

An Autoethnographic Study On Intercultural Communication As Experienced By An International Student From Kyrgyzstan

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The purpose of this study is to conduct an autoethnography about the intercultural communication experience of an international student from Kyrgyzstan. Autoethnography was implemented as a research of an insider, analyzing the intercultural communication based on the researcher's personal experience of interaction with Korean people on a daily basis. Data was collected from the notes and messages from the researcher's experience in Korea, analyzed, and the results were categorized into three cultural differences which cause misunderstandings and conflict. They are 1) insincere words, 2) recognition based on levels of academic titles, and 3) different perceptions of sickness. It is believed that this study will help Kyrgyz people and Koreans understand each other better, and serve as a base for further studies about students from Kyrgyzstan and intercultural communication experienced by them.

[Keywords] international student, cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, autoethnography, international student from Kyrgyzstan

I . Introduction

Continuing one's higher education overseas is a common occurrence in today's world. The reasons for the existence of this phenomenon range from better education overseas compared to one's home country, newer opportunities outside of one's zone of comfort, financial benefits, as well as the appeal of unique experiences in an unfamiliar place. With one or two of the above as the main reasons, students work hard to learn a new language, obtain enough information about the designated country, and raise the finances in order to accomplish their dream of studying abroad.

According to the OECD report, recently, host countries with the most popularity among international students such as the United States and Germany, have demonstrated a decline in the numbers of international students, while some countries have entered the international education market, one of them being Korea (OECD, 2013).

With the rise of interest among international students, Korea owes it to the colossal popularity of the Korean music, dramas, as well

as entertainment programs. Due to the fact that the content of the given media is appealing to a younger generation, individuals starting from teenagers, university students, and up to people in their 30s are affected the most. Another appealing aspect of education in Korea for international students is the equal amount of tuition for both the Korean citizens as well as the foreigners (OECD, 2013).

The main topic of this particular research concerns, as the title suggests, intercultural communication. Living in a foreign country has its perks as well as disadvantages (Parkinson, 2007; Engle & Engle, 2013; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Teichler & Steube, 1991). When one moves to a country other than their own, at first, it brings positive, exciting thoughts and emotions due to the novelty of the unfamiliar surroundings, the different language, lifestyle as well as the people.

However, because of these differences, difficulties are inevitable due to misunderstanding or lack of understanding of various aspects of life in the country of sojourn. Lee et al. (2015) divided the types of factors contributing to difficulty and stress in life in

Korea into cultural and psychological. One of the main contributors to the influence into the life and experiences in a foreign land is the people of the receiving country. In their article, Kang et al. (2014) demonstrated that building relationships with people is very important in the early stages of adaptation for foreign students in Korea. Thus, depending on the kinds of people they meet and the way they are treated by those people, foreigners' period of stay in that country can be anywhere between incredible and unpleasant.

Among various types of foreigners in Korea, students have the most encounters with people on a daily basis. The people who international students come in contact with vary, ranging from professors, peers and fellow students of various ages at school as well as people outside the school premises. Students learn and experience a myriad of new things from spending time and communicating with people. Communication is the most important aspect of daily life, and of culture.

Therefore, it is important for intercultural communication to be practiced in everyday life of every individual residing in this country due to the current transition of Korea from a single-race nation into a multinational one, which, as it is known by many, brought the concept of interculturalism. Since this concept is considerably new in Korea, a number of researchers continue to study it from various directions in the higher education dimension with focus on diverse groups of international students as research participants. Among the studies conducted up until now, there are several on acculturation of international students and some of them include the following: Na (2006), Seo & Keum (2012), Yu (2013), Lee & Nam (2003), Lee et al. (2015) and Kang et al. (2014). Some of many studies on Intercultural Communication of international students include Holmes (2004), Holmes (2006), Nakane (2006), as well as Sung (2007). While acculturation or cultural adaptation is viewed from the personal perspective of

international students and concerns the experiences they have, intercultural communication involves the encounters with people of various cultural backgrounds. Although there are studies focused on the acculturation of Central Asian study abroad students in Korea such as Kang et al. (2014) and Lee et al. (2015), there is a need for studies to be conducted on students from Kyrgyzstan. Some of the reasons include the following. Although Central Asian countries have certain similarities between them such as geographical location, the past membership in the Soviet Union, and certain cultural aspects, they are also greatly different in the areas of history, ethnicity, linguistics, as well as culture. Compared to other Central Asian students such as Uzbek and Kazakh, who make up the majority of Central Asian students currently enrolled in Korean universities, the number of students from Kyrgyzstan is considerably small, thus making them a minority among Central Asian students in Korea. Due to their modest number, not enough attention is granted to students from Kyrgyzstan, and they are slightly overlooked.

