

Critical Cosmopolitan Literacies of Korean University Students Interacting with Mongolian Teachers

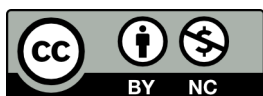
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Abstract

In South Korea, as in the rest of today's interconnected world, it is more important than ever to understand how students, the global citizens of the future, connect and communicate across differences of all kinds. Situated in a sociocultural perspective, this ethnographic case study examines intercultural engagement through the framework of critical cosmopolitanism. Specifically, it investigates how a group of Korean university students practiced critical cosmopolitan literacies—that is, how they demonstrated hospitality and critical reflection—while acting as cultural guides for visiting educators from Mongolia. Participating students received surveys both before and after the exchange. Supplemented by my own informal observations over the course of the exchange and focusing on the core tenets of critical cosmopolitanism, ethics of care and criticality, a thematic analysis of the students' responses was conducted. The imposed themes reflect the diverse ways students sought to establish an inclusive environment, including by building relationships, positioning themselves

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as responsive interlocutors, and accommodating their counterparts' perspectives. I also found they gained distance from their own enculturated beliefs, including by recognizing the limitations of their own perspectives and questioning norms and assumptions. Points of friction included limitations in the students' cosmopolitan imagination, while positive emotions facilitated the students' cosmopolitan interactions. This study takes an asset-oriented approach that explores students' demonstrated critical cosmopolitan literacies and points of friction/facilitation in order to provide practical recommendations for enhancing future intercultural programs in Asia, with the ultimate purpose of cultivating more compassionate, critical global citizens and creating a more just and welcoming world.

Keywords: critical cosmopolitanism, cross-cultural communication, ethics of care, intercultural exchange, teacher training

Introduction

Today's increasingly interconnected world brings many advantages and opportunities, such as the rich variety of perspectives and insights contributed by diverse populations (Hong & Page, 2004); simultaneously, however, not all people equally welcome such diversity. Intolerance and insularity seem endemic as vulnerable groups worldwide face prejudice and precarity (United Nations, n.d.), making it more urgent than ever to cultivate responsive, critical and compassionate global citizens.

Cosmopolitan education, which is oriented around encouraging such open, reflective dispositions in students (Hansen, 2013; Hawkins, 2014; Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014), has been posited as one possible response to the prejudice and division in today's global society. A majority of work in this area, however, has primarily been from Western perspectives, with a noted lack of research in Asia (Delanty, 2009, 2014). This absence, combined with the highly situated nature of cosmopolitanism (Corpus Ong, 2009; Delanty, 2014; Vasudevan, 2014) and a rising demand for international education offerings in the region (Yoo, 2024), suggests a strong need to better understand how cosmopolitanism manifests in Asian contexts. This study attempts to begin to fill this gap by exploring cosmopolitan literacies displayed by university students—specifically, pre-service elementary school teachers—participating in an in-person intercultural exchange program in South Korea (hereafter *Korea*).

Statement of the Problem

As of 2024, foreigners comprise nearly 5% of Korea's population of 50+ million people, and that number is rapidly rising (Park, 2024). In response, there have been government efforts to support inclusive (but assimilative) multiculturalism (Hu, 2016) as well as revisions to the national curriculum aimed at cultivating global citizenship (So, Lee, Park, & Kang, 2014). Still, minorities of all kinds face prejudice and discrimination (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2021), a situation aggravated by a notable absence of anti-discrimination laws (Lee, 2018). In 2018, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea declared Korea to have a "serious racism problem," noting in particular a rise in xenophobia in the media (Lee, 2018).

At the same time, Korea has a long history of cosmopolitan openness, evident in the country's delight in adopting and adapting global trends to local tastes. For example, Korea's most popular religions, from Buddhism and Christianity to the philosophy of Confucianism, all came from outside Korea but find local expression tinged with traditional shamanism (Korea Information Service, 2001), while the global sensation of K-pop is a combination of Western sounds and Korean aesthetic, with collaborations between American and Korean artists now commonplace (Park, 2013).

These tensions offer up rich ground for an exploration of how Korean university students negotiated difference and came to better understandings of both themselves and others as they participated in an intercultural exchange with in-service teachers from Mongolia. This qualitative, ethnographic case study included only a limited number of participants, but it offers intriguing insights into cosmopolitan practices in Korea, with practical ramifications for future intercultural exchange programs and their potential to encourage cosmopolitan dispositions—and ultimately, to help craft a better world.

