



INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

Navigating UK-Korea Business Communication: Challenges
and Strategies in Intercultural Contexts

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1. Introduction

Globalization makes cross-border business easier and more efficient for world trade and we can expand business relations to all corners of the world (Purba, 2021). During this process, international business communication is defined by Kurbakova et al. (2020) as an art that can be used to overcome cross-cultural shock and achieve mutual understanding with foreign business partners. According to the cultural theories and cases we studied this semester, we have a basic understanding of cross-cultural communication skills. Thus, target international business communication situations with specific countries should be explored to a greater extent.

South Korea, which is known for its dynamic economy and technological innovation, is a meaningful focus for exploring intercultural communication (Son, 2024) because it has strategic significance for British enterprises. According to GOV.UK (2019), the bilateral trade between the UK and Korea has increased by an average of 12% per year since the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2011. In 2022, the UK ranked top among South Korea's trading partners, with significant exchanges in automotive, technology, and services (OEC, 2024). However, differences between British and Korean cultural norms such as business etiquette, attitude to hierarchy and working style, pose challenges to successful business interactions.

This essay aims to identify potential challenges in UK-Korean business communication and provide solutions to address them. Using Gibbs' Reflective

Cycle, a structured model for analysing experiences, this essay will examine key IBC situations across six stages: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan (Chandrakumar and Rathnayak, 2023). With the help of these insights, the UK companies will be more equipped to handle the cultural differences when cooperating with Korean partners.

2. IBC Situations and Strategies

South Korea's business culture is characterized by a strong emphasis on hierarchy, collectivism, and relationship-building, heavily influenced by Confucian values (Pearce et al., 2022). The workplace in the UK, on the other hand, frequently values individual contributions and has flatter organizational structures. Thus, problems like miscommunication, relationship-building failures, and inconsistent decision-making processes might arise from these variances. To further evaluate and address these issues, situations will be analysed through the six steps based on Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Bassot, 2024).

2.1 Business Etiquette

2.1.1 Use of Formality and Titles

Koreans attach great importance to formal titles and honorifics, both in written and verbal communication (Clapton, 2024), while the UK tends to adopt a more informal way of titles, even between senior and junior staff. As a result, although the British may see their informality as a sign of openness, Korean people see it as disrespectful and find it embarrassing or confusing. The mismatch in expectations often leads to miscommunication that could undermine trust and cooperation. This challenge originates from different cultural norms between Korea's hierarchical traditions and the UK's equality focus. Therefore, the awareness of Korean formalities and the adoption of titles for respectful communication can reduce tension (Kim and Plester, 2021).

In order to build rapport and effectively deal with cultural differences, it is

essential to research and practice Korean business etiquette before meetings. For example, understanding the importance of hierarchy in seating arrangements and addressing the highest-ranking person first demonstrates respect for Korean norms (Han et al., 2023). Additionally, in business communications, it is better to use formal titles and honorifics, such as calling someone "Director Kim" rather than just "Kim." Moreover, observing and imitating communication styles, such as adopting a polite tone in discussions and avoiding direct confrontation, can help build mutual understanding and strengthen professional relationships (Garg, 2023).

At the core of Korean business etiquette is the concept of "Kibun" (Feeling), which emphasizes maintaining dignity and harmony in personal and business relationships. In order to comply with "Kibun", Koreans often avoid direct confrontation and negative responses, and even agree to consider suggestions they not agree to (GourmetPro, 2024). Therefore, it is important for UK companies to be aware of the subtleties of these communications to avoid potential misunderstandings and frustration on both sides. For example, using phrases like "Maybe we could consider" rather than "I think this is wrong" is more in line with the Korean preference for indirect communication.

2.1.2 Gift-giving

Gift-giving is a subtle practice in business, particularly in cultures like Korea, because it symbolizes respect and gratitude (CIBT, 2024). However, in the UK, gift-giving is rare in professional settings and may even be considered

inappropriate, so British people may feel uncertain or uncomfortable about the practice. The cultural difference arises from Korea's collectivist values, where gifts symbolize connection, compared to the UK's individualistic and professional boundaries (Lim et al., 2021).

Thus, in business communications, British companies may choose giving gift to adapt to Korean culture and build relationships. Although it can strengthen bond and build trust, it also faces the risks of being misinterpreted as bribery if mishandled (Emerson, 2024). Hence, critical analysis is needed to reveal the fine line between an appropriate gift that enhances relationships and an extravagant gesture that raises ethical concerns.

On the one hand, appropriate gift-giving reflects cultural sensitivity and thoughtfulness. For example, during the 25th anniversary of Starbucks' cooperation with Korea, the newly opened ninth Community Store in features replicas of two historic calligraphy pieces donated by Starbucks to the National Trust for Cultural Heritage (Starbucks, 2024). Additionally, to demonstrate Starbucks' sincerity in action, a portion of profits from "Special National Heritage Preservation Products" will also be donated to support the preservation of Korean national heritage. This thoughtful gesture reinforced cultural connections and appreciation without creating an imbalance or expectation of reciprocity (Keyes, 2023). The gifts were modest but meaningful, aligning with the purpose of fostering goodwill.

