

A study of Korean language education and healing among middle-aged and older learners

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the potential of Korean language learning as a means of psychological healing and improving the quality of life for Japanese middle-aged and older learners. Results showed that Korean language learning could help alleviate various psychological issues experienced by middle-aged learners and contribute to enhancing their quality of life. Learning a foreign language is not just about acquiring information but also about meeting people who use the language and understanding and experiencing their culture. In particular, for Japanese middle-aged learners, Korean language learning can be advantageous as it can lead to the discovery or development of new hobbies or interests. Results also showed that Korean language learning increased learners' opportunities for interaction with others and enjoyment of learning new cultural customs. These positive outcomes suggest the need for discussion of teaching strategies that focus on psychological healing in foreign language education. Further clinical trials with participants who learn foreign languages for healing purposes may provide more conclusive evidence on the diverse effects of language learning on stress, anxiety, depression, self-development, social connections, and cognitive ability.

Keywords Second language acquisition, Language learning outcomes, psychological well-being, Quality of life, Korean language learning, Cultural competence, Healing through language learning

INTRODUCTION

When is the best time to start learning a foreign language? What is the critical period for learning a foreign language? These have been long-standing questions in foreign language education. The underlying assumption behind these questions is the desire to attain fluency in a foreign language. Much of the current foreign language education is focused on achieving native-like proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As a result, some children start learning a foreign language as early as kindergarten, while most begin in the lower grades of elementary school. Of course, the foreign language in question is often English,

although in the past it might have been Chinese or Japanese. Mostly, the primary goal of foreign language education, in most cases is to attain good grades. Good grades enable students to gain admission to prestigious universities and secure better employment opportunities, which is why parents invest in foreign language education. However, the goals and objectives of foreign language education are changing, and the practical goals are not the only ones. Instead of merely pursuing higher education or employment, people are increasingly learning foreign languages for pleasure, such as to travel to a foreign country and converse with locals or to understand movies, dramas, and songs in a foreign language. This trend is likely to continue as AI and chatbots like GPT continue to develop. The focus of language learning is shifting from acquiring knowledge to pursuing enjoyment. Indeed, pursuing pleasure through foreign language education can have positive psychological and emotional effects. Unlike in the past,

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many people have started learning a new language after middle age because of the fun and benefits it brings.

Middle-aged Korean Language Learners in Japan

In the early 2000s, the popularity of Hallyu dramas in Japan led to a surge in interest in Korean language learning. NHK's Korean language courses also experienced explosive popularity, and interest in Korean language education which continues till day. However, the unique characteristic of Korean language education in Japan is the very high proportion of middle-aged and older learners compared to the other nations. Middle-aged learners are unique in that way they do not have specific immediate goals such as continuing education or finding employment.

Among the middle-aged learners, there is a very high percentage of women, which is related to the fact that the primary audience of Hallyu dramas are middle-aged women. However, it is noteworthy that it did not end with just watching but also many middle-aged women started to learn Korean. It can be inferred that Korean language education has a healing effect on the mind and body of middle-aged learners. In fact, there have been various interviews with middle-aged women who have reported being healed from depression.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether learning Korean actually has a healing effect on the mind and body of Japanese middle-aged women. This study does not involve clinical trials, but instead aims to investigate learners' responses through questionnaires.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We conducted a survey of 63 middle-aged Japanese Korean learners residing in Japan. Using a 5-point Likert scale, the survey measured that two main factors

have changed as a result of learning Korean. The first factor was psychological, which included decreased levels of helplessness, increase in self-confidence, changes in motivation and activities in life, and positive effects towards similarities in Japanese language. The second factor was related to quality of life, where the research was aimed to measure the increased interaction with others, discovery and development of interests/hobbies, improved relationships/family ties, increased meaningful experiences, improved ability to express thoughts/feelings, and enjoyment of new cultures/customs.

To analyze the results, we calculated the mean and standard deviation for each item to determine the change and impact of each factor. To address the limitations of the study, an open-ended question has been added survey, so that the participants can freely express how Korean language education has an impact in their psychological healing. We made it clear that this was not mandatory, stating that people did not have to fill it out if they did not have an opinion. There were 24 respondents out of a total of 63.

In order to assess the reliability of the questionnaire items, Cronbach's alpha was calculated using SPSS. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all questions was .901, indicating a high level of internal consistency. For the questions related to psychological factors that changed while learning Korean (questions 2, 4, 13, and 15), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .789, indicating a good level of reliability. Similarly, for the questions related to quality of life factors that changed while learning Korean (questions 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 12), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .845, indicating a good level of reliability. These results suggest that the questionnaire items were reliable and consistent in measuring the intended constructs.

Table. 1. Respondent information.