Objective

This study seeks to better understand the critical cosmopolitan literacies practiced by university students participating in an in-person intercultural exchange program in Korea. By gaining more insight into the varied ways such literacies can manifest in different contexts and better understanding the elements that facilitated or hindered the practice of these literacies, the study contributes an

under-represented, asset-oriented Asian perspective to the extant body of knowledge on critical cosmopolitan literacies. Drawing on the findings, the study further seeks to make practical recommendations for creating intercultural exchange environments conducive to cultivating critical cosmopolitan literacies and encouraging participants' growth as global citizens.

Literature Review

Defining Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is a framework embraced by a variety of fields, from anthropology to social sciences. It has been described as openness and receptiveness to difference (Hannerz, 1990); empathy and forgiveness (Ahn, 2010); trust (Hirose, 2019) and belonging (Vasudevan, 2014); and solidarity, mutuality, and connectedness (Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013), all underpinned by an ethics of care often referred to as *hospitality* (Derrida, 1997/2001).

Critical cosmopolitanism, meanwhile, involves self-reflexivity, a recognition of limitations in perspective, questioning norms, and self-problematization. This aspect emphasizes plurality, the idea that “[w]e hope and expect that different people and different societies will embody different values” (Appiah, 2006, loc. 2108), and fallibilism, the notion that “[o]ur knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence” (Appiah, 2006, loc. 2108). It is inherently a process of change; our conceptions of self, other, and the possibilities of the world are made and remade through encounters with difference (Delanty, 2009; Hansen, 2014).

Cosmopolitanism exists at the intersection of global and local but also encompasses differences of all kinds. It is, as David Hansen (2010) writes, a process of reflective growth and transformation, “a name for the ever-shifting, ever-vibrant space in which persons fuse openness to the new with loyalty to the known” (p. 159). When we encounter difference, we gain a greater sense of possibilities in the world and achieve sufficient distance from our own enculturated norms and beliefs—our “primary Discourse,” James Gee (1989) calls it—to recognize and value many different ways of *being* in the world. Critical cosmopolitanism is, at its heart, about the compassion, comprehension, and critical reassessment that can emerge from our “efforts to understand one another in relation to each other—to locate, reflect, represent, and engage self/world/other” (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014, p. 24).

Cosmopolitanism in the Classroom

Empirical studies in classrooms have identified a variety of cosmopolitan orientations in students, depending on definitions of cosmopolitanism. Some (e.g., Damico & Baidon, 2011; Dunkerly-Bean, Bean, & Alnajjar, 2014) have defined cosmopolitanism as simply thinking beyond the self/local and related it to global citizenship, yet this does not adequately distinguish it from other social justice-oriented frameworks. Other studies have focused more on cosmopolitanism's potential for embodied engagement and transcendence. Wahlström (2014), for instance, identified curiosity and wonder as cosmopolitan attitudes; she suggests educators can use "aesthetic-reflective experiences" to provide a break from routinized practice and engage "inner feelings, imagination and self-reflexivity" (p. 125) as part of cosmopolitan meaning-making. Similarly, David Hansen (2014) suggests "wonder, triggered by substantive encounters with the new" can cause people to "gain reflective distance from [their prejudices] and begin to grasp difference as well as similarity," ultimately recognizing "the limitations in their knowledge and understanding of self, other, and world" (p. 9). In a similar vein, Margaret Hawkins (2014), in her study of an online intercultural exchange between students in the U.S. and Uganda, explained how her students' perspectives were changed through encounters with the new, filtered through the lens of their own interests and experiences: "As everyday notions of familiar life...are ruptured, differences become visible, and can then be springboards for discussion and dialogue across difference" (p. 106). In contrast to Wahlström, though, Hawkins argued that cosmopolitanism necessarily includes a "moral and ethical imperative to engage in and sustain equitable and just relations" (p. 97).

Other recent empirical work also emphasizes more strongly the critical and ethical imperatives inherent in the framework and defines cosmopolitanism's characteristics accordingly. In one early study, Hull, Stornaiuolo, and Sahni (2010) identified a variety of "cosmopolitan gestures" (p. 340) they observed in an online exchange involving students in four countries. Among the cosmopolitan gestures described, the researchers highlighted students' "self-conscious self-representation" (p. 344); design choices that represented outward-oriented imaginings of their audience's reactions; open, hospitable reception of their counterparts' stories; and other small indications of considerate interactions that "helped young participants to imagine and enact morally and ethically alert selves" (p. 358). Hull and Stornaiuolo

(2014) later clarified and codified these “gestures” into three “cosmopolitan orientations” defined by how students positioned themselves rhetorically in relation to their imagined audience: (a) a proximal stance, in which students “build connections or create boundaries” (p. 29); (b) a reflexive stance, in which students take “a critical and reflective perspective” that “[assumes] the best possible motives for one’s interlocutors, giving them the benefit of the doubt and remaining open to further dialog” (p. 33); and (c) a reciprocal stance, an open, “listening stance that indicates to potential audiences that one is willing to engage further” (p. 37).

