

Considerations for Teaching (GUGC) Korean Students

Preamble

This guidance is intended to introduce the profile of Korean (GUGC) students to academic staff at the home campus. The intent is to equip faculty with a better understanding of the nature of Korean students, their study style, attitude and language skills.

This document inevitably deals with generalisations and stereotypes. While respecting that every student (and indeed faculty member) is a unique individual, this guide aims for a “one-size-fits-most” generalisation of the GUGC student profile. It is written in good faith, with no intention to judge, criticise or take sides, but to try to offer background insights into Korean students.

Here the term “Korean student” is shorthand for the typical GUGC student profile: a Korean national with relatively decent English ability who has come through the domestic education system (excluding international students, and students who have studied either abroad or at an international school, who usually have different profiles). The term “professor” here is similarly shorthand for a staff member of any rank who teaches these students.

Korean Student Profile

GUGC Korean students undoubtedly have a different profile from other UGent students. They have come through the Korean education system, which shapes their educational and cultural expectations. Even at GUGC, although all courses are conducted and assessed in English, the rest of students' lives is entirely Korean: they live in Korea, their classmates are almost exclusively Korean, and outside of class, all discussions are in Korean. This means they lack “immersion” in English language and European culture, and arrive fresh-faced for their “home campus” semester, carrying the double burden of studying fourth-year university-level courses while simultaneously assimilating to a new city and culture.

This document looks at three main areas, concerning students'

1. English proficiency
2. educational expectations
3. experiences adapting to life in Ghent

It provides some background regarding Korean students' issues in these areas, and lays out considerations for professors that might be used to help the students adapt faster, reorientate their expectations, and ultimately perform better.

1. English Language Proficiency

The standard of written and spoken English of an average student at a Korean university is considerably less than that of an average student at UGent. One key factor is the difference between Korean and English. The two languages have different alphabets, no common word roots, and wildly different grammar rules and sentence structures. For example, Koreans find articles “a” and “the” confusing, since Korean has no equivalent. The word order is also completely reversed: “I went to the store to buy milk” in Korean becomes “milk to buy store went”.

Moreover, the school system in Korea teaches English as a syntax to be analysed rather than a language to be produced. Korean schools teach students to perform well in tests, and not to specifically gain competencies, such that middle and high school classes focus only on grammar rules and reading comprehension, with no speaking or writing. Students at GUGC are significantly above average, but the concerns above are still relevant.

Reading

Regarding English, Korean students' strongest area is reading. GUGC courses require extensive reading of research papers, so all students have experience reading academic papers in English.

Considerations:

- Play to the strength, and refer students to information available to read, be it ppt files, UFORA announcements, textbooks, course materials etc

Listening

Korean students have at least three years of lectures in English, and so are expected to be fully able to follow and take notes for classes. However, a few minor accommodations will be helpful for weaker students.

Considerations:

- Accents. Koreans are raised on a steady diet of neutral quasi-North American accents, and struggle with anything different. By BA4, students are familiar with the rich and diverse range of accents among our staff, but it might take them a week or two to tune in to each professor's unique speaking style.
- Speed. Students might struggle with a fast-paced delivery, so slightly slower in the beginning of a course provides more clarity.
- Phrasing: To avoid miscommunication, direct positive parsing can be clearer than negative formation. For example, "Documents not of the permitted file type will not be accepted" can be revised as "Only documents in the permitted file type will be accepted."
- As mentioned, students' reading ability is uniformly stronger than listening, so it is worth writing down vital information (e.g.: exam rules) to reduce risk of misunderstanding.

Speaking

As with any subject, there is a range of abilities with the cohort, and confidence, fluency and complexity vary between students. Some students can English speak very naturally, while others struggle without time to prepare their ideas and language.

Considerations:

- All students should be able to explain something in English, but some will require time to prepare. (This has implications for in-class participation, which follows later.)

Writing

As with speaking, all students can write essays in academic English, but time and tools required will vary.

Considerations:

- Some students lean on grammar checkers when writing, and might make errors without them. Typical examples are mis-use of articles (a, the), missing plurals, or errors in verb form or word choice. Sentences may also be a little simplistic.
- Due to differences between Korean and English, some word order might feel a little unnatural. The writing can often feel slightly repetitive or indirect.