The main concern with which I wrote this article is in the research question:

How does an international student from Kyrgyzstan experience intercultural communication in Korea?

In this qualitative research, I aim to find the answer to the posed question, determine the current situation and offer a suggestion for further research.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is by some social scientists seen as an academic discipline – that is to say, one branch of communication studies, while at the same time, a field of concern for several other academic disciplines, such as psychology, social psychology, sociology, education, media studies, cultural anthropology

and management (Stier, 2006). Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2006) quote a Greek Proverb on the first page of the first chapter of their book. "Every tale can be told in a different way" (Samovar et al., 2006). It is an excellent way to give an example of the concept of Intercultural Communication simply, in one sentence. Then they emphasize the importance of intercultural communication pointing out far back into the past and the duration of its practice. In their book, *Intercultural Communication*, Rogers and Steinfatt (1999) define intercultural communication as the process through which we gain the insight provided by different perspectives and experiences.

Inquiry into the nature of intercultural communication has raised many questions, and has produced some theories. However, knowledge about it is far from complete (Samovar et al., 2006). As important Intercultural communication is, as a research field it is relatively young. According to Arasatram & Doerfel (2005), it has a short history of about fifty years. Before the mid-20th century, intercultural communication was limited to government representatives, merchants and traders, missionaries, explorers and tourists (Samovar et al., 2006).

Today, in a multicultural society where intercultural communication among diverse ethnic and cultural groups of people is practiced and facilitated every day, unavoidable intercultural communication itself may produce much more anxiety or apprehension across diverse cultural groups of people (Kang & Hong, 2007). Communication is a practice done by not only humans but animals, and even inanimate things given to us by Mother Nature. There are various types of communication, which makes it only natural for International Communication to have different types.

Bennett (1998) points out that only a small percentage of the world's inhabitants had to face the question "How do people understand

one another when they do not share a common cultural experience?" As representatives of various racial, linguistic and cultural backgrounds encounter one another and hold conversations, the importance of intercultural communication in Korea can be felt, making it a field that needs much research and has space for improvement. Communication across cultures and languages is really difficult and full of hurdles and pitfalls (Park, 2013). For a representative of Kyrgyzstan, a country which houses over 80 different ethnic groups and where interaction between different cultures takes places naturally without effort, the perception of and attitude towards foreigners required me to put myself in the shoes of Koreans for whom meeting foreigners and interacting with them is not customary.

1) Types of Intercultural Communication

When one hears the word 'communication', inevitably, the first thought that comes to mind is talking, putting thoughts into words and expressing oneself voicing these thoughts. That is verbal communication. Communication is a two-way process, for every person speaking there is usually someone who is listening. The receiving role in the communication process is just as important as the sending role, although it has received much less attention from communication scholars (Rogers & Stenfatt, 1999).

Can someone understand Indian society without knowing Hindi? It would be extremely difficult, as the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis implies. Language influences thought, and thus influences the meanings that are conveyed by words. Becoming fluent in a foreign language is a difficult and time-consuming task, but it is essential to gaining intercultural understanding of the society in which that language is spoken (Rogers & Stenfatt, 1999). This is the reason intercultural communication is especially difficult for monolingual individuals as well as those people who have never had encounters

with representatives of other countries. It is especially true about a vast majority of Koreans as it can be observed from a number of studies conducted to this day.

“Actions speak louder than words.” This saying is not unfamiliar to anybody who has even the weakest grasp of the English language. Sometimes it is easier to understand a person through nonverbal communication rather than verbal communication. A smile, a wink, a scowl, a squeaky voice, prolonged eye contact, fingers drumming on a tabletop – all these mannerisms reveal inner feelings. (Samovar et al., 2006). Rogers & Steinfatt (1999) explain and emphasize the importance of nonverbal communication:

“Nonverbal communication is particularly important when one’s language ability is limited, such as when one is sojourning in another culture. But most individuals, until they have studied the topic, think that nonverbal communication is just hand gestures... There is much more to nonverbal communication, such as space, touching, time, odors, and even the manner in which one speaks... Why do most people find the study of nonverbal communication so fascinating? Much nonverbal communication is unintentional and unconscious – and therefore cannot be easily controlled as verbal communication. It is difficult to lie nonverbally.”

