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Korean Language Education in North America: Its State of Affairs and Beyond

Introduction

One word that characterizes the current state of Korean language education in North American higher education is “growth,” a growth that is both remarkable and unprecedented. The surge in enrollment in Korean language courses at US and Canadian colleges and universities has become a noteworthy and intriguing case study in foreign language education. As per the 2021 report published by the Modern Language Association (MLA) (Lusin et al. 2023), Korean is now the 10th largest foreign language taught in US higher education institutions.¹ The most striking aspect of this growth is the exponential increase in enrollments, with a staggering 74,015.4% rise, from 26 in 1958 to 19,270 in 2021, and a 330.2% increase between 1998 and 2021. Such growth underscores the promising and encouraging future of Korean language education and Korean studies in North America and uniquely positions the Korean language among other foreign languages in education.

This paper explores the current status of Korean language education, primarily in US higher education, with indirect implications for Canadian colleges and universities based on US data. It highlights the increase in program size and the broadened curricular and pedagogical objectives of Korean language teaching and learning within the context of foreign language education and Korean studies. The paper begins by examining the significant growth and expansion of Korean language programs, particularly in the US, in terms of enrollment, curriculum, and teaching faculty. It then delves into the challenges that accompany this promising yet demanding growth of Korean language learning. The paper concludes by offering pedagogical suggestions for Korean language educators to reconsider, reassess, and potentially implement for the

field to progress further, underlining the necessity for change and enhancement.

Growth and Expansion

Student Enrollment

According to the 2021 MLA report² (Lusin et al. 2023), over the period of 2016 through 2021, Korean language enrollments recorded the highest increase of 38.3% from 13,936 in 2016 to 19,270 in 2021, growing by 5,334 enrollments. Korean was one of only three foreign languages gaining enrollments, along with American Sign Language (0.8%) and Biblical Hebrew (9.1%). In contrast, total college and university enrollments in languages other than English dropped by 16.6% during the same period. Korean enrollments have shown remarkable resilience, entirely against the recent trend in foreign language education in the US, considering that its overall enrollments fell by 6.7%, as shown in the 2013 MLA report, and by 9.1% in the 2016 report (ibid.). Indeed, the report indicates that the Korean language has been “remarkably consistent in its growth—it has not shown a decrease in enrollments since 1974” (ibid. 5). Korean language enrollment increases peaked during the COVID pandemic in the academic year 2021–2022³ and have started to ramp down or plateaued since then, meaning that the rate of increase has slowed or remained steady. Note, however, that even with such increases, Korean still has a small number of enrollments, less than twenty thousand students, which generates “high percentage increases” with “relatively small numerical increases” (ibid.).

The number of colleges and universities that offer Korean language programs has also increased. The American Association of Teachers of Korean (AATK), the sole professional organization representing all levels of Korean

² MLA reports, published every four or five years, only deal with enrollment in languages other than English in US higher education. The Canadian situation discussed in this paper is mainly due to the extension of US data and analysis.

³ The pandemic-induced shift to online learning may have influenced the enrollment trends, suggesting that Korean could be gaining traction as a second or third foreign language choice. This speculation is based on the observation that students had more flexibility to take additional courses, given that all classes were conducted via Zoom.

¹ According to this MLA report, the top nine foreign languages taught in US higher education are Spanish, French, American Sign Language, Japanese, German, Chinese, Italian, Arabic, and Latin.

language educators in North America,⁴ maintains the directory of schools⁵ offering Korean language courses and, to some degree, content courses (i.e., culture and literature). According to this AATK directory, more than 140 colleges and universities in the US and Canada⁶ currently offer Korean language courses. The number is expected to grow continuously in the future.

The forces driving this unprecedented growth are manifold: the rising popularity of Korean pop culture, known as Hallyu, the economic status and soft power of the nation, its continued geopolitical importance in the global backdrop, and the slowly but steadily increasing interest in Korean studies including history, literature, and media studies. It is worth noting that the impact of these reasons may vary depending on the regional and institutional characteristics of schools. For instance, schools with strong foreign language requirements, from one semester up to two years, can benefit from this school-wide curricular structure. The programs with relatively established undergraduate majors, minors, and graduate study in Korean studies can promote language courses (e.g., Columbia and UCLA). The schools located near large Korean communities can develop community-based projects, boosting enrollment (e.g., Los Angeles and Atlanta).