Written Responses to Open Exam Questions

Korean students have little or no experience of open-ended questions requiring a full written response. Korean tests are almost uniformly multiple-choice questions requiring rote memorisation, and provide little-to-no experience in open questions, essay writing, critical thinking or beyond-the-textbook understanding. There is no writing/speaking component to the English element of the national university entrance exam so students simply do not practice these skills. In fact, students rarely write essays even in their native language. Students are conditioned to regurgitate the information they have received in class under exam conditions: no further explanation or consideration required.

Therefore, an open exam question requiring a long written response is an alien concept to Korean students. Whereas home campus students can draw on years of experience to implicitly understand what is required of an exam question, and therefore deliver the type of response the professor is looking for, Korean students have no such resource to call on, and often are unsure exactly what to write about. This leads to mismatches between professors' and students' respective expectations; even if a student understands the subject and writes well, their response might not be what the professor wanted, leading to disappointment on both sides.

Considerations:

- Cultural Awareness. Try to make questions as clear as possible (in terms of the expected response content). Try to ensure there is no culturally acquired implicitness i.e.: where a Belgian student will intrinsically understand what is required but a Korean student will not have this cultural awareness to fall back on and risk inadvertently producing something different.
- Set clear expectations.
 - Content. As noted, Korean students have grown up regurgitating what they have learned. If this is enough, then fine, but if a question expects them to go beyond that and show some interpretation or critical thinking in a certain context, then clearly state so.
 - Style. Korean students often employ diagrams or bullet points in their responses for clarity. If these are not accepted, then say so explicitly – again either in the question prompt, or during class time.
- Clear Rubric. Although many students are competent in academic English writing, some still struggle, especially without recourse to grammar checks and other aids. Have a clear rubric considering the weighting of writing quality versus understanding of the subject. Written English is important, but it is the science course content that is being assessed.
- Show samples. Where possible, provide sample responses that show the expected style and level of response. A short commentary noting what makes the sample a successful response would also be useful.

2. Educational Expectations

In-class Participation

Educational expectations in classrooms in Korea and the west are quite different, with in-class participation being a significant difference.

Traditionally, study in Korea is very one directional. The all-wise all-knowing professor stands at the front and delivers knowledge; the students sit and listen. Students are expected to be passive recipients of this wisdom – critical thinking and further discussion are not required.

Students are therefore programmed to this learning style; indeed, many prefer it. Students are often reluctant to engage in a more interactive lecture style that expects them to contribute. It is simply not in their nature, and some even resent it (“Why is the professor asking me? They are the expert.”).

Korean students are also sensitive to the concept of “face”. In class, they may be reluctant to speak for fear of making a mistake in their English, or reveal a lack of knowledge, which would cause them to lose “face”. While westerners are usually not shy to venture an opinion (even if wrong) and are comfortable to think aloud, Korean students are unlikely to speak up. In general, expect a Korean cohort to be less forthcoming in the classroom, and participation will likely need some encouragement.

Considerations:

- Set expectations early. It might be worthwhile spending a few minutes in the opening class to explain the class style and requirements/expectations for participation. Explain how to participate (whether they should just shout out, or raise a hand etc), and that the important thing is discussion rather than providing correct answers (cf: “face”).
- Create a comfortable class atmosphere and encourage discussion. Start with some straightforward questions and show appreciation for responses. Once students see classmates answer and “survive” without having their ideas shot down, others are more likely to follow suit. Consider an icebreaker if that’s your kind of thing. (For more general tips, see also: [Being approachable as a lecturer: how do you do that? | Educationaltips \(ugent.be\)](#))
- Asking an open-ended question may be met with blank faces, but re-framing it as a closed “yes/no” question, or providing choices (“A, B or C?”) gives students a starting point and something to discuss. In this case, even if they don’t know, any student if asked can at least guess an answer.
- Students often struggle when put “on the spot”. They need time to process the question, form their opinion, and then construct their answer in English. Providing opportunities (time) to do this will increase participation:
 - Pair work. Give students a minute or two to discuss the issue with the person next to them, then ask them to share their thoughts
 - Group work is even better. Here, students discuss together in the safety of their group, then prepare something to feedback. One student then reports back the group’s opinion (rather than his/her own), overcoming concerns about individual loss of face.
- At the end of the class, asking “Are there any questions?” will be met with silence. Yet as soon as class is dismissed, suddenly one or more students will come to front with questions. Maybe they lacked the nerve to speak up, did not want to waste classmates’ time, or value the brief one-to-one moment.

