

Education Fever: A Literature Review on Student Impact of The Cultural & Societal Pressure in The South Korean Education System

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Introduction to the Issue

Students in the South Korean education system are generally high performing, but at what cost? A normal day for a South Korean student consists of much studying and little to no leisure time or quality time with family and friends. A survey conducted by South Korea's National Youth Policy Institute (NYPI) consisting of 9,060 elementary, middle, and high school students reported that "over 45 percent of the students said they study for over three hours every day, in addition to time spent at school" which increased with the age of the students (Kim, 2019, para. 5). A student's day might start at around 8:00 AM and end as late as 10:00 PM. A South Korean student may spend an average of 12 to 16 hours per day at school including study hall and after-school programs called cram schools or *hagwons*. The reason for all this studying? To be a top performer on their college entrance exams.

A student is expected to take a college entrance exam called the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). The CSAT is a high stakes standardized test required for all high school students planning to attend a Korean university. All eligible students in the country take the test on the same day and at the same time (no exceptions). This one test decides what universities will accept which students. There are three top universities that will make it so one can get a job

at almost any reputable company of their choice (called SKY universities). Consequently, many 'good' companies will only hire from these top universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University). With a standardized test (which does not allow for neurodiversity) being the deciding factor on your future, you can imagine the pressure and anxiety to do well. One could imagine the toll this takes on young people.

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 report, South Korea's students are some of the highest performing students in the world in subjects such as reading, mathematics, and science, but their general well-being and satisfaction are among the lowest ("Education GPS - Korea," 2018). While this report does not explicitly discuss suicide, this is definitely part of the issue. South Korea has had one of the highest suicide rates among young people compared to other countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for many years now ("Suicide No. 1," 2015; Kim, 2019; "1 in 3," 2021; Ha & Park, 2022; TEDx Talks, 2019). Young people, in this context, is referring to people ages 9-24 years old. This organization comprises 37 countries that are interested in co-constructing policies in order to promote economic growth. According to Statistics Korea and the World Health Organization, "suicide was the leading cause of death among those aged 9-24 in 2013" behind car accidents ("Suicide No. 1," 2015). In a 2019 *Korea Times* article, Jae-heun Kim reported that about a third of teens had thoughts of suicide at least once that year; 37.2% of whom cited "academic pressure" while 21.9% of those students cited concern over future prospects as a secondary reason (Kim, 2019). 2020 showed similar results ("1 in 3," 2021). Over the last few years, suicide among young people in South Korea has increased while the general trend in other OECD countries has decreased (Ha & Park, 2022; Arin, 2022; Lee et al, 2022). In the literature on well-being among young people in South Korea, I found that the common

themes that were cited as factors were academic pressure (“Suicide No. 1,” 2015; Kim, 2019; Ha & Park, 2022; Lee et al, 2022) and interpersonal relationships or bullying (Ha & Park, 2022; “Education GPS - Korea,” 2018; “1 in 3,” 2021). The purpose of this literature review is to address the issue of student well-being, how that is entrenched in culture, what this looks like in the EFL classroom, and possible solutions for this issue.

Cultural Context

Since the Choson dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism has been a deeply ingrained ideology in Korean culture, even today. The goal of Confucianism is to create social order and social harmony. One of the important pillars of Confucianism is filial piety, or the duty of a child to their parents. Another important facet of Korean culture is collectivism. In “Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution. Perspectives on Psychological Science” (2010), researchers aimed to reframe how collectivism and identity are connected. Figure 1 illustrates Interdependent Self-schema. Interdependent Self-schema describes how the Self (personal identity) is interdependent of those in the Ingroup (close social circle). This type of self-schema is more prevalent in those who are socialized in a predominantly collectivist society (such as students in South Korea). While collectivism and Interdependent Self-schema have many positive qualities (holistic focus and more sensitivity to others as well as how your actions affect those around you), the perceived failures of the Self are quickly perceived as failures of the Ingroup. While this can be comforting to some (in the sense of a shared responsibility and consequence), others may take on the identity and burden of the Ingroup. For example, a student who gets a low score on a test; a parent may feel this as a personal failure, and the student may feel remorse for failing their parents and causing their parents personal pain. A student may also

feel like they are not fulfilling their role in society and in their family by not academically succeeding in that way. But where did this obsession with education start?

After South Korea gained their independence from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the country was lagging behind in education and financial capital. At the time, only 22% of average citizens were literate and less than 20% of children had attended secondary school (Asianometry, 2022; TEDx Talks, 2019). There was a great need to establish stronger educational infrastructure. Due to the lack of resources, educational institutions became extremely privatized with around 75% of school funding coming from parents (Asianometry, 2022). This privatization led to the emergence of some schools being more elite than others. In order to decide what students were worthy of going to these elite schools as well as clamping down on corruption, the government put in place entrance exams. As early as the late 1960s, elementary school children were faced with extreme pressure to do well on the middle school entrance exam in order to get into one of these elite middle schools (Asianometry, 2022). These schools had better resources. Parents want their children to succeed and have a good life, so this burden to better their future came down to excelling in testing. These values and events have culminated into what is called Education Fever.

Education Fever refers to the cultural obsession with academic achievement commonly seen in many East Asian countries. This phenomenon describes this extreme focus on academic merit by students, parents, teachers and administration, companies, and even the government.

