

## Parkland College

---

Student Scholarship

Anthropology

---

2012

# Classroom Atmosphere: Does it reflect one's culture?

Sojung Kim  
*Parkland College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Kim, Sojung, "Classroom Atmosphere: Does it reflect one's culture?" (2012). *Student Scholarship*. Paper 1.  
[http://spark.parkland.edu/ant\\_student/1](http://spark.parkland.edu/ant_student/1)

Open access to this Essay is brought to you by Parkland College's institutional repository, [SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland](http://spark.parkland.edu). For more information, please contact [spark@parkland.edu](mailto:spark@parkland.edu).

Sojung Kim

ANT 103-001

Professor Isabel Scarborough

November 28, 2012

### Classroom Atmosphere: Does it reflect one's culture?

A classroom would be a familiar place for almost all people, except for the very young, and is a good place to observe diversity of gender, age, and ethnicity, particularly in the U.S. Hence, to observe a classroom atmosphere is a great topic for an ethnography project. Based on personal observations and experiences, although the components of a classroom are very similar in two different countries such as the U.S. and South Korea, the classroom atmospheres are produced differently in each culture. Therefore, after considering many other options, I decided to observe a classroom atmosphere to learn more about American culture, because I believe that the classroom atmosphere could reflect the culture that classroom is in. According to an article "Comparing Judgements of Social, Behavioural, Emotional and School Adjustment Functioning for Korean, Korean American and Caucasian American Children," Korean children's behavior in the classroom is more controlled and less self-reliant than that of American children (Jung and Stinnett, 2005). Through an exercise in participant observation, this paper highlights what differences and similarities of classroom atmosphere exist between Korea and the U.S, and further observes how different features of behavior, influenced by a certain culture, would be reflected in a classroom atmosphere.

Although due to globalization I feel there are many similarities between the two cultures; there are also obvious differences. Before I came to the U.S., I had attended school for about sixteen years, from an elementary school to a university. However, when I attended

a class in the U.S., I felt awkward due to the informal and free atmosphere. Contrary to the classroom atmosphere in the U.S., in Korea, almost all class atmospheres are very formal. For example, Korean students usually do not express their opinion during class, except at a certain time for discussion. In this context, when a professor asks a question, almost all Korean students are more likely not to answer voluntarily in order not to break conformity with the group. The reason for this attitude could be supported by an article titled “Korean, Japanese, and US students’ judgments about peer exclusion: evidence for diversity,” explaining that a number of Korean students tend to avoid being excluded. For instance, a student “who is disruptive (clown) or does not fit the group (sad) in order to preserve group harmony, a collectivistic value,” an essential concept in Korean culture (Park, Crystal, and Watanabe, 2003:557). In other words, if a student answers a question voluntarily in class, he/she is more likely to be excluded from the rest of the group because they regard him/her as a person who likes to stand out in the group and has a different attitude.

Furthermore, Korean students believe that if a student asks a question during a lecture, he/she interrupts the lecture. Therefore, to avoid interrupting, if a student has a question about the lecture, he/she is more likely to ask a question after the class. This attitude is interpreted by the professors as that Korean students show less participative behavior in class, such as raising a hand to answer a question, whereas the behavior is very often observed in American students, according to an article titled “A Commentary on Cultural Influences Impacting the Education of Korean American Adolescents.” The authors in this piece state that Korean students tend to ask questions of their friends rather than seek assistance from the teacher (Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011:36).

In the U.S., a class atmosphere is totally different to what I had experienced in Korea. Students freely ask and answer a question to express their opinion during a lecture even when the answer is wrong. When I saw a student interrupting a professor during a lecture for the

first time, I was shocked, because I had been taught since I was very young that to show respect you do not interrupt while a teacher, for example, is talking. Moreover, “to question the teacher would be considered inappropriate” in Korean culture (Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011:36). As an international student, I experienced culture shock, “a creepy and profound feeling of alienation,” from a usual class atmosphere in the U.S. (Kottak, 2011: 51). While to listen attentively and quietly to a lecture is considered a proper attitude for a student in Korean culture, to express a student’s opinion and answer a question voluntarily is considered as appropriate behavior in the U.S. culture. Although the setting is the same, the appropriate attitude expected of a student is quite different in both cultures.

To better scrutinize the differences and similarities in a classroom atmosphere between two different cultures, I chose to observe a class which I have been attending for this semester. One regular Monday, I arrived at the front of the classroom early to observe the atmosphere; although the place is not inside of a classroom, some of my classmates are always there before the class starts. Because we could only enter a classroom when a professor unlocks the classroom door, I thought the front of the classroom would be also considered as a part of the classroom to observe student’s behaviors. Before the professor arrived at the classroom, students chatted with other classmates about daily life and topics related to the course regardless of age or gender. Some other students played with their cell phones. Before class starts, the classroom atmosphere is very similar to what I experienced in Korea.