Rather than being frustrated by this, use it as a moment to engage and build trust/confidence with the students and encourage them to suggest such questions in the next class.

Other Cultural Considerations

Korean students tend to be conservative, quiet, respectful and diligent. They will have limited overseas experience; few have travelled abroad independently. In fact, few have even lived independently, since many still live with their parents. Korea is also a very convenient, conservative nation. In other words, Korean students have led a relatively sheltered life to date.

Universities in South Korea also have notable differences with European institutions. Once a student is accepted into a Korean university, it is expected that they graduate. Exams are much shorter and grades much higher. Professors develop bonds with their students, and in many cases take responsibility for them: a student failing reflects badly on the professor. Profs often use their contacts to find jobs for their students after graduation.

Finally, when a cohort of Korean students travels to Ghent together, they also tend to stick together. Partly this is safety in numbers; partly gravitational mass as even independent-minded students find it hard to escape the pull of the large group.

Considerations:

- Most Korean students will find safety in numbers, and left to their own devices, spend their time entirely with other Korean students. Participation with other students may not occur naturally, but would need to be manufactured.
- Given student-prof relationship at Korean universities, students may sometimes make requests that seem unsuitable in western culture (e.g.: asking for unreasonable support, requesting (expecting) special dispensation such as a deadline extension, or over-sharing personal details).
- Korea has a national “last-minute” culture, where plans are made and changed at the last minute. Don't be surprised to see students acting similarly, e.g.: making last-second alterations to their ppt as they start speaking, even though they've had two weeks to complete it! Just go with the flow.

3. Adjusting to Living in Ghent

Although the Ghent semester takes place in BA4, it is worth keeping in mind that Korean students are complete “freshmen” when it comes to Ghent itself. This will be the first time they have even set foot in the city of Ghent, and for many it is their first experience of living abroad, or even independently. As such, everything will be new and unknown, as they lack the basic information that locals take for granted – building names, classroom locations, schedules, logins, navigating the city, bike hire, finding the canteen, the library etc. Students may need a few weeks to get up to speed and adjust to their new environment. There is a lot to adapt to in a short time, and there will inevitably be some culture shock.

Moreover, unlike other international students who spend several years living in Ghent, and thus become immersed in the ways of the city, its people and culture, Korean students are only there for a single semester: by the time they've become accustomed to life in Ghent, it will already be time to return to South Korea. Some are also distracted by the attractions of being in Europe, which can lead to poor decisions regarding their priorities and use of time.

GUGC students feel a double burden to score highly during their final year studies – but have an additional challenge of adapting to Ghent at the same time as performing well in these higher-level courses.

Considerations:

- Life in Ghent is very different from Incheon (Korea) and students will need some time to adapt and settle it. Students will also not be familiar with the local jargon of Sterre, Ufo, Campus Coupure, and the like, and may need a little initial guidance.
- Be mindful of the students' situation as they adjust to a completely different culture and lifestyle on the other side of the world.

Summary

Korean students entering their "home campus" semester face the challenges of taking high-level university courses in a foreign language and culture, while needed to adapt to living in a new country.

The main considerations are:

- The students are new to Ghent and will need time to settle in
- Due to cultural differences (mainly) and English ability (partly), in-class participation may not come as naturally as with other students, and may need prompting.
- Due to their different educational background, Korean students lack experience of open-ended written questions, and even students with strong writing skills can be unsure of what to write. Expectations for responses for this style of question should be clearly laid out.

While professors should in no way be making wholesale changes to accommodate Korean students, some small considerations and adjustments can lead to better outcomes. The extra time taken to adapt an essay prompt, provide a sample response, or run an ice-breaker can actually result in time gained in the long run, as students will learn to more appropriately give the responses you need. If these changes lead to better experiences for both students and professors, then they will be worth it.