Curriculum Expansion

With these remarkable enrollment increases, well-documented in the field literature, Korean language curriculums at US higher institutions have expanded and diversified. More institutions are now offering upper-level language courses from Third Year all the way to Fifth Year or Sixth Year (e.g., Princeton) in some cases. Such an expanded language curriculum has led to significant growth in the number of undergraduate minors and majors being offered, established, and stabilized, fostering the progress and success of Korean language programs in turn.

In order to maintain such growth, each program must continually

reexamine, reassess, and accommodate learners' diversifying curricular needs. As part of such an endeavor, *Standards for Korean Language Learning* (2009–2012) was created and included in *ACTFL Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (2012). With the completion of this project, teaching Korean as a foreign language (KFL) as an independent field was placed into the larger context of foreign language education in North America. This collective undertaking was followed by the *Standards-based College Korean Curriculum for Korean Language Education* (2015), a detailed blueprint for actual curricular plans and designs at the college level. These two elaborate documents can be used as “a useful template for revising, expanding, and evaluating an existing curriculum” (Cho, Lee, and Wang 2021, 174) and designing upper-level courses as well as developing textbooks and instructional materials.

With diversifying learners and learner needs, the field of Korean for Specific Purposes has seen significant growth, leading to the development of courses such as business Korean, media Korean, and Korean through films and dramas. Korean-English translation and interpreting courses at Rutgers University are an exciting and inspiring example of energizing upper-level courses and providing different opportunities to advanced learners in connection with a certificate program. These Korean for Specific Purpose courses can also serve as a gateway into other Korean courses such as literature, history, religion, or cultural studies. As the number of students in Korean courses increases and the curriculum expands, various study abroad programs (e.g., Barnard and Rutgers) and summer language studies in Korea (e.g., Princeton and Yale) have been offered.

Furthermore, more institutions started to offer separate heritage tracks to accommodate Korean heritage language learners (HLLs) (e.g., Harvard, Princeton, and Rutgers). For a more concrete example, since 2017, Columbia University has offered two separate sections for non-heritage and heritage students at the third-year level. Starting in 2022, following the chaotic pandemic period, Columbia started to offer a year-long sequence of *Accelerated Korean for Heritage Speakers*, covering elementary and intermediate Korean in one year.

Korean Language Faculty

The surge in student enrollments and the expansion of curricula have significantly escalated the demand for more Korean language faculty across

4 The Canadian Association of Teachers of Korean (CATK) was founded in 2017, representing Korean educators in Canada.

5 The source is available at <https://aatk.org/schools/>.

6 Refer to Cho, Lee, and Wang (2021) for more detailed information on the Korean language programs in Canadian universities.

educational institutions in the US and Canada. The number of full-time faculty members in Korean language programs currently ranges from only one up to seven or eight (e.g., University of Hawai'i and UC Berkeley). With the continued increase in Korean course enrollments, reducing the maximum number of students in each class and adding more class sections by hiring more teachers has become essential to sustaining instructional quality and a robust curriculum. Unfortunately, quite a few programs take the first step by relying on adjunct instructors/lecturers—a practice that does not always lead to the hiring of full-time faculty member.

To fully grasp the current situation regarding Korean language faculty, it is necessary to understand the institutional conditions of Korean language programs. Most programs in North American higher education generally belong to a department of regional studies, such as East Asian Studies (e.g., Princeton), East Asian Languages and Cultures (e.g., Columbia), East Asian Languages and Literatures (e.g., University of Hawai'i), or slightly different variations. A smaller number of Korean language programs are part of the modern language department along with other foreign languages (e.g., Rice). Depending on the institutional structure, hiring a lecturer and creating a new line of faculty positions may involve slightly different processes, but it always entails departmental support and institutional commitment, particularly in financial resources. The process becomes even more complex when considering that a majority of Korean language faculty at the college level in the US and Canada occupy non-tenure line positions (e.g., instructor, lecturer, senior lecturer, teaching professor, and professor of practice). Thus, the Korean language programs that exist by themselves within the department without the faculty in Korean studies (i.e., tenure-line faculty) can add another layer of difficulty in expanding the program and hiring more teachers, highlighting the need for strategic planning and resource allocation.

