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Teacher Assistant - Advanced English: Presentation

General Observations

The fieldwork I was set in was Seoul National University, South Korea. I am a teacher assistant for an Advanced English Presentation class in the business division. Many students were set on improving their marketing skills, conference skills, and overall international skills gave that many students wanted to work globally. At the beginning of the fieldwork, students were set to give an overview of what they wanted to do and what they wanted to work on throughout the course. Many students said they wanted to work in marketing or raise their own business. This class seemed to be a good fit for their goals as one of the upcoming projects was to pitch a new, original project and sell it to the class. Many students seemed to be excited about this upcoming project when we were going over the syllabus. Overall, there seem to be many group projects in this course—for in-class and outside-of-class activities. One rather interesting thing was the difference between international students and Korean students. Korean students seemed more reluctant to speak up, they were generally quieter during group work and wanted to do individual work even during group projects, raised their hands less, and were stiffer when presenting themselves for the first few projects. The projects included enacting interviewing for a job, international meetings as a group, negotiating salary, etc. When they did not understand something since the course is in advanced English, they struggled to ask for help due to the language barrier. I believe my skills in Korean helped in this scenario as I was able to translate for them when they looked confused and were not doing what they were asked. The international students, although few, stood out due to their proficiency in English and cultural differences. In Korea, students are typically expected to simply listen to the professor, do the work individually, and get a grade. This class is more interactive.

Focused Observations

After the first week of working with the students, I found that the enactment of an international conference meeting was rather eye-opening. Students needed to first learn appropriate vocabulary, phrases, and cultural differences. Secondly, students had to listen to a conference meeting from audio and then read from the same script with each other. Lastly, they were to make their responses and solutions to possible scenarios that were given by the professor. This was all to prepare for an upcoming group project where students would negotiate five or more benefits they would want in their performance review presentation.

For this in-class activity (acting out a conference meeting), students were set into two groups. The groups consisted of about ten people. As the students were reading from the script, it was clear what group of students needed work. Korean students tended to be soft-spoken and their voices blended away when an international student spoke the same lines as another group. This stood out and needed to be dealt with immediately. We needed to push the students to be louder but not in a forced and stiff way. It was rather difficult to make them stay consistent with this, however, bringing this to their attention and our attention will help them in the long run.

After enacting the script, students were given different roles and scenarios where they would react in their own accord using the vocabulary and phrases that they were supposed to practice. We allowed them to use their cheat sheet so it wouldn't be too difficult. However, both the professor and I found that we needed to give students suggestions on what kind of solutions they could use while they were in the group projects—this was to avoid long silences or confusion in the practice.

Although the Korean students are rather advanced in English, they were not advanced in Business or other extracurricular activities as most students in Korea were not trained to have jobs before college. Korean students, since elementary, are solely focused on getting into the right middle school, high school, and college as they are judged by their grades and exam scores for each school level. This type of culture is different for international students as college is typically their main concern when it comes to acceptance. Thus, coming up with marketing solutions did not come fluently for them.

International students, namely Americans, had more experience in this field due to starting in high school in extracurriculars. This means taking part in volunteer work, summer programs, and internships. A Russian student also stood out in this particular issue since he was a graduate student and already had experience in a programming internship. Students from Europe or Hong Kong generally had a mix of the same experiences as Koreans and Americans. However, even with or without their business proficiency, some scenarios did not come fluently for them as some of the problems revolved around Korean cultures.

One thing that stood out was the scenario of what to do if the bus and train systems changed in Korea. The question was “How would you compensate the citizens?” This was rather difficult for students who were not from Korea as the bus and train system is already new. Everything works on a card system and is rather new for international students. Korean students were able to immediately think of solutions as they grew up with this system. Therefore, there were high and low points for international and Korean students.

Reflections

I found that both Korean and international students needed work in different aspects. Korean students needed more work in an international sense, such as showing more expression

body, facial, and vocal wise. Perhaps even gain more experience for future opportunities. International students needed to work on understanding different cultures more or less. The activity of acting out a conference meeting showed what students needed to work on for their two big presentations that are coming up. After writing notes for several students, international and Korean students had different things they needed to work on. Students are now set out to work on their performance review presentation. I will be watching closely what students need to work on as I was also in the same class and the same position as them.

From experience, I found that Korean students would memorize their script and sound rather robotic when presenting. Although everything came out perfectly, their movements and speech intonations were robotic. International students tended to rely on key points and sounded less robotic. Based on my experience, there is an advantage for international students as they are typically fluent in English. However, their weak point is not preparing enough since they sometimes overestimate themselves. With this in mind, we gave students pointers on making key points. While giving students pointers, Paulo Freire's work on "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" stood out to me. Most of his writing talks about how oppression can be accidental when teaching. With this in mind, we tried to allow students to create their own process instead of following a set rule. Although my experience saw these flaws and solution responses, we did not want to oppress students and later become unable to present due to set rules they think they need to follow, whether these are rules due to their peers or the suggestions they were given by their teachers.