

Egalitarian Competition: Ethnography of a Korean Classroom

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Project Purpose

Research will provide insight into how students create relationships and identity in an educational context where interpersonal goals for students in the classroom are being intentionally shifted by governmental and societal pressure.

Project Importance

Development in pedagogical ideology in South Korea has pushed school to incorporate a greater number of strategies to increase creativity and individual development in students. This is in contrast with the traditional pressures toward egalitarian social structures and learning styles.

Project Overview

Working with an IRB approved by Dr. Thompson which covers all publications done with data acquired during the 2018 field school on the condition of individual anonymity, observations were done throughout Seoul by members of the 2018 field school. My personal research took me to an elementary school on the northern tip of Seoul, the farthest north of any researcher, but not the newest school observed.

The teacher whose class I observed is a former student of Professor Kellogg of Sangmyung University and collaborator with Dr. Thompson. We used this connection to get permission to observe the specific teacher's classroom, students, and teaching over the course of two months, though had we requested it, the teacher would have been willing and happy to have us longer, by her own admission.

My observations were done by sitting in the rear of the classroom during instruction and break times. The class is composed of 26 students and a single teacher. As per the Institutional Review Board instruction, I will not disclose names of individuals or any information which would make individuals identifiable, but I can say the teacher of the class is a woman with more than a decade of teaching in her career, with more than half of those years spent working in elementary schools.

In addition to simple observation, I would also interact with the students of the class whenever they wanted to interact and would occasionally even join in activities the

class did (i.e. singing, some games, admiring artwork, etc.). This allowed me to create a positive and trusting relationship with students and the class as a whole.

The data I created during my observations are largely in the form of field notes taken at the time of events' occurrences. As I have previous experience and a certain degree of skill with the Korean language, I was able to understand the daily goings on of this teacher's classroom and the conversations the students would have amongst themselves in front of me. As a result, in my field notes are episodes, not only of activities and lessons as performed by the class, but also fringe events that did not include the entire class.

I frequently took notes in English early on, though I changed my methodology to using a standardized romanization system with some personal changes to preserve specific spoken characteristics of dialogue. The shift in methodology arose from a change in project focus. While I initially left for the field school with the intention of observing and analyzing the relationship of North and South Korea through the lens of elementary school lessons and dialogues (as the meeting between President Trump and Supreme Leader Kim occurred during our stay in the country), I shifted my attention toward a more linguistic approach toward understanding the classroom interactions between student and teacher.

Thus, my data collection required greater accuracy, not simply precision, in transcribing the classroom's dialogue. By using my modified Romanization method, I was able to transcribe with total accuracy much of the primary speech in the classroom. While I continued to take note of other conversations, this method did require me to be more selective in my data collection as I could not transcribe every spoken interaction in the classroom.

With this data, I will processually analyze the activities of the classroom in much the same way foundational anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, analyzed Balinese cockfighting as a window into the culture of a number of villages in Bali. I took copious notes of the behavior exhibited by students during their games played during rest time. I also took significant notes on the social structures the students had created amongst themselves and with the teacher.

By analyzing the students' games and using them as a lens for the broader structures and behavior of the classroom, I will be able to demonstrate the effects of these classroom games on the social structure of the classroom and the values these students have been enculturated into.

The discourse analysis of my collected data will take place by utilizing my field transcripts through translation which will include the epistemic and interlocutionary markers found in Korean speech to pinpoint the exact social cues and structures being communicated and created through the students' deictic speech acts. A specific

example of this analysis will be of the speech levels, ubiquitous in Korean speech, that I observed and carefully recorded when used between students, with the teacher, and by the teacher.

This discourse analysis and grounded analysis will largely be done on the data through MaxQDA software due to its ability to work with large scale data analysis and coding. This ability to analyze mass amounts of data will be vital as I have more than 300 pages of single spaced field notes detailing the minutiae of these students' school activities and classroom behavior.

While these methods of data analysis and theoretical discovery are not complex, they are fundamental anthropological methods which have been effective for decades. It is through these methods that I intend to analyze the social reality of the students I observed which has been changing due to post-modernist and globalist influences. The greatest conflict in Korean education in recent years has been the conflict between pushing neo-liberalist values of competition and exceptionalism into the classroom, or to more fully embrace the egalitarian tradition of valuing the collective of students over the individual.

After initial review of the data and some early coding, I have observed a trend of this ideological conflict between the new and the old has pushed the students into creating social structures markedly different from those in the US and from older Korean students. In my view (and limited analysis to this point) the structures created by the students in the class I observed are similar in construction to those found in the reconstruction era of modern South Korea, approximately 1955-1982.

This poetic mirroring of the past, I will argue largely unwitting, can be seen clearly through an analysis of the behavior of these students as well as their friend group structures. There were clear alliances among the children, already a shift from tradition, though most interestingly, an understanding of the creation and maintenance of these social structures can be seen in the games the students played during their rest times between instructional periods.

Three specific games were played consistently in the classroom, only one of which was overseen by the instructor and this only briefly at the outset. The games themselves as well as the behavior of students in and around these games point to a very specifically structured sociality, and it is that deeper structure which I intend to excavate through my analysis.

Some specific theories I intend to use in this analysis include the work of Ian Hodder (*Reading the Past*), Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*), and Pierre Bourdieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*). While Geertz will supply the theory of methodology, Bourdieu and Hodder provide a fundamental outline for finding the true meaning and structure of a social group. Their work on social structures and defining social realities

provide incomparable background from which to find the new and shifting social order created by, amongst, and through these students I observed.

Thesis Committee

Faculty Advisor

Greg Thompson: Assistant Professor of Anthropology, currently researching Korean culture and education, research field school instructor, present employer as a research assistant working toward a cowritten publication and a presentation at the AAA conference in November

quod.

Faculty Reader

Zachary Chase: Assistant Professor of Anthropology, former department thesis advisor and current archaeology thesis advisor, primary department theory instructor, previous instructor for several courses (writing heavy) who provided constructive feedback consistently

Department Honors Coordinator

Charles Nuckolls: Professor of Anthropology, assigned by honors college to assist with honors thesis process, extensive experience with Asian ethnography and anthropological methods, associate of several prominent educational anthropologists

Timeline

January- April 2018

Research Project planning and initial research in ANTHR 442 with Dr. Thompson

May- July 2018

Field school in Seoul, South Korea working with Dr. Thompson and Professor Kellogg (Sangmyung University)

September- December 2018

Data Analysis of research through the ANTHR 443 with Dr. Thompson
Discussion of analysis with all faculty advisors

January- March 2019

- ✓ Creation of publishable thesis in ANTHR 499 with Dr. Thompson
- Continued review and revision with all faculty advisors
- Thesis defense in Mid-February, further refining of thesis if necessary before March 8

April 2019

Work toward publication in journals including Anthropology & Education Quarterly, Korean Anthropology Review, Journal of Korean Studies

Culminating Experience

This research responds to an ongoing discussion about the development of Korean education and the adoption of neoliberal values in the classroom. This continuation of a contemporary academic conversation with new data and perspectives will provide great impetus for academic publication in several journals focused on this topic. While these publications are expected to occur after graduation, they are expected to be significant contributions to the ongoing ethnology of South Korea.