

Study Abroad/Reflections

Contact Zone in TESOL: East and West Immersion

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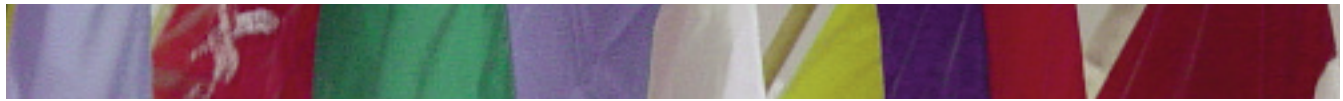
I was invited to give a talk at the Gwangju International Center (GIC) in Korea in Summer 2011. The GIC was established in 1999 by the Gwangju Citizens' Alliance to promote intercultural understanding and cooperation between foreign residents and local people in Gwangju, the capital of Chonnam Province, in Korea. Under the title of "Images of Writing across Cultures," I gave my talk about culturally embedded writing practices across nations and presented some practical strategies that the audience could use in various writing contexts. There were about 60 people in the audience. Half of them were Korean and the other half were expatriates, which included high school students, teachers in private language institutes, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, house wives, retired professors, and publishers. I was surprised to see that the majority of the Korean audience was high school students (it was easy to recognize them because they all came in their high school uniforms). I am not sure if they completely understood my talk since I gave the talk in English, but I thought their deep interest in the topic as they were constantly making notes and nodding during my talk. The high school students reminded me of the groups of high school students I saw at the American Embassy (I had to go to the Embassy since my visa recently changed from F1 student visa to H1 employment visa). I was surprised that they were there for visa interviews without their parents. All of them seemed really excited and cheerful: there was no sign of anxiety or apprehension on their faces.

I had an opportunity to learn more about the passion the high school students had for studying abroad because of the daughter of my former colleague Dr. Kim. He e-mailed me several times about his 16-year-old daughter, Yuri, who was angry with her parents for the past few months because they did not allow her to go to the United States for her high school education. Although Dr. Kim promised that he would take her with him to the United States on his sabbatical in two years, she was determined that she should go to the United States alone this year. He asked me to meet with

him, his wife, and Yuri after my talk at the GIC. When I asked Yuri why she wanted to attend a United States high school, she explained that most of her best friends were already studying in the United States alone without being accompanied by their parents.

She emphasized that she was the only student among her circle of friends attending the same English language institute who had not been to the United States as of yet (the institute is known for a strict English-only policy, and all the courses are taught by native English speakers). When I told her she should seriously think about the difficulties, she would face living alone in the United States, she said that she was already familiar with American culture and American educational system because of her friends in the United States as well as the movies and TV dramas she has seen. She reiterated that her parents should trust her and her ability to fulfill her education goals in the United States alone: she did not need to be accompanied by her parents. She was so emotional and desperate that she could not explain her reasons clearly, but instead broke down into tears. After our meeting, her father emailed me that she cried again when she came home and went to school the next morning with red eyes.

On my way back to the United States, at the Tokyo International Airport during my stopover to Seattle, I met Savannah, a 15-year-old middle school girl from Olympia, Washington. She was talking with other people but she immediately changed her seat to be next to me as soon as she found that I was Korean. She introduced herself in Korean "내 이름은 강 사린이에요 (My name is Sarin Kang)." I was amazed by her fluent Korean since I have not met many western teenagers who spoke Korean without little accent. She wanted me to call her "Sarin," her Korean name, and to speak to her in Korean. She explained that she adopted a Korean name "Sarin" based on the pronunciation of her English name (Savanah) and the Korean last name "강" based on the pronunciation of her last name. I was surprised that she even adopted a Korean last name. She was attending a middle school in Pusan and came to Korea with her mother who was teaching English in a language institute in October 2010. She was attending a regular middle school not an international school. She learned Korean in a community center in Pusan with other international residents. I was amazed not only by her fluent Korean (despite her short



stay in Korea just less than one year) but also by her enthusiasm to improve her understanding of the Korean culture. She was especially passionate about Korean popular music, which is known as “K-Pop.” She said that her favorite Korean music was “Go-Away” and wrote “노래방을 제일 좋아해요 (I love singing rooms)” in Korean in the little notebook I was holding. She wanted to continue her high school and university education in Korea simply because of her love for K-Pop.

Savanah’s deep interest in K-Pop immediately reminded me of the sweeping “Korean Wave” (which is also known as “Hallyu”) around the world. The K-pop, which has now made its way to the Bill Board Chart, has played the major role in spreading the Korean Wave around the world. The term, “Korean Wave,” was coined by Chinese journalists in China in the late 1990s (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Russell, 2008). Although many critics predicted that the Korean culture booms would die out, the Korean culture exports have continued to grow. The international popularity of Korean dramas spread into other fields such as music, food, clothing, cosmetics, and computer games.

