

The Need for Non-native Teachers in Korean Language Education

Hyein Amber Kim

State University of New York at Buffalo (University at Buffalo)

Abstract

This article reviews the recent literature in Korean language education, taking into consideration the main implications of such literature for Korean language teaching. Korean language teachers in Korea and Korean language education in the United States are examined, particularly as they relate to non-native teachers. Relevant research on non-native speaker teachers are discussed, together with their role in the context of the global need for Korean language teachers, specifically in universities and colleges in the United States. The article raises questions about the native speakerism and the role of non-native teachers in the Korean language education field.

Keywords: Korean language education, Korean as a Foreign Language, Non-native language teacher, Native speakerism, Raciolinguistics

Introduction

Korean language learners have increased globally with the growing popularity of *Hallyu* (the Korean Wave). Fueled by K-pop, K-drama, and Korean contemporary culture, Korean language learning has been on the rise. According to Duolingo (as cited in Dong, 2023), Korean was the seventh most-studied language and the second most-studied Asian language in 2022 on the online educational platform. Korean is also increasing in classrooms around the world as well. Korean language programs, in the form of courses in Korean as a foreign language—either in their regular curricula or in after-school programs—have been increasing in elementary, middle, and high schools in 27 different countries (Kang, 2022). In the United States, the number of students enrolled in Korean classes at higher education institutions jumped from 5,211 in 2002 to nearly 14,000 in 2016 (Yeung, 2023). The blooming Korean language learner population has led to a surge in King Sejong Institutes—state-run Korean language institutes—around the world as well. South Korea's culture

ministry revealed that it plans to secure about 500,000 Korean language learners overseas by 2027 (J-H. Kim, 2023).

The interest in the global expansion of Korean and the growing demand for Korean language courses resulted in an increasing need for Korean language educators on all levels, in various settings. This has led to a growth of Korean language teacher training and certification processes. Particularly, in the United States, the Teaching Korean as a Second Language (TKSOL) Certificate & Post Graduate Diploma PGD is available for those who are interested in becoming Korean language teachers (Universal American University, 2023). For the pre-K to 12th-grade spaces, universities like Georgia State University offer a Korean language certification program for educators who are interested in teaching the pre-kindergarten to 12th-grade setting (Korean Education Center in Atlanta, 2019). To become a Korean language educator in higher education institutions in the United States, however, such official certification may not be mandatory. While the majority of

Korean language teachers have backgrounds in Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, or Theoretical Linguistics (Wang, as cited in Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020), this is not always the case. One commonality of faculty who teach Korean language at U.S. universities, however, is that regardless of their areas of study, they are native speakers of Korean. If this is the case, is being a native speaker of Korean a fundamental criteria for Korean language educators?

The growing popularity of the Korean language worldwide has brought with it many changes in the language teaching profession, which is trying to adapt to the various educational settings and the diversifying backgrounds of its learners. One of the main goals of teaching languages is intercultural communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2008). With the increasing interest in Korean and surge of non-native Korean language learners, non-native speakers will be in optimal positions to lead other students into the Korean language learning. Therefore, Korean programs at U.S. universities should move beyond the native

speaker-dominated framework in language teaching—which often is coupled with raciolinguistic implications—and address the following questions: who can be a Korean language educator? Can only native Korean speakers become Korean language teachers? Can a mixed race Korean or non-Korean with multiple native languages become a Korean language teacher? If the Korean language is on the trajectory of becoming an international and global language, how do the demographics and backgrounds of Korean language teachers need to change according to the diversifying Korean language learner population? In order to address these questions, the article gleans from literature on the role of non-native language teachers (particularly in the English education field) to analyze the current status of Korean language teachers in Korea, examine Korean language education in U.S. higher education, and call for a need for non-native Korean teachers in U.S. universities and colleges.

