

Emotional Dimensions of Korean Language Teachers: A Theoretical and Empirical Exploration

Bong-woon Song^{1*}

^{1*} *Korean Language Education, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Republic of Korea*

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates the emotional dimensions of Korean language teachers by integrating theoretical frameworks and empirical data.

Method: Responses were analyzed using qualitative content coding and frequency analysis to identify core emotional themes. A qualitative synthesis of prior literature was combined with a descriptive analysis based on open-ended emotional self-reports from 78 Korean language teachers. Key variables examined include native speaker status, years of teaching experience, and educational background.

Result: The findings reveal that emotional labor, burnout, and fatigue are common among Korean language teachers, especially among early-career and native instructors. Conversely, many teachers—particularly non-native and experienced educators—reported motivation, hope, and emotional growth. These patterns highlight the dual nature of vulnerability and resilience in the teaching profession.

Conclusion: The study underscores the importance of addressing teacher emotional burden through emotion-sensitive training programs and institutional support. Findings offer insights for future policies and professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing the sustainability of Korean language education.

Keywords Emotional Labor, Burnout, Language Teacher Resilience, Korean Language Instruction, Emotional Well-being, Qualitative Study

INTRODUCTION

Emotion is a central component of teaching, particularly in foreign language education, where personal identity, linguistic competence, and cultural responsibility converge.¹ As Benesch (2017) argues, such educational settings impose emotional expectations on teachers—positivity, learner-centeredness, and cultural representation—transforming the classroom into a site of emotional labor.² This theoretical framework is highly applicable to Korean language educators, who often navigate complex intercultural and institutional dynamics.

While research on learners' emotions has grown (Kim et al., 2025³; Song et al., 2025⁴; Yu et al., 2025⁵; Chae et al., 2025⁶; Han et al., 2025⁷), the emotional experiences of teachers—especially in the field of Korean language education—remain

underexplored.⁸ This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Korean language teachers experience and manage emotional labor. Drawing upon Hochschild's theory of emotional labor (2012)⁹ and Maslach and Jackson's model of burnout (1981)¹⁰, this research seeks to illuminate the complexity of teacher emotions, extending beyond simple binaries such as burnout versus hope.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Procedure and Instruments

Data were collected through an anonymous, self-administered online survey distributed via Korean language teacher associations, international education networks, and institutional mailing lists. The study involved 78 teachers from diverse institutional contexts (universities, private institutes, language centers, and online programs). While scales such as the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale (FLES)¹¹ and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)¹², or the Korean Language Enjoyment Scale (KLES) and the Korean Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (KLCAS)¹³, have been widely used for language learners, no scale has yet been developed to

*Correspondence: Bong-woon Song

E-mail: paulsong0729@gmail.com

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measure teachers' enjoyment specifically. Therefore, the survey in this study consisted of two parts: (1) a structured demographic and professional background section, and (2) three open-ended questions designed to capture emotional experiences.

- "What emotions do you often experience while teaching Korean?" (general emotional pattern)
- "Describe a memorable emotional experience related to your teaching." (critical emotional event)
- "How do emotional factors influence your teaching practice or interaction with students?" (emotion–practice connection)

These questions were designed to elicit both positive and negative emotional experiences. No incentives were offered, and participation implied informed consent.

Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of 30 male teachers (38.5%) and 48 female teachers (61.5%), reflecting the traditionally higher representation of female educators in Korean language teaching. Among the participants, 36 teachers (46.2%) were native Korean speakers, while 42 (53.8%) were non-native teachers from diverse national backgrounds. The non-native teachers represented a wide range of nationalities: Vietnam (12, 28.6%), Thailand (9, 21.4%), China (9, 21.4%), Russia (5, 11.9%), Japan (5, 11.9%), Uzbekistan (1, 2.4%), Myanmar (1, 2.4%), and Other (3, 7.1%), illustrating the global reach of Korean language education.

Participants' ages ranged from their 20s to 60s, with the largest proportion in their 30s and 40s. Specifically, 10 teachers (12.8%) were aged 20–29, 24 (30.8%) were 30–39, 22 (28.2%) were 40–49, 16 (20.5%) were 50–59, and 2 (2.6%) were 60 years or older. This distribution suggests that the majority were mid-career teachers.

Regarding educational background, 16 teachers (20.5%) held a bachelor's degree, 38 (48.7%) a master's degree, 18 (23.1%) were doctoral candidates, and 6 (7.7%) held a doctoral degree (Ph.D.). Thus, over 70% of participants possessed graduate-level qualifications.