However, giving presents that are excessive or improper could be viewed

as unethical. Expensive goods may be interpreted as attempts to influence decision-making or gain an unfair advantage (Emerson, 2024). To prevent possible conflicts of interest, these circumstances are frequently governed in political and corporate contexts. For instance, South Korea's "Kim Young-ran Law" imposes strict limits on the value of gifts that public officials can accept, emphasizing transparency and fairness in professional interactions (Chan et al., 2024), which aligns with the UK's Bribery Act 2010 (Stocker, 2024).

To strike the ideal balance, businesses should follow culturally appropriate and moderate gift-giving practices. Making mindful choices, including buying culturally relevant products or symbolic souvenirs, will ensure respect for traditions without being seen as offensive (Landenberg, 2019). Furthermore, organizations should establish clear internal guidelines to distinguish between acceptable goodwill and unethical behaviour, maintaining both cultural sensitivity and professional integrity (Slomski et al., 2022).

2.2 Hierarchy and Social Relations

In South Korean business culture, social relations and hierarchy play a central role, heavily influenced by Confucian values (Kim and Hamilton, 2022). Relationships are structured around age, status, and seniority, with significant emphasis placed on respect for authority (Lee et al., 2022).

2.2.1 Chaebol Influence

Chaebols, which refers to a group of massive, mostly family-run business conglomerates, dominate South Korea's economy and wield extraordinary

influence over its external cooperation (Albert, 2018). Chaebols control large market shares in key industries, often creating monopolies or oligopolies (Kim and Kim, 2021). This dominance can marginalize smaller firms and foreign companies, leaving limited opportunities for British companies to establish an independent foothold (Gjoni, 2022). For example, chaebols often own supply chains and distribution networks, making it challenging for external firms to bypass their influence (Shin, 2020). UK companies may find it challenging to promote open communication or drive innovation when dealing with this hierarchical culture, and struggle to compete with chaebols' economies of scale and entrenched networks (West and Richter, 2024).

For instance, Tesco entered South Korea in 1999 by forming a joint venture with a well-established local retailer – Samsung, which is one of the most famous chaebol groups in Korea. Through its well-established 'Home Plus' banner, it localized its stores to suit the preferences of Korean consumers, making South Korea Tesco's largest market outside the UK (Perepu and Kumari, 2016). However, Tesco struggled with competitive pressures from dominant retail chains and broader economic shifts influenced by chaebol-led policies, eventually leading to its exit from the market (Fitzgerald and Kang, 2022). This highlights the difficulty of sustaining long-term success in a chaebol-dominated ecosystem.

To address the challenges posed by Korean chaebol systems, UK companies can consider two distinct strategies. On one hand, they could focus

on identifying opportunities in sectors or market segments that are less dominated by chaebols. For instance, targeting startups or SMEs within Korea's tech ecosystem could enable UK firms to establish independent partnerships (Koivisto, 2023). Alternatively, UK businesses might choose to collaborate directly with chaebols, gaining access to their well-established networks and resources. This approach requires building trust and maintaining consistent engagement with chaebol executives. Establishing strong relationships and demonstrating a commitment to shared objectives can help create more balanced power dynamics and productive partnerships (Amey and Eddy, 2023).

2.2.2 Senior-Junior Relationship

In Korean companies, the relationship between seniors and juniors forms the mainstream of workplace interactions (Fedorenko, 2024). Superiors are expected to provide guidance, mentorship, and professional development to their subordinates. In the workplace, this leads to strict adherence to the authority of age and position, where juniors are subordinate to seniors and decisions are typically made top-down (Opuala-Chalres and Eugenia, 2023). However, British companies, with their emphasis on flat organisational structures and open dialogue, may find South Korea's hierarchy rigid and difficult to navigate.

This Korean-style communication will run through the whole process of international cooperation. The most typical example is a Korean ritual called "Hoesik" referring to an entrenched afterwork eat and drink culture, which is a

cornerstone of team bonding in Korean business culture (Horak and Suseno, 2023). These events are seen as an extension of the work, where informal interactions help strengthen Senior-Junior relationships or cooperation on a personal level. Attendance is generally expected, especially for junior employees and partners seeking investment or cooperation. “Hoesik” serves as gateways for juniors to social and professional advancement and also provides a vital safety net for small business to build cooperation with large enterprises through connecting with key seniors (Fedorenko, 2024). However, “Hoesik” can be challenging for Western professionals who may feel uncomfortable with the blurring of personal and professional boundaries. Obligatory participation can conflict with Western norms of work-life balance (Le et al., 2020), and practices such as drinking games or hierarchical drinking rituals like pouring drinks for seniors, might cause embarrassment or stress.