Despite these promising studies, there is a notable dearth of cosmopolitan educational research in Asian contexts (Delanty, 2009; Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013), especially asset-oriented studies that consider how cosmopolitan literacies manifest in authentic interaction situations. This study seeks to fill these gaps and begin to flesh out our understandings of critical cosmopolitanism in Asia.

Research Questions

This study takes a critical sociocultural orientation (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) in order to understand students’ actions and impressions in a particular nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wohlwend, 2021), shaped by their personal experiences and expectations in a particular context. My overarching research question was *How do Korean university students practice critical cosmopolitan literacies during an in-person intercultural exchange?* To focus on the defining aspects of critical cosmopolitanism, understand their manifestations in this particular nexus of practice, and identify practical suggestions for future exchanges, these sub-questions guided my investigation:

1. How do students create a shared space of belonging in the nexus of an in-person intercultural exchange?
2. How do students demonstrate critical reflection in the nexus of this exchange?
3. How do points of friction and/or facilitation mediate and complicate students’ participation in this intercultural exchange?

The first question seeks to understand the hospitality/openness/ethics of care aspect of critical cosmopolitanism. It includes practices that facilitate and invite participation (Silverstone, 2006); signal belonging, solidarity, or care (Vasudevan, 2014); or demonstrate engagement as open, responsive interlocutors (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). The second question highlights the *critical* aspect of critical

cosmopolitanism and focuses on self-problematization (Delanty, 2009), a troubling of norms and questioning of assumptions. The third question seeks to understand the aspects of the exchange that helped or hindered students' practice of critical cosmopolitan literacies.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative, ethnographic case-study approach (Armstrong et al., 2019), which was appropriate for deeply exploring of the nuances of this particular context. Simultaneously, though, this work seeks to “extend [the case] across space, time and institutional structures and practices” by connecting it to the larger body of theoretical and empirical work on cosmopolitanism (Ó Rian, 2009, p. 304).

Research Context & Participants

This study took place at an international TEFL training summer program held at a national teachers college in a liberal-leaning region of South Korea. Twenty Mongolian in-service teachers participated in the two-week training program, which included daily English language lessons, TEFL training sessions, and cultural workshops taught by eight Korean university students. In addition, multiple opportunities for intercultural discussion and exchange were built into the schedule.

The Training Program

The program started with a bus trip to a park in the town of Namwon, where traditional Korean life and characters from a famous Korean love story are re-created, followed by lunch and a visit to a traditional hanok village in Jeonju, and concluding with dinner. The Korean students were intended to serve as guides throughout the day, explaining the food, the love story, and Korean traditional life; helping the Mongolian participants try on traditional Korean garb (hanbok), if they wished; and generally assisting with navigating, negotiating, and communicating, all while connecting in small groups. The second day of the program included an opening ceremony, lunch with the university president, and an academic exchange featuring presentations about each country's education system and guided small-group discussions. The remaining days of the program generally fell into a busy routine: English lessons in the morning (taught by me), lunch in the university cafeteria, three hours of professional development workshops facilitated by invited

presenters, two hours of cultural experience workshops led by the university students in pairs, and then dinner.

The university's international office was very involved in the training program, helping to coordinate the special events (the opening ceremony, lunch with the university president, and closing ceremony), space for the training sessions, use of the university's bus for the daytrip, the selection and preparation of the student participants, and more.

Participants

This particular analysis focuses on the experiences of the Korean university students, all first- through third-year students training to be elementary school teachers. The group included three men and five women (ages 20-23; one 30-year-old). The students had all previously participated in university-sponsored exchange programs (2 in a 2-week program in Australia, 2 in a 2-week program in Japan, and 4 in a month-long program in Vietnam). They had been selected for the university-sponsored exchanges based mainly on their English ability level, a sample lesson plan and English-language teaching demonstration, and an interview. The university international office selected students for this current program based on their availability, suggesting this opportunity to past exchange participants and confirming those who accepted the invitation.

