International students' out-of-class interaction during the preparation of academic assignments: The case of six Korean TESOL postgraduate students

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a case study which explores international postgraduate students' out-of-class interaction during the process of academic assignment preparation. Previous research concerning student interaction has focussed on peer response techniques within a classroom setting (Kneser & Ploetzner, 2001), and staff-student interaction in an out-of-class setting (Tinto, 1993). This study used a qualitative grounded theory approach to examine some characteristics of out-of-class interaction with peers, academic staff and others, and, the influence of this on academic assignment preparation. Six Korean participants were interviewed three times over the space of one academic semester. The participants also kept a diary recording their interactions concerning assignment preparation. This study revealed that students' willingness to participate in out-of-class interaction concerning assignment

preparation was affected by cultural and individual factors. There was a tendency for the participants to avoid interaction with academic staff. This reflects Confucian culture, whereby students are highly aware of teachers' authority. The participants' perception of English proficiency was also an important factor in out-of-class interaction. Students who had low self-perception of English proficiency reported some difficulties in out-of-class interactions with both peers and academic staff, and were hesitant in making contact with lecturers or tutors.

INTRODUCTION

International university students at Australian universities, particularly those from non-western countries, often have different ways of learning from their western counterparts. This learning behaviour relies highly on the student's cultural and language background (Ryan, 2005). Because of these differences international students often experience difficulties with language, culture shock or academic shock which may cause stress during the period of study (Silvia, 2008).

Students' out-of-class experiences are believed to influence their learning and development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In educational settings, students' communication with peers and teachers, both inside and outside of a classroom, can be formed in a variety of ways, according to the cultural and individual variables of language fluency, social relationship and personality (Astin, 1993). In the last few decades, a number of research studies (see for example Maxwell, 2000; Pascarella, Terenzini & Hibel, 1978) have examined interaction effectiveness in terms of academic achievement from a sociocultural perspective based on the theorising of Vygostsky (1978). These studies, however, tended to have diagnostic purposes in particular academic contexts. Some studies examined the general features of out-of-class interaction in relation to academic achievement (Tinto, 1993); university life (Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Gaff & Gaff, 1981); and the general lack of interaction with academic staff in university (Cox

& Orehovec, 2007; The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 2006).

One important facet of the campus experience for students is the nature of the social or interpersonal environment. This includes not only the extent of a student's participation in the peer culture, but also the frequency and quality of their interaction with academic staff (Pascarella, Terenzini & Hibel, 1978). Thus, students' interaction outside the classroom may be associated with other variables, such as academic achievement, satisfaction of general campus life, and hope for their future career.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociocultural interactions

Theories explaining the role of social interaction in learning originate from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Recent developments in sociocultural theory have highlighted the importance of reciprocal understanding and intersubjectivity for effective interaction (Wells, 1987). According to Vygotsky (1978), human development is inherently a socially situated activity. Social interaction enables humans to develop advanced thoughts through ongoing interactions with more experienced individuals in the community. He argues that language, as a core of interaction, plays a role in holding and passing thoughts from one individual to another. In this vein, the interaction between students and more experienced members of the academic community, that is academic staff, is essential. Several research studies have demonstrated the importance of interaction between faculty members and students, both in and outside the classroom.

Astin (1977) found that academic staff-student interaction was the strongest factor influencing student satisfaction on campus in a study conducted with over 200,000 students from more than 300 colleges and universities. In a later study, Astin (1993) found that

staff student interactions had a positive influence on both cognitive and affective student development.

It has been suggested that informal interaction with faculty outside the classroom may lead to enhanced intellectual development and therefore affect student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Academic staff, such as lecturers and tutors, play roles as instructors, role models, advisors and sources of support and guidance. Through engagement with faculty members in these capacities, students can develop a deeper appreciation for the subject material, be exposed to new opportunities for learning, and receive encouragement socially and toward a future career (Arredondo, 1995). Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1994) argued there should be an increase in such interactions in order to improve career choice, personal growth, and student persistence.

Korean culture and Confucianism

Historically, Korean culture has been influenced by Confucian beliefs (Adams & Gottlieb, 1993; Yum, 2000). "Confucianism is a philosophy of human nature that considers proper human relationships as the basis of society" (Yum, 2000, p.64). Confucian philosophy emphasises a strict hierarchical order of human relationships based on age, sex, and inherited social status. Respect for and obedience to parents, elders, and teachers is viewed as essential. Confucianism remains central to modern Korean culture and the cultural characteristics of the Korean people are often defined in terms of Korean Confucianism. These cultural values can determine the form and style of communication, interpersonal behaviour and interaction, and ways of learning.

In Confucianism, the harmony of social relationships, the suppression of emotions, and the importance of following the correct social order are very important (Ferguson, 2001; Lee, 1987). Confucian teachings about the structure of society and education place a heavy emphasis on obedience to parents, teachers, and elders. Therefore, the major influence on the educational system and

teaching and learning style in Korea is primarily based on highly idealised and hierarchical rules. Ferguson (2001) indicated that the most salient of Korean social rules for education is respect for the teacher. According to Kim (1998), young students have no exposure to critical thinking skills as there is little opportunity to develop critical skills in such a hierarchical educational structure.

