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At the Crossroad between Community and Additional Language: The Case of Korean Language Education in Australia

Framing the Context: Languages Education in Australia

Learners of Korean have been increasing at all levels and all around the globe, and Australia is no exception. This contribution wants to provide an overview of the status of Korean language education in Australia, offer some reflections on the main issues affecting primary and secondary schools, and argue that Korean language education in Australia is shifting from education aimed at background learners to education for learners of Korean as an additional language. However, before jumping into such reflections, it is first necessary to take a step back and contextualize languages education in Australia. This will help us understand the learning environment and better situate current trends facing Korean language education.

The careful reader will have noticed the expression *languages education*. Within Australian education, languages are not foreign, first, second, third, mother, or else. Languages are just *languages*. This expression is used to stress two important concepts. Firstly, the language repertoire of an individual is not made up of different, separate, disconnected languages, but it is to be understood as a whole. Secondly, languages are not "foreign," because languages taught in Australian schools, i.e. European, Asian, or Indigenous, are also spoken within communities living and using them daily in Australia.

Despite this consideration for languages, similarly to other Anglophone countries such as the UK, the US, or New Zealand, Australian students do not take up language studies as much as their European or Asian peers (Caruso & Fraschini 2024; Kinder, Fraschini, and Caruso 2024; Lanvers 2024). The reasons behind this apparently paradoxical situation, where several languages are spoken in the country but not many people learn languages, are multifaceted and complex. One reason is the country's persistent monolingual mindset (Clyne 2008), i.e. the belief that English is enough. Another reason is people's

perception of what languages are for. This has been eloquently illustrated by Mason and Hajek (2020), who show that languages are mostly represented in Australian media as either an economic resource or a problem, but not as a social resource. It is this flawed representation of languages and the lack of recognition that languages are not only a human right but also contribute to the individual's wellbeing that is conducive to the current situation, where enrolments in language courses are on the dive.

Much has been done and attempted, in terms of policies and initiatives, over the past 50 years to try to steer and revert the monolingual trend. The multicultural turn of the 1970s and 1980s, together with increased awareness of social justice, saw the introduction of languages in the school curriculum and the draft, by Lo Bianco (1987), of the first and only *National Policy on Languages* (Aliani 2024). This policy recognizes that languages enhance social and cultural cohesion, that languages are a source of group and cultural identity, and that plurilingualism is a national resource. The policy also goes further by advocating for the need for all Australians to learn at least an additional language (Lo Bianco 1987).

Asian languages have often been in the spotlight because of the repeated efforts of Australian public institutions to boost the country's *Asia literacy*, a concept addressed by about 40 policies, white papers, and official reports published between 1969 and 1994 (Henderson 2007). Unfortunately, advocating for Asian languages education has been seen at times as either an important necessity or with suspect (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2016), and the need to learn Asian languages is still often framed in terms of economic return, as evident in the *Australia in the Asia century White Paper* (Commonwealth of Australia 2012).

The goodwill to improve Asia language learning in Australia has been evident in the NALSAS (National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools) and NALSSP (National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program) plans. The former, implemented in 1994 and supported by an unprecedented A$ 400M funding from the Australian government, saw an early end in 2002 and it is often considered a failure because of too high targets, the focus on economic interests, and the lack of a bottom-up approach, i.e. an approach starting from the communities of speakers of Asian languages and their needs (Lo Bianco 2002). Korean is probably the language that failed the most in capitalizing from the funding since, among other reasons, the death of

Kim Il-Sung in 1994 and the crisis of the Asian financial markets contributed to fostering a negative perception of Korea in the eyes of Australia's public opinion (Fraschini, Elfving-Hwang, and Tao 2024). The NALSSP (2008–2011), which cannot be considered a success either because of too bold targets, was supported by the Australian government with A$ 64M and aimed at promoting learning of Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Korean (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2009). The program, again, did not deliver significant results for the Korean language in most states, except for New South Wales, where Asian language enrolments, overall, were boosted through the introduction of four syllabi catering for learners with different proficiency levels (Field, Wilson, and Cruickshank 2024).