The students' responsibilities included serving as a guide during the daytrip on the first day; participating in Day 2 activities (opening ceremony, lunch, academic exchange); designing and serving as the lead teacher on a 100-minute culture lesson, with support from a partner; and serving as the support teacher on their partner's 100-minute lesson. The teaching pairs were also invited to join the Mongolian participants for dinner following their culture lessons, and most (but not all) accepted. Pre-program preparation included two meetings with me for feedback on their lesson plans plus one meeting with me and a university liaison to finalize organizational details.

The twenty Mongolian participants were in-service English teachers instructing a variety of levels in various regions of Mongolia, and most were in their forties or fifties with limited overseas experience (though a few had been to Korea before). All of the Mongolian participants were women.

Finally, I, too, was a part of the program as a participant-researcher. I designed the training program; taught the English lessons and some of the TEFL workshops;

helped to prepare the Korean students; and typically accompanied the participants all day, every day, from the beginning of class until the end of dinner. All aspects of the present study, including the framing, analysis, and interpretation, are filtered through my lens as an American who has been living and teaching in Korea for more than twenty years—someone who has embarked on her own cosmopolitan journey over the years as she navigates the eddies of culture clashes and the exigencies of being an expat in Korea.

Data Sources & Data Collection

The data for this study came from three sources: a pre-program survey a post-program survey and my personal, informal observations throughout the process of preparing for and facilitating the program. The pre-program survey, sent as a link to the Korean students' group chat five days before the start of the program, was short and simple, primarily aiming to make explicit a rough snapshot of the students' pre-program mindsets and generate some initial reflections, which I hoped the students would return to at the conclusion of the program. (We ultimately lacked time to coordinate formal follow-up reflections, though.) The survey consisted of six questions total: three Likert scale questions and three open-ended reflection questions. All eight student participants responded to the pre-program survey.

The post-program survey was more extensive and was sent to students after the completion of the final culture workshop of the program. There were 26 questions total: 13 Likert-scale questions, 11 open-ended reflection questions, and 1 multiple-choice question paired with 1 follow-up question that asked students to explain their answer. Only five of the eight students submitted a response despite multiple reminders. The surveys were designed with the students' reflections and program improvements in mind, not explicitly for the purpose of research; thus, not all the questions were directly relevant to my research interests. A few of the Likert responses are included in the results below for triangulation purposes; the responses that were less interesting or not clearly related to my research interests are omitted.

Research Ethics

Both surveys were administered via Google Forms, with no identifying information collected. The responses to the surveys were completely anonymous, and the results are stored in a secure online location (Google Drive). Students were provided with a brief version of informed consent in the second (post-exchange)

survey. This survey included the option for students to approve (or not) my use of their anonymous words. All respondents approved my use of their quotations for potential research and reporting purposes. There was minimal risk for participants to participate anonymously in this study.

Data Analysis

The process of thematic analysis began with analytical notes and integrative memos as I combed through the data multiple times looking for anything surprising, intriguing, or disturbing (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). My thematic analysis was iterative and guided by Creswell and Poth (2018): I began with initial codes, which I then clarified into expanded codes designed to capture nuances, and I finally consolidated the codes into categories and themes as I identified patterns related to students' practice of critical cosmopolitan literacies.

Results

Themes Suggesting a Cosmopolitan Ethics of Care

Themes that I categorized as "ethics of care" encompassed codes reflecting hospitality, connection, solidarity, emotional engagement, and the creation of a welcoming space. (Note: Throughout the results section, all responses are exactly transcribed and might include minor errors, in order to accurately and precisely share students' responses.)

Building Relationships

In the pre-program survey, the students were very excited about the prospect of meeting teachers from another country and creating positive relationships with them. I coded multiple answers as *hope for building relationships*; for example, in response to the question, "What do you hope to gain from participating in this program," a quarter of the students explicitly mentioned relationships or connections to Mongolian teachers (e.g., "I want to have a meaningful relationship with mongolian teachers"). Students also evinced what I coded as *anticipation of shared interests* (e.g., "To meet people who share my interest in education is exciting").

In the post-program survey, meanwhile, a few students expressed what I coded as friendships/closeness (e.g., when asked about the "most helpful thing" from the program, one student replied, "Chance for everyone on the tour to meet and build friendships.") or remarked upon personal connections or commonalities (e.g., the

academic exchange “was not only a private story but also an education that was in common with each other”). In addition, I noticed the students smiling and offering praise to the Mongolian teachers during the culture lessons, which I coded as an attempt to build rapport with their learners.