Characteristics of Korean students

Under the Korean educational system, college students are often characterised as being passive concerning classroom participation (Ferguson, 2001; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006). Research indicates that Korean students view the professor's role as the absolute authority (Ferguson, 2001; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006; Skow & Stephen, 2000), frequently encounter difficulties in openly expressing critical thinking (Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006), avoid eye contact during conversation (Ferguson, 2001; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006), have a lack of understanding of 'ownership of knowledge' and prefer to speak Korean over English in academic settings (Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006). Korean students are educated in passive and teacher-centred ways and tend not to question teachers (Chu, 1993; Ferguson, 2001). The Korean teacher-student relationship is "one that is quite hierarchical, the teacher has unquestioned authority within a teacher-centred classroom. Korean students have not been trained to engage in reciprocal dialogue with teachers" (Martin 2003: 19). Because of these issues, it is likely that Korean university students would experience a degree of discomfort in engaging in academic study in western contexts, particularly in relation to being critical and engaging in staff-student discussion.

Research into out-of-class interaction

Past studies into students' interaction between peers have been limited to the classroom and focus on interaction as a learning strategy (Beech, 2001; Kumpulainen, 1996). There is a large literature on peer-response as a pedagogical technique (Paltridge, Harbon, Hirsh, Phakiti, Shen, Stevenson, & Woodrow, 2008). Studies concern-

ing out-of-class interaction have been more focused on the relationship between student and academic staff (Astin, 1993). Unlike out-of-class interaction, classroom interactions are usually performed under the specific setting such as group or pair-work to reach a given learning goal, whilst out-of-class interaction may be said to reflect students' autonomy (Tinto, 1993).

Several studies show a specific type of peer interaction to be beneficial for learning and the outcomes of cooperative learning have also been found to be largely determined by the quality of the peer interactions involved (Kneser & Ploetzner, 2001). For example, in Phillips' (1990) study, exploratory argument as a process of finding an answer or conclusion was found to be effective in fostering students' critical thinking and cognitive development. Through interactional learning, students may be expected to be able to gather and organise information, develop oral presentation competence and use technology to enhance communication effectiveness.

Dimant and Bearison's (1991) longitudinal study investigated university students' attainments of formal operational reasoning by testing the effects of different kinds of socio-cognitive interaction. The study showed that students solved significantly more problems during the interaction in groups than did individual students. They cited this finding as confirming the potentially facilitating effects of peer interaction on individual cognitive development. The dialogue which occurs in a learning situation is seen as an important means through which the external, social plane is internalized by the students to assist their own thinking (Mercer, 1992). In addition, Kumpulainen (1996) found students' verbal interactions were highly task-related and characterised by the exchange of information, questioning, judging, organizing and composing.

International students at western universities need to be aware of cultural differences. Discussing cultural issues with peers appears to contribute to students' overall academic development and a gain in general knowledge, critical thinking, and analytical and problem-solving skills (Astin, 1993). Students' socialising with people of

different cultural and language backgrounds on campus has been related to enhanced overall academic development and to knowledge gains in a particular field or discipline (Astin, 1993).

The role of student-academic staff interactions may be classified into four categories: socialisation of students, academic performance, satisfaction of university life and cognitive development (Astin, 1977). First, many researchers (Chickering, 1969; Pascarella, 1980; Wallace, 1966) have identified close student-faculty interaction as being of varying significance in the university socialisation process. They pointed to the powerful socialising influence of peer groups on student values, attitudes, and development during university. Second, some researchers (Chickering, 1969; Wallace, 1966) have attempted to correlate the relationship between student-faculty informal interaction and grade point average. However, the relationship is far from clear cut with many other variables, such as, the amount and quality of such interaction possibly influencing the findings.

Third, overall individual student satisfaction towards university life has been found to be associated with student-staff interaction (Gaff & Gaff, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976). Peer relationships have been widely reported to be a primary source of student satisfaction, but interactions with academic staff were also significant. Two important changes experienced by university students are an increase in cognitive ability and a deeper awareness of personal identity and values (Bowen, 1977). Student-academic staff interaction is identified as a determinant in these changes. Hence, the more informal contact with faculty, the greater probability that one or more of those academic staff will have some kind of specific impact on student development (Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Woods & Bavry, 1975).

While previous studies have focused on providing a general view of university students' out-of-class experience, this study focussed on students' out-of-class communication with both peers and academic staff in a natural setting during a period of assignment prepar-

ation. This resulted in an in depth look at each student. The aim of this study is to explore Korean students' out-of-class interactions and their perception towards these interactions. As an exploratory study it sought to describe characteristics of out-of-class interactions and topical themes which influenced this interaction. It employs a qualitative approach to produce a 'rich description' of these participants experiences (Mackey & Gass, 2005). There are two research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of Korean students' out-of-class interactions concerning academic assignment execution?

2. What are some variables influencing these interactions?

METHOD

Setting and participants

The study was carried out in the Faculty of Education at a major university in Australia. The participants were enrolled on the Faculty's Master of Education in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MEd TESOL). There were approximately 150 students enrolled on this the course and over 80 percent were international students from Asian countries. The MEd TESOL is a one year full-time or two years part-time course comprising eight units of study. Each unit of study is assessed through assignments of approximately 6,000 words or equivalent assessment tasks, such as presentations, group work and teaching practice. The most widely used assignment is some form of writing task designed to demonstrate knowledge and interpretation of issues on a given topic.

The participants in this study were six Korean students (Female = 5, Male = 1) aged between 25 and 35. Their previous professional experience (i.e., in teaching English) ranged from 1 to 5 years and they had lived in an English speaking country from 1 to 10 years. Four participants completed their undergraduate degree in Korea and two of the participants had received some of their previous education in one English speaking environment, one participant

went to high school in America and another had studied in Australia since junior high school. All the participants' level of English proficiency had met the university's entry requirement for graduate study (6.5 IELTS, 577/233 (CBT TOEFL). Table 1 presents a detailed description of each student. For participants' confidentiality, pseudo-nyms were used.