Despite such efforts—although learners of Asian languages constitute nearly half of the students in Year 12 taking a language subject (ACARA, n.d.)—enrolments in such languages are declining (Mason and Hajek 2021). Field, Wilson, and Cruickshank (2024) pointed out that among the reasons for the failure to boost student uptake there is the flawed perception that languages taught in community schools, such as most Asian languages, are not mainstream and relevant, highlighting a profound discrepancy between the value attributed to Asian languages and the othering of Asian language speakers.

Korean language education in Australia is to be situated in this broad context, where Asian languages are officially valued but fail to attract students due to a variety of reasons. The next sections will look in detail at the situation surrounding Korean language education at the primary and secondary levels.

Korean Language Education at the Primary and Secondary Levels

The provision of a language in the local educational landscape, i.e. the ability to cater for learners of that language, is indicated by the number and the diffusion on the territory of schools offering that language. Adopting a language such as Korean, i.e. making Korean courses available within a school course offer, is a complex undertaking because of the number of stakeholders involved, which include students, teachers, parents, the local department of education, and the availability of a Korean language curriculum. The following two sections provide an overview of the significance of some of these stakeholders, namely students, teachers, and the availability of Korean language curricula.

Schools, Students, and Teachers

Data provided by the Korea Education Centre (Sydney) and available through the Overseas Korean Education Portal (OKEP, n.d.) show that, at the national level and as of 2024, Korean is taught to 9,543 students in 68 schools (private or public institutions offering primary and/or secondary education). These numbers represent a significant improvement compared to the 4,218 students (131% increase) and 40 schools (70% increase) of 2009 (data compared with Shin 2010). Nevertheless, despite a better provision compared to 15 years ago, the number of Korean language students is extremely low compared to other languages, both Asian and European. In Year 12, at the national level, Korean has never made an appearance in the ten most studied languages (ACARA, n.d.).

Moreover, despite the increase in schools offering Korean, the provision is not equally distributed. Of the total number of schools where Korean is available, 48 are in NSW, ten in Victoria, two in WA, one in Queensland, four in South Australia, and three in the ACT. These numbers must be read with reference to the population and the number of schools operating in each state; when the total number of schools in each state is accounted for, it is possible to note that Korean is offered in 1/45 schools in ACT, 1/65 schools in NSW, 1/179 in South Australia, 1/228 in Victoria, 1/560 in Western Australia, and 1/1,797 in Queensland. Korean is therefore severely under-provisioned in Queensland and Western Australia and scantly provisioned in South Australia and Victoria.

Regarding the students, for current Korean language educators the shift in the composition of the learner population is perhaps more relevant than their simple increase. The changes in the student population are clearly visible in the data presented by Field, Wilson, and Cruickshank (2024) and related to NSW, highlighting how the slow but steady decline of background learners that started in 2004 was met in 2016 by a sharp increase in non-background learners boosted by the introduction of the *Korean Beginner* curriculum in the state, aimed at *ab initio* learners. Similarly, Fraschini, Cho, and Kim (2024) noted that the number of Korean learners in the only secondary school in Western Australia where it is offered increased by almost 18% over one year following the introduction of the non-background syllabus in the state curriculum. This shift from background learners to learners of Korean as an additional language is

further confirmed by enrolments in university Korean language courses, where non-background learners greatly outnumber background learners to the point that university course sequences are designed keeping non-background learners in mind, and in many cases, they cannot accommodate upper-level advanced background learners (Jee 2024).

Field, Wilson, and Cruickshank (2024) also remarked that the shift in the Korean language learner population may be due to the growing popularity of Korean popular culture. This is certainly a reason; however, it represents the surface of a more complicated picture. Fraschini (2020) depicted the complex tapestry of learners' vision and motivation in the case of high school learners of Korean in Western Australia, in a school context with no background students, and showed how varied student motivation can be. Some students were motivated by Korean popular culture and believed that "Korean is cool"; however, they were also motivated by the teacher and by the challenge represented by learning the language. A second group of students was also motivated by Korean popular culture, supported by a strong interest in any kind of Korean popular culture products and the desire to travel to Korea. These students enjoyed learning languages, and they also thought that some Korean language skills might help in their future careers. The last group of students, more academically oriented than the previous two, wanted to develop advanced level fluency in Korean, being determined to keep studying the language until university and beyond, dreaming of a career as an interpreter or translator, and moved by the desire, at some point in the future, to live in Korea. These results show that if being moved towards the language by the Korean Wave is the reality for some students, for some other students, the interest in the Korean culture is intersected with instrumental motivation, such as academic achievement, and integrative motivation, such as the desire to reside in the country.