Savanah’s passion for the Korean culture and language and her determination to continue her high school and college education in Korea also reminded me of the recent Asian cultural movements in the US. Melik Kaylan (2011) discusses the phenomenon of many parents in the United sending their children to Asia these days, since they want their children to experience the “strict” Asian educational system in the *Newsweek*. As the economic powers of China, South Korea, and Taiwan are getting stronger, an increasing number of parents in America want their children to experience the Asian educational system to raise their children as the so-called global elite. The Americans’ ever increasing interest in the Asian educational system, which the *Newsweek* calls “the Far East Immersion.” This is clearly reflected in the popularity of Amy Chua (2011)’s book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. As more parents become tiger moms and tiger dads, the ages of student population who study broad in Asia are getting younger.

Implications for Our Educational Practices

My encounters with Yuri and Savanah led me to reflect on how we can embrace the phenomena such as the sweeping “Far East Immersion” and “the Korean Wave” in our educational practices. Although they were teenagers, they clearly exhibited a strong sense of

global membership. They made me realize the importance of embracing the multiple literacies, multiple identities, and multiple discourses that such students bring to our classrooms and campuses. Yuri especially reminded me of the rapidly changing demographics in American institutions of higher education because of an increasing enrollment of international students and 1.5 generation students who do not fit the traditional definition of either mainstream students or international students (Matsuda, 2006; Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2009). She made it clear that the boundary between ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) is getting less clear these days. Yuri grew up speaking both Japanese and English (she was born in Japan when her father was working on his doctoral degree in Japan). Since she came back to Korea, she has been polishing up on her English in a private language institute known for high tuition fees as well as their courses which are taught by qualified native English speakers. She reminds me that the English language is no longer completely foreign to many international students who pursue higher education in the United States. They grow up interacting with the language through traveling, schooling, private tutoring, and a variety of mass media. They have been exposed to the English language at an early age because of the globalization and Internetization; thus, their literacy practices in English are different from the literacy practices of the international students who came to the America in the 1960s and 1970s.

Their strong desires to experience new cultures and languages (Yuri was desperate to study in the America and Savanah was desperate to study in Korea) made me realize that TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages) is standing at the threshold of a new chapter. For a while, the profession of TESOL was understood as a field that native speakers of English teach English, the *lingua franca*, to non-native English speakers around the world. The power of the English language is believed in every part of the world; however, as Asia can now compete not only economically but also academically and culturally, an increasing number of native English speakers are leaving their countries to immerse themselves in learning Asian languages and cultures. Both girls made me recognize the significance of fostering both curricular and extracurricular activities to help such students develop “inter-cultural literacy” which Guerra (1997) defines as “the ability to consciously and effectively move back and forth among as well as in and out of the discourse communities they belong to or will belong to” (p. 259). My

encounters with the teenagers during my trip to Korea made me reflect on my responsibilities as an international faculty member who specializes in second language literacy. Working at an American university where more than 80% of our international student population is of Asian descent, they made me think more seriously about how I can foster intercultural literacy environments that embrace both American students and multilingual students in our classrooms and in campus activities. During my return flight to Seattle, my hand was busy writing down all the thoughts percolating through my mind in the pedagogy book that I always carry when I travel. When the plane landed at the Seattle-Tacoma Airport, it not only brought me home, but also brought with me a sense of deeper awareness of global curriculum that better fits the needs of the new generation of global students. It was an awfully special summer.

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Multi-Cultural Expedition into Mindfulness among High School Students

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Many international college students know first-hand that striving for academic success can be stressful, especially far apart from the support and comfort of home. In today's fast paced world, hardly anyone is exempt from stress, and American high school students are no exception. A recent University of California at Los Angeles study discovered that, among 106 secondary school students, the percentage reporting good or above-average high school emotional well-being declined from 55.3 percent in 2009 to 51.9 percent in 2010 (Nauert, 2011). In an attempt to curb this trend, during the fall semester of 2011, a local high school psychology teacher invited the authors of this article to speak with her 4 psychology classes about stress and relaxation as part of a continuing collaboration with Arkansas State University professors of psychology.

The first author, an undergraduate psychology student involved with research on mindfulness and biofeedback, explained mindfulness to each class as simply being attentive to one's thoughts and feelings, whereas biofeedback is the real-time measurement of physiological functions increasing individual awareness of internal processes through the use of EmWave technology. The emWave uses heart rhythm information to calculate coherence, or balance, between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Studies reveal that a likely connection between the heart and mind is instrumental for facilitating positive emotions (McCraty & Rees, 2009). To illustrate biofeedback in action, we demonstrated how emWave technology coaches participants into a mindful state, through self-observation of one's breathing and heart rhythms. Through bringing the awareness onto these processes, mindfulness limits the stress related impact of negative rumination on the body, diverting the attention away from distressing thoughts. Students expressed their interest and excitement by frequently asking questions. Nearly everyone eagerly rushed to the front of the class to try out the emWave. The teacher was likewise happy to view the emWave firsthand.