Eu-gine's papers. She was thinking that what she was expected to do is to show how well she absorbed the knowledge by doing summaries of the reading material when she was asked to write papers:

> Nobody liked summary in my paper and every time I heard like "I
> don't want you to summarize it because I know this one and you
> know this one. I want your voice, your own experience".

Eu-gine's papers were criticized for just being summaries of the reading materials. What was required from her is to come up with original ideas, with her "own voice." Her way of thinking and her perception of a good student were challenged by the American way of thinking and expectations from a graduate student.

4.3.   Teacher's vs. Learner's Responsibility for Learning

The third difference in terms of educational practices in two cultures is the expectation on who is responsible for learning. In Korea, Eu-gine was not responsible for her own learning. It was the teacher who is responsible for his/her students' success. In contrast, Eu-gine discovers that the student is the responsible one for his/her own learning and success in the US:

> Here I have the responsibility for my learning but in Korea because
> of the teacher I can't learn anything. Responsibility goes to the
> teachers to make more meaningful learning so teacher has double
> responsibility. That's why they want to control more. I do not
> know but they may. But here I have the responsibility for my
> learning. If I didn't learn, that's my fault.

Our interviews showed that Eu-gine did not simply reach this conclusion without questioning or any resistance. It was not easy for her to accept the responsibility for her own learning:

> It was like teacher didn't do anything. Why doesn't teacher teach
> anything for us? Probably the teacher knows better than me. Why
> doesn't she do anything? [inaudible] That was my impression. It
> lasted one year. I had that perception for a long time. I thought
> American teachers would be better than Korean teachers. But

actually in reality American teachers didn't teach that much as Korean teachers do.

Expectations from a professor are different in two cultures. While American professors are expected to lead the way to the knowledge, Korean professors are expected to transmit the knowledge to their students. That is why Eu-gine used to criticize American teachers not to teach as much as Korean ones do.

4.4. Flexible vs. Structured

Eu-gine talked about the "hard" times she went through when she was left alone to make decisions (e.g., about which classes to take, what topic to write her paper on) as she was always directly guided by her teachers or professors in Korea, she was expecting the same direct and explicit guidance from her American professors:

> I do remember the worst part.. not worst part, the most difficult one is finding an interest. Every class professor asked me to conduct a research based on my interest but at that time I didn't have my interest. And in every class, with my past experience, I did not have to find my interest. Usually teachers assigned a topic and I had to conduct a research on that theme. But here I never prepared well and every class I had to make up my interest which I didn't have at that time. From the first class, every assignment, I felt like I am so left behind. I even.. I didn't even have a topic but the due is up, I am not prepared, I don't know what to do and sometimes I made up my interest but I do not know how to get access.. so that's kind of stuff. It was worst worst experience. And I have to write about it. … It was torture.

Eu-gine was so used to being assigned a topic to research that she had hard times to figure out what her real interest is on which she may want to write a paper. She was not only new to the culture but also new to the research field. There was high uncertainty about what was expected from her as a Ph.D. student. Moreover, some of her professors were so flexible that it did not help her at all but left her helpless:

> What I had was [as an expectation from the professors] to guide me directly and to give me an advice about my future. What kind

of options I can choose.. that kind of stuffs. I wanted to get direct

help from the teachers. That didn't happen.

The kind of guidance she was craving for was not provided to her. She felt that she was left alone and she had to find her own way by "following their way" to succeed though she struggled a lot. Her way was abandoning her expectations, take her own responsibility as an individual and make decisions by herself.

4.5.   Equal Status vs. Lower Status

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) states that "teachers are never publicly contradicted or criticized" (p. 53) in high power distance cultures as they hold a higher status in the society. If a graduate student comes from a high power distance culture, he/she might find very hard to contradict the professor even though he/she puts himself/herself in a very difficult position. Eu-gine always avoided such contradictions and put herself under overwhelming responsibilities:

> **E:** And seeing a professor because of project was weird. I never did in my life in Korea. I thought teacher initiates that kind of conversation all the time so I do not think I have that power to interact with a professor in the same status, equal status. It was weird. Usually when I go, we just listen to our professors.. … I never expected to interact with a professor. What I did at that time here was just listening. I initiated and I talked about my interest and after that the professor lead the conversation and I just listen and I say "ok, good idea" even though I didn't like it. "Ok, I will do that" and then I regret why I said "yes" to her suggestions because it's overwhelming. It was so demanding at that time. So I regret a lot.
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> **I:** That leads to a question. In Korea, were you used to contradict your professors?
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> **E:** No. If the professor says something then I have to accept it.
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> **I:** So is it rude to contradict or is it disrespectful?
>
> **E:** It's not acceptable at all.
>
> **I:** Acceptable..

E: At all.

I: So is it about respect?

E: Respect. Because the person knows better. More than me. …
And I am the person who *LEARNS* from the person so I have to
absorb his knowledge or her knowledge.

Being unable to say "no" or voice her own opinions, Eu-gine put herself in a situation where she did not want to be. It must not be that hard to imagine what she went through because of cultural differences on perceptions of status. Her American professors would be glad if she discussed her feelings, ideas and research interests as they would not think that contradicting is not "acceptable." However, she did not know that.

5. Discussion

Eu-gine describes the first year at the Ph.D. program as "an emotionally frustrating experience," "a terrible year of her life." It is clear from the interview data that she tried to be a good graduate student. She read a lot, studied hard, was ready to "absorb" knowledge which would be transmitted by the professor who knows better, and to show her learning by summarizing and memorizing what she was taught in class. Her way did not work in American classes. She was forced to speak up, to contribute to the classroom discussion though she did not know how to and when, to be responsible for her own learning, to be critical and to own her interests and voice.

Eu-gine went through a lot of difficulties but she did not give up. She "mysteriously" overcame those differences and changed. Although she realizes that it is very hard to change fully as she was "accustomed to the Korean culture for very long years" (more than 25 years), she is still able to "enjoy transforming."

It is a clear fact that the amount of time spent is the key for the international student to understand the educational practices in the new culture and adopt himself/herself to the new way of learning. The more time Eu-gine spent at the graduate classes, the more she developed an understanding of what is expected from her. She seems to be managing the courses more easily as she is now able to reflect on past experiences and make conscious effort to overcome cultural differences.

6. Conclusion

Adaptation to a new culture does not mean that one needs to abandon his/her identity or own cultural values but that he/she needs to create a "thirdspace" where he/she can create new meanings and understandings towards the new culture (Hall, Vitanova & Marchenkova, 2005). It is crucial for the foreign students who also seek academic success in the US as they need to be mentally stress-free in order to succeed. The basis for the creation of a "thirdspace" may be founded by professors at graduate schools who value the importance of dialog and developing an understanding of differences.

Eu-gine's was a personal effort. She struggled hard to overcome the differences and difficulties. There has to be something done for the international students who come to the US and study at US universities. They bring cultural values with them most of which are quite different than American ones. These cultural values might be very problematic for them and cause them to be less successful in courses. Dialog is the best way that may be stimulated to help international students at US universities. Thus, professors at graduate schools should be equipped with necessary knowledge about culture/s as their classrooms are growing more in diversity every year. They need to be aware of the fact that "An increased consciousness of the constraints of our mental programs versus those of others is essential for our common survival. … such a consciousness can be developed and that while we should not expect to become all alike, we can at least aspire at becoming more cosmopolitan in our thinking" (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 365).

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