TABLE 1

Description of each participant

Name	Gender	Age	Semester of study	Overseas study experience
Jin Ho	Male	30	Second	1.5 years
So Hee	Female	29	First	1 year
Su Jin	Female	27	First	1.5 years
Eun Young	Female	27	First	2.5 years
Mi Jeong	Female	25	First	10 years
Bo Kyeong	Female	34	First	2 years

Data collection

In order to examine out-of-class interactions two research methods were employed. First of all, participants were asked to keep a diary whenever they had interactions relating to their assignments with either peers or academic staff out-of-class. Because learners' reports about their internal processes and thoughts can be elicited by carefully tailoring the questions that researchers choose to ask, verbal report and other introspective methods are often used to gather data for qualitative studies (Dörnyei, 2007; Nunan, 1992). Dörnyei (2007) divides introspection as a method into two specific techniques: 'think-aloud' and 'retrospective report/interviews' according to the time set. Think-aloud is located in real-time and retrospective reports and interviews reflect a completed process (p.147). Using a diary, as a retrospective report, participants were asked to write the date, the start and finish time of the interaction,

the mode of interaction, the place, the number of interlocutors participating in the interaction and their relationship with each person, the interaction content and a self-evaluation (See Appendix A). The self-evaluation refers to how participants perceived the interaction in terms of advantages or disadvantages of such interactions. This process allows participants to observe and reflect their thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental state with a view (Nunan, 1992).

The interviews were conducted on three occasions over the semester for each participant (See Appendix B). The interviews followed a qualitative semi-structured technique in terms of using a pre-planned, determined framework with scope for expansion (Mills, 2001). A semi-structured interview allows respondents "to express themselves at some length, but offers enough shape to prevent aimless rambling" (Wragg, 1984). Also, a series of three separate interviews with each participant allowed the study to explore the meaning of experiences and in-depth perception of participants across time (Seidman, 1998). In the first interview, participants were asked about their current academic assignments. The interview topics concerned the procedure of executing these assignments, the perceived difficulty of these assignments, and the differences between operating in English and Korean in relation to these. The second interview focussed on the participants' general perception of out-of-class interaction in relation to assignment preparation. In the third interview, the participants talked about specific notions of interaction such as perception, preference, experience and language use.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used to classify the variations in students' reported experiences and conceptions concerning the themes of the interview (Bos & Tarnai, 1999). Reliability and validity are enhanced through this approach as no a priori categories were are used in the analysis of the data: categories emerged as a result of the analysis. This emphasis which allows categories to emerge from the data

rather than relying on pre-defined categories is based on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In this grounded theory approach, the researcher begins with the data, and through its analysis generates a theory.

The analysis of participants' diaries was divided into two parts. First, participants' out-of-class interaction patterns were analysed through quantification, involving counting the number of different kinds of interlocutors, the mode of communication and the location of communication. Secondly, the content and self-evaluation of the students' interaction were analysed through content analysis based on grounded theory.

The analysis of the interview data aimed at identifying participants' perception of out-of-class interaction. The interview facilitated data collection in an exploratory and inductive manner to focus on interpretations of what has happened in particular situations, rather than focus on predictions of what may happen in particular circumstances (Bassey, 1999). The interview data lent itself very easily to being reported as individuals' quotes. Using quotes is a useful way of bringing text alive, and allowing the participants to make cogent points, and to make the 'story' more believable (Powney & Watts, 1987).

Findings through both quantification and contents analysis were integrated to explain the role of interaction according to the amount and value of interaction. Thus addressing the issues of how participants interacted to complete assignments and to what extent this interaction assisted in the assignment preparation. The six participants' data were compared where differences or similarities existed.

RESULTS

General patterns of out-of-class interaction

Based on the participants' notes, interaction partners were categorised and counted in order to examine participants' interaction patterns. There are limitations with this method in relation to the

accuracy and frequency of reported interaction. Some participants may have been less committed to the project than others and may not have recorded every interaction. Table 2 presents the mode and number of out-of-class interactions according to participants' diaries. The number of interactions varies between individuals.

TABLE 2

Preferred modes of students' interaction concerning assignment preparation

	MSN or Email	Phone	Face-to-face	Total
Jin Ho	0	1	17	18
So Hee	5	2	5	12
Su Jin	16	0	10	26
Eun Young	0	13	9	22
Mi Jeong	3	7	15	25
Bo Kyeong	5	7	38	50
Total	29	30	94	153

Bo Kyeong showed the largest number of interactions, which was 50 and So Hee recorded the least interactions during assignment preparation with 12. The other students reported between 18 and 26 interactions. There were three kinds of interaction modes: internet, phone and face-to-face. The results indicated that the most frequent mode of communication concerning assignment preparation was face-to-face. Interaction by phone was the next most frequent with 30 out of 153 interactions. There were 29 computer-mediated interactions device such as MSN or email.

According to the data, students' interactions tend to be in one or two modes. Some students showed their preference for a 'face to face' mode. For example, Jin Ho reported 17 out of a total 18 interactions; Mi Jeong reported 15 out of 25 and Bo Kyeong 38 out of 50 on this mode. In contrast, Su Jin preferred to interact via the 'Internet'

reporting 16 such occasions. Lastly, Eun Young used 'phone' for the most of her interactions, which were 13 out of 22.

The interview data revealed the reasons for their preference for certain interaction modes. Jin Ho who had 17 out of 18 interactions in face-to-face mode stated the reason as follows:

I don't like chatting on internet or on the phone for assignments because it's hard to understand 100% each other because I have to show something and sometimes I have to draw something for better explanation.