The Role Non-native Language Teachers

In the field of English education, extensive research has been done on the role of non-native English educators of diverse geographical origins and language backgrounds (Llurda, 2004; 2006). Initiatives such as the 1991 Statement on Non-Native Speakers of English and Hiring Practices and the constitution of The Non-Native English Speakers in TESOL (NNEST) Caucasus in 1998 have appraised the role of non-native speakers in English education (Llurda, 2004). From previous research on non-native teachers in English language education, we may glean the strengths of non-native language teachers as well as some challenges they may face.

1) Strengths of non-native language teachers

Non-native teachers are an incredible asset to language education. Non-native teachers are “endowed with the privilege of bilingualism” (Llurda, 2004, p.318) and they are able to switch back and forth from their own language and target language, depending on the need of the learning situation. Non-native speakers also have the experience of having lived through the process of becoming bilingual and

expressing themselves in different languages (Kramersch, 2014), which may assist them in non-native learners. Moreover, non-native teachers may have more declarative knowledge (knowledge about the language), the capacity of empathy, and provide appropriate learning strategies (Nicaise, 2020). Non-native teachers may also have a more structured approach in teaching grammar, are better able to deal with grammatical difficulties, and may teach grammar more effectively (Llurda, 2006). Furthermore, non-native teachers may be able to better present to students the multifaceted reality in which the new language is used and help learners express their own identities through the newly acquired voice (Llurda, 2004). Finally, unlike the “native speaker only” policy that is applied in hiring practices citing students’ preferences regarding native speaker teachers, a growing number of studies have shown otherwise (Agudo, 2017; Díaz, 2015). For example, in a study of the preferences of 78 students of the License in LEA (Applied Foreign Languages Program) in a French university in Brittany, Díaz (2015) found that students

preferred native teachers in some items (overall in subjects connected to oral production such as pronunciation or oral exercises), but were inclined towards non-native teachers or both types of teachers in other items such as grammar, culture, strategies and vocabulary learning.

2) Challenges for non-native language teachers

Despite the merits of non-native teachers, there are various challenges that they face. First of all, there are challenges to non-native teachers' credibility (Thomas, 2014). For example, in many foreign language departments in Europe and America, there are prejudices and discrimination against non-native speakers, which leads to a "blanket exclusion of NNSs (non-native speakers) as potential teachers of English" (Thomas, 2014, p.6). This may lead to low confidence and self-perceived challenges to professional competence of non-native teachers (Brown & Berns, 2010). Non-native teachers are also prone to organizational invisibility within the mainstream, dominant culture. There is an underlying assumption of who the teachers are and who they are

teaching, which often leads to unconscious exclusion and dominance of the mainstream voice (Thomas, 2014). Non-native teachers also face challenges in classrooms of non-native students. Students may assume teachers should look a certain way to fit the native speaker image regarding race, language, and assumptions. This is due to the deep-seated racialized ideologies that idealize the “White native English speaker” and discriminate against some groups while privileging others. The field of raciolinguistics addresses this interplay of race and language, to uncover how the field perpetuates racial hierarchies in English language education (Rosa, 2019). Furthermore, there are challenges that non-native teachers face that stem from the ideology of “native-speakerism” that pervades the field, which values native speakers over non-native speakers (Swan, Aboshiha, & Holliday, 2015).

In order to address some of the challenges that non-native English teachers face and to understand the needs for their professional development, in the Teaching English

to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field, there have been second language (L2) teacher education programs and graduate-level seminars. For example, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) introduce a graduate level seminar within L2 teacher education that aimed: “(1) to raise graduate students’ critical awareness of the dichotomous discourse of non/native speakers, (2) to develop their identity as ELT professionals, and (3) to promote ‘counterdiscourses’ regarding cultural assumptions in the center community within the field of applied linguistics and L2 pedagogy” (as cited in Brown & Berns, 2010, p. 311). In addition, there have also been efforts to integrate the discussion of non-native English teachers across the curriculum of the TESOL MA programs, in an attempt for both native and non-native teachers to understand L2 learning experiences and challenges (Kamhi-Stein, 1999).

