**Anonymous Online Learning in Korea: Considerations and Approaches to Integrating**

**Anonymous Learning Elements into Online, Blended and Face to Face Courses**

**Abstract**

This paper explores anonymous online learning as a tool to overcome specific teaching and learning issues within Korean post-secondary institutions.  The chapter utilizes a survey of a small group of ESL students at a single Korean university to better understand student preferences and opinions about non-traditional learning options and opportunities in Korea.  While many students in Korea have not been exposed to online learning, the students surveyed expressed interest in learning online and they were especially interested in collaborative learning opportunities.  As more online classes and online learning opportunities start to become available in South Korea, this study explores anonymous online learning as an effective tool to overcome some significant and distinct teaching and learning challenges at Korean post-secondary institutions.  The anonymous online learning suggestions and approaches in the paper can be implemented within fully online courses and blended classes but they can also be used as stand-alone online components of traditional face to face and ESL courses.

**Introduction**

Technology is no longer a sidebar in higher education.  Today it is a critical component of teaching and learning in any program and across all program delivery modalities.  Students utilize tablets, smart phones, and laptops throughout class and they move seamlessly between their devices. Wi-Fi enabled classrooms are now norm and poor or intermittent Wi-Fi is a sure way to draw the ire of students and faculty alike.  These technology and smart device proliferations are forcing educators to rethink teaching techniques and to look for new and interesting ways to further integrate technology supported learning into their courses and programs.

Online forums and online submissions have changed how students interact with each other and how students interact with the instructor. These technology driven changes in student to instructor and student to student interactions can be used to an educator's advantage. These advantages are more evident when the changes are combined with accessibility to the unlimited information on internet to better facilitate student learning and to promote and enhance authentic learning experiences. Although Korea is viewed as a highly-evolved, technology driven economy and country it is both interesting and unfortunate that Korea has not taken advantage of the vast array of technology tools available in online learning. Korea is well behind the US and other developed countries such as Australia and New Zealand in supporting and encouraging the proliferation of technology across the curriculum.

### Review of the Literature

South Korea has a rich and deep history. The country has strong early influences from China dating back to the Gojoseon Kingdom as late as 300 BC (Daehwan, 2003). During the Goryeo Dynasty, from 918 to 1392 AD, Buddhism was the dominant religion, but as the dynasty fell, Confucianism started to become more prominent and blended with previously dominant Buddhist beliefs eventually creating Neo-Confucianism (Daehwan, 2003; Koh, 2003). The succession of the Joseon dynasty, from 1392 to 1910 AD, saw the rise of King Sejong who favored Confucianism and helped place its roots in Korea through his focus on education and scholarships (Koh, 2003; Weidman & Park, 2000). The Gukjagam, the highest educational institution built during the Goryeo Dynasty, was enhanced, relocated to modern day Seoul, and renamed the Sungkyunkwan (Lee & Yi, 2002; Weidman & Park, 2000). The Sungkyunkwan became the most important center for training Confucian scholars who were also political and cultural leaders. King Sejong also introduced Hangul, Korea's current language. With the introduction of Hangul, literacy in Korea rose and so did Confucian beliefs which ultimately

shaped the language to include hierarchical language and placed importance on Confucian based relationships (Daehwan, 2003; Koh, 2003; Weidman & Park, 2000; Zhang, Lin Nonaka, & Beom, 2005).

The Confucian influence led to teacher centered classrooms that provide little room for students to participate in discussion with classmates or the teacher because of the relationships that are emphasized by Confucian teachings (Bang & Kim, 2016; Daehwan, 2003; Zhang, Lin Nonaka, & Beom, 2005).  There is little praise given along with frequent scolding (Bang & Kim, 2016).  This criticism of the students in conjunction with the hierarchical relationships built into the classroom through the language and society has caused students to abhor school (Bang & Kim, 2016; Joen & Kim, 2012; Yun, Kim, & Kim, 2009).