Nonverbal communication involves gestures, movements and actions instead of verbally communicating ones thoughts and ideas. For representatives of different cultural backgrounds, due to various levels of language skills and comprehension, facing many obstacles is a big part of life. The ability to make use of it is true skill. While nonverbal communication can be of additional help in an intercultural communication, it can also bring challenges at the same time. Though there are common ways to express one’s mood, current state and emotions, there are also certain gestures

and facial expressions and other elements of nonverbal communication that belong to certain cultures and not to others. Thus, nonverbal communication is just as important as verbal communication and is worthy of the attentions of the scholars in the area of communication.

Park (2013) explains Asian communication in contrast with American communication as seen below.

“For Asians communication is meant to facilitate good interpersonal relationships. It is designed to promote and maintain harmony... It may be stated that, in Asian societies great effort usually is made to minimize open disagreement. Indirectness helps promote harmony by minimizing the chances of conflict...”

For Americans, communication is a tool to get something done. The words carry most of the message and the meaning... Communication for Americans should be as clear and as precise as possible. Americans want to reduce the chances of misunderstanding, of people receiving different meanings from the same message.”

Although Kyrgyzstan is considered a part of Asia, with its geographic location being Central Asia, communication is slightly different from that of Korea. Almost 70 years of being under the control of the Soviet Union, people of Kyrgyzstan have been influenced greatly by the Soviet ideologies; and recently, with much interest from the USA, Kyrgyz people are exposed to American culture. Therefore, to express their opinion in Kyrgyzstan, it requires for one to be open and direct.

2) Difficulties in Intercultural Communication

Sung (2007) describes the experiences of Korean students in Spanish speaking countries and the misunderstanding when talking to local people in Spanish. One good example of speaking the same language but having a difficulty understanding each other is when Koreans think they are saying “No, it is alright”

to an offer, the local people take it as “Yes, thank you.”

There are certain gestures that are international, such as the thumbs-up, the OK sign, but at the same time some of these signs, such as the V sign which means Peace and sticking-out-the-tongue, do not mean the same thing in certain countries. While in Korea it is common to hold up the V sign when taking pictures, it is an insult in some countries like the United Kingdom, Australia etc. When I was little, many little kids would stick out their tongue when they were mad at someone. In Kyrgyzstan it is simply a childish behavior, and in many parts of the world it is a serious offense. In Tibet, however, it actually means “I mean no harm to you.” Therefore it is interesting and important to learn some of the aspects of nonverbal communication of the destination country.

There are numerous studies on Intercultural Communication, and some of them include Bennett (1998) who studied literature to look at the current state of Intercultural Communication; Holmes (2004) conducted an ethnographic study of ethnic Chinese students’ in New Zealand, while in his 2006 study, Holmes conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese people from China; a study on representative of various cultures in America using quantitative research methods was done by Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern (2002); Nakane (2006) conducted an integrated study of Japanese students in Australian classrooms, Sung’s (2007) study centers around a group of Korean students’ experiences in Spanish speaking countries using group depth interview, as well as Stier’s (2006) literature review study. However, studies on study abroad students from Kyrgyzstan and their experiences of intercultural communication do not exist and with this study I attempt to pave a path in that direction.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Autoethnography

Ethnography, one of the qualitative research methods, has been widely used in various disciplines without limiting itself to cultural anthropology. Spradley (1980) describes ethnography as a culture-studying culture. He describes that ethnography consists of a body of knowledge that includes research techniques, ethnographic theory, and hundreds of cultural descriptions (Spradley, 1980). The idea of being there in person, relying on oneself as the primary research instrument, is sufficiently different from the prevailing image of how science should be accomplished that it has tended to overshadow issues of what one is expected to do upon arrival (Wolcott, 2008). Though there are several different types of ethnography, one particular type is quite interesting as it takes a slightly different approach to collecting data and has only one research participant, the author.

Autoethnography is not merely a story about oneself, it includes ethnography, which is mainly used to look at and study culture. Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding (Wall, 2008). According to Wolcott (2008), the term autoethnography exudes a certain self-explanatory air about it – one really ought to be able to figure out what it means. It was incorporated into the research lexicon without its earlier attachments, to become a reporting style dealing with the lived experience of researchers themselves (Wolcott, 2008). The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression (Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography also challenges traditional writing conventions that attempt to validate empirical science and uphold the power that accompanies scientific knowledge (Wall, 2006).