	Division	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	7	11.1
	Female	56	88.9
Age	Above 40	11	17.5
	Above 50	25	39.7
	Above 60	14	22.2
	Above 70	13	20.6
Duration of study	Less than 1 year	10	15.9
	More than 1 year - less than 3 years	11	17.5
	More than 4 years - less than 5 years	12	19
	More than 5 years - less than 10 years	19	30.2
Source of learning	10 years or more than 10 years	11	17.5
	Self-Taught	6	9.5

	Language classrooms	44	69.8
	Korean Cultural Centre, King Sejong Academy, etc.	9	14.3
	Private Lessons	4	6.3

Table 2. Analyze the reliability of survey questions.

Division	Number of questions	Question	Cronbach's α
All	10	All	.901
Psychological factors developed while learning Korean	4	2, 4, 13, 15	.789
Quality of life factors developed while learning Korean	6	5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12	.845

RESULT

(Table 3) First, the psychological impact of learning Korean was examined. As a result of learning Korean, Participants reported decreased levels of helplessness ($M=3.38$, $SD=.607$) and increase in self-confidence ($M=3.75$, $SD=.671$). Participants also reported that learning Korean has led to more passionate and active life ($M=3.68$, $SD=.779$), and the positive effects of learning Korean were related to its similarities in Japanese language ($M=3.73$, $SD=.653$). These results suggested that learning Korean can have positive effects on an individual's psychological well-being and enhance the positive effects of learning Korean through reducing feelings of helplessness and increase in confidence, enthusiasm, and activity in life, and exploring the similarities in Japanese language. The overall mean of psychological factors was 3.5321.

(Table 4) Next, the impact of learning Korean language on quality of life was examined. The mean and standard deviation of each response are as follows. (5) Learning Korean has increased my interaction with others ($M: 3.87$, $SD: 0.751$), (6) It has helped me discover new hobbies or develop existing interests ($M: 4.02$, $SD: 0.609$), (7) Learning Korean has improved my relationships and connection with my family ($M: 3.54$, $SD: 0.758$), (9) Learning Korean enables more meaningful experiences ($M: 3.59$, $SD: 0.754$), (11) Learning Korean improves the expression of thoughts and feelings ($M: 3.41$, $SD: 0.754$), and (12) discovering the joy of learning new cultures and customs through learning Korean ($M: 3.97$, $SD: 0.567$). The overall mean of quality of life factors was 3.6752.

These results suggest that learning Korean can have a positive impact on various aspects of learners' lives, such as their social interactions, personal growth, and enjoyment of cultural experiences. However, the level and type of impact may vary depending on the individual learner and their personal circumstances. Further research is needed to explore these aspects in

more detail and to develop effective strategies to promote positive outcomes in language learning.

Finally, when the participants were asked to answer, "Please feel free to describe why you feel psychologically healed by receiving Korean language education," the following responses have been received.

There were 24 respondents out of a total of 63. To summarize this, here's how. First response was, "There are many similarities between Korean and Japanese language which makes the learning very easy". The second response was, "There is a healing experience in understanding and connecting to K-pop lyrics". The third response was, "Korean has nice rhythms and sounds, so listening to the same songs in Korean helps to calm my mind". The fourth response was, "Using different languages allows me to have experiences that are not usual from my daily life, which helps me to calm my nerves". The fifth response was, "When you are having a hard time mentally and do not have time, you can make studying Korean as a part of your routine, so you do not have to worry about it". The sixth response was, "Learning Korean gives you the joy of being able to understand other people, and the more you learn, the more joy you get, and the more motivated you become". The seventh response is, "Having a good teacher is therapeutic in itself". The eighth response was, "Communicating in another language brings joy and confidence". The ninth response was, "Because it is fun to have interest in Korean and learn new knowledge, it seems that this pleasure leads to healing". The tenth response was, "While learning Korean, I use parts of my brain that I do not use in my everyday life, and focusing on them is therapeutic". Finally, two respondents said they were not sure about healing due to their short study period.

While the reasons why Korean language education is therapeutic varied, respondents generally emphasize the similarities between Korean and Japanese language,

including the fact that learning Korean allows them to understand better and interact with other cultures, and helps them to develop themselves by building their linguistic confidence. They also enjoy learning Korean because it exposes them to Korean culture, music, and drama, and they find pleasure and satisfaction in gaining

new knowledge and experiences as they acquire the language. They have mentioned that it helps to heal them mentally. These reasons suggest the possibility that learning Korean can help people cope with a variety of problems that arise from the social, cultural, and mental aspects of being human.

Table. 3. Changes in psychological factors while learning Korean

Division	N	Average	Standard Deviation
2. The level of helplessness decreased while learning Korean.	63	3.38	.607
4. Learning Korean has improved my confidence.	63	3.75	.671
13. Learning Korean has made me more motivated towards active life.	63	3.68	.779
15. The positive effects of learning Korean are related to its similarities in Japanese language.	63	3.73	.653
Total	63	3.5321	.65439

Table. 4. Changes in quality of life factors while learning Korean

Division	N	Average	Standard Deviation
5. Learning Korean has increased my interaction with others.	63	3.87	.751
6. Learning Korean has helped me discover new hobbies or interests or develop existing ones.	63	4.02	.609
7. Learning Korean has improved my relationships and connection with my family.	63	3.54	.758
9. Learning Korean has allowed me to have more meaningful experiences.	63	3.59	.754
11. Learning Korean has helped me to express my thoughts and feelings better.	63	3.41	.754
12. Learning Korean has made me enjoy learning new cultures and customs.	63	3.97	.567
Total	63	3.6752	.54605

DISCUSSION

Pathological phenomena such as depression and helplessness, which have been increasingly prevalent in middle-age, suggest that the psychological conflicts experienced by modern people have reached a critical level,^{1,2} and active intervention is needed to address them.