One important aspect that emerged from the results of Fraschini (2020) is the importance of the figure of the teacher in promoting and sustaining learners' motivation, and the availability of qualified teachers is one of the most important aspects of concern for school principals when assessing whether to introduce Korean language in their school. The number of teachers of Korean in Australia has grown together with the number of schools offering Korean language, passing from 69 to 122 (77% increase) between 2009 and 2024. In Australia, the criteria to receive a teaching qualification vary from state to state, but in most cases a Bachelor of Education is required for primary school

teachers, and at least a Master of Education is required for teachers of higher grades, such as secondary school. In some states, such as Victoria, possessors of postgraduate degrees of a level inferior to a master, for example a graduate diploma of teaching, may be eligible to receive a temporary teaching permit.

The content of postgraduate courses, including master's degrees, is generally focused on literacy and languages education but seldom on any specific language. The language-specific training usually happens through the school placement, conducted towards the end of the degree. Due to the strict requirements of the teaching qualifications, and the fact that degree courses equip future teachers with general literacy and language education knowledge, but not with language-specific knowledge, there is a lack of qualified Korean language teachers in Australia, i.e. of teachers "with a local teaching degree and teaching qualification, who also have content knowledge of Korean language education acquired through formal instruction" (Fraschini, Cho, and Kim 2024, 10).

It is possible to consider the scant opportunities available in most states and territories to learn Korean in schools and teacher training as two limitations affecting the Korean language in Australia. Some of these limitations have been addressed through recent initiatives set up by universities with the support of both Korean and Australian institutions. However, before exploring these initiatives, the next section will look at a further important variable: the availability, or non-availability, of a Korean syllabus in the school curriculum.

The Korean Syllabus

The increased demand for Korean language education around the world has been followed and supported by the introduction of courses in high schools in several countries, from India to Thailand, from Turkey to Vietnam, and from Russia to Western Europe. However, despite the considerable number of such countries, only a few have developed a local Korean language syllabus integrated with the national school curriculum. Within the restricted club of countries that developed their Korean language syllabus for high schools, Australia stands apart since different states and territories, through their independent departments of education, have developed their own Korean syllabus integrated into the state curriculum. What follows is a brief illustration of the main advantages and limitations of the syllabi developed in New South Wales, Victoria, and Western

Australia.

In New South Wales, Korean has been taught since the 1990s. Shin (2010) observed that through the 1990s and the early 2000s, the provision of Korean in the state has experienced periods of waxing and waning, but overall, the numbers have always been alarmingly low, both compared to other Asian languages and the overall Korean-background student population in the state. In terms of students' numbers, the situation still generates concerns almost fifteen years later (Field, Wilson, and Cruickshank 2024). Notwithstanding enrolments, the Korean language benefits in New South Wales from a syllabus structure that caters to different proficiency levels and year-levels. Up to Year 10, Korean is taught through the state Modern Languages K-10 Syllabus, a framework that can be used as a reference to develop the syllabus of all languages (except aboriginal and classical languages as well as Australian Sign Language). In Years 11 and 12, four different courses are available to suit different proficiency levels and are called *Korean Beginner*, *Korean Continuers*, *Korean in Context*, and *Korean Language and Literature*.