Korea's traditional mindset and feelings of needing to hold onto past ideas directly conflicts with their advanced information communication technology infrastructure (Geert Hofstede, 2017).  In the past, Korea lacked online courses, but with the creation of K-MOOC, Korea is rapidly developing online courses to better utilize the advancements made through their ICT infrastructure (K-MOOC, 2017).  This new emerging method of educational instruction in South Korea provides new opportunities for educators to provide greater motivation and participation from their students compared to traditional classes (Warschauer, 1995, Zheng & Warschauer, 2015).

**South Korea, Ultra Connected and Technology Focused but Trailing in Online Learning**

Koreans are some of the most connected people in the world and the country enjoys some of the fastest internet systems and connection speeds in the world. Korean citizens are so tied to the internet that the country requires citizens to register their identification number, full name and email addresses with the government.  Yet, online learning and online courses and programs remain uncommon and underutilized in Korea.  Korean online class adoption significantly lags

that of the United States, Canada, U.K., or Australia.  However, according to the ICEF Monitor (2012), recent trend data indicates that Korean universities are beginning to significantly increase the number of online classes as well as other formal and informal internet based learning options, and Korea is now leading Asia in e-learning adoption.

A good example of a growing online learning project is the Korean Ministry of Education (KME) sponsored K-MOOC project.  The K-MOOC project launched in October of 2015 with 27 open enrollment free online courses from ten Korean Universities.  By 2016 the project had expanded to 140 course offerings and the program expects to offer 500 courses by 2018 (K-MOOC, 2017).  One of the main motives for the project was to create alternative learning opportunities for Korean citizens that took advantage of the "advanced ICT infrastructure environment and e-learning technology" available in Korea.  The project's webpage also proudly states that Korea has achieved the highest levels of technology development in the world and that this strong technology infrastructure is an important element of the project.  Given these technology growth trends, it is logical to predict that Korea will consistently increase online class and program offerings over time across a range of credit and extended education settings.

**Online Discussion and Online Anonymity in Korean ESL Coursework**

Online discussions and online anonymity provide Korean university students with a different way to learn about English-speaking culture.  It also adds some much-needed innovation and flexibility to the traditional teacher-focused ESL classrooms that are usually based around a textbook.  The positive feedback that can be incorporated into online discussions when combined with the above average digital media usage of Koreans makes them good candidates for collaborative online learning.  81.6% of South Koreans access the internet on their mobile phone.  "About 31 percent of South Korean smartphone users watch mobile video on a daily basis, and another 25 percent of them watch mobile videos weekly." (Internet usage, n.d.).

Koreans also consume a large amount of their digital media through their social networking sites. This is reflected in 82% of South Koreans being active on social media in 2016, the highest in Asia (Internet usage, n.d.). Online discussions can be used as a tool to help facilitate student engagement, discourse, and discussion and to remove unauthentic feedback and the fear of embarrassment (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011).

## The Benefits of Online Discussion

Instructors use discussions boards as the primary source for student interaction. The majority of online discussion boards primarily involve reading and writing exercises. This appeals to Korean students because there is no speaking component and it helps to facilitate improvement in their reading and writing skills. Improved reading and writing skills boost their scores on the TOEIC, Test of English for International Communication. Doing well on standardized tests such as the TOEIC is expected of Korean students (Choi, 2008). Korean parents, educators, and peers place extreme emphasis on test scores and the Korean education system is test driven (Choi, 2008). Because the TOEIC exam places heavy emphasis on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing Korean students are motivated and eager to find ways to improve in these core testing areas.

The pressures that Korean students are under is immense (Choi, 2008; Wang, 2013). The strong Confucian influences of Korean society place an enormous amount of emphasis on education. 69 percent of South Korean high school students attend four year university and this is the highest college going rate in the world (South Korean Education Reforms, 2016; Population with tertiary education, 2016). Another indicator of the Korean emphasis on education is that the Korean Ministry of Education's budget has increased six-fold since 1990.

