

## Power Dynamics in Capitalized Korean Language Classrooms: Said, Heard, and Depicted Subjectivities of “Korean Teachers”

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the complexities of Korean pedagogy, which are socially bound and individually enacted according to power dynamics applied within Korean language classrooms. By critically analyzing teacher interview data alongside a Korean fiction piece titled *K'orian t'ich'ō* [Korean Teachers], this project uncovers that teacher-student relationships are multi-layered. Such layers stem from traditional Korean values where teachers are expected to wield authority over students, but simultaneously transposed into the globalized classroom environment where part-time female workers provide teaching services to international customers subscribing to and evaluating these services.

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Employing deconstructionist frameworks, this qualitative study aims to question the prevailing narratives of native-speaking language teachers' nationalist, ethnocentric, and individualist pedagogy. Consequently, this paper explicates Korean language teachers' subjectivities within and against the globally capitalized power dynamics, situating postcolonial marginality in South Korean context with Spivak's theoretical terms.

**Keywords:** Korean Teacher Subjectivity; Postcolonial Marginality; Power Dynamics in Less Commonly Taught Language Classrooms

## **Introduction**

Within the realm of teacher education, scholars have proposed terms such as *teacher belief* or *teacher cognition* to refer to the set of ideas and practices that teachers employ to enhance their teaching (Pajares 1992; Woods 1996; Kegan 1990; Borg 1999). Recent scholarship, inspired by Foucault's (1999a) notion that knowledge, power, and subjectivity determine the configuration of the subject, has increasingly focused on how individuals comprehend and express themselves within social and political contexts. Researchers described *subjectivities* as multifaceted, fluid, dynamic, and complex, with numerous manifestations (e.g. Greenwalk, 2008; Kelly, 2013; Gómez-Vásquez et al, 2018). Particularly, within the power dynamics of global capitalism, where languages are commodified as a means for speakers to gain a competitive edge in the job market, language teachers' identities—encompassing factors such as gender, race/ethnicities, nationality, and native/non-native status— influence how they position themselves and continually

reconfigure their relationship with their environment. For example, language teachers pursuing international careers often report experiencing culture shock and struggles in adapting to their new environments (e.g. Roskell 2013; Uzum 2017), resulting in transformations in their subjectivities—how they perceive, view, and experience the world. On the other hand, pre-service and in-service domestic language teachers encounter increasingly diverse student populations in terms of cultural background, motivation, linguistic repertoire, and learning needs in contemporary classrooms, necessitating ongoing professional development.

Another aspect highlighted in the study of *subjectivities* is the actions individuals take to construct and perform themselves, which can describe pedagogy as both socially bound and individually enacted in language teachers' classrooms. When pedagogy is defined and taught from a Western perspective, often in English within U.S. academia, it fails to fully represent and reflect the manifoldness of language teachers' pedagogy. For example, within the TESOL

field, it is not uncommon to encounter critical reflection of native language teachers' teaching practices and beliefs that perpetuates deficit-oriented approaches in the classroom. (e.g. Daniels 2018; Wang et al. 2021) Such critiques are essential in dismantling these classroom discourses that determine the appropriateness of languages and academic performance. However, the discussion must also extend to address the diverse realities of language teachers in postcolonial contexts who teach less commonly taught languages. Despite the recent global surge in interest in K-pop and Korean media content, celebrated for its potential to challenge English's symbolic dominance (e.g. Azzahrah et al., 2022; Cutler & Røyneland, 2018; Kim, 2016), there is a paucity of literature that contextualizes non-English language teachers' subjectivities, particularly within the context of Korean as a Second Language classrooms.

According to Spivak, postcolonial women professionals, obligated to both represent their backgrounds and adapt to new academic environments, straddle the line

between their privileges and marginalities. In this project, the four teachers interviewed and the three fictional characters in the book *Korean Teachers* can contribute substantially to the application of Spivak's theory by answering the following questions:

- 1) How are power dynamics distributed in Korean language classrooms in South Korea?
- 2) How do Korean language teachers' subjectivities resist and/or reproduce such power dynamics in their classrooms?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theoretical Framework: Spivak's Postcolonial Deconstructionist Approaches***

Deconstructionist approaches, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to structuralism, are a set of theories concerned with how language constructs meaning and how this meaning is shaped by power relations. In the context of postcolonial discourses, where dominant Western hegemony (Said, 1994) is imposed as superior, including the global use of English and naturalization of the capitalist economic

system, deconstructionist approaches have unveiled the construction of colonial powers' narratives of history and culture. By deconstructing these narratives, postcolonial scholars exposed how colonialism and imperialism have been justified and legitimized while marginalizing specific groups of people.