Korean Language Teachers in Korea

Korean language teachers are present in various spaces, including government organizations, King Sejong Institutes, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, KOICA and volunteering, and multicultural family support centers (mostly located in Korea). Korean language educators are present in four major areas in Korea. According to Kwon (2014), in Korea, Korean language education is divided largely into Korean as mother tongue/native language (i.e. *Gugeo*), Korean as a *Bangeon* (dialect), Korean as a Second Language (KSL), and Korean as a Foreign Language (KFL). *Gugeo gyoyuk* (lit. native language education) is offered to students learning Korean as a native language, often through Korean language arts classes in the Korean school system. Korean as *Bangeon* refers to the Korean language related to a divided Korea (i.e. *Bukhan-eo, Joseon-eo*) and Korean that keeps unification in mind (Kwon, 2014).

1) Korean as a Second Language (KSL) education in Korea

Unlike Korean as mother tongue/native language and Korean as a *Bangeon* (dialect), both KSL and KFL fall under the category of *Hangukeo gyoyuk* (Korean language education). KSL and KFL refer to Korean language education for learners whose native language is not Korean. Until the early 2000s, KFL was used as an umbrella term for Korean language education for non-native “foreigners” in the country. However, with the influx of immigrants and increase of multicultural families, the terms KSL and KFL have begun changing: KSL referring to Korean language education for learners in Korea, and KFL for Korean language education for learners outside of Korea (H. Kim, 2022). However, in some instances, the two terms KSL and KFL may be used interchangeably in Korea.

Currently, KSL aims to support “learners of multicultural backgrounds” (Kwon, 2014), including immigrants, long-term foreign residents and the growing

multicultural student population in Korea by providing Korean language and literacy education (Geum, 2022). It is important to note here that in Korea, a “multicultural” student usually refers to those who have one or more parents who are not from Korea (e.g. Vietnam, China, Philippines, Japan, Mongolia). According to the Ministry of Education and the Korean Educational Development Institute, the number of students from multicultural families has been increasing for 10 consecutive years, and has jumped 5.4 percentage points from 2021 to 2022 alone (Im, 2022). Hence a majority of the KSL programs in the Korean school settings tailor to this growing student population from multicultural families. KSL teachers, mostly native speakers of Korean, are found in this teaching and learning space; teaching students from multicultural families or immigrant backgrounds living in Korea. However, in order to become a KSL teacher in the Korean public school system, you must have a public school teacher certification or have expertise in Korean language

(Ministry of Education, 2020), which may be a hurdle for non-native speakers of Korean.

2) Korean as a Foreign Language (KSL) education in Korea

Meanwhile, KFL focuses on Korean language education for non-Korean, “foreign” students learning Korean outside of Korea. According to the National Institute of Korean Language (2023), a *hangukeo gyowon* (*lit.* Korean language teacher) is defined as an educator who teaches foreigners and the Korean Diaspora; those whose mother tongue is not Korean. In order to become a *hangukeo gyowon* (a KFL teacher), one must obtain the Certificate of Korean Language Teacher from the National Institute of Korean Language. Due to the increasing Korean language learner population inside and outside of Korea, the number of candidates who obtained the Certificate of Korean Language teacher in 2018 was 6685, a eight-fold increase compared to 842 in 2008 (Woo, 2019). KFL teachers may teach at universities, university-affiliated organizations, elementary and

secondary schools, government organizations (e.g. King Sejong Institute), multicultural family support centers, support centers for foreign workers, Korean Immigration and Integration Program (KIIP), and overseas businesses. While the Certificate of Korean Language Teacher is open for both native and non-native speakers of Korean to obtain, currently most KFL teachers in the country, much like KSL teachers, are native speakers of Korean.

In addition to the Certificate of Korean Language Teacher, another way to become a KFL educator is to major in KFL at Korean universities like Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS). For non-native speakers of Korean, this may be a potential avenue to become a certified KFL teacher. In fact, according to HUFS' Division of Korean as a Foreign Language, one of the main goals is to train non-native "foreign language" students to become Korean language educators: "We aim to cultivate talented people...as Korean language teachers. Through this, we hope that foreign language students who enter KFL will educate their students

in specialized Korean language and Korean culture based on their native language” (HUFS KFL, 2023). While many avenues are open for non-native speakers to become KSL and KFL teachers in Korea, due to the availability of native speakers of Korean in the country as well as the underlying ideology of “native-speakerism” that pervades the Korean language education field, native speakers of Korean are often valued over non-native speakers of Korean, much like the English language education field (Swan, Aboshiha, & Holliday, 2015).

