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A Case Study of Two Korean Students' Classroom Interactions in a Graduate Course in America

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This small-scale research project attempts to describe and explore the Korean students' perspectives on oral classroom interaction in a second language classroom in a graduate course in America. Based on the interpretist paradigm, this study employed the qualitative research methodology, triangulating the following methods: class observation, interviews, and document analysis. The findings are that the Korean participants perceived the importance of oral classroom interaction in an American classroom, and that there were shared several factors which influence their participation such as socio-cultural differences, course content, English skills, course requirement, and classroom activity types. Based upon the findings, pedagogical implications are provided for the teachers to help Korean students achieve academic success in American universities.

[second language classroom interaction/English class participation/ qualitative research process]

I. INTRODUCTION

Each year, a growing number of Asian students are coming to the United States for further study. Even though most of them have a fairly good command of English, as shown by their TOEFL scores, there is a gap between their linguistic knowledge and actual communicative performance in their academic classrooms in America.

Research on classroom interaction has focused mainly on children while the dynamics of classroom settings among adults seem to be less researched from the perspectives of second language learning (Fassinger, 1995). Furthermore, most of the previous research has been conducted on the relationships between the second language learners' linguistic knowledge and language performance (e. g., Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1994) or students' oral interaction in the EFL (English as a foreign language) context (Liu, 2006; Park, 2007).

Besides, some previous studies have addressed Asian students' reticence from the point of ESL (English as a second language) teachers (e.g., Tsui, 1996; Ferris & Tagg, 1996). They reported ESL students' unwillingness or inability to participate in class discussions. In spite of ESL students' difficulties in engaging in active participation in content classes, not much attention has been paid to graduate-level Asian students beyond the language classroom. Particularly, Korean students' perspectives on their classroom interaction in a second language content classroom have been seldom researched. Considering that Korean students constitute a large portion of international students coming to America to study, understanding their perceptions toward their oral classroom participation and their habitual ways of classroom interaction in the academic classroom is fundamental for effective instruction.

Methodologically, most studies on classroom participation (e. g., Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kramarae & Treichler, 1990) were conducted in class using observation or survey formats. Or several qualitative studies focused on ESL students' interaction in language courses (e.g., Park, 2004; Lee, 2003). Seldom did researchers conduct studies exploring students' own perceptions and interpretations of their academic classroom interaction and participation via interviews, thereby failing to provide rich data for thick description of Korean students: classroom interaction in content courses at the graduate level.

The purpose of the study is to describe and explore selected Korean graduate students' perspectives on their oral classroom interaction in a second language classroom in a graduate course at an American university by triangulating research methods. With this framework, this study employs the following research questions:

1. What are the general perceptions of selected Korean graduate students toward their oral classroom participation in the second language classroom?
2. Are there any factors which facilitate or hinder their classroom participation in the academic setting?

II. THE STUDY

1. Theoretical Assumptions

The study assumes that the quantitative research paradigm is not adequate to produce in-depth and trustworthy data from the students, particularly for this topic. On the basis of the dialogic postpositivist, interpretist paradigm, through the qualitative research approach, I, as a researcher, try to elicit the participants' inner perspectives. Since I am a graduate student whose native language is Korean, my personal experiences and my mother tongue play an important role in guiding or facilitating the whole research process. Also, this study triangulates methods for thick description and does not intend to generalize the findings to a wider population.

2. Research Design and Methods

1) Site and Access

This study was conducted in a course entitled ‘Methods and Techniques of Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages’ at a major state university in America. All the first year master's students in Foreign/Second Language Education (*aka* TESOL) program are required to take this course. The reason why I chose this class for my study was I wanted to observe many students from different countries, including two Korean students, and to see their interactions with their American peers. Since this is their first or second quarter at the university for most of them, they have not been acculturated much but have some experience in American classroom. In addition, this course attracted my attention because it required a lot of discussion or participation in the classroom, which matches my research interest. My final reason was since most of the students want to teach English in the future, I was hoping to gain some insight into the classroom interaction from the perspectives of future teachers.