Positioning Self as a Responsive Interlocutor

Another theme I imposed encompassed the manifold ways the students positioned themselves as responsive interlocutors (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014), seeking to share and understand—to represent themselves clearly while listening carefully. This theme includes several different codes I imposed on the pre-program survey responses: *Concern about communication barriers* (all eight students listed their English ability as the thing they were most worried about, suggesting a keen interest in representing their perspectives clearly); *open to new ideas* (e.g., “I hope to...develop a better understanding of multicultural perspectives...”), *excited about cross-cultural encounter* (e.g., “It seems interesting to see a Mongolian person that I have never seen before”; “I think it’s exciting to meet people from other countries”) and *wish to represent own culture well* (e.g., one mentioned a “need for a deep understanding of culture” in order to teach the Mongolian visitors about Korean culture).

The post-program survey and my personal observations substantiated the students’ desire to represent themselves and their culture well. In the post-program survey, it was clear some students had done *additional research to represent their own culture well* (e.g., “I studied lots of cultural background to explain our culture”). Similarly, I noticed they were very *open to feedback to improve their lesson*; while preparing for the exchange, the students seemed very receptive to input and unhesitatingly adjusted their topics, activities, and activity order to maximize interest and impact.

Hospitality and Accommodation

During and after the program, it was clear that students had strived to imagine their counterparts’ nexus of practice in order to accommodate their audience and effectively communicate across difference. In the post-program survey, for example, multiple students noted their personal efforts to *create a positive environment* (e.g., “I worked hard to find and compare the tools that would make the class more interesting and enjoyable”; “I do my best”). In addition, I noticed as we planned the Jeonju

daytrip the students were very anxious about creating a positive experience for their guests. I coded their concerns about our visitors' ability to eat spicy food and to endure the Korean summer heat as *concern about anticipated discomforts*. Finally, several students attempted to make their Korean culture lesson more accessible by referencing K-pop or the Netflix series *Squid Game* during the workshop, highlighting their efforts to communicate across difference by *imagining shared understandings*.

Themes Reflecting Cosmopolitan Criticality

The data to a small extent appeared to reveal an expanding critical consciousness and increasing awareness of the situated nature of "normal." When coding for cosmopolitan criticality, I focused on hints at reflexivity, awareness of limitations in perspective, questioning of assumptions or norms, self-problematization, and potential transformations in perspectives. I imposed several themes related to these aspects of critical cosmopolitanism.

Recognizing Limitations in Understanding

In order to teach their Mongolian counterparts about Korean culture, the students had to think carefully about how to explain their culture—a process that naturally highlighted aspects the students took for granted as "normal." Across all three data types, students demonstrated criticality by *recognizing limitations in understanding of own culture*. In the pre-program survey, one Likert question was helpful in revealing this; in response to the question, "How well do you understand the cultural aspect you're teaching," with 1=*not much* and 5=*I totally understand it*, the responses ranged from 2 to 5 with a mean and median of 3.5, possibly hinting at a growing self-reflection and distance from their primary Discourse (Gee, 1989).

The post-program survey similarly revealed students' growing realization that their understandings of Korean culture (especially in relation to the world) were too limited, making evident the socially constructed, situated nature of norms and culture. In the survey, every student strongly agreed with the statement, "This program has improved my knowledge of KOREAN culture," and a few students noted a recognition that cultural understanding is not innate, even when one is born to it. As one student noted, living in a culture is different from explaining it: "I was disappointed with my ability to explain culture. I felt that I did not know much about Korean culture and lacked the ability to convey it." Another wrote, "[Next time] I will study the things I am in charge of in advance." The students' recognition

of their own limitations in understanding was also supported by my observations; many of these student teachers were very willing to admit when they did not know something—the first step toward noticing and then questioning social norms and assumptions.

One additional code under this theme was *wider, more global perspectives*. The students' post-program survey responses generally pointed to an awareness of their lack of knowledge about Mongolia and a concomitant (slight) increase in intercultural awareness and interest. One student mentioned the academic exchange was the most helpful aspect of the program because they "learned more about each other's educational environment," while another student admitted "I wasn't interested in Mongolia at all, but through this activity, I learned a lot about it." This code was only applied a few times, though; while all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the survey statement, "This program has improved my knowledge of MONGOLIAN culture," few elucidated their new understandings or listed this new intercultural awareness as an advantage of the program. I was initially surprised by this revelation, but it certainly reveals a limitation of intercultural exchange: interaction, alone, is not necessarily enough to make a substantial impact. I will return to this in my discussion of practical implications and recommendations for future exchanges.

