

Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Native English Teacher using a Student's Funds of Knowledge for English Instructional Content

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Abstract: For some time now, research has indicated that English as a second language students benefit from culturally responsive teaching, teaching that views their native cultures and languages not as handicaps to be overcome, but instead as rich resources for instructional content. ESOL teachers in English speaking countries have been encouraged by this scholarship to act as researchers, researchers of their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Through ethnographic interviews these teacher-researchers have been able to gather information on their students' cultures, interests, and family lives, information known as their students' *funds of knowledge* and then use those funds of knowledge to develop culturally responsive lesson plans. However little research has been done on how this process can be used by English teachers in non-English speaking countries. In the fall of 2013, I conducted a series of interviews with one of my Korean students to learn about his culture, interests, and family life. I then used his funds of knowledge to develop a culturally responsive English lesson. The paper that resulted from these interviews attempts to answer questions, such as: What is culturally responsive teaching? How do students benefit from culturally responsive teaching? How can native English teachers benefit from ethnographic interviews?

Introduction

On April 16, 2012, my wife and I began the most rewarding adventure of our lives. We moved to Haenam, South Korea. I really enjoy teaching English to Korean students. I appreciate the little kindnesses they show me. I also appreciate how hard some Korean students work to learn English.

I hope that, in some way, when I return to the U.S., I am still able to work with Korean students. So I when the idea of using students' funds of knowledge to craft lesson plans was presented to me, I was quite eager to talk with one of my students outside of school to learn what he knows and how I can use it to teach him and others in a more thoughtful way.

Informant

There were several students I considered as a cultural informant. However I ultimately chose Kim Byeong Guk, because his English speaking ability is quite strong, so I felt we could talk together without an interpreter always being present. Most importantly, though, our families have become close in the last year. Not only is Byeong Guk my student at Haenam High School, but his mother, Songyee, works with my wife at Hwangsong Elementary.

So since I already had a certain comfort level with Byeong Guk and Songyee, he was an obvious choice to use as a cultural informant. And since most of our past conversations never had much to do with Korean culture I knew I would be able to learn a lot from them.

Interviews

I once heard Korea described as a country in between tradition and modernity. It is the kind of place where you will see an elderly woman pulling a cart of vegetables down a dirt road and then stop to make a call on her smartphone. I started to feel this more and more with each meeting I had with Byeong Guk.

On our first interview I began by asking Songyee what her favorite memory of Byeong Guk is. She told me about how much her family enjoyed playing yutnori. They play yutnori typically twice a year, during the Lunar New Year and the Chuseok holiday. It's played by using yut sticks and mals. The yut sticks are thrown to determine how many spaces a player can her/his mals on the board. Once a player moves all of her/his mals home she/he wins the game. Songyee and Byeong Guk talked about how much fun this game was for them and their family, but how they often argued about the game because they are all so competitive. Byeong Guk and his father, Sang Bok, are especially competitive, which Songyee said often leads them to cheat.

I next asked about Byeong Guk's typical day. He wakes up at 6:00 and from 6:00 to 6:30 he exercises, doing pushups, squats, and situps. He says he does this because he feels weak and wants to be strong. His mother smiled and put her hand on his arm. After exercising Byeong Guk eats a breakfast of rice, kimchi, bulgogi, daejeon guk, and vegetables with sauce. Songyee joked that Byeong Guk doesn't like vegetables and that is why he's overweight and Byeong Guk smiled and agreed.

Songyee then offered me some dokbal, a Korean dish made from skin from chickens' feet. Byeong Guk joked that I would probably die from her cooking. I asked Byeong Guk if he ever did any cooking himself and Songyee laughed at the suggestion. She said no that only she cooks in her home,

because she is the mother. I asked her if that was true during Chuseok also since we had just celebrated Chuseok in Korea. Songyee said it was and that all women did inside work during Chuseok, like cooking and cleaning. Byeong Guk said that men usually do the outside work during Chuseok. I asked what outside work was done during Chuseok and he told me about going to clean the graves of his grandparents and great-grand parents.