The class consists of 19 students (10 Asian, 7 American, 1 Latin American, and 1 visiting scholar from Latin America), 4 males and 15 females. The course follows a normal quarter-long course (10 weeks) and meets once a week for hours and 48 minutes each lesson when the study was conducted. The main course objective was to identify and meaningfully discuss a variety of TESOL methods and principles. The course instructor had a lot of experience with teaching international students.

My access to the class was not difficult because I already knew the instructor, who is willing to help students who are doing class observations. However, he suggested that I should not to videotape the class because it is obtrusive and anxiety-provoking to the students.

2) Sampling

Quantitative sampling depends on selecting a random and statistically representative sample that will permit generalization from the sample to a larger population. In a qualitative research process, however, samples tend to be purposeful, rather than random (Patton, 1990). My sample of interest was Korean graduate students at an American university. I chose Korean students because I am Korean who is a doctoral student in the same program, and as an insider, I wanted to gain some emic perspectives, i.e., local categorization of experience (Pelto & Pelto, 1978) from my Korean participants through the medium of the local language (Korean).

3. Data Collection

For the data collection, three qualitative techniques were used: classroom observation, interviews, and document analysis. The overall approach or strategy for data collection is a case study of the two Korean graduate students in the class. The data collection timeline of this study is provided in Appendix A.

1) Classroom Observation

Observational strategies vary in the extent to which the observer participates in the setting being studied. The possible researcher's roles during observation range from a complete observer to a complete participant. For this study, I decided to be a non-participant observer: I did not take any part in the activities of the class in order to remain objective and observe the classroom activity more effectively. While I took field notes, I missed some interactions or nonverbal expressions, which made me realize the Clifford's (1990) problematic aspects of notes on field notes.

When I first introduced myself to them in class for the first time, I just mentioned I am a second year doctoral student in this program. Some of the students in the class were somewhat surprised by my presence because that was a required course for the 1st year masters' students. On that day, I felt guilty

because I approached them not as a classmate but as a researcher, much like Macleod (1995) felt in his article. After a couple of weeks, when I came to know them better, I disclosed myself as a researcher.

For this study, I observed the class for a whole quarter, missing twice (one was for the class midterm; the other was due to my personal reason). There were a total of 20 hours of observations for the study. Field notes for the observations were written mixed in Korean and English during observations and immediately after each observation. The field notes included the description of the classroom situation, focusing on the classroom interaction, and my reflections including my feelings, reactions, and initial interpretations of what took place. For a sample of field notes, see Appendix B.

2) Interview Process

In order to understand "the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1998, p.3), I interviewed two Korean participants by using the Korean language. I conducted my first interview with my female participant in Wendy's for 1 hour and 30 minutes on Feb. 9. I interviewed my male participant in a study room for 1 hour and 30 minutes on Feb. 18. My interviews were mostly semi-structured, but I tried to add some open-ended questions. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and translated into English selectively. In my first interview, I did not pay much attention to the facial expressions and body languages, but I tried to closely observe them in my subsequent interviews.

During the interview, I had tried to take notes, but it distracted my attention from my interviewees. Instead, immediately after the interview, I wrote down my reflections, listened to the recorded tapes, and transcribed them. After that I did member-checks by meeting the female participant personally and sending an e-mail to my male participant.

3) Document Analysis

I collected the course syllabus and side materials as my documents. Initially, since I could not define the units of analysis, I had a hard time coding my documents. I just tried to see the relationship between the classroom interaction, and the class syllabus and the side materials.

4. Important Issues for Qualitative Research Methodology

1) Trustworthiness (Validity)

In order to establish validity (trustworthiness), I tried to follow the traditional criteria of a good qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

(1) Triangulation: Triangulation involves "use of multiple data-collection methods, multiple sources, and multiple investigators" (Glesene, 1999, p.32). In this project, for thick-description, I triangulated methods by combining the classroom observation, interviews, and document analysis.

(2) Prolonged engagement and persistent observation: These two criteria are important to establish the trustworthiness of data because both involve investing enough time with the participants, and becoming familiar with the research context. I observed a class for a whole quarter, tried to build rapport and trust with my participants not only in class but also outside the class by e-mails and informal interactions throughout the research process.

(3) Member checks: I did process member checks by personal meeting and e-mail communications after doing my interview transcription.