Questioning Norms and Assumptions

As described above, the students' post-program survey responses appeared to reflect a growing awareness of the contextual, constructed nature of "normal" as they began to note gaps in their understanding of their own culture. I also observed them taking tentative steps toward questioning norms, as they were all very responsive when I pointed out taken-for-granted ideas that were likely to be unfamiliar to their audience (e.g., what and when the Goryeo dynasty was; the contents and melody of the Korean traditional song "Arirang," etc.). The post-program survey also featured a few comments that I have interpreted as challenging social beliefs/values; under the code *moving beyond the myth of "perfect English,"* I noted a few students shedding a common fear of using imperfect English, shifting instead toward a more authentic, communicative approach (e.g., "Talking about Korean traditional culture and educational terms in English was the most difficult. However, by using examples and explaining them, I was able to solve the difficulty"). Small though it is, I count this as a rebuke of the test-focused, grammar-oriented English instruction that has

prevailed and been prioritized in Korea for decades.

Themes Related to Points of Friction and Facilitation

Friction: Limitations in the Cosmopolitan Imagination

The primary point of friction I identified as a theme was limitations in the cosmopolitan imagination of my students, which came in a variety of forms. In the pre-program survey, I noticed students were concerned about their *limited experience overcoming communication barriers* (“I’m really worried about my English skills, especially my communication skills. So, I feel very nervous about my class.”), which indicated a very restrictive perspective on what constituted effective communication. (As the *questioning norms* theme above suggests, though, I believe the students overcame this hesitancy as they experienced successful interactions and realized they had broader semiotic repertoires than they had believed.)

Another point of friction I coded was students’ sense of *inadequate preparation*. In the pre-program survey, this was reflected by relatively low scores in response to the questions *How confident do you feel about your ability to explain your culture in English?* (1=*not at all*; 5=*very confident*; range: 1-4; mean: 2.6; median: 3) and *How confident do you feel about your ability to teach your cultural lesson?* (range: 2-4; mean: 2.8; median: 3). The students’ post-program surveys suggested a similar feeling of inadequate preparation (e.g., “I needed to study Chunhyangjeon in Namwon. It was difficult because I had to deliver Korean literature to foreigners in English.”), while my personal observations noted several students’ tendency not to trust themselves (which I coded as *English worries*); they read Wikipedia entries during their culture workshop presentations instead of trusting their own ability to interpret and express the ideas. I have grouped these codes into this theme because these anxieties could have been avoided with some additional advance preparation and some creative thinking about communication.

Most of the codes that I ascribed to this theme came from my personal observations. I noticed, for example, a *reification of boundaries* as students were inclined to sit together during whole-group activities (e.g., lunch in Jeonju) instead of mixing with the Mongolians. This could, perhaps, be attributed to cultural norms (e.g., age and experience gaps) or maybe even politeness (e.g., not wanting to intrude on Mongolian participants’ socializing), but it also limited the bridges that could be built between the two groups. This hesitation to take advantage of various opportunities for interaction suggests to me a kind of myopia in imagining

the benefits of cosmopolitan connections.

I also noticed a few *gaps in imagination of Mongolian teachers' nexus*. In order to communicate effectively, we must imagine the nexus of our audience so we can make appropriate choices from our semiotic repertoire (Stein, 2008); however, a couple of students clearly had not considered their counterparts' perspectives and awareness. A few students' PowerPoint slides included unnecessary or confusing details (e.g., the technical names of Korean traditional fans); one student insisted on teaching a difficult version of "Arirang" instead of a simpler version with a more familiar tune; one student had an initial plan for the Mongolian teachers to make themselves Korean names, without considering that they would need to teach Korean letters first.

There were a few other times when the students could have questioned their own assumptions and expectations—could have asked the Mongolian teachers for input, for instance. One code I added here was *stereotypes*: the students, striving to be considerate hosts, were very concerned that Korean food would be too spicy or the weather too hot for the Mongolian visitors. While I admire the ethics of care this evinces, the hospitality is rooted in circulating national discourses about what "foreigners" are like. Another code I added here was *hubris*—though to be fair, it was just a student taking her "expert" role too far. This student's culture lesson focused on the Korean Lunar New Year, and she tried to draw parallels to the Mongolian holiday Tsagaan Sar—but she opted to lecture instead of inquire, which led to the Mongolian participants disputing several of her points. These codes reinforce the importance of inviting self-representation and questioning assumptions as key aspects of critical cosmopolitanism and the cosmopolitan imagination.