Korean Language Education in U.S. Higher Education

There have been three major waves of Korean immigrants to the United States: the first wave of Korean immigrants in 1903-1949; the second wave in 1950-1964; and the third wave in the 1960s through the early 1980s (Chung, 2023). In response to the growing Korean immigrant population and increasing interest in the language, more U.S. universities and colleges started offering Korean on campuses. In fact, from 1970 to 2000—during and after the third wave of Korean

immigration—Korean courses showed remarkable gains in enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities (Choi, 2016). In the 1990s, Korean saw the largest growth among all the languages except for American Sign Language (Choi, 2016). As of 2020, over 80 institutions in North America offer more than three years of Korean language courses (Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020).

Generally, in the United States, Korean language education has been divided into three branches: Korean as a Mother Tongue/Native Language, KHL (Korean as a Heritage Language), and KFL (Kwon, 2014). However, Korean as a Mother Tongue/Native Language—Korean language education for Korean students studying abroad, 1st-generation Korean immigrants, 1.5-generation Korean immigrants—is a smaller branch of the three, and is often absorbed with the two main branches of KHL and KFL. In U.S. higher education, most Korean language courses offered currently are KFL courses, with some institutions that offer separate, independent KHL courses. However, due to the fact

that many U.S. institutions do not offer Korean courses solely devoted to heritage learners of Korean, it is not uncommon to see heritage learners of Korean in the context of KFL classrooms.

1) Korean as a Heritage Language (KHL) education in the US

Korean language education is not widely offered in the mainstream U.S. public school system, leading to families and communities offering KHL education in the communities (Choi, 2016). A representative example of heritage language schools are Korean immigrant church-based Korean language schools (H. A. Kim, 2021). Most of the teachers in the community-based Korean schools are members of the Korean community; a majority of them heritage speakers of Korean as well as being ethnically and *racially* Korean (H. A. Kim, 2020). In higher education in the United States, while KHL courses are offered at some institutions, the size and organization of the Korean program, backgrounds and needs of learners, and the size of the

surrounding Korean community may also affect the availability. One unique phenomenon of Korean classes in U.S. universities and colleges is that heritage learners of Korean have a dominant presence in intermediate and advanced level courses, compared to the beginner-level courses (Choi, 2016).

It must be pointed out here how the term *heritage language* has been used and understood in Korean language education. In the U.S. context, *heritage language* is a term that refers to a “language of personal relevance other than English” encompassing indigenous, colonial, and immigrant languages (Fishman, as cited in Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003, p. 216). In addition, a heritage language speaker is “someone who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken and who speaks or at least understands the language and is to some degree bilingual in the home language and in English” (Valdés, 2001, p. 38). The definition and categorization of a heritage language learner, however, is often limited to those who are “fully heritage” or learners

who are from a monoracial background with two immigrant parents speaking the HL in the home (H. A. Kim, 2021). Similarly, the term Korean *heritage* language has been used mostly to refer to the language of people of ethnic Korean background who are monoracial Koreans (H. A. Kim, 2021). Accordingly, mixed race Korean Americans often are not recognized as learning their *heritage* language while Korean Diaspora (e.g. Korean Americans) are (H. A. Kim, 2021). With the diversifying population of Korean speakers, including third-generation Korean Americans and subgroups of heritage language learners, the term heritage language must be problematized and reconsidered as it leads to implications of inclusion and exclusion of some heritage learners over others.

