

# Korean Graduate Students' Experiences in Doing Discussions in English-Medium Seminars: It is Not All About English

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## *Abstract*

*The purpose of this study is to illuminate Korean graduate students' experiences in a discussion-based English-medium graduate seminar by looking at their experiences over a semester. In particular, this study focused on identifying and analyzing the factors that affect their participation by using qualitative methods. Interviews with eight Korean students in two graduate seminars from different departments at a university in Seoul were analyzed by using the constant comparative method. The findings show that while the students' initial worries revolved around their use of English in the classroom, their actual performances were not absolutely determined by their proficiency of English. What students realized from their experiences was that they have not developed the appropriate discussion skills to participate in an academic discussion. Furthermore, their reticence was caused by lack of content knowledge which is the result of not fully comprehending the required reading. The results of this study imply that when analyzing the effectiveness of English-medium lectures/seminars, we should not consider language as the only factor that affects students' performances. This study also suggests exploring other factors that cause difficulties for students to participate in the academic discussions in English-medium seminars in order to find the proper solutions for their reticence.*

*Key words: English-medium lectures, reticence, participation, class dynamics, discussion skills.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, much effort has been made in Korea to mark its place in the international academia. In this respect, the need for using English for communicative purposes has shifted towards using English as a tool to share knowledge. Accordingly, there has been a major rise of demands for English-medium lectures in universities. As for a university in Seoul, the number of English-medium lectures has increased from 474 to 595 within a year (Yang, Ham, Hong, Kim, I., Kim, S., 2008, p. 1).

Considering that there are approximately 4000 classes that are offered at this particular university in Seoul, English-medium classes take over 12 ~ 13 % of the total number of courses. In addition, a new policy has been applied to the incoming freshmen of the university, who will need to take over nine units (three classes) of English-medium lectures upon graduating. While a number of reforms have taken place, there has been a growing concern regarding ways to provide an effective environment for teaching and learning in the English-medium lectures. During the symposium conducted in a university (Kim, 2007), many professors have voiced their concerns about conducting the lectures in English. Some pointed out the difficulties in using a foreign language to deliver the content clearly and precisely while others were concerned about their class dynamics. In terms of students' experiences in the English-medium lectures, students emphasized that they were unable to participate in English-medium lectures due to many factors including their language proficiency, lack of content knowledge, and their personalities. Although there are a few studies that examined the students' perspectives (Jeon 2002 ; Kim, 2002, 2003; Lee, 2006; Jeon, 2007), the studies lack qualitative data that fully describe their personal experiences. For example, there is no explanation of why some students considered their language skills as affecting their academic performance while some shifted their concerns toward other

factors such as their personalities or lack of content knowledge. Moreover, the process through which they found these factors to be difficult is not described. In this regard, there is a necessity to understand students' individual experiences in English-medium lectures in order to understand their needs as well as the process through which their personal perspectives develop. As for examining academic discussions, previous surveys examined lectures which were largely lecture-based rather than discussion-based. In such classes, the discussions mostly consist of question and answer format, which is not a natural setting to examine class dynamics. It is, then, necessary to observe discussion-based seminars that require the students to participate in order to understand what the students experience as they share content knowledge, interpretations and opinions in English. In turn, such data can offer useful information for developing a suitable policy for expanding English-medium seminars.

The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth view of the English-medium graduate seminars by examining students' individual experiences during the course. Rather than having a predetermined set of factors for analysis, this study will focus on identifying and describing the actions and processes involved in the students' experiences through naturalistic and descriptive methods.