(4) Reflexive journals: I kept a reflexive journal mixed in Korean and English, and maintained it throughout the study period to track the events and insights that occurred during the process of data collection.

2) Ethics

Most of all, for reciprocity, I tried to build a trust and reciprocal relationship with my participants. As Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggested, I attempted "to make valuable contacts, and to understand the acceptance and repayment of obligations" (p. 66). I also maintained confidentiality, because confidentiality is "only one of the factors figuring into the reciprocal relationships that enables data collection" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 70). For this purpose, I used pseudonym, too.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, after a brief description of the study participants, the research questions are discussed based on the findings of the study.

1. Brief Description of Participants

1) Young-Hee: She is 34 years old. She graduated from a women's university in Korea. She has been in America for almost four years, but this is her first quarter in this program. Even though her undergraduate major was French, she started to have interest in teaching and learning English because she wanted to be a guide for her 4 year-old daughter. She was rather active and has positive perceptions toward classroom interaction in America. At the beginning, she was very quiet in the class. After several weeks, she was trying to participate in the classroom discussion as much as possible. For a sample of detailed interview transcript, see Appendix C.

2) Tae-Soo: He is 28 years old. He has been in America for six months, and this is his second quarter at the university. He was active outside the classroom. During the class break, he interacted with his classmates. However, in class he did not talk much. He is a thinker rather than a speaker in the content classes. However, he participated occasionally in class discussions. Sometimes he asked very important questions and gave some critical comments.

2. Research Question 1: What are the general perceptions of selected Korean graduate students toward their oral classroom participation in the second language classroom?

Both positive and negative aspects of classroom participation were discussed during the interviews. Basically, both participants recognized the benefits of oral classroom participation.

> "It is a good opportunity to exchange opinions and ideas with others." (Tae-Soo)

> "Classroom participation is a good way to improve my English in America." (Young-Hee)

However, they expressed some negative aspects of classroom participation, especially when dominated by several native speakers of English in the content classroom. Emphasizing the significance of meaningful contribution, Tae-Soo cared more about the quality of the discussion than the quantity of participation:

> Some native speakers of English speak very unimportant things. Their talking is too shallow with no depth. I think listening to their stories is a waste of time. No connection with the text. Too much talking does not lead to meaningful contribution to the class discussion.

Young-Hee also mentioned not talking dose not necessarily mean not participating in class. Non-verbal expressions are regarded as part of classroom interaction. From the classroom observation, it was found that while the teacher and several active classmates participated in the classroom, the other students usually looked at them, and express their agreement or interest with facial expressions such as smiling and nodding.

Regarding classroom activity types, Tae-Soo mentioned different preferences according to the context:

> It's hard to tell I prefer discussion to lecture. In America, discussion is popular and classroom interaction is emphasized. However, in Korea, the whole classroom does not value active participation.

Tae-Soo's comment is associated with socio-cultural differences between Korea and America, which will be discussed more in the next section. Generally, both participants expressed a strong desire to participate actively in classes in America.

3. Research Question 2: Are there any factors which facilitate or hinder their classroom participation in the academic setting?

Both participants shared some factors which influence their participation in the classroom. Several salient factors are socio-cultural differences, course content, English skills, course requirement, and classroom activity types, which will be discussed in turn.

1) Socio-cultural Factors

Among the many factors which influence the participants' oral interaction, socio-cultural factors were noted as the most significant to play an important role in class participation. Both think the whole Korean culture and society do not value discussion or interaction much, which hinders them from participating actively in the class.

From the initial observations, it was noticed that several students dominated the conversation and they did not hesitate to interrupt others' speaking. These active students are Americans or Latin Americans. These differences reflect different cultural value systems and practices. The study participants were trying to follow different conventions in spite of difficulties they encounter.

> Students are not supposed to talk in class. It's not a proper behavior in Korea. I seldom participated in discussion unless I was called upon. Now, my thinking has been changed in America. There is an old saying, “when in Rome do as the Romans do.” But it's hard to change my old behavior. (Tae-Soo)

Similarly, Young-Hee, as a graduate from a women’s university in Korea, expressed her initial struggles to participate fully in the academic community in America:

> During my stay in America, I have realized that in order to function in the academic class in America, I need to change my styles and attitudes which I had had in Korea for a long time. In Korea, silence is sometimes regarded as a virtue. Some people claim that if a man talks a lot, he has no depth. Especially, a quiet woman who doesn’t express her opinions in public is looked upon as a very charming lady, and has a good reputation of her personality. Generally, men and old people prefer obedient and quiet women. In America, on the contrary, women should know how to argue well and express their opinions freely. I was very impressed by the female students’ active participation in the discussion during the class.