After the professor arrived at the classroom and opened the door, students entered the classroom and took their same spots, where they always sit. Before starting a lecture, the professor explained about our schedule for the rest of the semester and added that this class is the best among other sections she teaches for this semester. The professor always gives a lot of compliments to the entire class and also to individual students. For example, on the day we

had a quiz she said that scores for this section were much higher than those of a morning class and asked us why the scores were so different, although she taught exactly the same thing. Moreover, when I go to meet her in her office or come across her, she always gives me a compliment about a result of a quiz, an assignment, or even the clothes I wear.

I think giving a compliment is not only due to her personality, but also to American culture, because I saw many professors often give a compliment to their students. Contrary to American culture, Korean culture is very sparing with words of praise. In Korea, a professor also gives a compliment to an individual student; however, compared to the U.S., the frequency is much lower. I think to give a compliment is one good aspect of American culture and, at the same time, an excellent way to encourage students; consequently, they might study harder and get higher scores than students who do not receive any compliments.

The class started. She began her lecture. While she was giving a lecture, one student interrupted her to ask a question. Although the question was not directly related to the specific part of the lecture, she answered the question in as much detail as she knew. And then she continued her lecture like she was never interrupted. About fifty minutes after beginning the class, we had a break. During break, the professor stayed in the classroom and chatted with students. One student asked her about why she became a professor, starting with “Hey, [her first name].” She answered the question very comfortably. To me, they seemed like friends rather than having a relationship between a professor and a student.

In Korea, usually, a professor does not share their personal story with students. While I was observing that they were talking about a personal story, I felt a sense of intimacy between the professor and the students. On the other hand, I think Korean students, including me, feel a sense of distance from a professor. In addition, the student called the professor like he was calling a friend. Although I already knew that students in the US are more informal and do not use a respectful form of address when they speak to an older person, I have still

felt uncomfortable. Because Korean uses different language forms depending on social status, reflected by age, role, and gender this is part of how students relate to professors (Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011:34). The feeling that I had at that time would be completely different from what other indigenous students feel due to the different cultural background. It could be explained by enculturation. According to Kottak, this term is defined as people acquiring attributes “by growing up in a particular society where they are exposed to a specific cultural tradition” (2011: 27). While American culture “promotes equality and independence,” respect is extremely important in Korean culture, especially in the relation between students and a teacher (Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011:33). In this respect, there is an old saying, in Korea, “Do not step on even a teacher’s shadow.” The old saying reflects Korean culture and how significant respect is toward teachers.

Suddenly, students started packing up their stuff; I realized that the class would be over soon by the distracted atmosphere. I guess the professor also received the hint by the changed atmosphere, so she began to sum up with an increased volume and change in tone. And, when she finished the lecture with a greeting, most students left the classroom in a hurry. I do not know where they go after the class; however, I saw this happening in every class that I attended. It is also interesting to me, because not only is this because of the professor, but I also get the impression that there is little time left by the altered classroom atmosphere. Like Kottak informs movements “are [definitely] part of our communication styles” (2011: 106). While American students pack up their stuff, Korean students would consult a watch frequently to send a signal to a professor, because they do not want to produce a distracted atmosphere directly. While American students express this directly, Korean students express what they want using an indirect way.

Based on this observation, I conclude that a higher-level of self-expression and independent action are observed in American students, whereas passive, less self-reliant and

controlled behaviors are seen in Korean students. From what I observed, I learned that demeanor reflects a certain culture. However, as I mentioned above, Korean culture has changed to become more similar to the U.S.'s due to globalization where, "nations and people are increasingly interlinked and mutually dependent" (Kottak, 2011: 43). Just a few years ago, Korean students were discouraged from expressing their opinions; however, through adoption of Western culture, Korean culture has been changing to "encourage the development of self-reliance, self-expression, and independent action" (Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011:34). Hence, students have started to express their opinion/idea during a lecture, although they might need to get permission from the professor by raising a hand. These cultural changes would not happen only in Korea, but many other societies might also experience them as well. To sum up, I conclude that collectivism and respect are very significant concepts in Korean culture; whereas, individualism and to express one's opinion/idea freely are key concepts in American culture, and these constitute major differences between these two societies. These statements support my initial assumption that different cultural values have an effect and hence are reflected on students' attitude in a class setting. I wish to end this by stating that I would not judge which is better or worse, because everything has positive and negative aspects. To think one's culture is superior to other implies ethnocentrism and is something I do not only avoid but hope to challenge with this paper (Kottak, 2011:39).

## Works Cited

Kottak, Phillip C. 2011. *Cultural Anthropology: Appreciating Cultural Diversity*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Jung, Andrian Woo, Stang, Kristin, Ferko, Doreen and Han, Shin-II. "A Commentary on Cultural Influences Impacting the Education of Korean American Adolescents." *American Secondary Education* 40.1 (Fall 2011): 31-38. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Dec. 2012.

Jung, Woo Sik, Stinnett, Terry A. "Comparing Judgements of Social, Behavioural, Emotional and School Adjustment Functioning for Korean, Korean American and Caucasian American Children." *School Psychology International* 26.3 (July 2005): 317-29. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Dec. 2012.

Park, Yoonjung, Crystal, David S., and Watanabe, Hirozumi. "Korean, Japanese, and US Students' Judgments about Peer Exclusion: Evidence for Diversity." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 27.6 (2003): 555-65. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Dec. 2012.