Facilitation: Embodied Cosmopolitanism: Positive Emotions

In contrast to the points of resistance and friction identified above, there were also many factors that appeared to facilitate students' cosmopolitan practices and built bridges, all of which I have grouped into the theme *Embodied cosmopolitanism: Positive emotions*. First, students' pre-program survey reflected excitement that I coded as *shared interests, new people, and trying out new roles (teacher & expert)* (e.g., "To meet people who share my interest in education is exciting but even more thrilled to interact with other countries Also trying out a lesson that I've designed myself is exciting."). The post-program survey highlighted the ways students were able to challenge themselves to communicate in new ways, *expanding their semiotic*

repertoire. In my own observations, I also coded students' *desire to craft an engaging lesson* (e.g., questions during our preparation weeks), and, relatedly, *appreciation for appreciation* (e.g., "Communicating is hard but they interested in Korea and asking lots of thing, so I'm happy to be with them and impressed."), the warm satisfaction of reciprocal interest and being a responsive interlocutor. In my own observations, I noted *smiles during interactions* between the students and the Mongolian teachers—joy, wonder, happiness, and friendliness that I interpreted as evidence of positive emotions and embodied cosmopolitanism.

Discussion

Overall, the students' critical cosmopolitan literacies were evident throughout the course of this exchange as they created a positive space of belonging through their openness, reciprocity, and concern, while the need to explain their own culture prompted them to reflect more carefully on their own understandings and norms.

In response to RQ1, which focused on the ethics of care aspect of cosmopolitanism, I found evidence of students' efforts at hospitality and accommodation, much as previous researchers did (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010). The students worked to create a positive experience; sought to increase accessibility through shared knowledge or referents in explanations of their own culture (Herron, 2026); and anticipated possible discomforts for our guests—though these ideas tended to be based on stereotypes about "foreigners," adding support for this tension identified in some previous work in Korea (Herron, 2026) but largely unmentioned in work in Western contexts. The students also showed a keen interest in building relationships. They were excited about discovering shared interests and commonalities and stated their interest in connection and friendship, supporting previous incarnations of cosmopolitanism as belonging (Vasudevan, 2014). The students also positioned themselves as active, responsive interlocutors, as has been identified in other work (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010). They expressed a desire to represent their own culture well while learning about others'; they were interested in meeting new people; they were concerned about communication barriers limiting their interactions and hindering self-representation; and they were open to feedback to improve their lessons' accessibility and appeal, offering support for previous findings but in a different context (Asia) and with different embodied roles (cultural guides/teachers).

In response to RQ2, which inquired about students' criticality, I found some evidence of questioning norms and changes in perspective. First, a few students recognized their limitations in understanding, an admission of fallibility (Appiah, 2006) that made evident norms previously taken for granted and highlighted the constructed and situated nature of culture. Similarly, there was some questioning of assumptions and values; for example, a few students realized perfect English was not necessary for communication, and they were generally responsive to feedback when I pointed out norms that might not be "normal" to their audience, supporting other theorizations of how disjuncture makes visible enculturated beliefs in a particular nexus (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wohlwend, 2021). Students also commented on their more global perspectives, including an increased interest in and knowledge of Mongolia (though no student elaborated on this) and especially a deeper awareness of similarities and differences in "educational environments." This focus on "ontologies of place" (Hawkins, 2014) specific to students' personal lives and interests also illustrates previous literature describing the way students "agentively investigate domains and scales of difference, and the impact of these on their and others' lives" (Hawkins, 2014, p. 109).

As for RQ3, there were also points of tension and friction hindering students' cosmopolitan practices, which I attributed primarily to gaps in students' cosmopolitan imagination. As mentioned, there was some evidence of an ethics of care based in stereotypes, as well as an overestimation of understanding while not inviting self-representation (e.g., Lunar New Year vs. Tsagaan Sar)—a shortcoming of previous cosmopolitan empirical work (e.g., Dunkerly-Bean, Bean, & Alnajjar, 2014) and underscoring Silverstone's (2006) construction of ethics of care as a space that requires the "other" to represent themselves. Similarly, there were a few inappropriate lesson choices (e.g., "Make a Korean name"; teaching a difficult and unfamiliar version of "Arirang"), which suggested to me an incomplete imagining of their counterparts' nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wohlwend, 2021) commensurate with other work in Korea (Herron, 2026). In addition, students seemed to feel inadequately prepared to be guides at times yet did not take the steps necessary to remedy this, and they appeared not to trust their English skills or their ability to teach Korean culture (evident in a couple of students' choice to simply read Wikipedia verbatim). Finally, there was a reification of boundaries as the Mongolian teachers and Korean students rarely intermingled, possibly due to role (teacher vs. student), age (40s and 50s vs. 20s), and/or culture differences. These latter two

friction points have not been sufficiently addressed in empirical work from the West. Ultimately, these friction points suggested the transformational potential described by Delanty (2009) was perhaps not fully realized in this exchange; additional time for preparation, interaction, and reflection would have been helpful.