Gayatri Spivak is a well-known Indian scholar in feminist cultural studies through her translation works of postmodernist French scholar Jacques Derrida, and her contributions to marginality studies. In her book *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), she directly answered to the concerns and doubts regarding authentic marginality while elaborating the constraint as a postcolonial individual devoted to deconstructive projects. Spivak wrote that one cannot not want to inhabit and yet must criticize the structure/system, as postcoloniality is a case of “impossible no to a structure (p.60)”. This ethical concern as a postcolonial teacher who belongs to and benefits from the privileged and authoritative institutions (or in Spivak's expression, the teaching machine),

speaks to current struggles faced by language teachers in postcolonial countries.

However, applying postcolonial deconstructionist frameworks to non-European settings has presented inevitable challenges for academia. (Selvi, 2024). For example, Bhattacharya (2015) criticized St. Pierre (2013) for perpetuating an imposed binary discourse of *us versus them*, where *us* predominantly encompasses methodologically complex postmodern researchers through the citational privileging of the works of *them*, French authors. Kennedy (2013) also explained the strengths and weaknesses of applying postcolonial studies to explore minority communities in Japan. The author argues that postcolonial theory reveals its Eurocentric, Christian foundations when applied to an ex-colonial situation that is not European in origin, perpetuating the long-held discourse of a “modernising project” with liberator/west- savage/east assumptions (Kennedy, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, any Asian adoption of postcoloniality should be grounded in local



structures of meaning, allowing East Asianists, both abroad and in their home countries, to explore East-Asian varieties of postcoloniality within their own contexts.

In this regard, post-colonial language teachers who teach Languages Other Than English (LOTE) come not only with their privileges but also with their marginalities as they encounter multi-layered structures to inhabit and criticize. As Hirst and Vadeboncoeur (2006) explained, LOTE teachers are considered as “containers” (p.209), vessels for knowledge transmission, the epitome of efficient and effective management with economic considerations constructing language and culture as commodities. Within and against such global neoliberalist discourse, LOTE teachers in Asian countries also recognize and resist orientalist discourses which otherize non-Western educational contexts by promoting Western-style as orthodox. For example, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have faced pedagogical struggles as they fail to address needs of local contexts (e.g. Li 1998;

Heng 2014; Williams 2017). Such commodification and otherization make LOTE teachers struggle to develop and exert their subjectivities, contemplating between leveraging their marginality and maintaining their sovereignty.

***Korean as a Second Language Teachers' Experience***

A brief historical overview of Korean educational academia reveals this point: following Korea's independence from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, Korean educational practitioners aimed to eradicate any remnants of Japanese colonialization, opting for American educational theories influenced by Dewey (for Dewey's influence on the "New Education" movement in South Korea, see Lee & Oh, 1997). Subsequently, Korean independence was followed by the U.S. educational aid program to Korea in 1952, symbolizing solidarity between the two countries in their pursuit of democracy throughout the Cold War period (e.g., Choi, 2016; Jeong, 2010; Kim, 1999; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2015).

As such, terms like *teacher authority* and *teacher agency* become tricky words within the multi-layered structures of globalization and capitalism, which privilege White, English-speaking, male educators. Particularly, while traditional East Asian classroom culture historically granted teachers authoritative roles in managing student behaviour and performance, teachers nowadays are often seen more as service workers catering to student-customers (Connell, 2013). In recent cases in South Korea, teachers have reported instances of abuse by students and/or their parents, along with a lack of protection in the system (Lee, 2023).