## II. RELATED STUDIES

Participation in L2 classrooms requires complex processing since there is a "constant interplay between external verbal exchange and internal linguistic processing" (Wu, 1998, p. 539.) Furthermore, there are many studies that have reported that Asian students in particular seem to have difficulties in participating during class discussions (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987; Johnson, 1997; Mason, 1994; Sato, 1982; Tompson & Tompson, 1996; Tsui, 1996; White & Lightbown, 1984). The professors in these studies claimed that Asian students had the tendency to not ask questions when they needed to clarify

meaning during the lecture and rarely contribute their opinions during class discussions. While these studies reflected on the professor's frustrations, there are also studies that attempted to tell the students' side of the issue. For example, Chen (2003) demonstrated that Asian students' cultural factors influenced their class participation. In fact, one of the participants (Seungwon) in Chen (2003) defined participation as something that "just means attendance in Korea" (p. 271.) Jackson (2002) also demonstrated that students in Hong Kong do not participate in class discussions conducted in English because they do not want to cause trouble by interrupting the class. Some students in Jackson (2003) were worried that they would be viewed as showing off if they talked too much during the discussions. In sum, the studies that examined Asian students in ESL settings attributed the students' reticence to their cultural differences as well as previous educational experiences.

In terms of class participation in L2 classrooms, the studies in Korea provide only an overview of the students' perspectives through quantitative methods. For example, Kim (2003) showed that from the results of her questionnaire that there were no significant differences between Korean-medium and English-medium lectures in terms of class participation where the students showed relatively low rates of participation. However, the study did not specify in which area the students have difficulties in since it did not provide qualitative data regarding their answers. The questionnaire in Kang (2007) asked students about their perspectives regarding content based instruction conducted in English and found that the students found their low English proficiency to be the most difficult aspect of English-medium lectures. In addition, some students also commented that the amount of work should be reduced due to the overwhelming burden of combining English and content knowledge. Although this study provided a glimpse of the students' experiences, it only examined the outcome of their classes without an understanding of the context of each class as well as the progress of each student's experience during a full semester. As for the other studies, while they have provided a

macro view of the students' perspectives regarding English-medium lectures, a closer look at their personal experiences is still lacking. Furthermore, the classes are mostly concerning lectures that are teacher-centered involving tasks that demand a minimum level of student participation during the lecture. In such classes, the interaction between the professor and the students cannot be examined. As a result, it is difficult to generalize such results since they do not reflect graduate seminars. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the following questions are considered:

- 1) What experiences do Korean graduate students go through in English-medium seminars that require them to participate in academic discussions?
- 2) What do they find particularly difficult and what accounts for their difficulties?

### III. METHODS

#### A. Settings and Participants

Two graduate seminars from different departments (Educational Psychology and English Education) in the College of Education at a university in Seoul were examined. Both classes were taught by Korean professors and met once a week for three hours and required the students to participate actively during the class. For example, in the Educational Psychology class, the students were to conduct a small group discussion of the reading material in each class. After the group discussions, the professor asked the students to summarize what they had discussed and provided lectures using Powerpoint to clarify content of the articles. Furthermore, the students were also required to post their reflections and discussions regarding the reading materials on the on-line forum. Thus, the student to student and teacher to student interaction rates were observed to be very high. As for the English Education class, each student had to prepare a review of the reading material they were

assigned to and lead the class discussion. After the presentation, the whole class discussed about the material and applied the content of the presentation to discuss about related topics within our society. In particular, since the focus of the class was on language policy, the discussions were mainly about how the content in the reading materials is related to language policies and the language learning environment in Korea. Thus, the discussions required knowledge of current events, the history of language teaching in Korea, and politics which were not included in the reading materials. The class discussions were mostly led by the professor, thus, the student to student and teacher to student interaction rate fluctuated from high to low depending on how much the students participated in the discussion. There were four students in each class and all eight graduate students participated in the study and a general outline of the background information of each participant is provided in Table 1 below. The participants are listed under pseudonyms.