The essential difference between ethnography and autoethnography is that in an autoethnography, the researcher is not trying to become an insider in the research setting. He or she, in fact, is the insider (Duncan, 2004). Autoethnography then differs from other methodologies because the researcher is a member of the group being studied, that is, 'the researcher as subject' (White, 2003).

The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult (Ellis, 1999). Because of the value that autoethnography places on the personal experience of the researcher, participant observation is the core practice through which reflections are developed and all other data collection activities are organized (Duncan, 2004). Wolcott (2008) describes the writing style of autoethnography as intensely personal, often passionate and confessional, and usually excellent quality. I aim to meet the demand of autoethnography, by being as open as possible, while not losing the objectivity.

2. About the Researcher

The reason autoethnography was chosen as the method for this particular study is because Korea has been my country of interest for almost 6 years. Although there is a considerable amount of students from Kyrgyzstan enrolled in universities in Korea at the moment, there are many more young adults in Kyrgyzstan studying the language and broadening their knowledge of Korea in order to fulfill their dream of continuing their education in top universities of Korea. Most of them receive Korea-related information through mass media and from occasional interactions with Koreans residing in Kyrgyzstan. However, it is not the same as experiencing life in Korea directly.

Also, compared to other international students from countries like China, Vietnam and

Uzbekistan, students from Kyrgyzstan make up quite a small percentage in Korea. Therefore, my goal is to impart my first-hand experience of sojourn in Korea for both the aspiring students in Kyrgyzstan and the people in Korea who do not have sufficient information about the people of Kyrgyzstan.

Not unlike the abovementioned students in Kyrgyzstan, information from the media as well as encounters with Koreans sojourning in Kyrgyzstan sparked the curiosity and awoke in me the desire to continue my studies in Korea. Korean is the latest language I am attempting to master. So far I am able to communicate my thoughts and opinions in Korean and my skills are evaluated as level 4, or intermediate, in the official Test of Proficiency in Korean. Due to Russian being one of the official languages of most Central Asian countries, it is the main language of communication, besides Korean, with fellow study abroad students from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. My academic mentor and some of the abovementioned Central Asian students reviewed this study in order to improve the initial finished work, and to ensure credibility.

3. Data collection

The collection of data for this study started on February 25, 2015 and went up until the first week of January, 2016. From the first day of my arrival in Korea I started making notes of everything that had happened around me, the interactions I had with Koreans and the things that I observed, my thoughts, which, when combined, total to 32 pages. Along with the notes, messages on social media accounts are used as data for this study.

4. Data analysis

Although data collection process did not stop until January 15, 2016, I started the analysis 1 month in advance while still collecting and organizing the data. I focused on the notes and messages on social media that I had gathered.

To ensure trustworthiness, fellow researchers from Central Asia and academic supervisors reviewed the data. Data analysis was conducted in several sections, coding the experiences in the notes into groups with common themes. Then I divided the data into verbal and nonverbal communication. Finally, I categorized the data into three different groups.

IV. FINDINGS

After analyzing the data, I divided the results into 3 categories of cultural differences which are bases for misunderstandings and conflicts as shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Cultural differences

NO	CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
1	Insincere words
2	Recognition based on levels of academic titles
3	Different perceptions of sickness

1) Insincere words

Before coming to Korea, I was informed by Koreans themselves that Korean people do not really mean certain things when they say them. In Korean this phenomena is known as “empty words” meaning “insincere words”.

“Often I hear the comment ‘You speak Korean very well’ as a response to my greeting in Korean from ladies working in restaurants, cosmetic stores, and other people I randomly meet. You can’t really say much in response to a comment like that. Anyone can learn a greeting in a foreign language, but that doesn’t mean they are good at that language. When we have foreigners greet us in Kyrgyz we encourage them with a smile, a nod, or compliment them with a comment such as ‘well done’.” (From personal notes)

Hearing comments on alleged excellent Korean language proficiency based merely on a simple greeting is perceived as insincere and can affect the idea and perception of Korean people in the minds of foreigners, inclining towards superficiality. It can also be an indicator of lack of sufficient information about the Korean culture and certain cultural aspects.

The concept of “insincere words” can be seen in the following examples as well:

1. When I first arrived in Korea, many of my Korean friends and acquaintances sent me messages on social media expressing their excitement over my arrival in Korea. Every single one of them suggested that we meet and catch up on life. As time passed by, however, the suggestions were forgotten. To this day, I have yet to meet up with most of them. During my conversation with a friend from China, it was revealed that this phenomenon exists in China as well. According to her, when a friend or an acquaintance says: “Let’s have lunch sometime”, it is in fact a way of saying “Goodbye”.

