Critical thinking, questioning and student engagement in Korean university English courses☆

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the viability of higher-level questioning in student-centered activities to elevate critical thinking and increase student engagement among Korean university English majors. The author examines research that identifies limitations for Korean students associated with their reluctance to speak or share opinions in class due to sociocultural influences in the classroom. Participants in the study posed and responded to higher-level questions in structured, small-group conversation activities. Findings revealed that cultural and institutional factors, as well as limitations in English language proficiency, can impact participation in student-centered, critical thinking activities. The author argued, however, that the evidence demonstrates that Korean students will overcome sociocultural obstacles and successfully engage in group conversations with peers in critical dialog when they possess adequate English language skills and when they are challenged to do so in lessons.

Introduction

Educators in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) are familiar with the challenges associated with implementing student-centered learning activities in Korean classrooms. Active learning approaches involving activities such as discussion or debate are often considered likely to fail in an East Asian context (Shin & Crookes, 2005). Korean students are generally uncomfortable with communicative tasks where they are expected to think critically and share original ideas with classmates and teachers in non-traditional classroom settings (Choi & Rhee, 2013; Lee, Fraser, & Fisher, 2003; Lee & Sriraman, 2013; Ramos, 2014b). Many see this as the result of several institutional and sociocultural factors, including an emphasis on rote learning for exam preparation, a tendency toward teacher-centered lessons, and a group-oriented, authority-reverent culture traditionally influenced by Confucian ideals (Cho, 2004; Kim, 2012; Lee et al., 2003; Ramos, 2014b; Seth, 2002).

In its 1998 review of the Korean education system, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) identified traditional, receptive learning methods with exam-driven content as innate problems in Korean education. It noted, "School education is excessively geared toward preparation for college [entrance] examination with the result being that memorization of knowledge . . . [is] the rule rather than the exception" (OECD, 1998, p. 25). Beginning in the late 1990s,

the Korean Ministry of Education (MOE) responded with efforts to overhaul the curriculum to emphasize problem-solving, creativity, higher-order thinking skills, and student-centered approaches (Chang, 2009; Kim, 2003). Despite these changes however, what the MOE calls for in theory rarely occurs in practice as teacher-dominated classrooms remain common in Korea (Byun, Schofer, & Kim, 2012; Campbell, Oh, Shin, & Zhang, 2010; Choi & Park, 2013; Lee & Sriraman, 2013). As McGuire (2007) explained, "There has been no serious or sustained effort to spread [critical thinking] pedagogy *across the curriculum* or throughout the education system in Korea" (p. 225). McGuire added that student-centered teaching approaches that promote critical thinking (CT) skills are rarely even present at the university level, where preparation for the entrance exam is obviously no longer a priority. Some recent studies involving Korean universities supported this claim, suggesting that through the use of receptive learning approaches, universities may not be fostering critical and creative learning despite a dedication to do so as articulated in their educational missions (Lee & Lee, 2012; Lee, Lee, Makara, Fishman, & Hong, 2014).

While this teacher-centered classroom dynamic exists in part due to a need to perform well on the university entrance exam, a great deal of the literature on Korean education acknowledges the existence of sociocultural factors that limit student engagement in the classroom. Scholars frequently connect this phenomenon to Korea's Confucian heritage. Kim (2012) indicated that "Korean students are not allowed to challenge the authority of schoolteachers under the Confucian tradition," which leads to "difficulties expressing their opinions" (p. 135). Ramos (2014b) stated that in traditional Korean classrooms, students passively listen and follow the directions of their teachers as a result of growing up in a Confucian society where they are discouraged from speaking up in the company of elders until they are asked to do so. Thus, by the time Korean students arrive at university they have been socialized to expect a passive learning environment, and they are noticeably uncomfortable when asked to take a more active role or demonstrate CT skills. This poses problems for university instructors who ask students to actively communicate, think critically, ask questions, share original ideas, and create new knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is not to critique the efficacy of receptive learning, or to advocate for one approach over another in all learning environments; rather it is to explore and ultimately endorse the viability of employing specific CT-based communicative tasks within a Korean context involving these sociocultural influences. Such influences have led some researchers to downplay the importance of communicative CT approaches in Korean and East Asian classrooms, including in EFL settings, suggesting they are "Western" approaches that may be inappropriate, or even problematic in that environment (Atkinson, 1997; Kim, 2002; McGuire, 2007; Park, 2013). Others have argued, however, that student-centered methods involving CT skills are applicable in East Asian classrooms despite these sociocultural implications (Crookes, 2010; Davidson & Dunham, 1997; Ennis, 1998; Kim, 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Rezaei, Derakhshan, & Bagherkazemi, 2011; Shin & Crookes, 2005; Shin, Lee, Ha, & Kim, 2006; Stapleton, 2001). This paper will align with the latter view, as it seeks to build upon the work of those scholars and to provide new evidence to support it.

Since culture and the sociocultural factors touched on above are integral to a discussion of the research in the present study, it is important to provide a definition of terms and to clarify the purpose for their use. In their report on intercultural language learning for the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training, Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, and Kohler (2003) defined culture as "a complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals, and lifestyle of the people who make up a cultural group" (p. 45). Bodley (1994) referred to culture more simply as "what people think, make, and do" (p. 22). He saw culture as a socially transmitted, symbolic set of beliefs that serve as a model to guide human behavior in a society (Frank, 2013). What people think and do, in Korean and East Asian society as a whole as well as in Korean educational institutions and classrooms, can serve as a context for understanding culture as it pertains to the present study. Further, sociocultural influences contribute to what may be labeled "sociocultural transfer." For the purpose of this research, sociocultural transfer refers to the effect on student performance in student-centered, CT activities due to a presence of attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviors, or practices often associated with Confucian heritage culture (CHC) in East Asian classrooms. These include a tendency toward teacher-driven instruction, a desire to save face, a fear of making mistakes, a reluctance to speak out or challenge teachers, a reliance on rote learning and memorization, and an exam-focused curriculum. This paper does not aim to critique the Korean education system or its classroom norms, rather it acknowledges the very real existence of these cultural implications and recognizes their relevance to any credible discussion of CT in East Asian education, as will be evidenced by the literature. Finally, this study will seek to challenge the myth that CT pedagogy is inappropriate or fruitless in Korean or East Asian cultural settings.

As a teacher-researcher, the author of this paper conducted research in a Korean university English language and literature department that sought to explore whether the use of higher-order questions targeting the upper levels of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) during structured, small-group discussions could be effective in engaging Korean students in CT activities. The effectiveness of the intervention was evaluated using a rubric based on Bloom's Taxonomy adapted by the researcher to assess student responses during the discussions. All observations, data collection, and analyses were carried out by the researcher. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) Will carefully crafted higher-order questions targeting the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy elicit improved CT from Korean students in group discussions? (2) Will such questions produce higher levels of engagement among students? (3) Will Korean students of English design effective higher-order questions that lead to increased engagement and improved CT? And, (4) Are meaningful results achieved using higher-order questioning in group discussions with students at all levels of English ability? Research methods, results and discussion, and conclusions and recommendations will be presented following a literature review of relevant theoretical and empirical research.