

Learning Korean as a Foreign Language: The Case of a Teacher Education Institution in the Philippines

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Abstract

Students' learning style in foreign language classes plays a significant role in designing and developing instructional approaches. Using a sample of 30 graduate students in a teacher education institution in Manila, Philippines, the study focused on the teaching and learning of Korean language as a foreign language. The results show that while the majority of respondents preferred group activities, along with a positive attitude towards doing homework, listening and speaking were also the two main skills seen favorable to acquiring the language. Vocabulary learning is also believed to be effective when done by writing or saying new words repeatedly. The findings of the study give significant input into the development of instructional materials, overall classroom management strategies, and efficient and effective approaches towards foreign language learning of graduate students. The popularity of Korean culture could also be tapped because learning Korean culture, history, and society can also contribute to the success in learning Korean language.

Keywords: Korean language, foreign language learning, graduate class, language learning, learning styles

Introduction

Researchers have explored various learning styles of individuals over time. Bada and Okan (2000) noted that learner skills and assumptions are central to effective teaching and learning. A typical language classroom entails numerous opportunities for students to display their interest towards the language being learned, while their teacher creates an atmosphere of collaboration, cooperation, patience, and other aspects related to successful language learning. It is also imperative that teachers need to recognize varying student needs and learning styles in the classroom, as it eventually leads to student achievement.

Wong (2015) asserted that learning difficulties could be addressed by understanding students' learning styles. Once the foreign language classroom becomes an environment where students' needs are being determined and addressed, achievement in terms of the skills involved in learning may also increase. Favorable academic outcomes of students are showcased when teachers' and students' behavior are in harmony towards realizing intended learning outcomes.

Peacock (2001) highlighted the under-researched nature of learning and teaching styles in the context of second/foreign language endeavors of students. With limited research on foreign language learning, specifically involving Filipino students, this study can be considered of considerable significance. Moreover, due to the shortage of available specific data, research on foreign language learning has not been strongly investigated. Woodrow (2017) noted that technology use in a foreign language classroom contributed to increased motivation of students. While this study took into consideration the role of motivation in the teaching and learning of foreign language, the use of technology was one of the aspects explored in this study as an agent assisting effective learning.

Cassidy's (2004) work on learning styles presented an extensive discussion of theories, models, and measures, along with numerous reviews of each. One specific model that captures the essence of this study is Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (ELM), which states that an individual expresses preference for a particular learning style over others. This model also supports the idea that learning is a "continuous and interactive process." As language learners personally explore their own learning styles, it is noted that every individual highlights a more effective approach to learning which may be different from others.

Higher Education as a Life-Long Endeavor

Graduate students pursue higher studies of learning as they see them as a life-long endeavor and continuous process. Students in the graduate school are faced with multi-faceted learning stages. Classroom experiences complement professional encounters; hence, learning is facilitated through experiential approaches. The essence of learning is felt because students themselves go through the process. Lessons are learned by some students via conceptual and analytical methods that give way to “abstract conceptualization.”

To be particular, in a foreign language classroom, students are expected to digest every concept learned in a manner that would encourage them to commit acceptable mistakes: “trial-and-error.” Lastly, every interaction in the classroom is an opportunity to reflect on whatever learning context they may experience. This reflection is in agreement with Fleming and Baume (2006), who asserted that it is essential for both students and teachers to establish common grounds for “thinking about, and understanding how they learn.”

This research was an attempt to uncover essential issues in teaching and learning Korean, especially in the era of the popularity of Korean popular culture – not just in the Philippines – but also in the international arena. In line with the provision of effective and outcome-based strategies in class, this research focused on identifying the kind of learning style that was actually needed, and the provision of strategies that are consistent with learners’ preferences (Cohen, 2003).

As the Commission on Higher Education (2010) mandated the inclusion of foreign languages as electives in the curricula of higher education programs, implementing institutions were expected to contribute to “understanding among nations.” Among the foreign languages identified that may be taught to students were Japanese, Chinese, and others. Korean is offered in some institutions, with favorable demand and interests from students. This could be attributed to the attractiveness of Korean popular culture in the Philippines, along with the presence of Korean nationals who live in the country for short term or long-term stays.

The issues encountered in establishing a new foreign language curriculum entails never-ending challenges and intertwined complications: i.e. appropriate instructional materials, effective assessment tools, and eventual alignment of course objectives to students so that they will be able to learn according to institutional goals. Another challenge is if teachers are given unclear processes to follow (Alsubaie, 2016). The teacher factor is one of the crucial elements in curriculum development. What constitutes an effective Korean language classroom set up in a graduate school? What would the learning styles be like, in terms of doing homework and learning techniques via media? How would graduate students prefer to be corrected when they commit mistakes while learning the Korean language? This research was conducted in an attempt to address these concerns, along with other pressing elements of language teaching and learning.