Nevertheless, she also emphasized the importance of encouraging atmosphere and respect from the whole class for active classroom interaction:

> The atmosphere of the class is very warm. Even though some people say something trivial, uh, the whole class respects it. I like it very much. I think it's impossible in Korean situation. Some people tend to look down on the person who says something unimportant during the class. I, myself, was afraid that my opinion was small in Korea. Here, I have learned self-confidence after several weeks in this class, because the teacher respects my opinions no matter what they are. That's my turning point.

Her comment also reflects the Korean students' desire to save face not mentioning something insignificant or wrong:

> I think it's culture (. . .) I am sometimes worried that if I say something like this, I might lose face.

Similarly, in order not to make a mistake, Tae-Soo was very cautious in his oral class participation. As he said, "I am afraid my performance is continuously evaluated by the teacher and by the peers," both students were also very conscious of others' evaluation. Young-Hee felt even more comfortable with native speakers of English in English than with Koreans in English because she did not have to worry about being evaluated.

2) Content Factors

Since the course is a content course at a graduate level, the course content is a factor which influences the Korean students' participation. From the first interview, it was found that Young-Hee seemed to have a hard time adjusting herself to the new classroom environment. Fortunately, she gained some confidence after participating in a class because of the course content:

> I am very glad I could make a contribution to the class discussion this time. The topic was related to my previous experiences. I also read the chapter thoroughly to understand the text before class. Because I was familiar with the content, I had some confidence in speaking during class discussion.

In one class which centered on the American educational system, both students could not express their opinions because they did not have sufficient background knowledge about the American education system. They stated that

they spent lots of time reading books or articles which were related to the course topic before the content-based class.

3) English Skill Factors

From the interview, it is obvious that English proficiency plays an important role in participating actively in class. Although Young-Hee has been in America for almost four years as a housewife, she had a hard time comprehending the instructor's or classmates' English academically. She could not understand several technical terms. Nevertheless, she admitted she had no courage to say "please repeat what you said" during the class.

In addition, it usually took much time to translate what her thoughts or ideas in English. She stated, "I think about my ideas in Korean, but I cannot translate them into English in exactly the same way I want to express." While thinking and translating, she lost her turns abruptly. She felt very frustrated when an American student interrupted her speech and said exactly what she was trying to say.

4) Course Requirement Factors

The course requirement has been found to be a factor which influences students' participation in the graduate course. Tae-Soo made a conscious effort in adjusting to the American classroom climate for a good grade and for his further study in America.

> I have a pressure to get a good grade. After obtaining my master's degree, I am planning to continue my doctoral study in this school. In order to be admitted to the doctoral program, my grade is important. Since class participation is a requirement for the course, I am trying to talk willingly.

Through the analysis of syllabus and side materials for the class, I have found that many of the class activities and requirements are directly related to the students' oral classroom interaction or participation in class. In particular, the course syllabus specifies that students' involvement is essential and "students are expected to raise questions and provide comments on course reading." Furthermore, their participation and presentation are also a part of grading scale (20%) of the course.

5) Classroom Activity Factors

One interesting finding was that although the Korean students were quiet in the class discussion, they were active and even looked professional during their presentations. In terms of class participation, Young-Hee preferred presentation to free discussion in large group settings.

> I prepared a lot for my presentation. I practiced many times. I wanted to look knowledgeable and professional. I think presentations are a good opportunity to show my intelligence and preparedness, although I feel very nervous. Besides, I don't have to worry about turn taking, because I am the leader of the day.

Based on the interviewees' data, it seems that both participants also preferred small group activities to whole group discussion. They were generally overwhelmed by the large class size. They said that it was hard to jump into the class discussion. They felt comfortable speaking up in a small group discussion with several American students.