Korean Beginner is a stream for students with less than 100 hours of instruction in the language, where Korean is learnt as a second or additional language. *Korean Continuers* is for students with no more than one year of education in a school where Korean is the medium of instruction starting from Year 1, and with less than three years of residency in Korea. In this case, Korean is also learnt as a second or additional language. *Korean in Context* is for students without any formal education in a school where Korean is the medium of instruction past ten years of age. In this case, Korean is the student's home language, and they have a cultural connection to it. Lastly, *Korean Language and Literature* is for students with a linguistic background in the language, i.e. students for whom Korean is the first language. Although teachers report grey areas when students are assigned to a stream instead of another, the advantage of such a structure is clear: the New South Wales syllabus can accommodate learners from all the spectrum of language proficiency. Unfortunately, students' enrolments in some courses are so low that some may be terminated in the future.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority offers the relevant university admission exam (in the Victorian case, the VCE) for 37 languages. Of these, 26 languages are taught following the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages, i.e. a common framework for syllabus

development. Of the remaining, six languages have a one-stream syllabus, four languages (Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese) have a two-stream syllabus (called *First* and *Second Language*), and only the Chinese language is offered under three streams (Chinese *First*, *Second*, and *Second Language Advanced*). In the case of the Korean course, the criteria to place students in the *Korean First Language* or the *Korean Second Language* stream depends on whether they have undergone "no more than seven years of education in a school where Korean is the medium of instruction" (VCAA, n.d.). This criterion, which also applies to the other languages, represents an obstacle to the further development of the Korean language in Victoria because it is not suited to divide learners into background and non-background. Following this criterion, a non-background student is required to sit the same VCE Korean exam as a background student who has undergone all their primary school studies in Korea. However, since the Korean language in Victoria has a history of community language, the current exam is tailored to the proficiency of background speakers, and therefore, it is of a too high difficulty level for non-background learners, contributing to the current situation where only background learners elect Korean Second Language as a VCE subject. It is also believed that the lack of non-background students taking the VCE Korean exam is at the origin of the lack of Victorian high schools offering Korean language courses (for details regarding issues related to Korean language in Victoria, see Fraschini, Cho, and Kim 2024).

The Western Australian curriculum included only six languages (Italian, French, German, Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian) when in 2021 the local School Curriculum and Standard Authority announced the plan to introduce the syllabi for Hindi, Tamil, and Korean. After undergoing a development process from April to December 2022, the Korean syllabus was successfully introduced in 2023, becoming the most recent Korean language syllabus developed in Australia. The Western Australian Korean syllabus follows the structure of the pre-existing language syllabi, i.e. one stream from Year 1 to 10 and two streams for Years 11 and 12. The two upper-level streams are called *Korean Second Language* and *Korean Background*. Students can elect their stream in Year 10, and the criteria to enrol in the *Korean Second Language* stream is to have undergone less than one year of formal instruction in the Korean language, to have spent less than two years living in Korea, and do not use Korean for communicative purposes outside of the classroom. The Western Australian

curriculum clearly divides students into background and non-background, and the university admission exam (in this case, the WACE) is prepared on these criteria as well. The long sought-after introduction of the Western Australian Korean syllabus (for details see Fraschini, Elfving-Hwang, and Tao 2024), as mentioned above, had a positive influence on students' enrolments in the state.

Figure 1 is a visual representation mapping these three syllabi against the continuum of language proficiency.

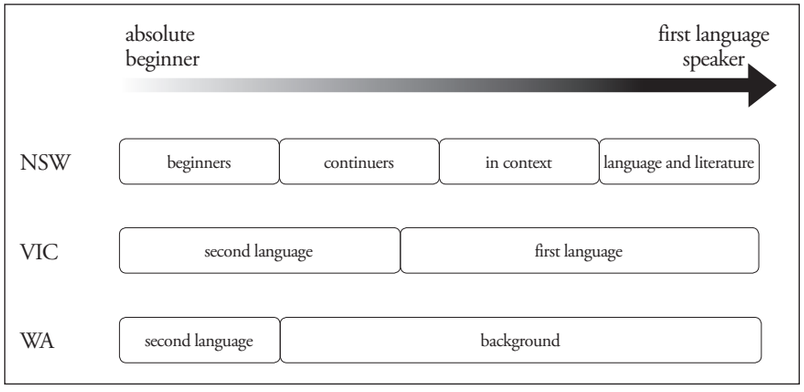

Figure 1. NSW, VIC, and WA Syllabus Breadth Compared to Learners' Language Proficiency