Table 1. Background Information of Participants

Department*	Participants	Age	Year in school	Experiences abroad	TEPS score**
EP	Minju	24	M. Ed. 1st year	no	650
	Hyuna	27	Ph.D 2nd year	6 months	620
	Sunhee	29	Ph.D 1st year	no	600
	Mikyung	30	Ph.D 1st year	no	600
EE	Daesik	26	M.Ed 1st year	no	940
	Jeemin	27	M.Ed 2nd year	no	N/A
	Kyungsun	27	Ph.D 2nd year	no	850
	Joongyu	30	Ph.D 2nd year	5 years	N/A

\* EP (Educational Psychology) and EE (English Education)

\*\*The required TEPS score for EP and EE were 510 and 800 respectively.

There were two M.Ed and Ph.D students in each class and three students from each class did not have any experiences studying abroad. Some specific questions were asked regarding their experiences of taking an English-medium class as well as

the types of speaking activities. When asked whether they have taken English-medium lectures prior to the present one in Educational Psychology class, two students answered that they have not and the other two students responded that they were currently taking another English-medium lecture in the department. As for English Education class, three students had answered that they have no prior experience in taking an English-medium lecture. In terms of their experiences of content based discussions in English, all four students did not have any experience and three out of four students answered that this was their first experience. Lastly, one student in Educational Psychology class answered that she had the opportunity to do a content based presentation whereas all four students in English Education class have done presentations in English regarding the course content.

#### **B. Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to obtain a wider perspective that can consider multiple factors of the students' experiences, a naturalistic and descriptive method was applied rather than an experimental one. As noted by Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative methods allow the researchers to achieve a holistic and contextualized understanding by obtaining details about phenomena such as their emotions, thought processes, and beliefs that are difficult to extract through quantitative methods.

The data were collected during the Spring semester of 2008 (March ~ June). The researcher observed the class and video-taped each class session for 15 weeks. The purpose of the observation was to build trust between the students and the researcher. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), active engagement and persistent observation are both necessary conditions that can allow the researcher to identify salient issues and topics. In addition, by means of such involvement, the researcher can learn the context which can minimize misunderstanding and distortion of data. In order to identify such salient issues, the researcher took field notes of important events during the classroom observation. The combination of

field notes and the analysis of the video tapes, then, was the basis for the interview questions. Thus, the researcher met with the students three times during the semester and the students were asked the questions the researcher extracted from the field notes.

Open-ended interviews were conducted following the Three-Interview series (Seidman, 1998) in which the researcher met with the students three times during the observation period and asked questions that were suitable at that particular phase. During the first phase, the students were asked about their general background information regarding their experiences in English-medium lectures and their expectations of the class. Since the first interview was conducted two weeks after the class started, questions regarding their impressions of the class were also included. The interview during the second phase consisted of questions that deal with the details of their experiences as they were in the middle of the semester. Finally, the third phase focused on their reflection of the class by attempting to make sense of their experience and their personal perspectives of their outcome.

The researchers met once a week within the three month period (July to September) and coded the interviews and categorized the themes. The data were analyzed according to the principles of grounded theory since the purpose of this study was to "capture the experiences" of the students and use "constant comparative data analysis" to generate and connect "categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories." (Creswell, 2005, p. 406). Strauss and Corbin (1990) define the grounded theory approach as "one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents" and that "it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon" (p. 23). In this regard, Straus and Corbin (1990) emphasize that the "data collection analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other" in that "one does not begin with a theory then prove it. Rather, one begins with an