Songyee then told me that women resent men in Korea, because of the extra work women do during events like Chuseok and the Lunar New Year. I asked if that's how all women in Korea feel. Byeong Guk said no and that Koreans in their 60s, 70s, or 80s are very traditional, that Koreans in their 50s and 40s are somewhat, but that Koreans in their 30s and 20s are not traditional in their thinking about women. He said this leads to a lot of arguing between the older and younger generations. However he also mentioned that the younger generation unconsciously feels that women are inferior to men. He said that he wants to treat women equally so if he sees a woman struggling with something heavy he doesn't help her. He also said that the younger generation is more about egoism and the older generation is more about community. He said he wasn't sure which was better.

The impressions that I took away from this first meeting were that about Songyee and Byeong Guk's relationship and Byeong Guk's attempts to understanding the evolving relationships of men and women in Korea. Songyee and Byeong Guk have the kind of relationship where they constantly tease each other, but you can see by the small things they do they care deeply for each other. Songyee teases Byeong Guk about his weight, but she seemed quite proud of the fact that he gets up to exercise every morning. Byeong Guk teases his mother about her cooking, but he would often put his arm around her and hug her. They seem to have a very close personal relationship.

I also noticed in this first meeting that Songyee and Byeong Guk seemed interested in the relationships between men and women in Korea. Byeong Guk especially seemed unsure about how he should treat women in modern Korea. He is uncertain about how to mix modernity with traditional Korean thinking.

For our second interview I met Byeong Guk and Songyee at a local coffee shop to talk. I asked Byeong Guk about what he and his friends like to do for fun. Video games and sports were normally the activities he and his male friends engaged in or talked about. His female friends liked dramas, all-star talent shows and love stories. Study also takes up a large amount of their time. I asked him what he and his female friends normally talk about and he said things that his female friends are interested in like the dramas, all-star talent shows, and love stories. He said most of his male friends aren't interested in those things, but they pretend to be when they are talking to girls. I asked him about dating, if he or his friends

had boyfriends or girlfriends. He said he did not, because he wanted to focus on his studies, but that he had friends who had boyfriends or girlfriends. Songyee said that Byeong Guk didn't have a girlfriend because he was ugly and Byeong Guk laughed. Byeong Guk also mentioned that dating takes place in the 1st and 2nd grades of high school, but that dating stops in the 3rd grade, because students are very focused on studying for their college entrance exams. I asked Byeong Guk what university he hoped to get into. He wants to go to Korea University. I asked Byeong Guk if he would date after high school and he said he would, but that he was afraid to be married. When I asked why, he said that divorce is becoming common in Korea and that women often do better than men in divorce settlements and so, he does not want to lose his money in a divorce.

I next turned to Songyee and I asked how she and her husband met. She said they met while living and working in Gwangju and that they married after dating for a year. I asked how they ended up in a small town like Haenam. She said that 10 years ago her husband found a better job in Haenam and so they moved. I asked her how living in a small town compared to living in a large city. She said that she likes the city better, because she misses all the cultural opportunities she had in a large city. Byeong Guk said he didn't miss Gwangju, because he was so young when they moved to Haenam. He said he preferred smaller towns, because he does not like big crowds.

Some of the observations that I walked away from in this interview included again Byeong Guk's ideas about relationships between men and women and his relationship with his mother. Byeong Guk, for a young man, seemed unusually thoughtful about men, women, and relationships, even if his thoughts seem unusual to me. His relationship with his mother stuck in my mind, because as a westerner it sometimes seems abusive to me even though I know it's not. I am often taken aback at how differently men and women and family members treat each other in Korea versus back home. Songyee will often make jokes about Byeong Guk's weight or his looks. Byeong Guk will make jokes about her cooking or her age. Yet neither one of them ever gives any indication of being hurt by it.

I've noticed this with other students as well. For example during one class I saw a boy and a girl working together on an assignment. The boy seemed to be teasing the girl about something and then suddenly he slapped her. Now she was not hurt and did not even look offended (the slap was not hard), but I immediately took him by the arm and to his homeroom teacher for discipline, because in my mind it is always wrong to hit a woman, no matter how hard. His homeroom teacher, who is also an English teacher, laughed when I told him what happened. He then took the student back to the class and asked him to apologize to the girl and left it at that. Everyone, the boy who hit, the girl who was hit, the other

students who witnessed, and the homeroom teacher who was in charge of discipline all laughed at the situation. No one was upset, but me.