Students are ranked from an early age and expected to consistently perform at the top of their class. Pressure comes from all directions with family, friends, and educational institutions

all focused on test scores and competition for limited spaces at desirable universities (Choi, 2008).  These pressures come to a boiling point when students take the Suneung, the Korean equivalent of the Scholastic Aptitude Test.  This high stakes test is responsible for high school students studying 14 hours a day (Hu, 2015).  This gateway test provides all Korean high school students with immense stress in the lead up to the test.  The test is also linked to psychological depression and high suicide rates among Korean teenagers.  Liang Wang (2013) researched the effects of high stakes testing and Korea's leading suicide rate within the OECD of 28.9 per 100,000 people (Suicide Rates, 2017). Wang's (2013) research on Korea finds that "suicide was the leading cause of death of Korean individual's ages 15-24 years in 2008" (p.2).

Given these pressures and expectations, Korean students are conditioned by society to conform. Pressures to excel in school and to conform to family expectations and cultural norms can start as early as kindergarten (Lee & Yi, 2002; Shin & Koh, 2005).  This stunts in-class discussion as Korean students do not want to be seen as 'individuals.'   The cultural norm and expectation is that Korean students are part of a collective social structure and that they defer to the elders who lead the group (Kashima et al., 1995). It is a deeply held Confucian belief within Korean society that the group should come first and that any form of individualism or standing apart from the group is not only contrary to the group concept but it is explicitly and strongly discouraged (Daehwan, 2003, Koh, 2003).  This directly impacts students and their learning styles.  Students become unwilling to participate in class discussions for fear of being seen as individualistic or saying something out of the norm (Kashima et al., 1995).  They also worry constantly about how they are being perceived by instructors and peers and this anxiety negatively impacts their ability to participate in a wide range of learning activities (Arnau et al., 2007; Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010) .  Given these constraints, teachers can use online discussions to promote student engagement and to create individual learning spaces where

authentic teacher student interactions can take place without social conventions and cultural norms dictating behavior.   The Gosling (2011) study supports this conclusion.  The student's online self is more expressive than what you might find when speaking to the same person face to face (Gosling et al, 2011).

Korean students are already familiar with and comfortable with online interactions.   This is evident by their vast amounts of data consumption, high internet speeds, and the extreme technology based connectivity within the country.  Hoe, Oh, Subramanian, Kim, and Kawachi (2014) surveyed over 50,000 middle and high school students about their internet usage concluding that males primarily use the internet for online gaming and searching information while women primarily use the internet for searching information and blogging or updating their personal homepages.  Over 75% the population in South Korea has a smart phone (The Global Media, 2012), and 73% of the population that use the internet in South Korea utilize KakaoTalk, a popular free mobile instant messaging application, on a daily basis (Internet usage, n.d.). These factors indicated widespread familiarity with technology and communicating online, indicating that most college age Korean students are already comfortable and competent in an online teaching and learning environment. Another benefit of online discussion is that students in the online chat or forum deal with only text and do not have to address various accents. Tauroza and Luk's (1997) study found that one of the most difficult aspects of English second language learning (ESL) is parsing different accents and diverse dialectic emphasis and pronunciations. In an online discussion, students also have more time to respond, and they can use the internet or the course text to aid their writing while they are working in the chat or discussion board (Campbell, 2007; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Hoon & Emerson, 2002).

Making the shift from in-class discussions to anonymous online discussions can dramatically improve ESL learning among the Korean college age population.  The instructor

can deliver positive feedback in the online classes or the online discussion without singling out the student or calling unwanted attention to them amongst their peers (Campbell, 2007; Chester & Gwynne, 2006). Given Korea's Confucian roots, online discussions are a good way to promote student participation and they are a good way to give focused positive feedback. They are also a good place for instructors to address individual student questions or issues. Further, students in an anonymous online discussion can ask questions or ask for clarifications or further help without worrying about appearing needy or slow. Given these important benefits, online discussions and chats can be more beneficial than in-class discussions especially in ESL classes (Chapelle, 2001; Warschauer, 1995, Zheng & Warschauer, 2015).