area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge" (p. 23). Lye, Perera and Rahman (2006) provide an overview of the researching process through the grounded theory approach by explaining that the "resulting theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (p. 136). Glaser (1978) points out that the focus of grounded theory is to "discover" what is going on and that "conceptual specification is the focus of grounded theory, not conceptual definition." (Glaser, 1978, p. 64, original emphasis). In terms of data coding, this study used the open, axial, and selective coding method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the open coding period, the researcher transcribed the interview sessions, summarized each student's responses, and searched for prominent concepts, themes and events within the data. Specific concepts that have been sorted out were then put together under a newly formed category during the axial coding period. Finally, the categories were examined together to search for a core category that can act as a cohesive device by showing the relations between the different categories during the selective coding period. In order to establish trustworthiness, the researcher followed the four criteria set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) which are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility deals with the extent to which the reality reconstructed by the research findings reflects the original multiple realities. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility can be established by means of prolonged engagement with the participants, persistent observation, and triangulation of data. In particular, peer debriefing and member checking are two ways that are regarded as the most efficient ways to establish credibility. Peer debriefing is defined as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). There were two peer debriefers for this particular study who read through the interview transcripts and offered their insights. This study also conducted member checking sessions in order to verify the

interpretations of the study. In particular, the researcher met with the students individually after the categories have been set. The explanations of the results were provided and their responses were also included in the final stage of data analysis. In terms of transferability (i.e., external validity), the researcher provides detailed accounts of the students' experiences and as for the dependability (i.e., reliability) data from different sources are used. Lastly, confirmability (i.e., objectivity) is established by having the peer debriefers read and comment on the researcher's personal memos and field notes that were taken during the research period.

#### **IV. Results**

The results from the interviews which were conducted three times during the semester were categorized and coded under their appropriate phases. The three phases are titled as the following: 1st phase ("It's all about English"), 2nd phase ("Is it really about English?"), and 3rd phase ("It's not about English after all!"). The interview was conducted in Korean and their responses were translated by the researcher.

##### **A. The "It's All About My English Skills" Phase**

Initially, the students focused on their English skills when they were asked about their experiences in English-medium lectures and their expectations about the class. Their anxieties centered on their low English skills while they also considered the class as an opportunity for them to improve their English skills.

##### **1. Anxiety About English**

At this phase, the students had fears and expectations about English-medium lectures based on their previous experiences. The students and the professor were still trying to adapt to the particular learning environment. The level of pressure from assignments and tests was at a minimum. A majority of the

students expressed their concerns about taking an English-medium seminar most of which derived from their anxiety about their language proficiency. The students in the Educational Psychology class were primarily concerned about their low level of English and considered as their deciding factor in terms of their willingness to participate. Although their anxieties were similar in general, each student seemed to have their own reasons for having such concerns based on their social and learning context. For example, Minju was the youngest student in the Educational Psychology class and commented that she felt nervous and uncomfortable about revealing her English proficiency to her peers, with whom she had already established a close relationship in the Korean-speaking context:

I'm afraid people will find out about my proficiency in English, like fluency and pronunciation. It's a bit uncomfortable for me to speak English and refer to my seniors as "you". (Minju)

For Hyuna, English was viewed as an obstacle that blocks her comprehension of the class discussion and content showed her reliance on Korean for clarifying content:

I'm not sure whether I understand the content in English correctly. I can't really check since the content is not summarized in Korean. (Hyuna)

In terms of asking questions, Sunhee claimed that she did not feel comfortable using English to ask questions and referred to her low English proficiency and lack of confidence in English as the major reason for "not asking questions." Similarly, Mikyung expressed her frustration from the beginning of the course and argued that she would have "expressed herself fully" if she were to use Korean. In fact, she felt as though using English restrained her participation rate as well as the amount of input she can provide in the class discussions.

While students in the Educational Psychology class mostly based their anxieties and concerns about the English-medium seminar on their low level of language proficiency, the students

in the English Education class showed a different concern regarding language based anxieties. In particular, the students in the English Education class were not concerned about their English proficiency but about revealing their English abilities to their peers. Since their major required high proficiency of English, the students felt pressured about accuracy and fluency. Furthermore, since a majority of the classes in the department are conducted in Korean, the students felt uncomfortable about conducting the seminar discussions in English. For example, Jeemin answered that she feels as though she needs to feel comfortable with using English since her major is closely related to using English, but she felt that this constant need to become comfortable makes her feel uneasy and uncomfortable:

I feel like I'm wearing someone else's clothes when I speak in English. I can never get really comfortable. (Jeemin)

Similarly, Kyungsun felt pressured to speak English "perfectly" due to the expectations from her major:

I think I would have been less embarrassed if I were not in my own department. So, because I was trying to be "perfect", in terms of English, I think that is the reason why I am quiet during the class. (Kyungsun)

Lastly, when Joongyu, who has studied abroad for 5 years, was asked why he did not participate during class discussions, he commented that it was because he did not interact with his peers during his years abroad. Due to lack of experience, he was not sure as to what he should do to join in the discussion:

I just studied there; I didn't really interact with others. Most of the classes were lecture-based and if we had discussions, they were to clarify course content, not to give one's opinion. This kind of class is new to me, so I'm not so sure what I should say. (Joongyu)

In sum, students from both departments expressed their anxieties in using English in the class discussions. For the Educational Psychology majors, their low English abilities were

perceived as the reason for their low participation rate or lack of understanding the content. For the English Education majors, most of their anxieties were from their learning context. The pressure to be perfect in English seemed to have made them feel uncomfortable and nervous as though they were being tested on their English skills every time they spoke.

## **2. Expectations about Practicing and Using English**

Although the students in both classes viewed their language proficiency as their major source of concern, they also anticipated for improvements as a result of many practices during the seminar. In this regard, the students' expectations were mainly about "practicing and improving" their linguistic ability. Similar to their concerns in English, each student presented different expectations regarding the course in terms of improving English proficiency. Hyuna in the Educational Psychology class considered the English-medium seminar to be a valuable opportunity for her to "practice" her English as well as "gain content knowledge." Sunhee wanted to feel comfortable about using English in general and viewed this seminar to be the appropriate opportunity to "get used to" using English as well as "improve her listening skills" by listening to English-medium lecture and discussions. Unlike other students in the class who focused on speaking, there were some student who considered this seminar as an opportunity to learn how to read the articles written in English more critically. For example, Mikyung expected that she would be able to develop her "critical reading skills" by means of this seminar and Minju that she would be able to enhance her "vocabulary knowledge" in her content area by discussing the meaning of terms used in the academic articles.

Students in the English Education class regarded this seminar to be a "practicing ground" rather an opportunity to enhance their English abilities. Thus, they were not expecting to become more comfortable with using English or improving their English abilities but were more eager to use their stored knowledge of English. In this way, Daesik commented that he

usually studies English phrases, expressions, and vocabulary outside of class, but did not have any place to actually use what the student had learned. Thus, he wished to "practice the expressions" during the seminar. Likewise, Jeemin expressed that she would like to practice her "speaking and listening skills."

In sum, during the first phase of the interview, the students in both classes expressed their own unique concerns that are related to their English proficiency. Furthermore, the students also had expectations of improving their linguistic abilities through practice and discussions. There were, however, some variations related to the students' academic background in their reasons behind similar concerns and expectations. The students in the Educational Psychology class based their concerns mostly on using English as a tool, the students in the English Education class felt pressured about reaching perfection when speaking English. Furthermore, while the students in the Educational Psychology class expected their English abilities to improve as a result of taking this seminar, the students in the English Education class considered the seminar to be an opportunity for them to practice their English abilities and check their current proficiency and fluency.

#### **B. The "Is It Really About My English Skills?" Phase**

The second interview was conducted during the last week of April, which was 5 weeks after the first interview. At this phase, the students in the Educational Psychology class had just finished their midterm and the English Education students began to search for a final paper topic. As a result of the work load, the level of pressure and frustration was at a maximum. The difference between the first stage and the second stage is that the students began to realize their own limitations which they have not experienced during their previous experiences in English-medium lectures. In particular, when they were asked about the difficulties they were experiencing, a majority of the students in both classes showed concerns regarding their role in the class participation which were not directly related to English. This new concern was different from their previous interview