2) Korean as a Foreign Language (KFL) education in the US

Another branch of Korean language education in U.S. universities and colleges is KFL. Coupled with the growing interest in Korean popular culture, student demand is driving

more Korean language courses and study abroad experiences on U.S. university campuses (Cox, 2023). According to the Modern Language Association (as cited in Ahn, 2022), student enrollment in Korean language classes at U.S. colleges has risen 78 percent from 2009 to 2016, reaching 15,000, even though the total number of enrollment in language classes has plateaued in recent years. More courses now offered and are opening in U.S. higher education settings are KLF courses, targeted towards the growing Korean language learner population. Along with Korean language courses, more programs are also offering Korean culture courses as well (Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020). While there is extant literature on issues, pedagogy, literacies, and program building regarding KFL education (Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020), not many studies discuss the need (or lack thereof) for non-native teachers in the field.

The Need for Non-native Korean Teachers in U.S. Universities and Colleges

U.S. university and college campuses are educational and research hot spots for Korean language teaching and learning. Currently, the majority of Korean language teachers are women lecturers in their 40s or 50s, with over ten years of experience, holding a doctoral degree from an American higher education institution in Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, or Theoretical Linguistics (Wang, as cited in Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020). It has also been documented that there is a decrease in KFL faculty who have backgrounds in theoretical linguistics (e.g. syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics) and an increase in faculty with Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, and Foreign Language Education (Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020). While this is the current snapshot of KFL faculty, this may not always be the case. In fact, there are faculty members in KFL teaching at U.S. universities and colleges who may have backgrounds in areas such as Korean literature, Korean studies, history, and even music. In other words, a

background in Korean language pedagogy, Korean linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, or Foreign Language Education is preferred, but may not always be required.

1) Why KFL faculty diversity matters

One commonality of KFL faculty in U.S. higher education is that regardless of the faculty's areas of study, all are predominantly native speakers of Korean, who are mostly also ethnically and racially Korean. It is noteworthy that data about non-native teachers of Korean *and* data about non-Korean/mixed-race Korean educators of Korean in the field are nonexistent or sparse; perhaps due to the insufficient number of non-Korean/mixed-race and non-native educators in the field. This phenomenon may be exposing the native speaker-dominated framework in Korean language teaching—which often is coupled with raciolinguistic implications. However, with the expanding KFL field, a perennial question—perhaps the perennial question—about the landscape of native/non-native teachers must be raised.

Why are KFL educators predominantly monoracial, native speakers of Korean? More importantly, should they be—given the increasingly diverse teaching and learning environment and diversifying learner population? How can the KFL faculty profile diversify to include teachers from various backgrounds? Relatedly, subtle, subversive, hidden, and covert racialized ideologies of “(racial/ethnic) Korean native speakerism” that continue to pervade the Korean language education field must be examined.

The racial, ethnic, linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds of students at U.S. universities and colleges continue to diversify. The representation of all racial/ethnic groups increased on college campuses between 1980 and 2022, except for white students (Nam, 2023). Faculty in U.S. higher education institutions are also becoming more diverse, although they remain far less so than students (Davis & Fry, 2019). Similarly, the backgrounds of the Korean language learner student population on campuses is diversifying, but the Korean language education field is not succeeding in

diversifying faculty. It has been reported that students who have educators of the same racial or ethnic background are more likely to perceive those teachers as role models and put greater effort in school and higher college goals (Nam, 2023). Accordingly, it may be beneficial for KFL students to have faculty who look like them and also share a similar Korean language learning journey as a KFL learner. In fact, non-native KFL faculty members, having knowledge of the linguistic backgrounds and various identities of KFL learners, may have a greater appreciation of the difficulties that the students face learning Korean.

2) Strengths and challenges of non-native KFL teachers

Non-native Korean educators may be able to help other non-native students with their own lived experiences of learning Korean (Kramersch, 2014). Non-native Korean educators may also have more linguistic awareness of the linguistic systems underlying the languages/dialects the students speak, as the linguistic distance between teacher and learner is closer (Llurda, 2006). In addition, non-native

Korean educators who speak the same L1—English in the U.S. context—as their students may be more accurate in identifying the sources of lexical difficulty and better teaching grammar than native Korean teachers, much like in English education (Llurda, 2006). At the University at Buffalo, there have been two non-native teachers in the Korean program within the past five years: one White male American teacher and one White male Canadian teacher. Both teachers, as linguistics scholars and KFL learners themselves, taught beginner-level Korean courses and students reported positive learning experiences with these teachers, citing many of the merits of having non-native teachers as mentioned above (e.g. effective grammar teaching, ability to understand learners’ difficulties, closer cultural proximity with learners).

