

THE ROLE OF RHETORICAL ETHOS IN DEVELOPING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING ACROSS CULTURES: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF ONE FULBRIGHTER TO SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

A primary goal of the Fulbright Program is to nurture mutual understanding across cultures. This article aims to show how rhetorical ethos can contribute to this goal. Following an autoethnographic study of one Fulbrighter's experience in South Korea, the concept of rhetorical ethos is explored. Next discussed is the impact certain conceptions of rhetorical ethos can have on mutual understanding. Finally, areas for further research are offered.

Keywords: mutual understanding • rhetoric • ethos • South Korea • autoethnography



I'll never forget the day I learned I was selected for a Fulbright grant. I found the official award letter in my campus mailbox. It was the start of spring break, so the college was nearly deserted. However, by the time the break was over, I had turned into a minor celebrity. I couldn't walk down the sidewalks on campus without someone stopping to say congratulations. I didn't even know some of these people, but they knew about the Fulbright program.

The Fulbright program is recognized worldwide for providing scholars with opportunities to conduct research and teach internationally. Through competitive awards, US citizens pursue academic interests overseas, and citizens from other countries do the same in the United States. Scholars from all fields and 160 countries receive grants, and these scholars build and share academic expertise through their support. While these academic pursuits are what make the Fulbright program so well known, perhaps less well known is the Fulbright program's emphasis on promoting mutual understanding across cultures; the intended outcome of the Fulbright program is not only to advance academic knowledge but also to improve intercultural understanding. This additional emphasis on intercultural relations makes the Fulbright program unique.

In addition to its lesser-known emphasis on mutual understanding, another lesser-known fact about the Fulbright program is that it provides grants not only to well-established scholars but also to recent college graduates. One example of such a program is the Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship

(ETA), which embeds fluent English speakers into English-as-a-foreign-language classrooms around the world. One aim of this program is that the English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) will teach English to non-native-English-speaking students, but another aim is that the ETAs will serve as representatives of United States culture in all its diversity and also learn about the culture of their host countries.

In this article, I share a synopsis of my experience with mutual understanding as a Fulbright ETA in South Korea. In order to explain what made my experience of mutual understanding possible, I explore the concept of rhetorical ethos and discuss how certain conceptions of rhetorical ethos can contribute to mutual understanding. Finally, I conclude by suggesting areas for further research into questions of mutual understanding across cultures.

MY FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

It was as a Fulbright ETA in 1993 that I traveled to South Korea where I was assigned to an all-boys middle school, which consisted of students in the equivalent of seventh, eighth, and ninth grades in the US. At the time, English instruction in South Korean public schools began in the first year of middle school, so the youngest students I taught were encountering formal instruction in written and spoken English for the first time. We ETAs in South Korea focused our English instruction on listening and speaking skills. None of us were the primary English teacher for any particular classroom of students. In fact, the principal of the school where I was assigned arranged my teaching schedule so I would have contact with as many students in the school as possible. On a rotating basis, I interacted with all students in the school at least once during the academic year. Some teachers asked me to read portions of the textbook aloud so the students could repeat after me, while other teachers I worked with allowed me to create my own lessons. Despite the wide variety of classroom interactions I had with the students, all had the opportunity to speak with and listen to a native speaker of English, almost all for the first time in their lives.

Not only did I work with students on strengthening their English skills, but I also helped the teachers I worked with strengthen their language skills as well. The English teachers at my school formed a group in which any teacher at the school could practice conversational English by discussing a wide variety of topics. I participated in this group weekly and helped the teachers gain confidence in their speaking and listening abilities. Beyond this, I also brought the chance to practice English speaking and listening to the host families with whom I lived during my grant term. Through the day-to-day conversation necessary to function as a family unit, discussing such things as schedules, daily plans, and meal options, the families had the opportunity to practice both speaking and listening in English. In addition, two other instances allowed me to engage in bringing English to broader audiences. In

one instance, I was invited to appear on an English language radio program, and in another instance, I was invited to assist at an English-as-a-second-language workshop for college students from around South Korea. Through all of these interactions, I helped broaden the language skills of many.

Beyond the duties of teaching English, however, my ETA experience also involved teaching about cultural differences, as emphasized by the Fulbright program's goal of fostering mutual understanding. As a result, I tried to share important aspects of US culture with the South Koreans I came in contact with. For example, in the lessons I planned for my students, I regularly included cultural elements. In one class, my lesson plan might have included a discussion of daily chores carried out by family members in the US; in another class, the lesson might have involved listening to US pop songs; and in another, the lesson might have involved the brainstorming of slang terms used in the US. Through these means, I introduced the students to some cultural practices common in the United States. I strove to provide a small glimpse into what my life in the US was like so the students could imagine a world other than what they encountered in their daily lives and perhaps different from what they learned about US culture on television or in movies.