However, teacher subjectivities within and against such complex, postcolonial power dynamics in the context of Korean as a Second Language (KSL) classrooms have been underexplored. Wang (2022) highlighted the dearth of research on Korean language teachers, citing Kang (2017), who found that only 3.8% of the entire publication on Korean language education since 2000 focused on teachers. Out of a few studies available on teacher identity formation

and struggles, the concept of *teacher authority* has been mentioned several times as a way to secure their professional identity and to address their marginalities in the classroom. For example, Song (2023) focused on Korean language teachers' vulnerability in response to the internationalization and the escalating demand for English-speaking ability. Song's teacher interview data revealed that monolingual KSL teachers interpreted the Korean-only policy narrowly, supporting a monolingual immersion approach to safeguard their authority in the classroom, while KSL teachers with other language skills, such as English, Chinese, or Japanese, tended to challenge the Korean-only policy by utilizing their multilingual skills and experiences as resources for their teaching. Kim & Smith (2019) noted that establishing and maintaining teacher authority in the classroom was a strategy used by a Korean language teacher with non-native identity (Japanese in the study). Conversely, native Korean teachers were able to accommodate the local (North American in the study) understandings of teacher professionalism: becoming

nice, friendly teachers in the classroom. Lastly, Park's (2023) study also documented how Korean language teachers negotiate their identity between a cosmopolitan, open-minded stance and a nationalist, ethnocentric stance as an honorary Korean ambassador while dispatched abroad to teach Korean language.

## **Methods**

### ***1. Methodology and Data Sources***

This paper employs a qualitative approach, identifying itself as an ethnographic case study design that uses content and discourse analysis methods. Drawing from teacher interview data and a fiction novel depicting teacher experience, conducting a qualitative ethnography project proves effective not only in exploring participants' (in this case, Korean teachers) beliefs, values, and practices within their cultural, social, and political context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 1997), but also in reflecting the multi-folded, subjective, subaltern voices and critiques. (Seneviratne, 2004; Place & Ciszek 2021).

The first data source, teacher interview data, was collected during Stanley International Research project throughout Summer 2022. The second data source is a fiction novel, *Korean teachers* (2019) written by Seo Su-Jin. The book was referenced by different teacher interviewees several times during the interview (e.g. “Have you read the book, Korean teachers? It is just our stories!”). While it is not a common approach to include a fiction text as data, using a novel as a research resource has been one of the explorative choices made in sociology research to “see what happens when sociology and literature are reciprocally illuminated by their dissimilar, yet comparable, approaches to the same site” (Alworth, 2010, p.302). Rinehart (1998) advocated for the use of fiction as one form of the ethnographic strand and how it may in fact be more effective in conveying certain aspects of lived experience, complementing traditional academic writing.

Given that the site for exploration of postcolonial marginality (Spivak, 1993) in this paper is in language classrooms from Korean teachers’ emic and etic perspectives,

the relationship between the author, readers, and the text revolving around Korean teachers is worth scholarly attention: the author who was a Korean teacher wrote a book titled *Korean teachers*, and teacher informants who read it validated its verisimilitude as a way of presenting truth(s) about teacher subjectivities in the classroom reality during the interview. The author of *Korean teachers* (2019), Seo Su-Jin, was born and raised in Seoul, received her BA in Korean literature and her MA in creative writing while teaching at several universities in Seoul as a certified Korean language lecturer. She wrote her debut novel, *Korean teachers*, in Sydney, Australia, and was awarded the 25th Hankyoreh literary award. In an author interview, Seo acknowledged that the book included her and her colleagues' teaching experience, intending to narrate a story about how Korean society treats elite women (Choi, 2020). The plot follows four consecutive academic semesters at a language school in Seoul, depicting four Korean teachers' personal and career journeys encountering social and ethical challenges.

## **2. *Research Context***

Korean teachers receive systemic training through various institutions. To become a Korean as a Second Language (KSL) teacher in South Korea, one needs to graduate from 1) 4-year university, 2) National institute of lifelong education, or 3) graduate school to be qualified to get a certification issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Framework Act on Korean Language, 2019). With a certificate and teaching experience, the teacher can apply to work for language schools in universities, language schools abroad through King Sejong Institute or Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), regional community centers, and public grade schools, etc. (Introduction of Korean Teachers, 2023). While the field is largely women-dominated (Fraschini & Park, 2022), Korean language lecturers working in universities have expressed low satisfaction regarding welfare, salary and job security: 50% of Korean lecturers were teaching less than 15 hours per week, 57% of Korean lecturers were paid less than 30,000 Won (\$22.26 as of



October 2023) per hour, 88% of Korean lecturers had short-term contracts with less than one year, and of those, 86% were not offered severance pay (Park, 2018). Moreover, recent changes in South Korean law, particularly the revision of the Part-time Instructor Act in 2019, have been critiqued for worsening college lecturers' job conditions. (Kim, 2022).