There are, of course, challenges that are specific to Korean language education for non-native Korean speakers who are willing to become KFL teachers at U.S. universities and colleges. First and foremost, there is a lack of official training and accreditation for Korean teachers at the graduate

level in general (Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020). Currently, the American Association of Teachers of Korean (AATK) has assumed its role of KFL faculty training through the annual conferences and faculty workshops, and since official Korean teaching certifications (e.g. TKSOL) are not required to obtain a faculty position in U.S. higher education, non-native educators are dependent on the hiring processes of each Korean program in U.S. universities or colleges. Non-native educators may be perceived by fellow faculty members and students as not having the language abilities to teach Korean compared to native speaking teachers, leading to discrimination within the field. Non-native teachers may also be questioned about their linguistic authenticity, fluency in Korean with ‘original’ accent, and understanding of Korean culture; advantages that native speakers of Korean may have, compared with non-native teachers (Nicaise, 2020). These prejudices may pose a challenge in KFL classrooms with heritage learners of Korean, particularly in upper-level or literature courses.

In order to support KFL teachers in the Korean language education field, it would be crucial to integrate scholarly discussion on non-native Korean teachers in teacher education programs, professional conferences, and seminars. On a broad level, like the TESOL field, alternative pedagogical models need to be explored and field-tested rather than transferring the native speaker models to various teaching contexts. With regards to the development of non-native Korean teachers' proficiency for teaching success, teacher training programs need to take on non-native Korean teachers' language demands into consideration. In addition, discussion is needed on what kinds of training will better develop non-native Korean teachers' professional competence in the L2 education programs, given their unique challenges. Research should also be conducted to further understand the experiences of not only non-native Korean teachers, but learners who learn Korean with a non-native teachers as well. Meanwhile, a step for U.S. universities and

colleges may be for non-native Korean teachers to teach introductory, first-semester courses in Korean programs.

Final Remarks

There are a growing number of Korean language learners, who are of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds. With the increasing Korean language speaking population globally, there will be more non-native speakers and users of the Korean language. As Korean language learners of various backgrounds increase on U.S. universities and campuses, there have been more discourse about pedagogical approaches and practices, curriculum, authentic course materials, teaching and learning methods, and multiliteracies in the KFL field (Cho, Lee, & Wang, 2020); however, a need for a more diverse faculty profile that reflects the diversifying student population, which includes non-native, non-Korean teachers, has not been adequately discussed (or practiced). Native-speaker status is not a criterion for language teaching; rather, knowledge of and skills in the language, understanding of pedagogy, and ability

to understand and meet students' needs are (Agudo, 2017). Further research on what professional expertise is required to be a successful Korean language teacher in a given context should be investigated. In addition, the nature of Korean language learning and how non-native teachers can develop their unique roles as mediators should be explored as well.

The current snapshot of Korean educators in U.S. higher education shows that faculty are predominantly racially and ethnically Korean, and are native speakers of Korean. However, previous literature in language education has revealed the advantages and merits of non-native teachers (Kramsch, 2014; Llorca, 2004; 2006; Nicaise, 2020). Perhaps it is time to revise some notions and ideologies about native and non-native teachers of Korean, as native language ability may not necessarily mean more effective teaching (Claypole, 2016). With the conditions for the gradual acceptance of Korean as a global language and increase of non-native speakers worldwide, a diverse background of Korean teachers—including non-native educators—are needed in the

KFL setting in the U.S., particularly in universities and colleges where there is a surge in Korean language courses offered. With the increasing interest in the global expansion of Korean, and as Korean becomes a widely used international language, a shift of two types in Korean language education is needed: one is “a paradigm shift in research and teaching,” and another is “an understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of the uses and users” (Kachru, 1992, p. 362) of Korean.

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