Anonymous online discussion can be used to help promote discussion and lessen the fear of public embarrassment and intimidation (Roed, 2003). The rules about online behavior and requirements regarding online conduct, post lengths, content, and deadlines should be clearly discussed to ensure student security and privacy (Bikowski & Kessler, 2002; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Students should be respectful of others and refrain from using inappropriate online etiquette, such as typing in all caps, disrespecting another student, stealing another student's alias, or impersonating another student (Chester & Gwynne, 2006). Internet etiquette and the rules for the discussion boards should stem from the code of conduct at the university. If done properly, the anonymous discussion boards can be a powerful tool that the teacher can use to promote authentic discourse and discussion.

## Creating Anonymous Discussions

Blackboard, Moodle, and Canvas are three popular learning management systems (LMS) for online course and program delivery. All three systems require students to input their real names and information so that teachers and other students can recognize each participant within the class. Within each learning management system, there are forums that the instructors can use

to set up online discussions, and students can upload documents to the teacher or to the class. Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle all currently allow or have allowed the creation of some level of anonymous discussion either within a course shell or as a separate discussion thread.

In Blackboard instructors can go into the Forum Settings and click a box to allow anonymous posts.  Directions for anonymous discussion creation in Canvas can be found at https://community.canvaslms.com/ thread/2591.  And, Moodle used to have a 'plugin' that allowed for the setup of anonymous discussions (https://moodle.org/plugins/view/local_ anonymousposting) but unfortunately, this plugin has not been updated and it should not be used in its outdated format.  So, while Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle all do or did allow an instructor or course designer to set up an anonymous discussion, doing so in a way that specifically meets teaching goals or that provides maximum student privacy might require the expertise of a seasoned instructional designer familiar with the platform. However, it is more important that current and future LMS's have functions to allow anonymity for students, either within an online course or in a separate anonymous online forum space, to help offset the Confucian ideas and ideals that have been implemented within the Korean education system.

## Authentic Feedback Flourishes in Anonymous Online Environments

As discussed above, the Confucian ideas and ideals of Korean culture result in a lack of authentic in class interactions and they significantly hinder the learner and the instructor. One example of this hindrance is that instructor feedback to students often has to be 'sugar coated' so as not to embarrass the student in front of classmates.  Guardado and Shi (2007) discuss the issue of 'sugarcoated feedback' when students' were not given anonymous feedback when they said, "many participants expressed little confidence in peer commenting.  Some chose to provide positive feedback or sugarcoat their negative feedback as reviewers or found peer feedback useless, and therefore, did not follow it in their own revisions as authors" (p.458).  In contrast,

anonymous discussion and postings allow and promote honest and authentic feedback in an environment where public and peer perceptions are not a concern. Removal of this cultural barrier to provide an authentic instructor and student feedback and dialog facilitates improved learning outcomes and improved test scores.

Without anonymity, students are likely to give only positive feedback to each other, out of fear of upsetting other students and in order to maintain their friendships and relationships with other students. Being anonymous helps students feel more at ease, and it also allows them to give honest peer to peer feedback that might not otherwise been given. While my Korean students clearly understand that giving inauthentic or overly positive feedback does not help them or their peers they almost always feel compelled to give only positive feedback in any public setting. Anonymity can provide Korean university students more comfort when they are in-front of others, allow them to worry less about feeling humiliated for their own perceived low proficiency levels and to break from conformity to cultural norms that might inhibit their actions (Campbell, 2007).

Online anonymity helps Korean students avoid societal rules that play major roles in everyday life in Korea, and it helps promote student-to-student discussions in addition to instructor-student discussions. One of the biggest issues in the Korean classroom is the above average power-distance that permeates Korean culture. Power distance is best defined by Geert Hofstede (2017) as, "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally." Korea's Confucian instilled society has a hierarchical structure that can be found across numerous aspects of Korea life and culture. Those on the lower end of the hierarchical structure in Korea are expected to be consistently respectful and agreeable and they are expected to accept their roles without question. This results in a person without power, in this case the student, unquestionably

accepting the ideas from the person with the power, the teacher.  Students are expected to accept the information and to not question the instructor and they are conditioned to be respectful at all times.  Because of the large power-distance in Korean culture, classes within Korean universities are teacher-centered and make in class discussions or interactions with the instructor difficult, stilted and overly formal.