Mi Jeong's statement presents another reason:

As I stay at school most time, I naturally interact with others by physical meeting. We regularly meet on class and often meet in the library by chance so I've got more chance to talk in meeting.

Meanwhile, Su Jin and Eun Young reported their preferences using MSN and phone interactions:

I much prefer talking on the MSN. It's not easy for me to meet physically as I can't stay at school long so you know talking on the MSN is kind of convenient. (Su Jin)

I usually discuss something with my friends on the phone at home. Of course I have more interaction in classroom as I have more chances there but I think phone interaction is quite useful and helpful because I can interact with my friends whenever I need it. Even though I want to talk with someone at school, sometimes the schedule is hard to fit so we decide to talk on the phone. (Eun Young)

Bo Kyeong who reported the greatest number of interactions also asserted that electronic devices helped her interaction a lot outside the classroom.

I can't stay at school as much as I want because I have two little kids at home who need my hands so I have to leave school at certain time. At home I still need interaction for my study and assignments. In this case I use internet or phone. It's very helpful. But because I prefer face-to-face interaction, I try to finish all the problems at

school. But some questions just pop up so those questions I get answers through MSN or phone. If I can't reach my friends at home I will be in panic.

The mode of interaction tends to be influenced by students' circumstances or needs. Face-to-face mode is probably the most common and easiest way because students can talk before and after class. However, sometimes, students are asked to discuss assignments with peers regardless of time and place. A number of recent studies on wireless learning environments indicated that wireless devices such as email, MSN or mobile phones allow students to construct knowledge and collaborate with classmates outside the classroom regardless of location (Olsen, 2000; Sotillo, 2002).

There were four main categories of interlocutors: lecturers, tutors, classmates and out-of-school friends. The academic staff included lecturers who teach at the university and tutors who lead discussion or activities of a subject that is being studied. Table 3 presents the interlocutors reported by the participants in their diaries.

TABLE 3

Distribution of interaction partners

	Lecturers	Tutors	Classmates	Out-of-school friend	Total
Jin Ho	0	0	18	0	18
So Hee	3	1	8	0	12
Su Jin	6	0	20	0	26
Eun Young	2	0	19	1	22
Mi Jeong	3	1	19	2	25
Bo Kyeong	0	6	44	0	50
Total	14	8	128	3	153

As can be seen, most of the interaction reported by the participants was with classmates. The majority of the interactions (128 counts) were recorded between classmates out of a total of 153 reported interactions during the seven week period. Of these, 14 interactions with lecturers and 8 interactions with tutors were reported by six participants. There were also three occasions of interactions with out-of-university acquaintances.

While the majority of the respondents interacted frequently with classmates, some students avoided interaction with academic staff. Jin Ho's interactions were entirely with classmates; Su Jin and Eun Young's interactions were only with lecturers. Similarly, Bo Kyeong reported all her interactions were with tutors. Looking at students' reported interactions there was a common pattern. The participants often referred to a communicative chain whereby an issue was discussed with peers then followed up by discussion with academic staff. The diaries showed that 12 out of a total 20 interactions with lecturers or tutors were preceded by peer interactions about the same topic. For example, Mi Jeong had a discussion with her peers concerning a difficulty in her assignment. Mi Jeong and her peers then decided to visit a lecturer to get further advice. Mi Jeong's next interaction showed that the problem had been solved through

talking with the lecturer and she terminated her interaction by asking the lecturer for clarification.

I was confused which frame I have to stick for this assignment but there was no solution because we could not make a conclusion. We better ask to the lecturer for this. (in the library)

We got a clear answer from the lecturer of the issue. (at lecturer's office)

Su Jin showed the same way of interaction with academic staff. According to her diary, she discussed some issues concerning communicative language teaching (CLT) with classmates using online MSN.

It seems we can not find any information about CLT in terms of literacy on reference list so we'd better ask the lecturer after next class.

Her following record indicated that she had contacted the lecturer and had got a clear answer.

We need to focus on describing CLT only. I am clear now.

This interaction pattern with academic staff emerged from the interview data. Su Jin stated as below.

Sometimes we (classmates) discuss together and if we can not get clear idea or deep understanding for something we talk and talk and finally we decide to go to lecturer. But still without clear answer those interactions help me a lot while we are talking.
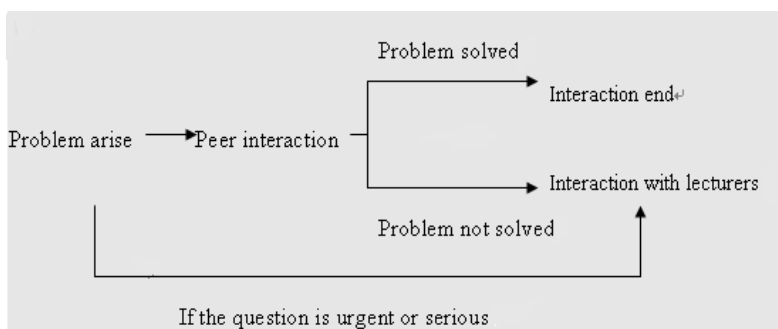
Another participant, Eun Young, reflected that she sought interaction with academic staff as a last resort when peer interaction did not solve her problem:

I always ask my classmates. I can't do by myself without asking because I'm so worried about making big mistakes. But sometimes I feel I have to ask lecturer directly because no one around me was sure about the question or some questions seem only lecturers know the answers.