These is an existing consensus on the significant contribution that learning styles play in nurturing one’s ability in a foreign language classroom (Vaseghi, Ramezani, & Gholami, 2012). As professional learners of a foreign language, students are also on a promising journey to battle ‘cognitive decline’ (Antoniou, Gunasekera, & Wong, 2013). The findings of Berggren, Nilsson, Brehmer, Schmiedek, and Lovden (2018) are also pertinent. They noted that language learning in older individuals had little effect on improving cognitive abilities, although their skills improved. Overall, when it comes to student achievement in a foreign language classroom, “pedagogical relevance” is the most crucial element (Sun, 2009).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design through content analysis, where graduate students completed an online survey by using a web provider. The subjects who participated in this research were 30 Doctor of Philosophy students at a teacher education institution in Manila, the Philippines. Students are required to take six foreign language credits, and chose Korean to fulfill this requirement. Students belonged to education, science, and math clusters.

A questionnaire, which focused on Korean language learning satisfaction and preferences, was constructed by the researcher. The 10-item instrument highlighted pertinent issues in relation to research objectives (learning styles, homework, vocabulary, error correction, media, and class activity). A self-constructed portion of the instrument also dealt with the respondents' insights on what could be done to make Korean language learning relevant to graduate students, along with a query on their experiences in class. Kolb's ELM served as a springboard in developing the instrument, highlighting four major elements: experiencing, reflecting, abstracting, and thinking. Before the instrument's actual design, the researcher gathered existing literature on learning styles and highlighted key concepts that would inform the instrument's final content.

This study placed importance on the contribution of the chosen case, since it mainly focused on foreign language learners in the classroom. Data were gathered from a special group of individuals who were not only students, but also professionals who had developed their own ways of learning. It is also worthy to note that the foreign language offering served as a requirement for graduation, compared to other academic specialization courses that were taken.

Results and Discussion

This section provides the results of the study. Results are presented in tabular form, followed by a brief analysis. Items are presented in each table, along with the frequency count and percentage. Specific written responses are also presented to appropriate items to complement the analysis.

Table 1. Are You Satisfied with Your Achievement in Korean Language this Term?

Satisfaction with Korean Language Achievement	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	29	96.67
No	1	3.33

Table 1 shows the respondents' overall satisfaction in connection with their Korean language achievement after one academic term of attendance. While the class is only in its initial offering, it is interesting to note that 96.67% of the respondents felt positive about their performance and achievement in class. A typical response (R. 5) was:

"I think the continuous offering of the Korean language and continue[d] teaching [of] it from the basics will help graduate students communicate and understand Korean later on."

In addition to the positive perspective towards the class, respondents also carried with them ideas that went beyond the usual language learning assumptions. They also viewed the experience as an avenue towards mutual understanding of cultures and even diplomacy, as indicated as follows:

Korean Language can be used whenever there is an exchange study with the Korean government, when we will use their reference materials that are rich in good values, cultural beliefs and other things which we can also learn and explore more our expertise, to understand them when we communicate with them. (R. 10)

Table 2 presents specific preferences of the respondents when it comes to studying the language. Result show that there was a preference for group activities, which pegged at 76.67%. This is followed by pair activities (33.33%) and other combinations presented with lower percentages.

Table 2. What Is Your Preferred Style when Studying Korean Language?*

Preferred Style of Learning	Frequency	Percentage
Individual	4	13.33
Pair	10	33.33
Group	23	76.67
Large Group	1	3.33

*Multiple responses

Table 3. Do You Prefer Having Homework?

Homework Preferences	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	28	93.33
No	2	6.67

When it came to doing homework, a majority (93.33%) of respondents strongly believed that having homework was acceptable. While most of the graduate students were working professionals, it is very interesting to note that they still preferred to attend to academic needs, even after class. One student (R. 20) responded as follows:

“Providing more homework or interactive games can help us to review previous lessons or lesson learned during class discussions.”

Table 4. What Is Your Most Preferred Way of Learning the Korean Language?*

Preferred Way of Learning	Frequency	Percentage
Reading	15	50.00
Listening	16	53.33
Speaking	16	53.33
Writing	11	36.67

*Multiple responses

Table 4 presents preferences of learning in terms of macro skills in a language class. According to respondents' multiple responses, students prefer both listening and speaking (53.33%) among four skills. Given this statistic, it would be helpful to design activities that highlight these skills in the classroom. When planning activities are related to these, practical applications might also be considered. Suggestions were as follows:

“I think it will be relevant if the things learned in class can be used in real life experiences like talking to Koreans” (R. 15). And R. 25 said:

“Expose the students in more communicative activities inside and outside the classroom where they can immediately use/apply what they have learned. I do believe that language can be learned easily when it [is] use[d] in day to day activities.”