These cultural norms and classroom dynamics are evident in Warschauer's (1995) study of a class of ESL students in Hawaii composed of Asian students.  He noted that the Japanese students were the most reserved, and this was probably because of their cultural upbringing and the education methodology within school.  In Warschauer's (1995) study there were five Japanese students; four of the Japanese students contributed 1.8% of the comments in face-to-face discussions meaning that they were almost silent.  The fifth student made 48% of the comments in face-to-face discussions. "This single student made five times as many face-to-face comments as all four other Japanese students combined" (Warschauer, 1995, p.21).  It is extremely interesting to note that the fifth Japanese student was married to an American.  As a result, he had the opportunity to practice English and to learn about American culture, values, and beliefs.  From his prolonged exposure to and extensive practice in English language and American culture, this Japanese student had learned to 'culture switch' and his behavior was consistent with the other American students in the class.

According to Cambell (2007), ESL students from Asian cultures tend to be reluctant to express views that disagree with the views or teachings of the instructor.  "They feel more comfortable in a student-led, student-centered discussion" (p.41).  Online anonymity can help Korean university students feel more comfortable during online discussions.  Online discussions can increase participation dramatically.  Several studies have reported increases of as much as 10 times more that in-class discussion participation levels, as well as increases in the student's

comfort levels (Chester & Gwynne, 2006; Warschauer, 1995).  Use of anonymous discussions and other online exercises can also help to change the peer-to-peer dynamics and shift the power balance in the classroom away from the instructor.

## Participation in Online Discussions

Korean ESL students can be difficult to manage and to engage in the curriculum because of the Confucian constructs that lead them to exhibit low participation rates.  The traditional style of teacher-centered classes is prominent throughout Korean universities.  The Confucian ideologies present in Korea have made the role of the teacher, instructor and professor highly desirable and highly respected.  Confucian ideas require that individuals seek harmonious relationships through respecting and following tradition and social hierarchy.  These relationships focus around the elder having the power and status to which other younger persons must submit.  The Confucian relationships, father and son, ruler and ruled, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and friend to friend, focus on each individual knowing his or her place within the social structure and hierarchy.  Social structures and hierarchies are based on relationships of age and status and through individuals showing respect to those of higher status and older age.  Koreans, following the teachings of Confucius, seek harmony in society through sincerity, tolerance, and forgiveness of others. Relational harmony, social hierarchical relationships, and traditional conservatism are core elements of Confucius' teaching as are having few items, being pure, non-competitive, showing moderation, and having few desires or individual wants and needs (Zhang, Lin Nonaka, & Beom, 2005).

Based on Confucian teachings the instructor-student dynamic results in the instructors being seen as a ruler.  The student must defer to and show complete respect to the instructor and by extension all teachings of the instructor.  Add to this established relationship the large age difference between the instructor and the students and the Confucian focus on education, and the

result is that the instructor holds immense power and commands complete respect in the classroom.  These ideas have contributed to a power-distance dynamic in the Korean classroom. This dynamic ensures that students are obedient and quiet and that they never challenge the instructor.  Lee, Fraser, and Fisher's 2003 study of teacher-student interactions in a high school support this when they said, "The present study revealed that teacher–student interactions in Korean senior high school science classrooms reflect the general image of the youth–elder relationship in society of 'directing teachers and obeying students" (p.83).  The authors (2003) continue to describe Korean high schools as "directive, controlling and not supportive of students' self-activities" (p.82).

Korea has deep-rooted and unaltered ideas that ensure Korea's traditional views and orientations endure.  Geert Hofstede (2017) defines long term orientation as, "how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future." Geert Hofstede (2017)'s research on culture describes Korea as, "one of the most pragmatic, long-term oriented societies".  Korea's desire to maintain links with the past when dealing with current and future challenges gives Korea its cultural identity.  This desire to hold onto established ideas and tradition makes it difficult to implement new concepts and ideas if these newer ideas conflict with long term, previously held beliefs.