### ***3. Research Setting and Participants***

To recruit participants for the study, I engaged with online communities for pre-service and in-service Korean teachers, distributing flyers explaining the purpose and process of the interviews. Among the 10 individuals who reached out to me, four teachers were selected as informants for this study. The selection was purposeful, convenience sampling aimed to recruit female Korean language teachers whose first language is Korean. During these cross-sectional, one-on-one interviews, it should be noted that my informants were wary of disclosing personal details of their struggles, complaints and conflicts inside and outside the classroom, including which exact institutions and class levels they are teaching at,

fearing it could imply who they are and negatively impact their reputation or employability in the future. Table 1 below summarizes the brief biographical information that four interviewees agreed to provide.

*Table 1. Self-identified profile of teacher informants.*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	L1	Teaching experience
Ji-eun	Woman	Not disclosed	Korean	Currently working at language schools in universities in South Korea Formerly dispatched to teach in European countries
Seung-Hyun	Woman	In her 30s	Korean	Currently working at language schools in universities in South Korea Formerly dispatched to teach in Southeast Asian countries
Seo-young	Woman	In her 40s	Korean	Currently working at language schools in universities in South Korea Formerly taught in community centers in South Korea Formerly dispatched to teach in Arab countries

Blue	Woman	In her 50s	Korean	Currently working at community centers in South Korea
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This paper also includes three central characters in the Korean novel, *Korean teachers* (2019), as additional participants in this qualitative study. This decision is supported not only by the justifications and rationale for the use of fiction in diverse human disciplines (e.g., Denzin, 1994; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Gibson, 2021; Hager, 2019; Rinehart, 1998), but also by the need to engage with fiction to represent subaltern voices and as an attempt to de-westernize what has been considered reasonable and/or reliable research practice: relying on “I” stories as data.

The reluctance of my teacher-interviewees to stand out as individuals who experienced specific struggles resonates with Wang & Brockmeier’s (2002) observations of everyday practices in Asian cultures: the existence of another genre of personal narratives where the ego often withdraws to the background in order to talk more about significant others, the

narrators' personal relationships with them, and the social context (Röttger-Rössler, 1993; Triandis, 1989). While such withdrawal should not be interpreted as passive storytelling, we can turn to fiction texts as supplementary data in which the writer could freely show us her "interpretation of the actual or imagined events" (Rinehart, 1998, p.204). Table 2 below identifies biographical information of three figures described in the fiction, *Korean teachers*.

*Table 2. Profile of three figures in "Korean Teachers"*

Name	Gender	Age	L1	Teaching experience
Seon-Yi	Woman	In her 20s	Korean	Recently hired at H language school in a university in Seoul
Mi-Ju	Woman	In her 30s	Korean	Taught 8 years at H language school in a university in Seoul
Han-Hee	Woman	In her 30s	Korean	Head instructor at H language school in a university in Seoul

#### **4. Positionality**

I graduated from a university in Seoul with a major in Korean Language Education, and just before Covid-19 hit, I came to the U.S. to teach Korean as a Foreign Language while working

as a Teaching Assistant and pursuing my doctorate degree at a Midwest university. My dual identities as a Korean teacher and a novice researcher in the U.S. academia sparked my interest in Spivak's (1993) concept of marginality as applied to postcolonial elite women. Therefore, when I had the opportunity to return to Korea with the Stanley International Research award, I was excited to connect with fellow Korean teachers. Initially, I believed that I was an insider in this teacher community, having received similar education and sharing common concerns and challenges in the classroom. However, I soon realized that I was also an outsider to the community of Korean teachers in South Korea because of my status as a transmigrant student/researcher.

Moving between the U.S. and South Korea left me feeling like I didn't truly belong anywhere but a third place. While my research participants and I all identify as "Korean women," the Korean teachers in my study refer to those who teach their first language, Korean, to foreign students in the Korean-dominant society of South Korea. However, in the

U.S., I have faced an identity crisis as a teacher from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group and as a novice researcher “coming from those marginalized places, but who can only enter the world of acknowledged knowledge in languages not their own and within discourses based on foreign and estrange-ing structures” (Krog, 2015, p.162).