Teaching experience varied across the sample: 28 teachers (35.9%) had 1–5 years, 26 (33.3%) had 6–10 years, 14 (17.9%) had 11–15 years, and 10 (12.8%) had more than 15 years of experience. Overall, most teachers had between 1 and 10 years of teaching experience, reflecting an early-to-mid-career profile. Pre-service teachers¹⁴ were excluded from the study.

Although this sample does not represent the entire global population of Korean language teachers, its diversity across gender, nationality, age, education level, and institutional context provides valuable insights into the emotional dimensions of the profession.

Data Analysis

Open-ended responses were translated into English and

coded thematically. Coding focused on recurring emotional descriptors such as enjoyment, anxiety, burnout, pride, fatigue, and motivation. Inter-coder reliability was enhanced through iterative discussion. To supplement qualitative coding, statistical analyses (Chi-square tests and ANOVA) were conducted to examine differences across teacher groups (experience, native status, educational background).

A word cloud visualization was generated using NVivo software to illustrate lexical trends. Importantly, the word cloud was not treated as a stand-alone result but as a complement to coded categories, allowing a richer contextual interpretation.

Ethics Statement

This study was exempt from IRB review as it involved no clinical intervention, personal identifiers, or sensitive data. Participants provided implicit consent, and the study adhered to ethical principles of the National Research Foundation of Korea and international guidelines (ICMJE, COPE).

RESULTS

1. Frequency and Distribution of Emotions

The most frequently reported emotions were burnout (16.7%), tiredness (10.3%), motivation (10.3%), and hope (9.0%). Other terms included gratitude, curiosity, frustration, and passion. Fig. 1 (stacked bar chart) illustrates the coexistence of negative (burnout, fatigue) and positive (hope, motivation) emotions. The duality of emotional exhaustion and resilience reflects the psychological complexity of teaching.

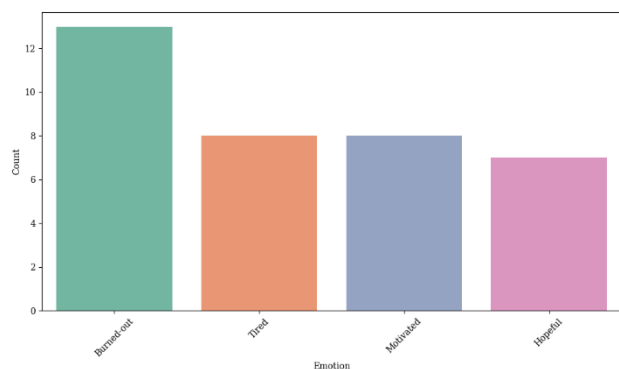


Fig. 1. Distribution of Major Emotional States among Korean Language Teachers. Burnout was the most frequently reported emotion, followed by tiredness, motivation, and hope.

2. Emotional Variation by Teaching Experience

- **Novice teachers (1–5 years):** Reported higher burnout and fatigue. Chi-square analysis confirmed significant differences between novice and experienced groups ($\chi^2 = 12.4, p < .05$).

Table 1. Emotional States by Teaching Experience (percentages)

Teaching Experience	Burnout (%)	Tired (%)	Motivated (%)	Hopeful (%)	N
1–5 years (n=28)	32.1	17.8	7.1	3.5	28
6–10 years (n=26)	15.4	11.5	11.5	7.7	26
11+ years (n=24)	4.2	8.3	16.7	20.8	24
Total (N=78)	16.7	10.3	10.3	9.0	78

Note. $\chi^2 = 12.4, p < .05$.

- **Experienced teachers (10+ years):** More frequently reported hope, gratitude, and motivation. ANOVA tests showed significant variance in positive emotional reporting across experience levels ($F(2,75) = 4.61, p < .05$).

These findings suggest a developmental trajectory of emotional resilience over time.

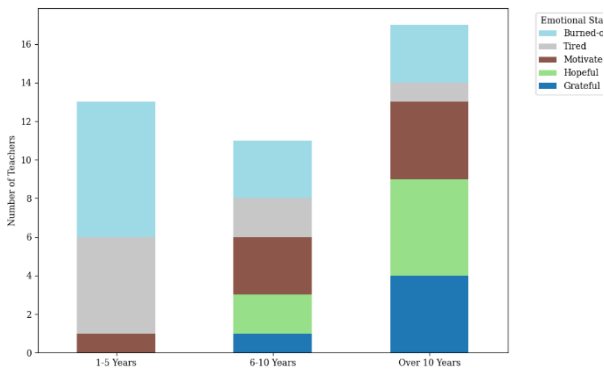


Fig. 2. Comparison of Emotional States by Teaching Experience. Novice teachers were more likely to report burnout and tiredness, while experienced teachers reported more positive emotions such as gratitude and hope.