Designing instructional materials should reflect relevance to the topic and opportunities for every day applications. Once students are able to realize how each topic could be concretized, this would help them appreciate the discussion and develop a grasp of the topic.

Table 5. What Is Your Most Preferred Way of Vocabulary Learning?

Preferred Way of Vocabulary Learning	Frequency	Percentage
Using new words in a sentence	8	26.67
Writing or saying new words repeatedly	21	70.00
Avoiding verbatim translation	1	3.33

Respondents preferred writing or saying new words repeatedly (70%) as an effective way of learning new vocabulary. While it is challenging to memorize and eventually be able to use these words in context, this aspect is a crucial section of the overall language learning set-up. Activities should be well planned – with student needs articulated – in order to facilitate vocabulary learning.

Table 6. How Would You Like Your Errors To Be Corrected in Class?

Preferred Error Correction	Frequency	Percentage
Immediately in front of others	26	86.67
Later at the end of activity in front of others	0	0.00
Later in private	4	13.33

Error correction in a foreign language classroom is one crucial thing that needs to be addressed proactively. As students are prone to commit mistakes in the course of learning the new language, mechanisms related to error correction and classroom management should be acceptable. The overall classroom environment also determines the class mood; thus, students being corrected after any mistake become a part of the strategy.

When students were being corrected in an atmosphere that made them feel valued, and when they were being treated as a work in progress, they saw the situation as an opportunity to grow and learn. Setting the learning environment that was warm and helpful became a prerogative towards achieving this, as indicated by R. 11 and R 27, respectively, as follows:

“The warm learning environment made it easier to learn and appreciate the Korean language.”

And

Learning Korean was a fun experience for me but it helped that the teacher and classmates were not negative on mistakes and the exercises were fun. Repetition was the key I think and even in class, words and phrases were repeated often enough to be easily remembered.

Table 7. What Is Your Most Preferred Media in Connection with Your Korean Language Learning?

Preferred Media Usage	Frequency	Percentage
TV/video/films	12	40.00
radio/audio	11	36.67
written material	0	0.00%
Blackboard	2	6.67
pictures/posters	5	16.67

Audio and video materials were still preferred in class, even in graduate school. TV/video/films with Korean-related content topped the preferences. The most preferred content included Korean pop culture icons and topics which could surely capture students' interests, since they are also exposed to these even outside the classroom. This preference was indicated by the following comments:

“Giving examples and helping the students to learn the concepts from time to time are some of the ways. Videos could be also done” (R. 10). Or,

“Continue tapping Korean popular culture. That would be interesting and very helpful” (R. 23).

There are many materials online related to Korean language, ranging from movies, songs, and TV shows which could be utilized in class. While using these resources would require great preparation and time management for the foreign language teacher to compile and present in class, the impact could be favorable once it captures students' level of interest and suitability to the lesson.

Table 8. What Is Your Most Preferred Learning Activity in Connection with Korean Language Learning?

Preferred Learning Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Games	10	33.33
Role Play	2	6.67
Talking with or Listening to Other Students	11	36.67
Memorizing Dialogue	5	16.65
Learning Diary	1	3.33
Songs	1	3.33

Games and student interaction were the top preferred learning activities. True enough, interesting activities work for all ages – regardless of academic level being pursued – even in graduate school. Once appropriate games are planned and facilitated, it makes the entire teaching and learning activity productive and interesting. This is indicated by comments such as:

“Design [a] program for culminating activity portraying Korean folktales and well-known literatures” (R. 29).

While games could be integrated in daily classroom activities, these could also be highlighted at end-of-the-term discussions as a culminating activity that synthesize what has been learned throughout the entire semester. This thought was expressed by student R. 3:

“Maybe it would be helpful if students can interact with Koreans in a particular educational activity wherein they can utilize the skill learned in studying the language. Use the language in culminating activities e.g. a song and dance number.”

Overall, the participants of this study looked for opportunities to apply what they had learned. They sought avenues to practice the vocabulary they had memorized and the grammatical structures they had mastered. Providing them with appropriate chances to interact with Korean native speakers would be an interesting activity.

The respondents were also asked to write down any concerns related to their Korean language learning experiences. The responses were analyzed, and the following themes were generated:

Challenging Experience. A majority of the students consider their experience as a challenging endeavor. With all the pressures that graduate school brings, the respondents still found attendance at the Korean language class a rewarding part of graduate school. One learner commented as follows: “Though it was hard because learning the skill in the language starts from scratch” (R. 30). A second (R. 13) was more upbeat upon reflection.