since they were mostly concerned about their English abilities in the beginning of the semester while they were frustrated about their lack of participation in the second interview. Accordingly, their concerns were shifting away from language and more towards a new factor that seemed to be hindering their participation in class. Students in the Educational Psychology class were frustrated about various aspects of the seminar related to conducting group discussions. The quantity of the discussion was high, but the students felt that the quality of the discussion was lacking. As such, most of the students were confused about the depth of their discussions and they did not know why their discussions tend to seem "shallow" and "repetitious." For example, Minju found herself repeating the same details during her group discussions. She claimed that the discussions often lack depth and seem monotonous:

I feel like the discussion is a bit repetitious. It seems like the group discussion circles around one single topic without much depth. (Minju)

Hyuna also felt that the discussions were "shallow" in that they seemed to be similar to "everyday conversations" rather than "academic discussions". She considered this to be the "effect of using English" for such discussions. Another cause of the students' difficulties was the work load. The students' perspectives regarding the workload differed in that some students were still considering "English as the major cause" for their stress about their work load while the other students pointed out that "preparing for discussions itself" is difficult. In this regard, Sunhee, who showed high dependency on Korean for content knowledge, argued that she was "overwhelmed" by the required work and claimed that everything would be easier if they were conducted in Korean:

There are simply too many things to do. I am overwhelmed by the amount of work. I wish the materials can be summarized in Korean. (Sunhee)

For Mikyung, it was not the pressure from English, but the pressure that she applies to herself in order to prepare for the class discussions:

I feel like I have to prepare so much before coming to class. There are so much work to do just to discuss in the groups and in class! (Mikyung)

While students in the Educational Psychology class felt difficulties in small group discussions as well as the overall workload, students in the English Education class had different types of frustrations. In particular, they were confused as to what they needed to do in order to participate in the whole class discussions that are often led by the professor. Since the class discussions require them to combine content knowledge to their knowledge not covered in the reading materials, the students felt uneasy about not being able to prepare for the discussion, and as a result, not being able to participate. As Daesik points out, a majority of the students claimed that the difficulty in participating is due to its "relevance to the reading material." The combination of the pressure to participate in the whole class discussions as well as to produce fluent and accurate English was described as the major cause of their difficulties. As a result, the students explained that they ask questions or make comments "on the spot" that are not "well-developed" or "high in quality." In this regard, Jeemin explains that she has a hard time capturing the discussion topic, thus, she asks questions for the sake of participating rather than clarifying meaning:

I can't participate in the discussion because I can't really prepare for it. The topic of the discussion is usually led by the professor and not really about what we read at home. So I ask the questions that are relevant at a given moment and then just listen after I got my turn in participating. (Jeemin)

Kyungsun was also confused about the flow of the discussion but for a different reason: the pressure to participate. She admitted that she spent most of the time trying to formulate



the proper questions in her mind. When she "tuned out" from the discussion to do this, she was not able to pay attention to what others were discussing. In this way, she not only lost the flow of the discussion, but also lost her chance to speak :

I find myself tuning out when others are speaking. I do this so that I can prepare for what I have to say. But usually, since it takes me awhile to prepare everything, I end up losing my turn to speak. Plus, I just can't seem to offer anything significant in the class discussion. (Kyungsun)

As explained by the students, the cause of their frustrations and perceived difficulties differed from student to student. Among such diversity, however, there were some common factors shared by the students in both classes. For example, all of the students expressed that they found class participation to be most difficult. In addition, lack of depth was also a shared concern. For the Educational Psychology class, some students felt that the discussions did not have any depth whereas some students in the English Education class showed that outward participation (i.e., asking questions) lacked depth since it was done simply to participate rather than attempting to clarify meaning.

### **C. The "It Was Not About My English Skills After All!" Phase**

The third interview was conducted in the 3rd week of June. Since they had already turned in their final papers, they no longer had pressure or stress from assignments and grades. Therefore, the students were able to reflect on their experiences more objectively.