Despite the multiple institutional constraints and financial difficulties at higher institutions after the pandemic, the field of Korean language education has witnessed increasing activity and competition in the hiring process over the past five years or so. In the last academic year of 2023–2024 alone, there were hirings of Korean lecturers at major institutions such as Harvard, MIT, University of Chicago, Yale, Northeastern University, and University of British Columbia, to name just a few. Also, in the academic year 2022–2023, there were hirings at Brown, Duke, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Yale, and

Columbia. According to the AATK job announcement site, more than 100 jobs in Korean language teaching were posted from 2019 through 2024.

Issues and Challenges

Different issues have surfaced and enduring challenges persist. To gain a comprehensive understanding of these issues and to effectively address the challenges, it is crucial to recognize the roles of three distinct stakeholders in Korean language education in the US and Canada: students, institutions, and teachers.

Diversified Learners

For the past ten years or so, several noticeable changes have been observed in the student population taking Korean language classes:

- the increasing number of non-heritage language learners enrolled in the elementary and intermediate (or first year and second year) Korean
- the increasing number of HLLs who begin their Korean language instructions in the upper-level classes
- the diversified HLL population⁷ in terms of their backgrounds and proficiency levels in Korean

With the increasing diversity in students' proficiency levels, needs, and learning objectives, reassessing and reshaping the Korean language curriculum has become even more urgent and necessary.

The differing needs of heritage and non-heritage language learners have always been among the most pressing issues in most Korean language programs at US and Canadian colleges and universities. The needs of HLLs can be fundamentally different than those of non-heritage language learners, even when their proficiency levels are similar. Korean HLLs are defined as “those who have an ethnolinguistic affiliation to the Korean heritage, but may have a broad range of proficiency from high to none in Korean oral or literacy skills”

⁷ Refer to Harris and Lee 2022 for a more extensive discussion of Korean HLLs.

(Lee and Shin 2008, 154), growing up using Korean within a natural, input-reach setting (i.e., with their parents and relatives). Simply put, HLLs may lack reading and writing skills while relatively competent in speaking and listening, whereas non-heritage language learners generally find speaking and listening most challenging.

Such varying needs have become even more complicated and challenging as the profiles of non-heritage and heritage learners have become more varied regarding their backgrounds, proficiency levels, target language and culture exposure, and learning goals and motivation (Lee 2023). It has become quite tricky to categorize them into one or the other group, to identify their learner profiles, and to pinpoint their needs. For example, we find an increasing number of non-heritage learners who self-studied the language and were substantially exposed to Korean culture, mostly pop culture, before formal instruction at an institution began. It is, in fact, understandable and expected with the ubiquitous and profound impact of social media and technological advances such as Duolingo and YouTube on language learning. The HLL population is also diversifying with the increasing number of third-generation Korean American and half-Korean students (i.e., a mother or a father is Korean). These Korean heritage learners may be culturally Korean to some degree, with everyday experiences such as food and some fragmented cultural knowledge, but linguistically more limited than “typical” Korean HLLs. Placing these diversifying HLLs in the “right” classes within restricted curricular resources is becoming even more challenging and taxing.

Another challenge related to the varying learner needs is maintaining upper-level enrollments. With increasing enrollments and more undergraduate majors and minors being offered, Korean language curriculums at many institutions have been successfully expanded to include more advanced-level courses. However, the introductory to advanced Korean language enrollment ratio stays at 5:1 (Lusin et al. 2023), implicating the roughly 20% retention rate following intermediate or second-year Korean. According to the MLA report (ibid.), Korean is not unusual in this retainment issue since all upper-level foreign language courses struggle to maintain enrollment and learners’ interests to varying degrees. The unique difficulty of Korean, being a super-hard language for native English speakers, as per the US Department of State, necessitates extended learning periods (e.g., 88 weeks and 2,200 class hours) to achieve professional working proficiency on the Interagency Language Roundtable

(ILR) scale. This underscores the significance of a robust curriculum and strong enrollments in upper-level Korean courses. Sustaining these courses to produce advanced-level learners is a task that requires long-term institutional visions and responsibilities.

Institutional Characteristics and Constraints

Confounding the issues discussed in the previous section, the gap in institutional resources and financial support between comparatively wealthy private universities located in metropolitan areas and public universities relying on government funding can be vast. Not all Korean language programs⁸ can sustain and advance at a comparative rate or with similar-level ease. Despite these institutional resource disparities and “significant regional variability in terms of education accessibility” (Choi 2016, 34), the growth and expansion of Korean language programs over the past ten years or so has been consistent and constant.