To successfully navigate Korea’s hierarchical business culture, UK companies should focus on respect for seniority and gradually fostering open communication within the established framework (Dogan and Higgins, 2023). UK professionals must understand the significance of senior-junior relationships in the workplace, even though they conflict with Western values. From another perspective, “Hoesik” can be seen as opportunities for informal networking, where moderate participation can enhance relationships and cooperation progression. As companies increasingly seek to balance hierarchies with open business practices, UK professionals should be proactive

in navigating these cultural dynamics to unlock new opportunities for collaboration and growth (SOA, 2024).

2.3 Balancing Harmony and Competition

In Korean business culture, harmony and competition seem to be opposites, but in fact, they are a dynamic balance jointly shaped by high collectivism and fierce market competition (Im, 2019).

2.3.1 Harmony

Korean business culture places a high value on harmony, particularly in avoiding open conflict and making collective decisions (Ylikortes, 2020).

Firstly, Korean culture tends to deal with disagreements and conflicts through indirect means like ambiguous language or private communication to maintain group harmony (Kaartti, 2023). However, direct communication in British culture may be seen as a more efficient way to move the discussion forward. This contrast is consistent with Hall's point of the difficulties faced by low-context cultures moving into high-context environments (Hall, 1976). To cope with this cultural difference, UK companies can adopt flexible communication strategies, such as discussing sensitive topics via email or private meetings, to avoid raising tensions in public.

Secondly, the Korean collective decision-making model emphasizes consultation and consensus (Fiveable, 2024). Often, the decision-making process can be complex, as the opinions of all parties involved need to be considered. Hofstede's research suggests that Korea is a “collectivist” culture,

with a strong focus on team benefits and relationship maintenance in contrast with the UK's "individualist" culture, so this may seem inefficient for UK companies that emphasize voting decision-making and result orientation (Wale, 2023). An effective strategy to handle this is to provide some time for the Korean team to discuss while providing multiple sources of data and support material so that the Korean partner can make a quicker consensus-based decision.

Vodafone's cooperation with Samsung is a good example by providing various resources in "Business Connected" project, finally prompting Samsung to reach an internal cooperation intention and offer a suite of hardware and software products helping UK small businesses to improve performance (Vodafone, 2022). In addition, UK firms can move forward the discussion in stages, with each step ensuring a clear consensus on both sides and reducing misunderstandings due to communication differences.

2.3.2 Competition

Despite the focus on harmony, Korea's business is also known for its competition culture, and the "Palli-Palli" (fast-fast) culture is a typical expression of its competitive spirit (Park, 2022). This culture stems from the need for rapid economic growth in post-war Korea and permeates every aspect of business with a strong focus on speed and efficiency (Park, 2019). Companies generally require their employees to accomplish tasks quickly while seizing market leads through agile execution. However, the high pace of the Palli-Palli culture contrasts with the strategic planning UK businesses (Taylor, 2024). This

difference presents two major challenges. Firstly, the Korean expectation of quick reaction and immediate action may lead to UK businesses being seen as stuffy due to the rigid formal processes. Secondly, the Korean tendency to frequently adjust strategies in a high-intensity competitive environment may make UK firms uncomfortable which are used to a stable model of collaboration.

To address these issues, UK firms need to adopt flexible strategies to adapt to Korea's high-paced culture. On the one hand, it can shorten the processing cycle and improve efficiency by adopting agile project management methods such as Scrum or Kanban (Rehkopf, 2024). On the other hand, clarifying the timeline and outcome expectations of both parties at the early stage of negotiation ensures that both parties have a clear understanding of priorities. At the same time, UK companies can also establish rapid feedback and communication mechanisms, such as regular video conferencing or real-time updates on project progress, to meet the expectations of Korean partners (PsicoSmart, 2024).

To conclude, harmony and competition may be conflicting, but in Korean culture, the different aspects of the two features make them a dynamic balance. To handle this in cooperation with Korea, it is crucial to adopt cultural-oriented business practices to focus on respecting both their collectivist and fast-paced work culture (Choudhury, 2024).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding the cultural dynamics between the UK and South Korea is critical to facilitate effective business communication and partnerships. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle provides a structured approach for analysing and addressing these challenges. Businesses can bridge the communication gap by reflecting on these key situations, evaluating cultural differences, and proposing practical actions. Different business etiquette, such as formality in titles and the practice of gift-giving, as well as different attitudes toward hierarchies, present both challenges and opportunities for UK companies. By embracing Korea's hierarchical structures and emphasizing respect through formal communication and relationship-building, British businesses can better understand and overcome these complexities listed above. Additionally, understanding the subtle nuances between harmony and competition in Korean culture will help UK professionals adapt their strategies to meet Korean expectations, where flexible strategies and cultural sensitivity are keys to strike a balance between these two seemingly conflicting spirits. By continuous reflection and strategic practice, British companies can create strong, sustainable partnerships with their Korean counterparts, overcoming cultural barriers and achieving long-term success in this dynamic market.

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