Figure 1 shows that the major Korean language syllabi developed by Australian states strive to include learners from all the spectrum of language proficiency, from absolute beginners to first language speakers. Nevertheless, a careful consideration will reveal that in Victoria, absolute beginners will be disadvantaged as they may study through the same syllabus and sit the same exam designed for learners who have received up to six years of education through Korean medium of instruction. The situation is almost the opposite in Western Australia, where background speakers with very little knowledge of the language are required to sit the same exam as background speakers who speak Korean as a first language. Therefore, while the Victorian syllabus suits better background speakers, the Western Australia syllabus suits better non-background speakers. These two syllabi have been modelled on the ground of previously existing language syllabi available in the respective states, but the period they were developed is at the same time symbolic of the shift, in terms of learners' population, experienced by the Korean language in Australia. While the older Victorian syllabus is anchored in a period when the population of

Korean language learners were mostly background speakers, the newer Western Australia syllabus reflects the reality that most learners are now non-background speakers, as noted above.

Recent Initiatives

The scant provision of the Korean language on the territory and the issues surrounding the availability of qualified teachers have already been mentioned as some of the issues affecting Korean language education in Australian schools. Regarding the former, the poor distribution of schools offering Korean language courses across the country implies that most students are not able to study Korean from primary to university without interruptions. The latter must be understood in terms of qualifications accepted within the Australian education system, as well as content knowledge of Korean language education received in an instructed setting. Recently some universities, such as the University of Melbourne in Victoria and Curtin University in Western Australia, have tried to address these issues thanks to funding provided by the Korean and Australian governments.

The University of Melbourne established its Korean language teacher training program in 2023 thanks to the financial support of the Korean Ministry of Education through the Korea Education Centre (Sydney). The program provides Korean language education skills for Australia-based teachers and aims to create a pool of locally qualified teachers. The program is designed for aspiring teachers with no or little formal experience, and despite being a non-degree-awarding program, it attracted 136 applications in the first year and 157 in the second year, for 48 places available. The program provides participants with general knowledge regarding Korean language teaching and specific knowledge about teaching Korean in the Australian context. Therefore, classes not only include common topics, such as learners' psychology, second language acquisition, and Korean grammar pedagogy, but also contextualized ones, such as the Australian Korean language syllabi, teaching for Australian-Korean background learners, and Korean language assessment in Australian schools. Theoretical classes run weekly online to allow participants from all states and territories to take part, and the program is concluded by a two-day demonstration class workshop at the University of Melbourne. Because of the potential of the program to increase the future Korea-capability of young

Australians and its alignment with the goal of the Australian government to foster Asia literacy, from 2024 and for the following two years, it became co-funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Australia-Korea Foundation.

The University of Melbourne teacher training program is meaningful but has some obvious limitations. The most relevant is that because of the current regulations, the program cannot award a teaching certificate, which can be awarded only by the relevant authority in each state on the completion of specific undergraduate or postgraduate courses. Hence, the program effectively addresses the need to provide local teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge specific to Korean language education; however, aspiring Korean language teachers must enrol in further studies and pursue additional pathways to become certified teachers.

Curtin University, in Western Australia, addressed the issue of the availability of Korean language classes for high school students. As seen above, the Department of Education of Western Australia introduced the new Korean syllabus in 2023, which means that Korean became available as a subject in the Western Australia university entrance examination from the Year 12 cohort of 2024. Unfortunately, as of 2024 only one school in the state offers Korean language at the secondary level, and therefore students from other schools are not able to take Korean courses. The Korea Research Centre of WA hosted at Curtin University, with the support of the Australia-Korea Foundation, launched in 2023 Korean language classes for local high school students through the already existing Curtin University's Rising Scholars program (KRCWA, n.d.). Through this program, students in their last year of high school can take Korean classes at Curtin University, become eligible to sit the state Korean language examination, and gain advanced standing, i.e. credits, against their future university degree. Along with the university-oriented course, the same centre also offers general free Korean language and culture classes to high school students, even those who do not have the goal of sitting the Korean exam of the university entrance examination (KRCWA, n.d.).