Cho, Lee, and Wang (2021, 171) present three different models of Korean language programs in North American higher education:

- Model 1: train prospective students to achieve an advanced level of proficiency in the Korean language with a special focus on practical language training.
- Model 2: allow prospective students [*sic*] to obtain an academic degree (i.e., major or minor) in Korean language or Korean studies.
- Model 3: in addition to a robust undergraduate program, also offer a graduate program in Korean studies with the goal of producing the next generation of Korean studies scholars.

Most Korean language programs are developed into Model 2, and only a handful of institutions, such as Columbia, Harvard, and UCLA, have been developed into Model 3. Granting such limitations, language programs develop the following three stages: 1) offering multi-level language courses without a degree program; 2) offering a Korean minor; and 3) offering a Korean major (ibid. 176). In reaching Stage 3, the roles an institution can play should be fully

⁸ See Wang 2015 for the historical development of Korean language programs in US higher education.

understood and appreciated.

Lusin et al. (2023, 3) effectively summarized the roles of institutions in successful foreign language programs as follows:

- Adequate funding for language programs is an integral component of keeping language programs afloat.
- Support from the institution as a whole matters; without it, language departments struggle to maintain faculty lines and courses.
- Support from administrative offices and other departments also matters; for example, career services offices can help increase interest in language majors and connect students to local businesses.

One way to secure, reserve, and maximize institutional resources and support is to prepare for program evaluations. Although being evaluated as a program can certainly be a stressful process, if successful, it could provide a firm ground on which to build and expand the program. Here are practical suggestions for a program evaluation to address local issues and concerns (Cho, Lee, and Wang 2021, 179):

- evaluate how the program works and what the learning goals of the program are
- evaluate the program against other language programs in the same unit
- understand the value of the program in the institution
- enhance the program accountability through explicit assessment tools
- contextualize KFL education within larger educational goals
- get the program accredited or create a minor/major

Teacher Education and Professional Development

KFL faculty has various backgrounds in terms of their majors, terminal academic degrees (i.e., MA or PhD), teaching experiences, and professional paths. While an increasing number of teachers have doctoral degrees specialized in Korean linguistics, language pedagogy, and applied linguistics from various institutions in the US, Canada, and Korea, an equally significant number of teachers have an MA or PhD in different fields, such as literature, history, or education. Wang (2014, 2018, 2024) has constantly investigated and profiled KFL teachers in the US and Canada. Wang (2022) also extensively reviews how

instructor characteristics, such as language background, teaching experience, educational background, and gender, intertwine with other instructional aspects and impact learning outcomes. With this diverse profile of the KFL faculty in mind and relating to the fact that the field itself is becoming more competitive with the increase and expansion of hiring opportunities in the last few years, teacher training programs and teacher education research still need to be improved.

Considering these needs, there has been a constant effort to establish more systematic and structured teacher training programs and professional development opportunities. When it comes to degree programs, the University of Hawai'i (at Manoa) and UCLA are major institutions that operate doctoral programs in Korean linguistics and language pedagogy in North America. It should be noted that there is a rich variety of postgraduate degrees that many Korean language professionals earned, covering various language-related majors in second language acquisition, applied linguistics, or foreign language education. In addition to these diverse degree programs, there are several certificate programs. For instance, the University of Toronto and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education jointly offer one exemplary non-degree teacher certificate program in collaboration with the Korean Education Centre in Toronto at the Consulate General of Korea and the Language Education Institute at Seoul National University (Cho, Lee, and Wang 2021). The Korean language program at Columbia University is currently planning a summer certificate program for Teaching Korean as a Foreign Language (TeKFL as a tentative acronym). The potential target population of this program is post-undergraduate and graduate students in related fields, such as linguistics, language education, or East Asian studies, who are interested in teaching Korean as their potential profession. It will be offered virtually as a short-term pilot program in the summer of 2026. The purpose of this pilot program is to test the curriculum developed for the graduate-level program and assess the viability of the program as a summer certificate program in the future. Another example is the K-12 teacher certificate programs at Rutgers University in New Jersey (Chun and Cho 2018) and Stonybrook University in New York State. Although they are not directly related to KFL teachers in higher education, these certificate programs are vital to welcoming and encouraging connections between Korean language education in secondary education and higher education.