IV. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In terms of perceptions of classroom interaction, both Korean graduate students feel that classroom interaction or participation are necessary, especially to improve their English proficiency and to succeed in U. S. graduate classrooms. As Edward (1996) stated, classroom participation is one of the most important areas in graduate courses because American universities value discussion as a learning tool. In spite of the significance of classroom interaction at the graduate level, from the present study, several factors were found to influence their participation in their academic classroom. It has been found that socio-cultural differences, course content, English skills, course requirement, and classroom activity types hinder or facilitate their interaction in the content course.

The findings of the study also suggested that socio-cultural factors seemed to have a negative influence on their communicative activities in the class. However, it would be better to keep in mind that these sociocultural factors should be viewed as a result of interplay among numerous factors (Nam, 2005), and these factors are not fixed, but changing and situated.

Although the study cannot be generalizable to the whole Korean graduate students in the academic settings in America, this study has some implications for teaching students in similar contexts. Based on the findings of the study, several pedagogical suggestions are made for the teachers to help Korean students achieve academic success in American universities by adjusting to the different classroom climate.

Most of all, teachers need to have a clear understanding of their socio-cultural differences. In order to help Korean students to function well in American classes, it is important to recognize that they are just different, not deficient, and their different socio-cultural values are worth attention and understanding. As the previous studies (e.g., Lee, 2003; Liu, 2006) and this study showed, among the many socio-cultural differences, the classroom turn-taking in Korea is totally different from in America. While though interruption is a rule behavior in Korea, it is habitual to American students. Since Korean students have been found to have a hard time in taking turns, one suggestion is to allocate turns by the teachers or to take turns in the beginning of the course.

Another finding is that Korean students have a tendency to take more time to think carefully and to translate their ideas in English. Since the course is not a language course but a content-based class at the graduate level, it requires content knowledge to function effectively in the communicative activities in the academic classroom. It would be better for the students to write journals based on the course reading before the content-based class. Korean students could have opportunities to process their ideas and thoughts before the class discussion. Moreover, if they can bring their personal experiences into the classroom, their participation could be more actively engaging in class.

It was also found that teachers' encouraging attitudes promote or hinder students' verbal participation in class. The finding is consistent with Park's study (2004). It should be remembered that teachers' just one word or response could make a student a risk-taker or silent participant in the discussion. Creating a sense of belonging would be a good way to embrace the reticent Korean students and to have them participate actively in the academic classes in America. For these purposes, when giving students discussion topics or assignments, teachers should remember that the topic should not favor or disadvantage students from any cultural groups.

Finally, as Morita (2004)'s study and the study current demonstrated, students' participation is positively related to their English skills. Ultimately, it is the students' job to enhance their English proficiency and confidence to perform oral discussion tasks which are usually required in graduate courses in America.

Therefore, for Korean students who want to study further in America, more preparation is suggested in order to function effectively in their discourse community in America and to overcome socio-cultural differences.

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APPENDIX A

Data Collection Timeline

Date	Activity	Approximate time
Jan. 5	Selected research topic and field site for observation after library search	2 hours
Jan. 9	visited the course instructor and obtained permission for my observation	20 min.
	class observation	2 1/2 hours
Jan. 16	class observation	2 1/2 hours
	received O.K. from the two Korean participants and got information	30 min.
Jan. 30	class observation & reflections	3 1/2 hours
Feb. 6	class observation	2 1/2 hours
	scheduled an interview with Tae-Soo	10 min.

Feb. 8	developed interview questions	2 hours
Feb. 9	interview with Young-Hee & reflections	2 hours
Feb. 16	confirmed the interview schedule and sent possible questions by e-mail	20 min.
Feb. 18	interview with Tae-Soo	1 1/2 hours
	e-mailed Tae-Soo for thanks & confirmation	30 min.
	transcribed the interview tapes	5 hours
	translated some parts into English	2 hours
Feb. 20	class observation	1 1/2 hours
Feb. 23	member-checks over lunch with Young-Hee	2 hours
Feb. 27	class observations and reflections	3 hours
Feb. 28	brief interview with Young-Hee	15 min.
	brief interview with Tae-Soo	15 min.
Feb. 28	document analysis	2 hours
Mar. 6	class observation	2 1/2 hours

APPENDIX B

Description & Reflections on Classroom Observation

Several students and I had a hard time finding a new classroom for the class. Because of the class size, the classroom has been changed. Finally, I entered the classroom and took a seat among the students. The new classroom was large enough to accommodate all the students. There were 19 students (10 Asian, 7 American, 1 Latin American, and 1 visiting scholar from Latin America), 4 males and 15 females.