When asked to reflect on her own difficulties during the seminar and offer her reasoning behind them, Minju explained that it was due to her "lack of knowledge of the materials". In particular, she pointed out that the reason why she felt herself repeating the same details during the discussion is because she did not have any more content to add. Thus, she realized that the source of the "repetition" is not her English proficiency but

her content knowledge:

I didn't get to participate that much because I didn't have time to read the articles thoroughly. I was basing my discussions on my limited knowledge of the materials. (Minju)

The cause of "shallow discussions" perceived by Hyuna was found to be her lack of clear understanding of the materials. In fact, she realized that she has had limited understanding of content knowledge in her Korean medium lectures and she was able to "play it off" due to her proficiency in Korean. As a result, it was difficult for her to continue in this way since, according to Hyuna, the mental process of translating requires "clear understanding of the materials":

If I had used Korean, I think I could have used it as a shield and played it off and sounded as though I understood everything even if I didn't. But since I used English, I had to be "perfect" in terms of understanding the content so that I can transfer my knowledge from Korean to English. Since I didn't have a clear understanding of the materials, this was difficult (Hyuna)

Sunhee, who seemed to be stressed throughout the seminar, explained that she had to put extra amount of effort just to comprehend and discuss in English. She also mentioned that she learned how to "read the articles critically". As a result, she was able to figure out what is and is not a valid research article through her discussions in class.

I think I was really stressed out because I had to concentrate so much when the class was conducted in English. I don't think I learned how to speak English better, but I did learn how to read the articles critically. I now know that there can be "bad" articles written in English! (Sunhee)

Mikyung, who was taking another English-medium lecture, which was mostly teacher centered, made a comparison between the two types of seminars she has experienced during the semester:

I now realize the difference between regular "Lecture-Presentation" type graduate seminars in English and the discussion type. In the LP type, all I have to do is to prepare for my presentation, which is usually once per semester. When others present their materials, I don't have to read that carefully since we don't have to ask questions. So in that sense, I don't have the opportunity to make the material "my own". But in the discussion class, like this one, you have to constantly discuss YOUR version of the meaning with others, so there is some pressure for you to understand the materials completely. So, in this class, active participation, in and out of the classroom, is really important. I also found out that even though the articles are written in English, the content can be "not so great". (Mikyung)

In this way, she identified the importance of "discussions" and making one's "own" meaning in the process of generating and comprehending meaning. Students in the English Education class, who were confused about how to participate in class discussions, commented that their lack of preparation could be at fault. In this regard, Daesik explained that he did not have the time to finish all the reading assignments and as result, had nothing to contribute to the class discussion. Thus, his confusion about the materials made the discussions seem "erratic":

I didn't finish all the reading assignments, so I simply had nothing to say. The discussion topics are erratic and I didn't know how to prepare for them. (Daesik)

Similarly, Kyungsun emphasized the importance of reading extra materials to prepare for the class discussion. In fact, Kyungsun explained that it was difficult for her to participate since she did not have the "sophisticated knowledge" to "keep up " with the professor's lead in the discussion. In this regard, what seemed "erratic" for Daesik was actually the result of not having enough knowledge beyond the text for Kyungsun:

I realized that I have to read a lot of additional materials such as other articles and newspaper to keep up with the discussion. I don't

think the class reading assignments were enough to understand the material and conduct a sophisticated discussion or follow along with the professor's lead. (Kyungsun)

The students also pointed out their lack of experience in asking questions. Since they did not know how to ask questions appropriately without turning it into criticism, they refrained from asking questions during class discussions. Jeemin explained her reasoning for not asking questions in class:

I didn't ask questions because I don't know when my question can be an attack towards their English proficiency and reading comprehension. If I ask about the reading materials, I feel like I am criticizing their English abilities since it somehow sounds like I am telling them that their English proficiency is too low to understand the materials. (Jeemin)