Figure 1 refers to students' general interaction procedure, which was derived from dairy data based on the commonalities. Looking at participants' interaction with academic staff, there were some common habits between students. When students had a problem while doing assignments, they firstly talked with classmates, except when they had very urgent or serious questions. Also, when the problem was solved within peer interaction, the interaction was terminated. However, when they could not get a clear answer they planned to have further interaction with academic staff.

FIGURE 1

General Procedure of out-of-class interaction

The interview data expands upon the reasons of this procedure. In terms of peer interaction, some participants indicated that they felt they could not get the correct advice from peers. They perceived peer interaction as more useful for sharing knowledge and opinions regarding the issues. Therefore, students seek an interaction with academic staff to get a final and reliable answer. The following quote from Mi Jeong's interview data reflects this.

I guess although looking for clarification with my peers it's more like discussion because they are not sure they are not the one who is marking so they just say "I think … so do you think…" kind of giving and taking information so it's more like discussion.

Another participant, So Hee, who reported the smallest number of interactions, also showed a distinction between interactions with peer and academic staff.

With peers that's not really helpful. That's kind of chatting I think. There is no clear conclusion between answers, but if I interact with lecturers I could get a clearer answer from them.
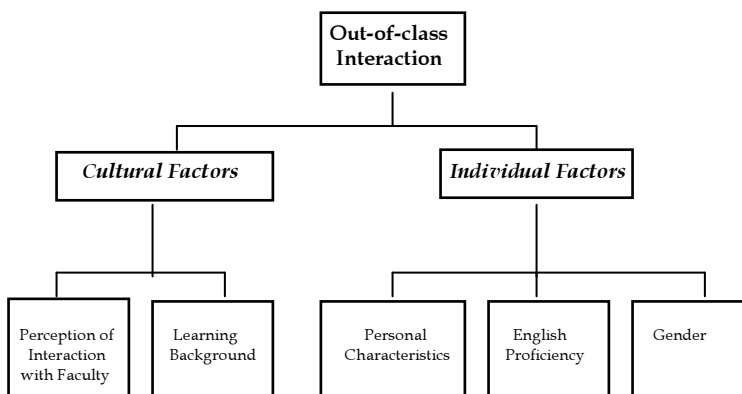
Variables influencing out-of-class interaction

The conceptualisation of variables contributing to out-of-class interaction among Korean students in Australia, was derived from interview data from the six participants. The two main factors affecting out-of-class interaction that emerged from the content analysis were cultural and individual. A repeated content analysis identified major concepts that seemed to influence the interaction. These concepts were broken down into themes and finally classified into main categories. Such an approach is a common data analysis technique in a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Cultural factors refer to those variables relating to a Confucian heritage background and individual factors relate to a person's characteristics. Figure 2 presents the two main categories of variables contributing to out-of-class interaction, along with sub-categories.

The perception of interaction with academic staff reflects students' willingness or reluctance towards interaction with teachers based on participants' cultural background. The learning background reflects students' experience of studying in English speaking countries. Personal characteristics refer to degree of students' dependence on peers, lecturers and tutors during assignments. The English proficiency in this model refers to students' self-evaluated English competence and tested English scores.

FIGURE 2

Two main categories of variables contributing to out-of-class interaction

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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │  Out-of-class   │
                    │   Interaction   │
                    └─────────────────┘
              ┌───────────────┴───────────────┐
      ┌───────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐
      │ Cultural Factors │           │ Individual Factors │
      └───────────────┘              └──────────────────┘
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│Perception of│ │ Learning  │ │  Personal │ │  English  │ │ Gender │
│ Interaction │ │Background │ │Characteris│ │Proficiency│ │        │
│ with Faculty│ │           │ │   tics    │ │           │ │        │
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These variables were counted as frequencies for each category in order to show the impact on out-of-class interaction. The following table indicates the frequency of each of the variables derived from the interview data (See Appendix C).

TABLE 4

Variables contributing to out-of-class interaction sorted based on the frequency

Categories	Sub-categories	Number of instances
Cultural	Perception of interaction with academic staff	18
Cultural	Learning Background	3
Individual	English proficiency	9
Individual	Personal characteristics	8
Individual	Gender	3

Perception of interaction with academic staff

Students' attitudes concerning interaction with academic staff were evident in much of the interview data. Overall, while students showed high respect for academic staff, they felt uncomfortable in interactions with lecturers or tutors. The following statement by Mi Jeong and Bo Kyeong highlight this feeling:

> *Whenever I try to interact to academic staff I feel I bother them… they are busy…So I just ask to my friends and get the best idea I can (Mi Jeong).*

> *It was caused by cultural background. Because in Korea I haven't had many chances to talk with my tutor or lecturer… because sometimes when I bring some specific question sometimes it annoys teachers. I just listened to them in a class. I can't talk freely inside or outside of classroom (Bo Kyeong).*

All the participants referred to their reticence to interact with academic staff because of an uncomfortable feeling based on their perception of absolute authority invested in teachers. The following statements reflect participants' view about hierarchical relationship with lecturers.