When it came to my host families, certainly I introduced them as well to the day-to-day cultural differences and similarities between us. For example, they learned that the rich foods most South Koreans eat for breakfast, including fish, rice, kimchi, and vegetables, could sometimes upset the stomach of someone who was accustomed to eating lighter fare in the morning, such as the cereal or toast I was used to. They also learned that, as a person in my twenties from the US, I expected to be able to come and go from the house at will, without needing to ask permission or explain my whereabouts. At the same time, they learned that I hoped to be included in family outings, I hoped to avoid creating extra work for them, and I hoped to form lasting relationships with them, all of which highlight some distinguishing features of family relationships in the US.

What were the impacts of these attempts to share my culture with the Korean people I met? I'm sorry to say I can't speak to any long-term impacts, as it has proved challenging to stay in touch with the people I lived and worked with in South Korea. However, I did see evidence of the immediate impact my presence had on at least some of the people I encountered. For example, one of the students I taught had developmental delays and was nonverbal. He also happened to be a neighbor of my first host family, so we sometimes carpooled to school together along with one of my host brothers. One day, as we emerged from the backseat of the car, he grasped my hand, which caused quite a stir among his fellow students as we walked across the playground to the school entry. Some students stood gaping and pointing while others started shouting and running to catch up to us for a closer look. I took this as a sign that they were surprised at my acceptance of him. Perhaps other teachers at the school didn't treat him this way, or perhaps they did

but the students didn't expect this behavior from me because I was from another culture. In any case, I know I showed those students that my cultural background allowed me to see someone with developmental delays as being worthy of respect and that the students were impacted by this display.

In addition to exposing Koreans to US culture first-hand, I was introduced to Korean culture for the first time. I attended several cultural events, including the celebration of Buddha's birthday and the Andong Mask Dance Festival. I also visited several cultural sites, including the border area of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone; Haeinsa temple, home of the Tripitaka Koreana, a set of Buddhist scriptures carved into wooden printing blocks; and the city of Gyeongju, site of the ancient capital of the Silla dynasty and many royal tombs. I ate Korean foods for the first time, some of which I came to love; I witnessed the six-day workweek; and I saw Korean mothers carrying babies strapped to their backs with quilted blankets. I learned to play a Korean stringed instrument called the *gyageum* in weekly lessons, and I traveled extensively throughout the country, learning about the different regional dialects, customs, and food specialties in the various South Korean provinces. I witnessed many cultural practices that were new to me, and as a result, I came away from my year in South Korea with a richer conception of the country, fulfilling one of the primary aims of the Fulbright program.

What made this learning about culture possible? Why was I able to gain a richer understanding of the Korean way of life? And, assuming at least some of the Koreans with whom I interacted learned from me as well, what made this phenomenon possible? The answer is rhetorical ethos.

DEFINITION OF RHETORICAL ETHOS

The definition of rhetorical ethos is a debated matter among scholars. My research has shown that when rhetorical ethos is taught in undergraduate courses, the concept is often reduced to mean the communicator's credibility, assertiveness, or authority. This is because in those undergraduate courses, the aim of the assignments is largely limited to making arguments. Since the most effective rhetorical ethos to use when trying to win an argument is one that is credible, assertive, and authoritative, the definition of ethos becomes narrowed to suit that purpose.

However, other definitions of rhetorical ethos go beyond credibility, assertiveness, or authority. Over centuries, theorists have advanced the following definitions of ethos: character as revealed or constructed through language, custom, or habit; persona; sympathy for or identification with the audience; sincerity; self-expression; self-image; voice; willingness to be open; and collaboration with the audience. There are other definitions beyond these as well; the multitude of definitions is a result of the changing understandings of culture, individual identity, rhetoric, and rhetorical ethos over time.

These multiple definitions of ethos reveal that it is a flexible concept that can be used in different ways in different situations depending on the communicator's perspectives and purposes. Speakers or writers are not limited to appearing credible, assertive, or authoritative but can take other stances instead. In fact, sometimes portraying another type of ethos might be more beneficial than the type of ethos typically taught in undergraduate courses.

HOW RHETORICAL ETHOS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

When communicating to reach mutual understanding, relying on an assertive, credible, authoritative rhetorical ethos is not necessarily the best choice. Instead, my research has shown that a rhetorical ethos marked by sympathy for or identification with the audience, a willingness to be open, and collaboration might be more helpful. Such an ethos can be identified through the speaker's or writer's asking of questions, for example, or their pursuing an inquiry rather than proving a point, or their investigating problems rather than dictating answers.

While one can portray such an ethos without reflecting actual intentions, such a front is difficult to sustain. Hypothetically, in my cohort of ETAs to South Korea, there might have been some who were not open minded to learning about Korean culture. Instead, they might have wanted to convince Koreans they met that the way of life in the United States is the best way to exist. They might have portrayed an open ethos at first in order to appear interested in Korean culture, gain good will, or be polite, but eventually, this open ethos would have been betrayed by their ethos of assertion that the US is the best. To my knowledge, none of my cohort behaved this way. Instead, we all remained open, were willing to collaborate with the Korean people we met in striving to understand each other, and even found ways to identify across cultural differences.