With Korea's rapid rate of technical and scientific advances, Korea will be looking to integrate technology advances into the classroom. But given the power of traditionalism, this integration will present unique challenges throughout the Korean education system.  Korea's reliance on older ideas when using present concepts presents unique issues that seriously and consistently limit learning and student success (Geert Hofstede, 2017).  Anonymous online learning can provide students with the ability to break out of the confines of teacher-centered

classroom through the use of online discussions and other anonymous online activities (Warschauer, 1995, Zheng & Warschauer, 2015).  However, anonymous online learning as well as the role of the teacher as a facilitator in online course work will go against deeply ingrained and long standing ideas and beliefs around how education should occur.  It will be fascinating to see how these strong and opposing forces interact and enable or constrict change and innovation within the Korean education system.

Anonymous online discussions can provide students increased equality and can lead to higher participations rates (Collins & Berge, 1995; Hartman, Neuwirth, Kiesler, Cochran, Palmquist, & Zubrow, 1995; McComb, 1994; Ruberg & Taylor, 1995).  Anonymous online forums give students the opportunity to participate synchronously or asynchronously.  Students who are typically quiet or voiceless in class have the opportunity to engage in discussion with their classmates.  In contrast to a live conversation that requires the student to process the words and information at faster processing speeds, online forums and discussions provide students the time to fully process the conversation and information.

A study conducted by Polat, Mancilla, and Mahalingappa (2013) discusses participation in L2 (Second-Language Learning) learning. But it is not clear if these findings help us to better understand Korean students. The Polat, Mancilla, and Mahalingappa (2013) study found that there was a significantly higher number of posts and a higher word count in the nonanonymous forums than the anonymous ones (p.67).  The Polat, Mancilla, and Mahalingappa (2013) study focused on American students studying Spanish. As discussed above, Confucian based Korean culture is vastly different, and these differences are significant as they relate to online learning versus instructor lead classroom based learning.

Koreans enjoy using Korean made products and they are proud of Korean companies and how they rank against foreign competitors. KakaoTalk is a good example of the loyalty displayed by South Koreans. As of 2015 KakaoTalk boasts almost 29 million unique users and reaches nearly 95% of the Korean population. Naver, Korea's main website and search engine, since its inception in 2015 has 15 million unique visitors and reaches just over half the population while Google can claim only 11 million unique visitors and a 37% impact rate (Nielsen Korea, n.d.). If Polat, Mancilla, and Mahalingappa's research was conducted in Korea, given the tight regulations requiring South Koreans to be identifiable online, we can suggest that Koreans would participate more in anonymous online discussions since this would be their chance to voice their opinion without direct repercussions and concerns about not following long held beliefs and societal rules (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Lee & Yi, 2002; Shin & Koh, 2005; Warschauer, 1995). Their research also suggests that when considering online forums both anonymous and identifiable options should be considered when looking for participation in discussions in the online forums.

Koreans traditional educational style as influenced by its strong Confucian roots has made participation difficult for students in the classroom. Online learning gives students a platform to participate in robust and engaged discussions and learning activities compared to the traditional Korean classroom where students are expected to accept the one way communication of the traditional lecture style class in which they must adhere to a large set of societal norms.

## Motivation Factors in Anonymous Online Learning

Motivation is one of the biggest factors in determining whether or not a student will succeed at learning online (Dembo & Seli, 2012; Rueda, 2011). A student's personality and the details of the course drive the motivation for students to participate in the class and to become

engaged with the course material.  For online classes, students need to develop a different skill set and approach as opposed to learning in the classroom with a teacher in the room.  Whether the class is synchronous or asynchronous, having to use technology to be dependent upon learning is different than physically going to a location to learn with other students and the teacher (Clayton, Blumberg, & Auld, 2010; Wighting, Liu, & Rovai, 2008).