> *I'm really shy and my speaking is poor. When I talk to lecturers I get nervous, I don't know why because it's traditional thing. Actually I don't like formal relationship particularly teacher who is very higher position to me. When I talk to them I don't feel comfortable. It was from… yeah when I was young I always avoided teacher. I didn't want to talk to them so… (Jin Ho)*

> *Lecturers' status is much higher than me so I don't want to bring some difficulties or annoying things to them. I don't want to annoy them. That's why I avoid contacting them. (Bo Kyeong)*

Perceptions of English proficiency

The six participants had slightly different entry levels of English proficiency ranging from IELTS score 6.5 to 7.5. This may have influenced their willingness or unwillingness to communicate out-of-

class in English. Eight comments out of 9 from five of the respondents reflect a tendency to avoid interaction in English because of the possibility of misunderstanding during communication. The data indicated that a perceived lack of mastery of the English language hindered the repondents interaction. This finding is in agreement with studies conducted by Lee and Carrasquillo (2006) and Robinson (2003). The following statement shows the participant is reluctant to interact in English:

Actually when I interact with my classmates normally I speak Korean and there is not much problems. But I don't think I like interact with foreign classmates because it's very hard to explain my problem in English. (Jin Ho)

I am worry whenever I interact in English because there can be any misunderstanding between me and my classmates. It's not as clear as I speak in Korean. (Bo Kyeong)

In terms of interactions with academic staff, five comments from five students showed two general anxiety factors. One concern was making mistakes during interactions. The following statement by Eun Young reflects this.

When I talk to lecturers I have to think about grammar mistakes, vocabulary mistakes and also if my question is relevant or not I have to think about so many things so it's not comfortable.

Another concern was imperfect communication in English. This was shown in So Hee and Jin Ho's statements.

I always try to prepare what I am going to say to lecturers. Of course I can communicate with them without preparation but I can convey better my question and that's the way to save time and reduce anxiety. (So Hee)

It is very uncomfortable thing to me to interact with lecturers. I have to care many things when I interact with them… especially English… because my English is not good, I am so worried I can misunderstand them or make them misunderstand me. (Jin Ho)

In contrast, Mi Jeong presented her preference for using English during interactions. It should be noted that Mi Jeong had been educated in Australia from high school. She reported a preference for using English during assignment interactions and seemed very confident in using English.

> *Because I've educated in Australia for last ten years, I am more confident to speak in English when I talk about study and assignment. I don't know much about academic terms in Korean.*

DISCUSSION

The present study shows that the participants in this study were reluctant to have individual contact to academic staff based on their high awareness of teachers' absolute authority. This tendency has been found in previous studies as one of the most significant features of Korean students (Chu, 1993; Ferguson, 2001; Skow & Stephan, 2000). This view is prevalent in Korea and is evident in the Korean education system. This can be observed, in students' learning, school systems and relationships between teachers and students so on. Korean students may take the view that asking a teacher questions indicates a lack of understanding, thus, highlighting a possible defect in the teaching, thus, asking questions in class is perceived as rudeness (Chu, 1993; Ferguson, 2001). Rather than waiting to say later, a recommendation as to what should be done when dealing with Korean international students in regard to their perception at an institutional level should be discussed here.

There are significant differences between the Korean educational system and the American educational system which is based on the European tradition (Chen & Chung, 2000; Chu, 1993; Ferguson, 2001). Australia is also included in this western education system as one of the NABA (North America, Britain and Australia) countries. Since primary school Korean students are exposed to teacher-centred and passive ways of learning (Chu, 1993; Ferguson, 2001). This cultural learning background causes students to accept teachers' control passively rather than interact with them. In such cultures,

students would also refrain from asking questions of a teacher, who plays the role of authority figure.

The findings of this study also indicate the students' lack of confidence in using English, regardless of their actual competence. Therefore, this reduces students' willingness to communicate in out-of-class interaction. Lee and Carrasquillo' study (2006) found similar results concerning Korean students' characteristics. In their research, they found that Korean students showed a lack confidence in English and consistently underestimated self-judgements of their language ability. In addition, Lee and Carrasquillo indicated that the factor which was most important according to academic staff was not the students' English proficiency but the lack of students' oral interaction and communication.

Research into international students in western universities suggests that these students encounter problems in communicating with others in English especially in an academic setting (Chen, 1996; Zhai, 2002). In this research, all students except one who had been educated in Australia referred to English language problems encountered in academic settings such as lectures and tutorials. Zhai's study (2002), which examined international students in American colleges, revealed that language challenges are one of the biggest issues that international students face, along with adjustment to the western setting, in this case the American education system. Leder and Forgasz (2004) also found language competence was cited as a substantial problem by international students in Australia.

IMPLICATIONS

The limitations of the study may be those generally associated with those of a qualitative study. This research was conducted using a small sample size that inhibits the generalizability of the findings. The sample size for this study was six graduate students. A further study could examine the relationship between students' interaction performance and academic achievement. Identifying the contribu-

tion of out-of-class interaction may provide crucial evidence for explaining the role of interaction.

Another limitation can be attributed to data collection. As one of the data collection methods the participants in this study were asked to keep diaries whenever the interaction relating to assignment preparation occurred over a period of seven weeks. Because such interactions were not externally monitored, it can be expected that not every interaction occurrence would be fully recorded. In order to reduce this concern, the data collection period was divided into three sessions and diaries were provided for each term separately with a reminder.

The present study did not examine the relationship between participants' out-of-class interaction and their subsequent academic achievement. Their assignment performance or grade point average (GPA) data were not available given the short timeframe of the study. Therefore, any information about the relationship between quantity and quality of students' out-of-class interaction and academic advantages relies upon the participants' self-report.

The current study has revealed some characteristics of Korean university students. Such characteristics suggest three implications which are primarily associated with student-academic staff interaction. Emerging evidence of interactions with lecturers or tutors has been claimed to have many positive effects (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Berger, 1997; Chickering, 1969; Lamport, 1993). This study indicates that for these Korean students personal contact with academic staff could be daunting. This may also be the case for other international students and as such this issue could be highlighted in orientation sessions for international students.