3. Native vs. Non-native Teacher Differences

- **Native teachers:** More likely to report burnout and demotivation, possibly reflecting stronger institutional demands or cultural pressures. This pattern is consistent with previous findings on teacher stress in high-expectation contexts (Yoon & Choi, 2015¹⁵; Kim, 2024¹⁶).

- **Non-native teachers:** More likely to report hopeful, challenged, and growth-oriented emotions, aligning with resilience literature and reflecting differing institutional and cultural expectations. These constructive emotions echo prior research emphasizing adaptive growth among non-native educators (Oh & Lee, 2024¹⁷; Lee & Oh, 2025¹⁸).

Statistical testing: Confirmed significant group differences ($\chi^2 = 9.8, p < .05$).

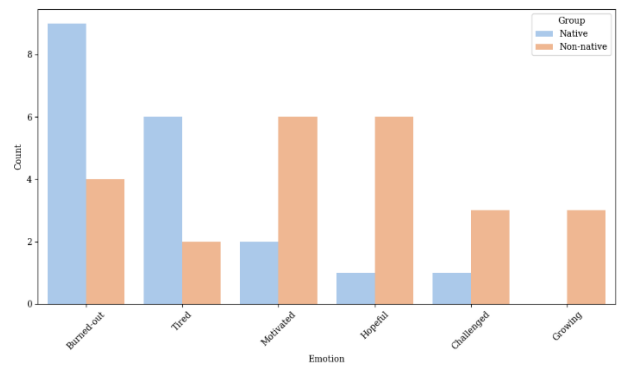


Fig. 3. Emotional States of Native and Non-Native Korean Language Teachers. Native teachers reported higher burnout, while non-native teachers showed stronger positive emotional orientations such as hope and motivation.

4. Lexical Trends

Word cloud analysis highlighted frequent use of “curious,” “demotivated,” “growing,” and “passionate.” Figure 2 provides a visual summary. These terms capture both vulnerability and agency, reinforcing the qualitative coding results.

Table 2. Comparison of Emotional States by Native Status (means ± SD)

Emotional State	Native (n=36, M ± SD)	Non-native (n=42, M ± SD)	t / χ^2 (p-value)
Burnout	2.91 ± 0.88	2.21 ± 0.67	t = 3.12 (p < .01)
Motivation	2.18 ± 0.71	2.83 ± 0.74	t = -2.87 (p < .01)
Hopefulness	2.05 ± 0.66	2.74 ± 0.81	t = -3.01 (p < .01)

Note. Scores based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high).

Table 3. Top 10 Most Frequent Emotional Words

Rank	Word	Frequency	Category
1	Burned-out	42	Negative
2	Tired	26	Negative
3	Motivated	26	Positive
4	Hopeful	23	Positive
5	Grateful	18	Positive
6	Curious	15	Positive
7	Challenged	12	Mixed
8	Passionate	10	Positive
9	Frustrated	9	Negative
10	Growing	8	Positive

Note. Words originally reported in multiple languages and translated into English for consistency.



Fig. 4. Word Cloud of Emotional Terms Used by Participants. Prominent terms such as “burned-out,” “hopeful,” “tired,” and “motivated” reflect the coexistence of strain and resilience.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm the centrality of emotional labor in Korean language education, while moving beyond a binary “burnout vs. hope” framework. Instead, emotions are shaped by institutional and cultural contexts:

- **Institutional factors:** Employment instability, lack of mentoring, and administrative expectations increase burnout.¹⁹
- **Cultural factors:** Native teachers face heightened cultural representation pressures, while non-native teachers often frame teaching as identity growth and professional opportunity.

These results demonstrate that teacher emotions are not only individual psychological states but also socially and institutionally embedded. The coexistence of burnout and resilience indicates the need for dual strategies in teacher support: reducing institutional stressors while fostering positive emotional engagement.²⁰

Practical Implications

- Incorporate emotional labor awareness into teacher training curricula.
- Provide structured mentoring for early-career teachers.
- Establish institutional safeguards to reduce workload-related burnout.
- Recognize the contributions of non-native teachers and foster inclusive support systems.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Korean language teachers’ emotions are multifaceted, shaped by both vulnerability (burnout, fatigue) and resilience (hope, motivation). Statistical and qualitative analyses highlight how experience and native status intersect with institutional and cultural conditions to influence emotional well-being. Supporting teachers emotionally is essential for the sustainability of Korean language education. Future research should expand sample diversity and employ longitudinal designs to further capture emotional trajectories.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

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