Reflecting on what I see in Byeong Guk and Songyee's relationship and that experience helps me to see that just because I am offended by something should not lead me to assume immediately that everyone will be. Now I am not advocating freely slapping women or the insulting of children or parents, but I see that sometimes these things have to be looked at in their cultural context.

For our third interview Byeong Guk and I met alone. Since previously we discussed dating and marriage in Korea. I wanted to learn more about this and more about Byeong Guk's thoughts on these subjects. I asked him if he was to go on a date what his ideal date would be like. He said that he would like to take his date to dinner, the movies, and for a walk somewhere. He said that he doesn't think dating is much different than in the U.S. However one difference he has noticed is that the parents typically don't meet their child's boyfriend or girlfriend until they are actually going to get married. I asked what that was like and he said that both sets of parents and the children will meet together to see if there is harmony between the two families. If there is harmony than the marriage can continue, but if not the parents won't support their children's decision.

I asked what a Korean wedding was like. He told me that Koreans typically have two weddings, one modern and the other traditional. The modern wedding is like any western wedding, but the traditional wedding is very different. First even before the wedding begins, Byeong Guk told me that the groom sends a ham, a traditional wedding box, to the bride. The ham contain gifts for the bride and the honseo, a marriage document wrapped in black silk that the bride is expected to keep with her until she dies. The ham is delivered by the hamjinabi, usually the groom's friends, and if the bride accepts the ham then they are officially a couple. For the wedding ceremony the bride and groom wear red and blue hanbok, traditional Korean clothing. The red and blue hanbok symbolize the harmony between the two. The bride also paints red circles on her cheeks to frighten evil spirits away. Another important tradition that Byeong Guk told me about was Pyebaek. Pyebaek, Byeong Guk said, is a ceremony held after the wedding for family only. The primary purpose of Pyebaek is to honor the groom's parents. At the ceremony the bride gives her new mother and father-in-law jujubes and chestnuts. These symbolize the potential children the newlyweds might have.

Byeong Guk wanted me to be able to see some of the things we were talking about, so we took out my computer and he showed me pictures of hams and pyebaek ceremonies. I asked Byeong Guk why Koreans have two weddings, a modern and traditional one. He said that younger people in Korea like western culture, but that they still want to honor their older customs. However they don't mind mixing

the two a little. I asked him which one he preferred. He said, “I don’t want to do either one. I want to get married in a Batman suit. I want my wife to wear a Wonder Woman suit. But maybe she won’t like that.”

We discussed the possibility of an English lesson about marriage traditions from different parts of the world. I showed Byeong Guk some wedding videos on Youtube from different traditions. We watched a Jewish wedding dance, an African wedding dance, and an African American tradition of jumping over a broom after being married. When Byeong Guk saw the Jewish couple being hoisted into the air while still in their chairs, he said, “I want to do that at my wedding.” He commented on how many people think other traditions are abnormal, but he liked them.

I really enjoyed this interview. Listening to Byeong Guk talk about wedding traditions in Korea and seeing his reaction to the Youtube videos told me that this was a topic that he was deeply interested in and connected with. I also enjoyed talking with Byeong Guk on a personal level. He felt really real to me after all this. Earlier this week Songye told Amy that Byeong Guk said he had a nice time with Jeremy teacher.

Lesson Plan

Before I began my lesson plan I had to learn what the standards are for Korean high school students learning English as a foreign language in Korea. Since these standards are written in Korean I can’t read them myself, at least not well enough to get even a sense of them, so one of my Korean English speaking friends kindly translated some of the standards for me. The standards require that high level students be able to interpret new information and express their ideas and opinions.

I designed a lesson that allows students to do all these things. The lesson begins with a quick warm up in which the students match English words as well as Korean transliterated words having to do with marriage customs to their English meanings. Following this I give a brief presentation about different marriage traditions of countries or ethnicities. I include in my presentation marriage traditions from India, African Americans, Peru, Lebanon, and finally Korea.