There are many different methods of psychotherapy. Among them, 'reading therapy' and 'self-expressive writing' are there. In the United Kingdom, more than 100,000 people used book prescriptions in nine months, proving the effectiveness of book prescriptions and attracting the attention of the world.¹ Phenomenological studies have focused on the interaction between participants and reading materials³ and the therapeutic effects of support and interaction between participants in group reading therapy with adult women.⁴ In group reading therapy, people feel empathy and acceptance by bravely revealing their problems through interaction, which has been shown to be comforting and healing.⁵

Writing reduces an individual's subjective distress, increases happiness, and reduces negative emotions and

depression.⁶ The benefits of writing therapy are physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, and social.^{6,7} The physical benefits we're talking about are stress and tension relief.

Foreign language education involves reading, writing, and interaction. Therefore, it is worth noting that foreign language education contains elements that lead to psychological healing. The results of the survey show that learning Korean is psychologically comforting and has a real impact on an individual's happiness. A typical symptom of depression is sadness. Depending on the person, they may hide their sad feelings and not express them outwardly, or they may unconsciously deny them and be unaware of them.⁸ Nevertheless, the positive results of the survey can be seen as evidence that Korean language education has a positive effect on psychological healing.

Learning a foreign language is not just about acquiring information. Also, to learn and meet the common people who can speak it, and to understand and feel the culture in which they live. Learning Korean can be especially beneficial for middle-aged Japanese learners. In the analysis part, the item with the highest mean value was "Learning Korean has helped me discover new hobbies

or interests or develop existing ones. If you do not want your psychological comfort to be a one-time thing, you need to make it as a hobby. Having a hobby means doing it consistently. It is sustainable because of the interest and excitement which leads to the motivation to learn, and it is sustainable because you experience the results of your learning. It also strengthens the continuity by discovering or developing hobbies and interests. This is why Korean can be an upper hand over other foreign languages for Japanese people (linguistic similarities to the Korean Wave). In addition, the items "Learning Korean has increased my interaction with others" and "Learning Korean has made me enjoy learning new cultural customs" also had high mean values. This can be interpreted as Japanese learners enjoyed learning Korean culture and interacting with various people through Korean.

The English documentation says the following about learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world. The teaching should enable pupils to express their ideas and thoughts in another language and to understand and respond to its speakers, both in speech and in writing. It should also provide opportunities for them to communicate for practical purposes, learn new ways of thinking and read great literature in the original language. Language teaching should provide the foundation for learning further languages, equipping pupils to study and work in other countries.⁹ The English document is more ambitious and specific in relating foreign language learning to other parts of the curriculum, and to learners' general development. It also makes important claims about how learning a particular language has wider implications for the understanding of self, of one's position as a citizen and of the nature of language. In other words, foreign language learning can be expected to promote the mental, moral, social, and cultural growth of the learner.¹⁰

This study suggests that emotional stability and psychological healing from a variety of factors related to Korean language learning, including reading, writing, interaction, and cultural exploration. However, the study did not explicitly distinguish between the specific contributions of language learning and social communication. However, Korean language played an important role in promoting emotional stability and giving the learners a sense of accomplishment and also

increased the interaction with others, and increased the joy of learning a new culture through the language.

Because this research focuses on the psychological effects of learning Korean, we did not address the expectations and outcomes of learning other languages. However, there may be certain foreign languages that can maximize the psychological healing effect depending on the language region. During survey, along with the "sense of accomplishment" of learning, survey respondents also chose "intercultural understanding" as an important factor. If the target language is too difficult, it will be difficult to get a sense of accomplishment. This may differ depending on the mother tongue and target language, and also cultural factors may play an important role in developing interest and accepting the culture. Therefore, more future researches are required to explore the comparative perspective of different foreign languages in different language regions. Furthermore, additional perspectives such as cognitive development, interculturalism and multicultural understanding should be explored. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of foreign language learning on learner's psychology and it will also provide valuable insights into language teaching practices.

Even though this study did not involve participants who learned Korean for therapeutic purposes, it was found to have a positive impact on learner's psychological stability and quality of life. This possibility suggests that there is a need to discuss teaching methods that focus on healing with foreign language education. Future clinical trials with participants who have been learning a foreign language for therapeutic purposes may provide more definitive results on the effects of reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improving self-development, social connections, and cognitive abilities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicting financial interests.

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