While writing this paper during the summer of 2023, several tragedies were reported in South Korea as teachers committed suicide in their classrooms while demanding better protections for educators. Although situations of K-12 public school teachers and those of Korean language teachers in higher education may not be identical, these recent tragic incidents made me acutely aware of my privileges and responsibilities as both an insider and an outsider within Korean teachers’ community.

### ***5. Data collection and analysis***

Each cross-sectional, one-time teacher interview lasted approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured format, including additional follow-up questions and

conversations based on participants' responses during interviews. The interview questions given beforehand were used as guidance (see Appendix), designed to hear Korean teachers' experience, thoughts, and challenges while positioning themselves in the globalized and capitalized Korean language classrooms. One-on-one interviews were conducted in Korean, either on Zoom or in-person throughout the summer of 2022. Spoken, narrative data from the interviews were captured through audio recordings and later transcribed, translated into English by the author of this paper.

The data analysis was comparative and inductive, with interview data collected and analyzed as one dataset, the fiction text as another dataset, both of which were reviewed with Spivak's (1993) concept of marginality as a theoretical framework. Member-checks were conducted to enhance the credibility of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The first cycle of data coding involved descriptive coding and values coding to reflect participants' values,

attitudes, and beliefs, representing their perspectives or worldview (Saldaña, 2021). Through content analysis, teacher evaluation system was identified at this cycle as teacher interviewees explicitly talked about teacher evaluation by students and how it affects the individuals and power dynamics in the classroom.

The second cycle of data coding involved theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2021) via discourse analysis in order to focus on the social context of teacher subjectivity in a Korean as a Second Language (KSL) classroom in South Korea. Systemically integrated around “major conflict, obstacle, problem, issue, or concern to participants” (Saldaña, 2021, p.314) as the central/core category identified at this cycle included how teachers feel deprived, disturbed or disregarded in terms of teacher authority. As a result of Atlas Ti and handwritten coding, three themes were associated with relevant concepts from Spivak’s (1993) notion of postcolonial marginality, providing answers to the research questions. The



excerpts were drawn from the interviews and scenes in the fiction text with minimal revision.

### **Findings**

This research explores the multifaceted power dynamics within Korean language classrooms by examining the subjectivities of Korean language teachers through the lens of Spivak's theory, specifically focusing on three key concepts: teaching machine, impossible no, and postcolonial marginality.

#### ***Finding 1: Power Dynamics Distributed Within the Teaching Machine***

In this section, I will explain how South Korean universities in Seoul serve as postcolonial entities within a commodified education system that sells learning experiences to international customers from western countries. The use of the term Western here is not necessarily for essentializing, but refers to Euro-American hegemony and dominance in post-colonial contexts (Said 1994), having been mentioned as objects to be deconstructed and critiqued for counter-discourses by scholars (e.g. Metz 2015; Moosavi

2020). In this regard, Spivak (1993) defined *teaching machine* as the Euro-American university education system, which serves as an aggregative apparatus of power and knowledge. Teacher interviewees (Seo-young, Ji-eun, Seung-hyun) explained how the teaching machine operates, constructing a center of power and knowledge while disseminating pre-scripted classroom discourses to have influences on teachers in South Korea. Seo-young explained:

I guess the language schools grovel in front of Western students even when we all are in South Korea. I personally never get (negative) feedback/complaints when teaching foreign workers (from non-western countries). (...) If (Western) students tell me the feedback directly to me, I will accept it, but they backstab me through the school office, telling our boss first so we are fixed. I have even heard how they dismiss or bully an instructor, like students gather to score the instructor poorly in the student evaluation or to publicize some accusations.

The collaboration between Western students and language schools makes the teachers sense the hierarchies applied within Korean language classrooms. What Ji-eun, another teacher informant, identified as power dynamics at play was that the teaching institution “manage teachers tightly,” holding meetings “whenever teacher is considered as a problem,” according to “students’ popularity vote”, which corroborates with descriptions in *Korean teachers* as well (e.g. school office managers base off students’ evaluation of instructors’ employability, penalties and incentives.) Seung-hyun even made a self-conscious joke about her positionality in the classroom, “I shouldn’t be mad at customers.” She explained that responding customer-students in an emotional way is not professional and would “cause troubles”.