Each student's unique personality determines their own motivational factors when considering online learning (Rueda, 2011).  In Korea, motivation can be an issue since online learning is not common and students may not have experience with online learning and they may be unsure of how to approach online coursework.  When comparing South Korean students to American students, Korean students show significantly less motivation to learn online (Lim, 2004).  Lim's (2002) study found that Korean students listed course relevancy, learning control, and course interest as the most important motivational factors.  Self-efficacy is listed as the least important motivational factor signaling that students see courses as a compulsory requirement.  Comparatively, the American students listed course relevancy, self-efficacy, and reinforcement as the top motivational factors and affect and emotion as the least motivation factor.  The only factor that Korean students scored significantly higher for is for learner control when compared to Americans (Lim, 2004).  This suggests that American students strive for mastery of the course content to increase their self-efficacy.  While Korean students have goals that are performance based.  Korean students who displayed low self-efficacy, a heavy focus on the course, and learner control affirm their cultural preference for performance over mastery.  Korean students seek to attain high performance levels rather of mastery of a topic.  This distinction is likely due to the testing emphasis within the Korean education system.

Once a student enrolls in an online course to improve their second language acquisition, the student can reap quick and significant benefits.  The typical asynchronous online forums give

students the time to better understand the course material at a pace that suits them. Replaying or revisiting content is easy and the student is in control of the pace of learning. This lessens the fear of difficult social interactions and embarrassment. It also fosters a higher level of comfort through the more manageable and slower paced online discussions as compared to a more dynamic real time classroom interaction (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000; Campbell, 2007, Roed, 2003). This alleviation of stress gives Korean students the opportunity to be more engaged and to gain control of their learning, something that Koreans rank as a highly desirable element when taking online classes.

## English Language Learning Survey at Namseoul University

In 2014, the General Education Department of Namseoul University conducted a survey of 141 Korean university students to understand student's preferences for English language learning. The survey also captured data about course delivery formats and student preferences for online or face to face learning. The survey was written in English, and a Korean staff member gave verbal instructions in Korean. Students responded to all the answers that applied to them for each question, and the students were able to comment on all parts of the survey in order to help the researchers gain better insight into and more information about their answers.

## Survey Results and Findings

Only 18 of the 141 participants said that they had any experiences learning English online. This is not a surprise as Korean universities rarely offer online classes. At Namseoul University there were only 11 online classes offered in the spring 2014 semester, and all of them were taught by Korean professors in Korean. Within the survey, students could also comment on their answer choices and a recurring theme amongst the 141 survey students was they wanted to study with and communicate with friends in English with 86 students saying that studying with friends was important. Even though many students mentioned that they preferred learning in

class, the comments about learning with friends were the same as students who wanted to learn in a group environment.  These data points strongly suggest that students want to learn with their friends regardless of the class delivery format.  Online discussions and online classes can help students stay connected and build relationships with their peers while learning as a group. Online courses can also facilitate individual learning, depending on the assignments given.

However, the most important takeaway from the survey was that online courses give students a voice and a place to learn and to interact with friends.  72% of students who took online classes to learn English said that they enjoyed it.  While the total number of students who had taken online class was small, the interest in online classes was measurable and consistent with the small number of students who were exposed to online learning.

## Survey Results

The lack of interest in online learning in Korean stems from the cultural idea that learning should be done in a classroom with a teacher.  With all of the online classes at Namseoul University being taught by Korean professors in Korean, students have very few opportunities to learn from English language teachers through online course mediums.  Yet, there are signs that online learning, especially in the L2 area, could be beneficial and of interest to Korean university students.  Over 70% of the students who took online classes said that they enjoyed studying online and 43 of 141 students said that they would try online or hybrid classes.  Combining this interest level with a review of the literature strongly suggests that Korean students would enjoy online learning that is student-centered.

The literature shows that ESL and English as a Foreign Language students who study online can improve their English proficiency and their relationships with other students in the class (Campbell, 2007; Chester & Gwynne, 2006; Duff, 2002).  The large amount of positive feedback regarding online learning and the strong personal connections that are built through

online interactions make online learning a natural choice for Korean students wanting to learn with their friends in English. This relationship with friends and group learning was extremely important to the students who were surveyed. If students are able to take classes with their peers this can increase the feelings of and perspective of control that a student has when learning online. This sense of increased control and communication leads to increased motivation to learn and increased levels of student engagement (Rueda, 2011).