Discussion

Strategies to address the issues surrounding Korean language education in

Australia must, first and foremost, consider *why* there is the need to support the provision of Korean language education in the country. To this important question, it is possible to find at least three answers.

Firstly, Shin (2010) noted that the need to teach Korean is always addressed in the Asian language education policies developed by the Australian government and that the government itself stresses the importance of maintaining strong ties with Korea. Nevertheless, despite the relative growth over the past two decades, the number of students is extremely low compared to other languages. This dissonance was true in 2009 as it is true in 2024, and it represents an oxymoron that should be addressed.

Secondly, from a top-down perspective, economic statistics related to 2023 show that Korea is Australia's third-largest export and fourth-largest import market, and commercial exchanges with Korea represent 7.7 per cent of Australia's international trade (ABS 2024). The sixth and most recent Australia-Korea 2+2 Foreign Affairs and Defence ministerial talks, organized in Melbourne in May 2024, increased further the cooperation between the two countries in many sectors, from security to energy (Minister of Foreign Affairs 2024). Overall, Australia needs Korea-literate people, with the necessary knowledge to sustain and foster the relations between the two countries in the future.

Thirdly, from a bottom-up perspective, the number of non-background learners wishing to approach the Korean language is growing, as demonstrated by the enrolments in Korean language courses at universities, by the increasing enrolments in non-background learners in New South Wales and Western Australia after the introduction of language curriculum suiting their needs. If we consider that learning a language should be first and foremost access to a social resource (Mason and Hajek 2020) and a means towards personal wellbeing (Oxford 2016), then the insufficient provision of the Korean language in several Australian states is depriving many students of these resources and means.

Fraschini, Cho, and Kim (2024), in their report on Korean language education in Victoria, set a number of objectives at which Korean institutions, Australian institutions, and local universities should aim to work together. Some of them are valid also for the broader Australian context and can be summarised with the need to expand the focus of Korean language education to include non-background learners, the need to provide teachers with placement, professional development, and employment opportunities, and the need to increase the

visibility, which ultimately would lead to an improved perception of the Korean language. It is possible to notice that these three broad objectives involve the main stakeholders, namely the students, the teachers, and the community.

The expansion of opportunities for non-background learners is a task mainly for local authorities. This contribution already mentions that the availability of a syllabus for non-background learners can make a considerable difference. Such a syllabus supports learners who wish to study Korean from primary school up to university; in this sense, it provides learners with a long-term vision through their schooling years.

Providing teachers with placements, professional development, and employment opportunities is a complex task that must be undertaken in coordination by local universities, and local and Korean authorities. Local and Korean authorities can support the introduction of Korean in a few local schools, which would give prospective Korean language teachers the possibility to conduct their placement and ultimately provide a pool of qualified teachers. Local universities can contribute to teacher education by setting up regular professional development workshops for teachers, once a year or once every six months.

When addressing the lack of visibility of the Korean language, it must be first considered that the continuous decline of already low enrolments is a sector-wide concern, not a problem of the Korean language alone. A social media or online campaign for example, aimed at increasing visibility, raising awareness, and improving the public perception of the Korean language can perhaps bring some short-term benefits; however, long-lasting benefits can be reached only through deep changes in the public opinions about languages, a goal achievable only by a coordinated effort across all languages. Only if all languages will thrive in Australian communities and schools will the Korean language thrive along.

Conclusion

This contribution has presented an overview of the state of Korean language education in Australian schools. Despite the increase of schools offering Korean, qualified teachers, and learners over the past 15 years, the current status still raises concerns, in particular considering other Asian languages. This contribution argues that the future of Korean language education in Australia lies in focusing

on broadening learning opportunities for non-background learners, therefore supporting the shift of the Korean language from a community language to an additional language. Nevertheless, this contribution also made clear that, along with Australian and Korean institutions' and local university's efforts to support the development of Korean language education, there must be a coordinated effort across all languages to improve the perceptions that the broader Australian community has towards *languages*.

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