There were also facilitating factors that smoothed the way for these cosmopolitan practices. I found embodied cosmopolitanism evinced through positive emotions such as engagement, excitement (about new people, new ideas, new roles), appreciation, and a desire to share and engender positive emotions by preparing effective and engaging lessons, similar to Vasudevan's (2014) work but with more disparate participants. The students also were able to overcome their own reticence by expanding their semiotic repertoire to communicate more effectively and confidently (Stein, 2008), contributing to a more positive experience for everyone involved. Though the divisions between the Mongolian and Korean participants remained throughout the program, it was evident that the students sought to create a positive and welcoming space of belonging (Vasudevan, 2014). They also appear to have had an opportunity for the beginnings of their own "aesthetic-reflective experience" (Wahlström, 2014, p. 125), feeling a sense of wonder at these new experiences and new potential in the world.

Practical Lessons for Future Exchanges

This study revealed both the strengths and shortcomings of this two-week summer program, especially in terms of the program's potential to elicit cosmopolitan practices. This was our first time designing a training program such as this, and there are certainly areas that could be improved. Based on my findings, there are a few changes and recommendations I would make for future intercultural exchanges:

1. Make sure there is enough time! The points of friction identified in this study suggest the students could have benefited from more time for additional research, more feedback on their presentations and their new roles (especially their assumptions and cultural blind spots), chances to invite Mongolian participants to represent themselves, and time for guided reflection both before and after the program. The points of facilitation identified here would also be supported by adding time for more conversations, connections, and opportunities for students to practice expanding their semiotic repertoires. Advice for future programs thus includes building into the schedule sufficient time for everything: time before the program for reflection, lesson feedback,

preparation, and practice; time during the program to interact, connect, and communicate; and time after the program to debrief and reflect together.

2. 2. Design activities to encourage points of connection. The students and teachers in this program tended to remain segregated by role, age, and/or culture; however, one of the highlights according to the students was the academic exchange, which afforded an opportunity to connect via shared passions and similar experiences. Designing additional activities that allow the two disparate groups to find common interests and shared identities might allow more chances to blur borders and reshape belonging.
3. 3. Provide opportunities for shared joy. One of the reported strengths of this program was the rapport and positive emotions generated, which contributed to a sense of cosmopolitan welcome. Future programs could build on this by providing more chances for delight and wonder—especially via boundary- and role-shifting, equitable, and reciprocal engagement. Perhaps inter-mixed groups could take turns presenting about a common passion, or the teachers and students could take turns presenting beloved games and traditions. In this case, the culture presentations were lopsided; though the Mongolian teachers shared their passions with me during our English and TEFL lessons (for example, by singing and dancing), the Korean students had little opportunity to experience Mongolian culture or to learn from these teachers.
4. 4. Invite self-representation and be wary of generalizations. This generally is a good idea in education, especially in culture education. Just as the Korean students in this program several times made assumptions about the Mongolian teachers based on what they had been taught about “foreigners,” it is easy to slip into stereotypes when explaining cultures and traditions. Creating space for people to represent themselves is thus key to true critical cosmopolitan connection.

Conclusion

More work is needed, and this is only one small case-study, but this work provides an asset-oriented perspective on critical cosmopolitan literacies based on actual behavior, experiences, and self-reported perceptions. This study adds nuance to our understandings of how critical cosmopolitanism can manifest in Asian contexts, and it offers some practical evidence and suggestions for intercultural exchanges,

especially short-term international teacher-training programs. For our next iteration of this program, I intend to include more opportunities for group reflection, feedback on PowerPoint slides, and more opportunities for students to connect with their Mongolian counterparts, including a more equitable schedule for cultural sharing (e.g., presentations about Mongolian culture from Mongolian participants).

The implications of this study include a few key details that could merit further investigation in the future. First, it suggests that intercultural exchange, alone, is not necessarily sufficient to elicit or cultivate critical cosmopolitan literacies; adding time and multiple opportunities for equitable, joyful exchange and connection could be beneficial for boundary-shifting and belonging. Second, feedback seems helpful in identifying cultural assumptions and generalizations, but it is also worth identifying activities and reflection practices that could guide self-problematization to highlight norms and blind-spots. Finally, support for students' multiliteracies and multimodal repertoires could help encourage students to question traditional norms regarding "correct English," which in turn could help them communicate across difference with confidence; it could be worth exploring the types of activities and practices that effectively support students' confidence and intercultural communication skills.

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