When a communicator portrays such an open ethos, it isn't always reciprocated. I remember one particularly memorable moment when some fellow ETAs and I were standing on a sidewalk in front of a department store in the city of Busan when a Korean man approached. He started speaking to us in Korean, so one of my friends tried to engage in conversation. Suddenly the man shoved her angrily. Although she portrayed an open ethos, it was not reciprocated.

As this example shows, sometimes our attempts to connect across cultures fail. However, often times, if one communicator shows an open ethos, the other will respond in kind. This is because there is nothing threatening about an open ethos, nothing to lead the other communicator to be wary, nothing

to cause defensiveness. Instead, an open ethos offers an invitation to join on a journey of mutual discovery. Through conversation, both parties can find reasons to sympathize with each other, can find ways to identify with each other, and can collaborate with each other in creating a new, shared reality.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My interest in rhetorical ethos as a means for achieving mutual understanding across cultures stems in large part from my time in South Korea, although other interactions I've had with people from cultural backgrounds different from my own have also played a role. When I decided to pursue

a doctoral degree, I chose to make the question of how to communicate to achieve mutual understanding the central focus of my studies. I wanted to understand if there was an effective way to reduce conflict in the world through changes to our ways of teaching communicative practices.

The exploration of this question became the foundation of my dissertation. In it, I proposed a pedagogy designed to introduce students to an open, inquiring ethos that would allow them to communicate through writing in ways that could foster mutual understanding across cultural difference. I designed and implemented an assignment that asked students to explore inquiries and pose questions rather than argue and assert.

My research in this area did not stop after I completed my doctoral studies. I went on to write other publications in which I further developed the ideas I had previously explored in my dissertation. Additionally, I have presented at conferences in the United States and around the world on the same subject. My Fulbright year in South Korea certainly impacted my research agenda for many years following.

Although other authors have explored similar ideas to my own, there is room for more research into ethos and its role in fostering mutual understanding across cultural differences. How can we help people develop the type of ethos that will enable communication aimed at achieving mutual understanding? What do we need to do to help people listen to such an ethos with an open mind? Does the same type of ethos work across all cultures, or are different types of ethos more suited to particular times and places? The list of questions still to be investigated leaves plenty of room for more exploration and discovery. Perhaps scholars and students interested in this area of inquiry will pursue Fulbright grants that will enable them to explore the topic in more depth.

As a Fulbright alum, I have pursued opportunities to enable others to benefit from Fulbright grants and potentially pursue research agendas that would seek to investigate questions about mutual understanding across cultures. I have served as an adviser to students applying to nationally

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competitive scholarships such as the Fulbright to enable them to put forward their strongest possible applications to study and live abroad; I have served as a campus selection committee member not only to determine which students should move forward in the national selection process but also to help those students prepare for the possibility that a Fulbright grant could lead to a lifetime of investigating mutual understanding across cultures; and I have served as an English language and literature disciplinary review committee member to select Fulbright scholars who clearly understand the importance of facilitating mutual understanding in addition to their academic endeavors. In all of these roles, it has been my hope to advance the aims of the Fulbright program and perhaps make positive change in the world by enabling mutual understanding across cultures. I encourage all Fulbright alumni to find their own ways to do the same.

NOTES

1. For official language about the role of mutual understanding in the Fulbright program, see “Fulbright Program Overview,” Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, United States Department of State, accessed May 27, 2022, <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/history>.
2. For details about how ethos is commonly taught in undergraduate courses, see Karen P. Peirce, “Alternatives to Argumentation: Implications for Intercultural Rhetoric” (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2006), <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/194304>.
3. For an overview of various definitions of rhetorical ethos, see James S. Baumlin, “Ēthos,” in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 263–277, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195125955.001.0001>.
4. For more information about how rhetorical ethos can facilitate communication across cultural differences, see Karen P. Peirce, “Employing Ethos to Cross the Borders of Difference: Teaching Civil Rhetoric” in *Crossing Borders/Drawing Boundaries: The Rhetoric of Lines across America*, ed. Barbara Couture and Patricia Wojahn (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 76–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b18vhw.9>.



The author visiting Gyeongju, South Korea, in spring
1994

BIOGRAPHY

Karen P. Peirce, PhD, is a writer and editor. She serves as associate publisher for marketing and advancement with the WAC Clearinghouse, an open access publisher in the field of writing across the curriculum, and is also associate editor of the International Exchanges on the Study of Writing book series. Additionally, she is on the board of the North Carolina chapter of the Fulbright Association and acts as the chapter's webmaster. From 1993-1994, she was a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) in South Korea. She blogs at <https://sites.google.com/view/kppeirce/blog>, can be found on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kppeirce>, and can be contacted via email at kpp@ix.netcom.com.