From the year 1980 to the year 2000, the number of Hagwons jumped from 381 to 14,043 while the number of students enrolled in Hagwons jumped from 118,000 to 1.4 million in those same years and has exponentially grown since (Asianometry, 2022). Parents are praying in temples for their child's success and are waiting in line all day so that their child has a good study spot in

their Hagwon after school. Parents are also getting expensive tutors and academic programs for their children, spending about 30% of their income on their child's education (Asianometry, 2022; TEDx Talks, 2019). With such a systemic issue, what could possibly be done by one teacher?

Possible Solutions

According to the quasi-longitudinal study on motivation in English learning, Kim and Kim (2016) found that while competitive motivation did not have a direct or significant impact on English Language Learning in 2006 and 2010, the role of competitive motivation is becoming increasingly dominant in English achievement (Kim & Kim, 2016). Competition amongst peers is often used by Korean teachers and in Korean schools as a way to 'encourage' (pressure) students into studying harder. Students are constantly made aware of their class rank and test scores are posted in the hallway for everyone to see. The classroom environment is increasingly becoming more intense and competitive as time goes on.

One way to improve the classroom environment for students is by promoting healthy motivational factors. Being an inspiring teacher is one of the biggest motivators for students. In Lamb and Wedell's 2015 study, Korean respondents praised their teachers for their professionalism and expressed the importance of how "a positive relationship between teacher and learners reflects the importance of 'classroom dynamics', 'group cohesion' and other qualities" (Lamb & Wedell, 2015, 12). Kim and Kim's 2016 study urges for more research into the effects of competitive motivation. With the rise in competitive motivation being used in South Korean classrooms, teachers need to put more emphasis on intrinsic motivation rather than "excessively focusing on competition with peers" (Kim & Kim, 2016, 138).

One thing to keep in mind for a teacher would be to integrate “activities that learners perceive as directly relevant for meeting their language use goals are those activities in which learners will invest themselves, supporting the need to help learners develop more specified, personal, and realistic, language use goals” (Weger-Guntharp, 2008, 214). To address the aspect of collectivism, a Korean students’ (collectivist) and the US students’ (individualist) sense of well-being both seem to come from “the belief of being autonomous and from a focus on goals likely to satisfy one’s needs” (Kim, Kasser, & Lee, 2003, 285). This means that it is important for teachers to put more focus on intrinsic motivation and personal value in learning than on extrinsic motivations even in collectivist societies. Essentially, having more intrinsic motivation correlates with having a higher sense of well-being.

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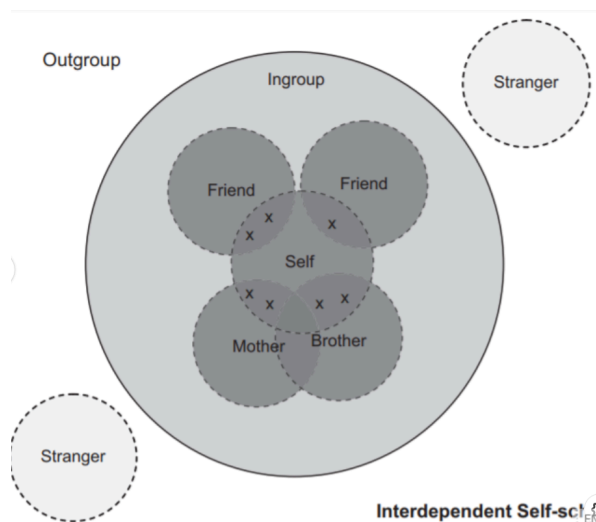
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Appendix A

Figure 1: Interdependent Self-schema



(Markus & Kitayama, 2010)

Appendix B

In the context of teaching English in South Korea, it is difficult for a teacher to have much control over curriculum. With a systemic focus on standardized tests, it is still important to incorporate intrinsic motivation in the classroom when possible. Source 1 is more of a brief overview or list of strategies while Source 2 goes more in depth on the different aspects of intrinsic motivation while also giving actual instruments for assessing student motivation.

Some Sources:

1. <https://www.waterford.org/education/how-to-motivate-students/#:~:text=Intrinsic%20motivation%20occurs%20when%20students,regardless%20of%20any%20external%20factors.>
2. <https://positivepsychology.com/intrinsic-motivation-students/#learning>

Overall, these sources promote autonomy, positive washback, and consistent and meaningful feedback. Incorporating student interest and choice into classroom activities and materials is one way to promote autonomy. Another way is understanding student goals on an individual level and providing them with the steps to achieve those. Imagine a student in South Korea in your English course that doesn't seem to have much interest in going abroad or learning another language in general. You investigate and find that the student is passionate about working for a specific company that only recruits from SKY universities. To achieve that, they must be a top scorer on the college entrance exam which includes a language section (many companies preferring English or Mandarin). To approach this student as if they're interested in using the language for personal enrichment in terms of culture or going abroad would not be

effective. Instead, the approach should be to meet the student where they are, and show them strategies for scoring well on English exams. While this is not ideal for a language teacher who values that students can use their skills for personal enrichment and that students are passionate about the language, it is important to understand the student's perspective to help them reach their goals even if they are not yours.

Appendix C

Here is a list of possible questions to ask in an interview or questions to think about in general that are important to planning how to implement intrinsic motivation and target language use goals.

- How much of the curriculum or class activities are teachers expected/allowed to design and change?
- What test tasks are required of the students?
- What data is a teacher required to provide to the school or parents?
- Are students preparing for a standardized test?
- What is the goal of the institution for students to be able to do?
- What is the general reason parents send their children to this institution?