It was all fun, though challenging to learn a language very foreign from ours, but I find it rewarding. Towards the end of the day, piece by piece, Korean class has taught me the value of patience in learning and understanding every word that has a common meaning.

Balance in Graduate School. Since students take Korean language classes along with their specialization courses, the experience creates balance between classes that are heavy with theory and concepts. A language class serves as a window to capture one’s interest in other cultures and languages. This only happens when Korean language classes are carefully planned and facilitated, and when great attention is given to students’ needs and learning preferences. This is reflected in a statement by R. 6:

“Studying Korean language has been the equalizer for the nerve wrecking Term 1. The fun and interesting way on how the language was thought made it a thing to look forward to every Saturday. This is an experience worth remembering.”

Agent of Cultural Appreciation. Taking Korean language classes could also serve as a venue towards advocating cultural appreciation and sensitivity. As students are being exposed to a new language and culture, they develop a deep sense of awareness about other peoples' ways of life. It also creates a connection among cultures that commenced from learning the language. Students are not just confined to the four walls of the classroom; the foreign language learning experience serves as a spring board in broadening one's horizon, while also serving as an agent of cultural appreciation. These sentiments are reflected in comments as follows:

"Taking Korean as my foreign language in graduate school helped me appreciate the language and the culture even more" (R. 12). And,

"I can say that I developed a deeper understanding of Korean people, more than what I watched in K-Dramas" (R. 30).

Human Development Impact. Korean language classes in graduate school may be just a usual curricular offering at a Teacher Education Institution, but the experiences of students in the classroom provided a different manifestation. Learning foreign languages by adult learners may be facilitated by providing an appropriate atmosphere and highlighting cultural aspects of the foreign language. It is also interesting to note that while course objectives were met, students also gained cultural and social understanding of different people groups and ways of life.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The results provided by this research study showed specific and context-based experiences of students in graduate school. Even though confined to a different set-up, graduate students were still expected to manifest designated outcomes in the course of learning Korean language (vocabulary, grammar, speaking skills, etc.).

While most respondents were satisfied with their experiences, it is significant to note a preference for facilitated group activities instead of the usual individual or pair work set-ups. This is seen as an opportunity to highlight collaboration and cooperation among students who start learning the Korean language at the same proficiency level. Assigning homework was also highly preferred to supplemental learning outside the classroom.

One of the major contributions of this study is articulating how a healthy and helpful classroom environment could help facilitate learning. Being in a positive environment, Korean language learners appreciated being corrected immediately in front of others whenever they committed mistakes. Members of the class were also seen as a big contributory factor to this, since acceptance and understanding of the mistakes committed are taken into consideration.

This study affirmed how to enhance peoples' experiences when it comes to foreign language learning. Experience obtained in a Korean language classroom expands the richness of human life: new vocabulary words, new culture, new sentence structures, new ways of thinking are introduced. It offers new opportunities for people to add value to their life experiences, and eventually to use their new found abilities.

TV/video/films were seen to be the most preferred media in the classroom. This could also be supported by tapping contents that are interesting to students – Korean cultural content, for example. Teachers of Korean language may tap available online resources that pertain to Korean popular culture. In the end, this aids in language learning, and may serve as a tool in developing awareness and cultural sensitivity among students.

Games and student-to-student interaction provided an opportunity to add to regular classroom activities. A Korean language class can be seen as a window to break the traditional approach towards learning. By integrating essential activities such as games and other interesting elements, learning could be facilitated towards the desired achievement goal. This aspect is very critical to note, since the respondents of the study were enrolled in graduate school, where

approaches mainly centered on books and reading academic materials. Korean language classes may be seen as an avenue to promote interesting approaches to learning.

Learning Korean as a foreign language offers promising approaches for teachers and students. It could serve as a venue in advocating cultural appreciation, while one's own identity is emphasized. From the four walls of the classroom, students may be brought to a completely new world: new language and new culture, through concrete and research-based teaching and learning strategies. Since it was taught in graduate school, the experience could affirm that there is no boundary or confinement when it comes to learning and appreciating other people's ways of life. Moreover, this study has provided a vital contribution in planning, designing, and implementing foreign language curricula, particularly in the context of graduate teacher education in the Philippines. The findings provide valuable inputs regarding effective teaching and learning.

In the future, researchers could focus on the development of appropriate materials to be used in the classroom. It also would be interesting to explore how graduate students see their attendance at Korean language classes – its impact, meaning, and values. This could eventually concretize the assumption that learning a foreign language goes beyond knowing vocabulary words and being able to speak the language.

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