After the presentation I have the students break up into groups and work on planning a wedding themselves. In their groups the students work to plan a pre-wedding ceremony, the actual wedding ceremony, a post-wedding ceremony, as well as giving thought to what the wedding participants and guests will wear. They can use the traditions we covered in the presentation or they can use their own ideas. Before the students begin their work I ask them if the wedding is taking place in the past, present, or future. After making it clear that the wedding is in the future, the students understand that their sentences must be in future tense. I ask them then how do you write in future tense and what verbs they

should use. Then it is made clear to the students to use verbs like “will” or the phrase “is going to.” After this the students begin their work. I walk around to each group and observe what the students are writing and participate in the discussions as well. Once the students are finished with their assignment the last ten minutes of class is spent sharing ideas for weddings.

The lesson requires the students to both write and speak, since the primary job of a native English speaker is to encourage students to use the English they learn. It meets the standards required by the Korean education system because students are using and interpreting the new information they have been given about wedding ceremonies by incorporating it into their own wedding plans, as well as expressing their own opinions and ideas.

The lesson is culturally relevant in two ways. First it uses the native culture as content, since I derived much of the information from my meetings with Byeong Guk and Songye. However, I made sure to have a local Korean English teacher review the lesson to ensure that I accurately understood all the information Byeong Guk shared with me (Diaz-Rico, 2008, pgs. 288-291). It also included cross-cultural examples which the students were then free to use in their own activities. I felt this would help the students achieve ethnocentrism or in other words accept cultural differences and even integrate them into their own work, since the students were free to use the wedding traditions in planning their imaginary weddings (Diaz-Rico pg. 293).

When I taught this lesson to Byeong Guk’s class he was quite excited, because he knew that the lesson came from our discussions. He was the first to finish his matching warm up. Some of the students in his group complained that the lesson was too difficult because of the writing involved, but Byeong Guk kept his group on task the entire time. He took the lead in the discussion and volunteered to do the speaking for the group. The entire class as a whole seemed to enjoy the lesson as well. They spent a lot of time laughing about what customs they would include and what their imaginary weddings would be like. After class several students asked me about my own wedding, since I included a couple of photos from my wedding. It was a good opportunity for me to talk about western wedding customs as well.

Conclusions and Implications

One thing that I’ve learned to appreciate from this project is how much work has to go into understanding people and the things they love. If we’re not careful we can allow our own preconceived notions or cultural understandings prejudice us against others. However we can retrain ourselves, not to be free of our cultural understandings, but to see the common ground between ourselves and others. Allen (2000) brings this out well in her article on ethnographic interviews. Our own schemas or how we

interpret information is part of who we are and can't be undone. But we can get to know others and see the overlap between our culture and their culture (pg. 52). In her study, the participants reported that they not only learned about the student's culture but something about themselves as well (pg. 54). The same is true for me. I learned that when my culture comes in contact with other cultures, I have a tendency to jump to conclusions. Initially hearing Byeong Guk and Songyee teasing each other seemed mean and cruel to me. However when I stepped back and looked at the larger picture I saw that they were just different and expressed their affection for one another in a different way.

Diaz-Rico (2008) points out that ethnorelativism allows us to freely discuss culture without generalizing people (pg. 294). Being careful about generalizing others is another important lesson I took away from this project. I never thought that a young Korean man would think so much about men and women and how they live together. But from Byeong Guk I learned to expect surprises from students.

The primary purpose of this study I realize is to help immigrant students who are living in America. Because I live in Korea, I didn't have the opportunity to work with a student like that. However I see from this experience that and from other reading I've done that it's important for students to have advocates who are like them. Hayes (2009) study of non-native English teachers found that though the world may prefer native English teachers over non-native English teachers, non-native English teachers often have an edge over native English teachers when it comes to helping students. Non-native English teachers are able to use the students' native language to help them understand more difficult lessons. Outside the classroom non-native English teachers are helpful because they can provide better guidance for day to day living to students, again, because they know the native language (pg. 5,8). Therefore while the non-native English teacher isn't a "native" in the English sense, the non-native teacher has a "nativeness" that is just as valuable if not more valuable (pg. 9). This relates to students in America who are English language learners, because they are in a situation where they may not have that kind of advocate. They don't have someone who speaks their language and can immediately understand who they are and where they come from. However, as teachers of English as a second language, if we become learners of their culture, if we make it a point to get to know them on an individual level, if we bring their culture into the classroom and hold it up as something valuable, then maybe we can be the next best thing.

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