The survey shows that not many Korean students have learned online, and this appears to stem from the long-term orientation culture that Korea has developed. While the amount of online degree programs and online classes that are currently offered are limited, Lee, Yoon, and Lee's 2009 study found, "Korea is one of the fastest growing countries in e-learning" (p. 1327). This is because of Korea's rapid growth of its information and communications technology industry. This is increase in e-learning is confirmed by K-MOOC's creation in 2015 and its ambition expansion.

**Anonymous Online Learning Outside of ESL**

Anonymity is a double-edged sword that can liberate students in both a positive and negative ways. Anonymity can provide the freedom necessary to participate freely and without worry of receiving direct negative feedback in public. But it can also provide students with a veil that allows them to be more aggressive and less empathetic of others (Christopherson, 2007; Zimbardo, 1969). The code of conduct that is enforced at most universities helps ensure that students who choose to violate these interpersonal and netiquette rules are punished appropriately. Grades and class participation requirements in group discussions, discussion threads and other group work should also be required and each of these online or face to face course sections should clearly outline class conduct and netiquette expectations. These point allocations tied to proper and appropriate class interactions combined with the code of conduct

should be sufficient to positively shape student's online behaviors while providing students with a safe place to voice their opinion in a digital classroom setting regardless of the subject matter.

## Future Research

The survey of Namseoul University students showed that most students were unaware of online learning options but that studying with friends was an important factor in course and program selection.  These results show that students want to be in more collaborative and less rule binding learning environments.  This small single institution survey provided only a cursory understanding of student perceptions of online learning and the factors that contribute to motivation to learn and to participate in the learning process. Future research in this area should include a comprehensive survey examining student's motivational factors and the factors that hinder and promote participation in the classroom.  The survey should be conducted across a range of South Korean post-secondary institutions.  Looking at private and public universities ranging from large elite universities to small regionally accredited colleges will provide a more complete understanding of the factors that affect motivation and participation in South Korean post-secondary institutions and it will further inform the utilization of anonymous online learning as an element of both online and face to face courses.

## Conclusion

Given Korea's deep Confucian roots, online discussions offer a good way to promote student participation and they are a good way to give focused positive feedback.  They are also a good place for instructors to address individual student questions or issues.  Further, students in an anonymous online discussion can ask questions or ask for clarifications or further help without worrying about appearing needy or slow.  Given these important benefits, online discussions and chats can be more beneficial than in-class discussions especially in ESL classes.

Without the opportunity for Korean students to engage in online discussions, students will continue to be held to the Confucian rules that govern and shape Korean society. While the Namseoul University ESL survey did not show much participation in online learning, those who did participate enjoyed online classes more than traditional classes. This suggests that there needs to be more of an opportunity for students to learn online and for students to use some elements of anonymous learning to express themselves without the fear of embarrassment or fear of violating long held cultural norms and ideals.

The K-MOOC project is changing education in Korea by opening up online classes and online learning to the general population. With Korea's ICT industry booming and the country boasting the world's top internet speed, online learning will surely continue to increase in Korea. This increase in online classes gives students an opportunity for alternative methods of education. Online course and learning options will give instructors the opportunity to increase participation and motivation to learn while decreasing cultural barriers to learning in the classroom. It is imperative that teachers and students not only adjust to online learning but that they maximize its benefits when living within a Confucian society.

Understanding the societal rules that Korean students must adhere is paramount to delivering impactful online classes and to providing improved education opportunities for ESL in South Korean post-secondary institutions. By implementing anonymous online learning in South Korea, students are freed from the binding rules that govern their language and society. With properly regulated anonymous online discussion boards, instructors and students can create a harmonious learning environment that will help them succeed on their educational journey while utilizing the vast technological advantages that are available within South Korea.

**Key Terms**

Power-Distance – the way that power is distributed and how those who have less power accept the unequal distribution of power.

Confucianism – teachings related to Confucius relating to ethics, education, relationships, and harmony within the society.

K-MOOC – Korean Massive Online Open Courses

The Suneung - Korean high stakes test accepted by South Korean universities.  This is the American equivalent to the ACT or SAT.

Self-Efficacy – belief in one's own ability to succeed and it is associated with control, hope, and optimism.

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