2. The “empty words” phenomenon also occurred at the university. Usually, when professors mentions treating us to lunch or dinner, they usually keep their promise. However, there was one case when a professor promised to treat us, the Central Asian students of our department, to meat if we completed a conference successfully. After the conference, however, the topic was not raised again.

This cultural aspect could lead to misunderstandings and maybe even conflicts for a person with my cultural background if they are unaware of it. In Kyrgyzstan, and in Central Asia in general, when someone suggests to meet up or promise to take someone out to lunch or dinner, it is expected of them to make plans in the near future.

Due to the inability to express what one feels directly, and instead, having to go around what one is really trying to say, it can be quite

difficult and frustrating. Although this deserves a separate category, I decided to attach it to the existing category.

2) Recognition based on the levels of academic titles

As we spend 6 days a week in the research laboratory which houses 15 PhD and Master's students of various nationalities, cultural and religious backgrounds and of various age groups, there are many encounters between Korean students and foreign students on a daily basis. Naturally, conversations are made regularly and people not only think out loud, but also share their thoughts with fellow students.

There were several occasions when PhD candidates were discussing us, the students of the Master's Program. One of these conversations included the following line uttered by Ms X:

“What can they be possibly be doing? (in terms of academic work) They are only on their second semester of Master's!”

At a separate occasion, when the same PhD candidates were discussing the foreign students, Ms. X mentioned that in this research laboratory only the PhD candidates are considered the students of our professor. Master's students do not apply.

Another example of the distinct line between the students of the Master's Program as well as PhD students was demonstrated when a field trip for the members of our research laboratory was organized in the summer of 2015. After some deliberation, it was decided to include only the professors and PhD students. Unlike the previous two, this case was a demonstration of division by actions rather than words, therefore, nonverbal communication took place.

Many people seem to be interested in whether I have plans to continue and apply to PhD once I get my Master's degree, and when I show

hesitance, they are taken aback. One of the seniors in our research laboratory, Ms. Y, expressed her opinion with a slight hint of disapproval:

“In Korea, it is important to receive PhD degree, because if you stop your studies after receiving your Master's Degree, your situation is sort of vague. You either go all the way or you start your professional career once you have your Bachelor's Degree.”

These cases from different parts of the period of my research demonstrate an individual's position in the Korean society. These experiences pushed me to one thought – people will look at you and judge you based on your academic title not only in your professional career, but also in everyday life in Korea.

3) Different perceptions of sickness

Sharing a research laboratory with 14 other people is not easy, especially if the students are of different ages. On top of that, cultural differences make it even more difficult to find a common ground. One of the biggest problems and main cause for conflict was the different ways people perceived cold. Koreans seem to be more resistant to cold than people from Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in general. This was observed not only in our research laboratory, but also in other parts of the school, as well as beyond the school premises.

Throughout the past 11 months, I have been sick several times. Although, some of the reasons include lack of sleep and irregular nutrition, one of the biggest factors was the cold draft in our laboratory. We, the students from Central Asia, discovered an interesting fact about Koreans, during our conversation with Ms. Y. We explained to her that when cold draft enters the room and hits one, one will catch a cold and get sick. To this, Ms. Y was surprised and said that one does not get sick that way. She claimed that one can get sick due to dust. This is another cultural difference observed from my conversations with Koreans, and it can also

cause misunderstandings if not communicated.

V. CONCLUSION

In this study, I looked at my experiences dating back to 11 months ago, thoroughly went over my notes and analyzed the feelings and thoughts I had during the events described in the notes, categorized them and tried to give meaning to them. From the result of the study I discovered the differences between my cultural background and the Korean culture. Looking at the three different categories, there were certain unanswered questions, however, it is clear that intercultural communication is at its beginning stages in Korea. There is a need for Koreans to understand and accept foreigners the way they are and vice versa. In order for this mutual understanding and acceptance to take place, there is a need for space to educate, communicate and solve problems and conflicts due to the unsuccessful communication between cultures. Due to the lack of studies associated with study abroad students from Kyrgyzstan and their communication with Koreans, it is difficult for mutual understanding to develop between the two people. I expect this study to serve as a base for future studies concerning students from Kyrgyzstan and in understanding culture as a whole.

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