Secondly, international students' out-of-class experiences including interactions can be more enjoyable when they have more fluent language proficiency. Although most universities offer voluntary English classes focussing on writing for international students whose native language is not English, it seems that such services are only temporarily used by international students. As Robinson (1992)

suggested, long and short terms of English programs which make the implicit cultural knowledge explicit in their instruction and provide opportunities to develop essential skills for university work will empower international students to develop necessary skills and knowledge for their academic pursuits.

Lastly, the group of participants expressed opinions that need to be considered in creating learning and teaching environments to meet lecturers' and students' needs. But at the same time, academic staff also have the responsibility to familiarise themselves with the cultural and linguistic characteristics of their students. Such awareness by academic staff will contribute to creating a more relaxed and environment which encourages interactions between students and academic staff on campus.

FURTHER RESEARCH

As the present research was an exploratory study observing international students' out-of-class interactions with a small sample of the representative population, the findings of the study cannot be generalised without future research on a larger scale with a larger number of participants from more than one university in Australia. Studies into out-of-class interactions with large numbers of international students, possibly by adopting survey or questionnaire methods, will allow such generalization.

Another potential direction for future research relates to the growing use of technologically enhanced communication on/off campus. An and Frick (2006) found that the communication taking place via email is qualitatively different from face-to-face communication. Looking at such different modes of out-of-class interactions in detail and their relationships with quantity and quality of interactions will provide an interesting source for this area of study. For example, the role of computer mediated teaching models that employ the use of such tools as synchronous and asynchronous discussion tools could be the basis for an interesting study.

Finally, a comparison of out-of-class interactions performed by local students and international students could provide a deeper understanding of each group of students. International students' are influenced by their native cultural/language background although they are studying in other countries (Reinicke, 1986). Research into native and non-native students' similarities and differences would indicate that many variables have an influence on students' out-of-class interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented patterns and perceptions of Korean international students' out-of-class interactions on and off campus during the process of assignment preparation. As Korean students' perception of teachers' high authority were characterised in several studies, this study also showed students' failure to establish a communicative relationship with teachers based on the reasons. Interestingly all the participants, regardless of the duration of their study experience in western countries (up to ten years), reported the same difficulty concerning interaction with teachers. In order to enhance Korean students' communicative relationships with teachers, there need to be more understanding of cultural differences for both students and academic staff.

English proficiency was a significant variable influencing students' willingness to interact. Students reported that their imperfect English ability often led to concerns about misunderstanding and hesitation in communicating with lecturers and tutors. This is likely to be an issue of a lack of confidence rather than an issue of fluency. The students' English proficiency was adequate for graduate study as indicated by the university English language entry requirement.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT'S INTERACTION DIARY

Date	Start T	Finish T	Place	No.P	Rel	Title Assin	Content	Evaluation

* Title of categories abbreviations refer to:

- Evaluation: Brief comment
- TitleAssin : Title of assignment
- Rel: Relationship with interacted people
- No.P: Number of people
- Note that this diary has more space for writing in the actual study.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1 (Participants' assignments)

1. Tell me about your English learning background.

2. What assignment are you working on it? Tell me about your assignment in detail.

3. Tell me about the procedure of your assignment? How do you start?

4. What is the most difficult part of your assignment?

5. If you find some difficulties from your assignment, how do you deal with the problems?

6. Is preparing an assignment in your native tongue different than in English? Tell me about it.

Interview 2 (General notion of interaction)

1. Do you like working together during a class? What about outside of classroom?

2. Do you have any regular meeting for studying? Tell me in detail.

3. How often do you seek communication with others?

4. Who do you usually interact with? Do you usually interact with some particular people, or a variety of people?

5. What is your main reasons having interaction with peers or lecturers? (sharing information? discussion? collaboration? Etc.)

6. Tell me about your ways of interaction with others. (face to face? on the phone? chatting? Etc.)

7. What is your most effective way for interaction and tell me the reason.

8. What is different interacting with peers and interacting with lecturers?

9. If you have much interaction with other or not, what do you think is the reason? Needs? Your personality? English fluency?

Interview 3 (Specific notion of interaction)

1. Is interaction using English different than using your mother tongue? Tell me the reason why?

2. How does interaction help you to achieve assignments?

3. Do you think social relationship influence on interaction? Tell me in detail.

4. Have you experienced any difficulties in interactions? What do you think can help to overcome the problems? What can help for your better interaction?

APPENDIX C: QUOTES FROM STUDENT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT RELEVANT TO THE CATEGORIES

( ): the number of instances

Cultural factors (21)	
remove	Categories
Perception of interaction with academic staff (18)	
Question appropriateness (7)	
Su Jin	I'm gonna ask them direct 'Am I out of track or not..?' something like this. It's one of the questions we have to avoid but I am desperate. Yeah sometimes it's confusing.Yeah so I have to know that.
Su Jin	When I send email to lecturers it has to be really simple. It has to focus on… sometimes for me it is hard to explain what my problems are. I want to ask but something like that I just go around and not only focus.. It is hard to focus on but I really want to know. This is because the language problems. Between friends they don't care whether I spend ten minutes and twenty minutes but to lecturers…
Eun Young	I sent several emails to the lecturers, even though they give email back it was not what I really wanted. But even though I didn't have clear ideas from those answers I didn't give email again, because I assumed the questions were not that appropriate.
Eun Young	While in a lecture she talked about assignment what we have to do and… but even though I understood what she said later on I forgot and I am worry about if I give the same question or not… that's what I am not comfortable
Bo Kyeong	I got a email from one of lecturers who says don't ask specific question regarding assignment so that makes me never ask about specific.. And then I am more relying on students who studying the same subject.
Bo Kyeong	I bring some specific questions sometimes it annoyed them so I always think about whether the question is ok or not. I have to think about it