At first, the instructor asked the students to take out the previous articles and turned on the OHP equipment. He wore a dark-colored jacket and black pants. The transparency was about “Grammatical Explanations in ESL.” As he discussed the article, the visiting scholar raised a question about adult/children language learning. While the teacher responded, one American student interrupted the talk and talked about her experience. As soon as she finished, another American student shared her personal story. After the instructor's comment for the language learning with children, one Asian female student expressed different about the language learning with children, saying that “it's difficult to understand and children speak very informally.” The instructor showed a deep interest.

While the teacher and several active classmates participated in the classroom, the other students usually looked at them, and express their agreement or interest with facial expressions such as smiling and nodding. Before turning into a different topic, the instructor always said, "Any questions or comments?" At that time, one Asian student asked an interesting comment, which made the whole class laughing and active.

.....

Toward the end of the class, most of the students looked relaxed and somewhat tired. They were losing concentration. Some students talked with their classmates informally in a lower voice.

At the end of the class, the instructor explained Midterm and assignments for the course, using OHP. Students wrote down. They looked serious. One Asian student asked a question about the exam, and a couple of American students, too. The teacher answered the questions. Finally, he handed out some materials for next week, and dismissed the class.

My impression was that this class was pretty interactive and dynamic. Since the topic was related to the students' language learning experience, they were more engaging with the discussion. However, several students rather dominated the conversation and they didn't hesitate to interrupt others' speaking. These active students are Americans or Latin Americans. I guess the active participants of the Latin Americans is due to the culture or their mother tongue, Spanish, which is rather similar to English.

One interesting point is that not all of the American students were active in the oral classroom interaction. Even though English is their native language, they kept silent or mentioned a little, which is intriguing to me. Asian students were usually quiet, but one Asian student, unlike the previous class, were quite active today. Actually, she is Korean and I am scheduled to interview her next week. Since this is a large class, I wish I could observe small group activities, too.

APPENDIX C

Interview transcript

Transcription conventions:

[ ] - contextual information such as nonverbal interactions

(. . .) - pauses in the dialogue

(. . . . .) - protocol omitted

Interview 1 (with a female student)
Place: Wendy's
Date & Time: February 9 (9:40 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.)

[greeting] (. . . . .)

Interviewer: Tell me how you got into this TESOL program. Is this your first quarter?

Interviewee: For the last quarter, uh, I was in MED program. But I had realized that MED didn't match to me. So I switched into the TESOL program which fits well to me.

Interviewer: How long have you been in America?

Interviewee: For a long time. About 4 years. I majored in French, but I came to have interest in English as I watch my daughter learning English. I want to guide my kid. (. . .)

(. . . . .)

Interviewer: How do you feel about classes in America?

Interviewee: The class level is high. I want to express myself above personal and daily conversations (. . .) I was so afraid in the beginning. But I like the instructor's teaching style. He's so encouraging.

Interviewer: I agree. He's got a lot of ESL experiences.

Interviewee: The atmosphere of the class is very warm. Even though some people say something trivial, uh, the whole class respects it. I like it very much. I think it's impossible in Korean situation. Some people tend to look down on the person who says something unimportant during the class. I, myself, was afraid that my opinion was small in Korea. Here, I have learned confidence after several weeks in this class, because the teacher respects my opinions no matter what they are. That's my turning point.

Interviewer: In your opinion, what factors influence Korean students' oral classroom participation in America?

Interviewee: I think it's culture (. . .) I am sometimes worried that if I say something like this, I might lose face.

Interviewer: What else?

Interviewee: Well, students' level, age, and motivation influence (. . .) Classroom atmosphere and environment are important. The

familiarity among students, etc. I have heard that when students know one another, if they hire a tutor, they can participate actively in the classroom, because they know and understand one another. Well, I think, it's an indirect way.

(. . . . .)

Examples in : English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: College or University

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