Kyungsun also admitted that she usually has a habit of not asking questions and related this type of tendency to her educational background in Korea:

I also don't know how to ask questions properly. I think it's my personality. I just keep quiet even though I have questions to ask. I sometimes write them down in my notes, but I never get to ask them later on. I think my educational experiences in Korea have made me feel comfortable about being passive in class. (Kyungsun)

The only student who did not provide any reasoning for his low participation rate was Joongyu. He did point out that he "could have participated" more, but he also claimed that the discussion was "repetitious and monotonous" which is reminiscent of Minju's comments during the second phase prior to her reflection of her experiences:

I wish I could have participated a bit more. But I felt as though the discussion was repetitious and monotonous. (Joongyu)

The students in the last phase all seemed to have had their own versions of an "awakening" regarding their role in class

discussions and the factors that affected their participation. As they moved from one phase to another, they began to realize that their English skills, which they had initially been concerned about, did not play an important role in their participation. At the end of the semester, the students found out that their learning styles and lack of preparation, knowledge, and discussion skills were the main contributing factors that affected their participation in the class discussions.

## V. Discussion and Conclusion

Although there has been a soaring demand on offering English-medium courses at the college level, little research has been focused on the understanding of students' experiences in such courses. As the findings of this study show, critical aspects that affect their actual performances in the courses which were conducted in English were not absolutely determined by their proficiency of English. Rather, similar to Seungwon in Chen (2003) their previous experiences that defined "participation" seemed to have influenced their on-going decision making of whether or how they are going to engage in the classroom discussion. As Mehan (1985) and Cazden (1988) suggested, the typical type of classroom interactions Korean students in this study had had from their past schooling experiences seems to be the three-part sequence of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE). Even in seminar courses at the graduate level, the discourse pattern students are mostly exposed to is students' presentation-professors' comments-question & answer session. Such experiences seem to shape their conception of what their classroom discussion should be.

Similar to other studies, the results of this study also showed that Asian students seem to have difficulties in appreciating any learning from classroom discussions (Johnson, 1997; Liberman, 1994; Zongren, 1984). These studies suggest that Asian students tend to prefer lectures to discussions because it is hard for them to find the interactions in the class to be

significant contributions to their learning. Researchers argued that such phenomenon can be explained by cultural differences. Richards (1985) suggests that this is due to cultural differences since, in Asian societies such as Japan and Thai, the favorable forms of communication is a more regulated were students often are restricted from expressing their ideas freely.

In addition to previous experiences and cultural influences, the amount of effort the students' put into comprehending the course material seemed to have had a considerable impact on their class discussions. As Minju and Mikyung pointed out, the quality of the discussion heavily depended on how much the students actually knew about the content. In other words, the students found out that successful discussion is a product of students' attention, participation, and interaction, one that promotes transactions with others' ideas and opinion, leading to shared knowledge among participants in the classroom discussion (Coward, 1983). Most of the students in the present study had admitted that they usually did not do extra readings and often did not read the required text. Their interview responses show that the students could not participate because they had nothing valuable to say rather than their English proficiency or lack of discussion skills. In this regard, it was not the language but their lack of effort that limited their contribution to the class discussion.

In sum, by highlighting students' experiences in the English-medium classrooms, this study showed that English, on its own, cannot solely determine the difficulties students go through in graduate seminar courses which demand active participation in classroom discussions. As such, this study also showed that classroom discussions are performed not just through the use of language but also by students' collaborations with other students and their teacher along with their understanding of the significance of the classroom discussion. As emphasized in Hong (2003), successful performances in classroom discussions require background knowledge related to a discussion topic, knowledge about the generic structure of discussion including opinion, explanation, example, counter opinion, and

other strategies that allow effective involvement in discussion. In conclusion, both teachers and students should search beyond "the language problem" when determining the effectiveness of English-medium seminars.

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