Mi Jeong	I guess some lecturers don't give clear, direct answer… yeah with friends we have some different idea for some subject what I ask them could be unfamiliar with them so I have to explain well what I know and what I understand and then expression and I have to think about it yeah different perspectives… that's difficulties…

Perception of absolute authority (6)

Jin Ho	I'm really shy and my speaking is poor. When I talk to lecturers I get nervous, I don't know why because it's traditional thing. Actually I don't like formal relationship particularly teacher who is very higher poison to me. When I talk to them I don't feel comfortable. It was from… yeah when I was young I always avoided teacher. I didn't want to talk to them so…
Eun Young	Before I used to ask kind of… that kind of rough questions… I don't think they're gonna give very detail information because it's kind of…they're gonna mark us
Mi Jeong	Whenever I try to interact to academic staff I feel I bother them… they are busy…So I just ask to my friends and get the best idea I can.
Bo Kyeong	Actually I don't know why but I'm still afraid of talking with lecturers because they are gonna mark our assignment so I don't wanna show my weakness
Bo Kyeong	It was caused by cultural background. Because in Korea I haven't had many chances to talk with my tutor or lecturer… because sometimes when I bring some specific question sometimes it annoys teachers. I just listened to them in a class. I can't talk freely inside or outside of classroom.
Bo Kyeong	Lecturers' status is much higher than me so I don't want to bring some difficulties or annoying things to them. I don't want to annoy them. That's why I avoid contacting them.

Anxiety about English proficiency (5)

Eun Young	When I talk to lecturers I have to think about grammar mistakes, vocabulary mistakes and also if my question is relevant or not I have to think about so many think so it's not comfortable.
Su Jin	Because of the language problems, between friends they don't care whether I use ten minutes and twenty minutes but to a lecturers… we can not explain too long because they are busy.
Jin Ho	It is very uncomfortable thing to me to interact with lecturers. I have to care many things when I interact with them… especially English… because my English is not good, I am so worried I can misunderstand them or make them misunderstand me.

So Hee	I always try to prepare what I am going to say to lecturers. Of course I can communicate with them without preparation. But I don't want to make mistake in front of them and that's the way to save time and anxiety.
Bo Kyeong	Sometimes I hesitate to contact lecturers because of English.
Learning background (3)	
Jin Ho	I've never studied overseas before. All my education background is Korean so I'm very Korean style in learning.
Eun Young	Even though I spent my high school in America, you know, it's very hard to change learning habits.
Bo Kyeong	I was educated in very Korean way so I feel more comfortable with Asian classmates. I think we have more common things.
Individual factors (20)	
Language Proficiency (9)	
Jin Ho	Actually when I interact with my classmates normally I speak Korean and there is not much problems. But I don't think I like interact with foreign classmates because it's very hard to explain my problem in English.
Jin Ho	I think the first problem is language. Because of the language problem since I came here I normally hang around with Korean classmates and I am still doing it.
So Hee	Even though my English is poor sometimes I really think I need interaction with lecturers.
Eun Young	Sometimes because of my imperfect listening skill I feel like I miss some important information
Bo Kyeong	I am worry whenever I interact in English because there can be any misunderstanding between me and my classmates. It's not as clear as I speak in Korean.
Bo Kyeong	Talking in English and in Korean is a bit different. I think if I discuss something in English it normally takes longer time than in Korean.
Jin Ho	Sometimes I feel irritated talking in English when I can't express well something I really want to discuss.
Su Jin	When I discuss something in English I have to have enough time to get a clear answer.
Mi Jeong	Because I've educated in Australia for last ten years, I am more confident to speak in English when I talk about study and assignment. I don't know much about academic terms in Korean.
Personal characteristics (8)	
Mi Jeong	Maybe it's because of cultures or my personality I am a little bit shy when I try to interact with lecturers

So Hee	I don't know maybe it's kind of habit or personality, you know since I was young I've tried to do everything by myself, I didn't want to lean on others. Probably that's one of the reasons.
So Hee	What if one of my friend told my about something and that's wrong. Then I can't blame anyone because that was my decision.
Eun Young	My first assignment was so difficult but now it's much easier because many Koreans help how to deal all the things because I always ask people. I think my decision might be wrong.
Bo Kyeong	Whenever I find some difficulties in my assignment I look for someone. Yeah… someone reliable… I usually send email to tutors and talk with my friends. I need some kinds of map to lead me to the right position so I have to ask something to others. Yeah, it was really really helpful actually and in both information and emotion.
So Hee	I can be more confused if I have lots of interaction. I might think what I should do… so I'm trying not to listen to that much others' opinions.
So Hee	I don't feel I have to interact with others. Actually I don't believe people that much because I don't change assignment because of someone's advice.
So Hee	I ask something whenever I see any of classmates who have the same class with me. I don't mind whether they are close to me or not. If I only ask some particular people, the people could be stereotyped as well as I may get wrong information but if I ask whoever I see in a class… that would be better for me.
Gender (3)	
Jin Ho	compared with other classmates I don't really talk much, they are girls
Jin Ho	I had a difficulty to fit it to class and they are girls. I don't like that kind of thing because it's very uncomfortable.
Jin Ho	Because I am male I already told you I am not familiar this environment which the majority is female. When I was in Korea I didn't hung out with girls I hung out with male friends so I am not familiar with that so that can be main reason for less interaction.