Most KFL instructors at US and Canadian higher institutions engage

in professional development activities (e.g., workshops, invited lectures, and academic conferences) offered at their institutions or organized by professional organizations such as AATK and ACTFL. As Wang (2022, 488) argues, the importance of research in teaching should be “an indispensable and integral part of teaching, as teachers are informed of the best practices from active research.” Still, not all instructors/lecturers are able to regularly participate in these professional activities for various reasons such as time constraints, burdensome teaching and administrative responsibilities, or strenuous domestic and international travel schedules. The primary obstacle, however, is the lack of financial resources and institutional support. Non-tenure line faculty members often find themselves without access to conference travel funds, and their schools may not fully appreciate their professional development efforts, unlike tenure positions. This systemic issue is deeply rooted in institutional structure and characteristics, resource accessibility, and often local institutional characteristics. It is crucial for institutions to allocate more resources for professional development, to recognize the value of non-tenure line faculty members’ contributions, and to create a supportive environment that encourages their participation in professional activities.

Concluding Thoughts

What will the future hold for the field of Korean language education in US and Canadian higher education? How should we, as language professionals and researchers, be prepared for it? I believe that the future direction of the field lies within our collective efforts in pedagogical research. The recent announcement for the *Korean Language in America (KLA)*,⁹ the official journal of the AATK, has suggested the following five topics for future special issues aiming “to explore innovative research, methodologies, and pedagogical practices” that advance the field of Korean language education:

- Assessment and feedback in Korean language learning with a focus on fostering learner autonomy and continuous improvement
- The role of technology in Korean language instruction including the

- potential for personalized learning experiences and increased accessibility
- Cultural competence in Korean language education
- Korean language acquisition in multilingual contexts including the interplay of Korean with other languages
- Innovative approaches to teaching Korean pronunciation exploring new methods, tools, and technologies

These proposals effectively reflect the most pressing issues in the field and commendably direct us to the next steps in research and pedagogy.

In addition to the five research agendas proposed by the KLA editorial board, let us pay attention to another well-known but still developing pedagogical notion: *critical literacy*, under the overarching pedagogical stance of *critical language pedagogy*. Critical literacy, the main axe of the pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group 1996), is a powerful tool that promotes critical thinking “by emphasizing differing voices and stances represented in texts” (Suh 2025, 201) and, importantly, challenges the status quo, empowering us to think beyond the obvious and engage with the world critically. Critical literacy within the multiliteracies framework¹⁰ focuses on the dynamic and transformative meaning-making process in which a learner participates as an active language user. Learners are encouraged to bring their own values, interests, life experiences, and world views into their learning processes (Tavares 2025). Through this process, critical literacy pedagogy recognizes and highlights linguistic, cultural, and social plurality and promotes critical engagement, learner autonomy, inclusive classrooms, and culturally relevant teaching. And it eventually empowers learners.

In the KFL setting, critical literacy and critical language pedagogy have widened the perspectives on rapidly diversifying learners by effectively promoting “the linguistic and cultural pluralism that has been rapidly growing in the learning and teaching of Korean” (Suh 2024, 203). These pedagogical notions offer more instructional opportunities to enhance the value of foreign language education, multimodality, and criticality. It is also closely related to the conflicting views on bilingualism: the belief that bilingual speakers tend to be disadvantaged linguistically, culturally, and socially versus the notion that bilingualism is conducive to enhancing one’s intellectual, cognitive, and

9 The source is available at <https://aatk.org/notice/?mod=document&uid=977&pageid=1>.

10 See Suh and Jung 2021 for the review of multiliteracies in the KFL setting.

sociocultural capacity. Foreign language education in the US and Canada cannot be discussed outside bilingual policy and politics as it is closely connected to the continuing discourse of identity, nationality, cultural politics, and policymaking.

In KFL education, practical strategies and classroom applications employing these pedagogical notions are still underway, and attempts to connect critical literacy, identity, and social justice are at a relatively early but promising stage. At the AATK Annual Meeting in 2023, finding the two most noteworthy words appearing in the conference program, “critical” and “social justice,” including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), was encouraging. Another example is the theme of the upcoming international conference on October 26th hosted by the Korean Language Education Research Institute at Seoul National University: “Linguistic and Cultural Diversity, and Learner Autonomy in Korean Language Classroom.” Critical language pedagogy is “no longer considered ‘radical’ or ‘too liberal,’ whether dealing with Korean as the national language, a second, or a foreign language” (Suh 2024, 201). It is hoped that the pedagogical research agendas discussed above will present a way to reflect the state of affairs in Korean language education in the US and Canada and to guide us in the right direction to productively and stimulatingly advance the field.

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