When the school office, as intermediaries between students and teachers, does not negotiate between different understanding of classroom culture and teaching styles, it only serves the teaching machine as postcolonial educational

institutions. Such a stance perpetuates the narrative of the liberated Western classroom versus the savage non-western classroom, as one of the modernizing projects (Kennedy, 2013) for the West to enlighten the East. Within such a power dynamic, local teachers are voiceless, dehumanized as mere accessories to be fixed or replaced.

Moreover, Seo-young's statement revealed another important point about the power dynamic at play between students in Korean as a Second Language (KSL) classrooms. When the teacher "never gets (negative) feedback/complaints when teaching foreign workers" while Western students voice their concerns, what makes one customer-students and others worker-students? What signifies 'foreign workers' in the South Korean context has been associated with ethnic/national backgrounds: they are mostly from nearby Asian countries (KOSIS, 2016) with different visa and documentation issues, some of which require enrolment/attendance in Korean language classes to issue and maintain the visa status. Considering recent news related

to discriminatory practices by language schools in South Korea,<sup>2</sup> worker-students' marginalized position in the KSL classroom could perhaps explain why they remain compliant rather than actively filing their complaints. It may be due to the possibility of fearing to cause troubles and losing their visa (as instantiated through characters—Vietnamese students— in *Korean teachers* as well) or having fewer motivations and expectations to create changes for a better learning experience.

The tension between Western students and Korean teachers, and a lack thereof between Korean teachers and foreign-worker students, taken all together, underscore the multifaceted power dynamics that emerge in postcolonial educational settings. The agency and ability to engage in classroom discourse are influenced by various factors, including nationality and visa status, educational background and membership to Western hegemony, and the broader

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<sup>2</sup> [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/1120099](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1120099) &  
<https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/area/capital/1127902.html>

postcolonial context in which language schools in Seoul serve the teaching machine, perpetuating hierarchies with local teachers feeling vulnerable and worker-students remaining silent in their classrooms.

***Finding 2: Korean Teachers' Subjectivities With "Impossible No"***

Spivak's (1993) *impossible no* addresses the double-bound subjectivities experienced by postcolonial elite women, who are perceived as "other" and simultaneously as "one-of-us-with-cultural-particularities" (Mazzei et al, 2015, p. 40). In Korean language classrooms, the teacher is the other to Korean learners and one-of-us to the teaching institution at the same time. Regarding how teachers navigate such subjectivities between the so-called global/ egalitarian classroom culture and Korean/ hierarchical classroom culture, Seung-hyun shared her concerns regarding classroom management as follows:

I feel like students from Europe, they are assertive and opinionated, although I am not sure if it's due to

generational, cultural or individual differences. I think they ask a lot of questions during the lecture, while Japanese or Korean students tend to approach the teacher during breaks, after class, or during class activities, but these villains just cut the flow of my talk and interrupt the pacing of the class, so I feel it's hard to manage the class. Wouldn't other students find it uncomfortable when the student thinks of the instructor like a personal one-on-one tutor and asks all the questions?

From alike episodes, comparison arose between individualist classroom discourse and collectivist classroom discourse, essentialist and relativist discourses, which built up the "impossible no" for Korean teachers who found it difficult to determine whether, when or how to correct the way students question (Seung-hyun), receive teachers' feedback (Seo-young), or greet properly (Blue) in the classroom. Without dialogues in which students and the teacher can understand and respect each other, the

“impossible no” oftentimes can lead to “despising eyes” (Seo-young), making “uncomfortable” (Seung-hyun) and “bothered” (Blue) situations in the classroom.

Such tension brought up during the teacher interview was also dramatized through the novel, *Korean Teachers*. For example, a teacher (Mi-ju) is positioned as a feminist who reclaims her professional self, managing a trouble-making boy in the classroom, while the student (Nika) turns out to be a gender-nonconforming girl who was offended by the teacher’s misgendering based on appearance and rigid feedback on her linguistic performance. In the scene where Mi-ju decides to reclaim her authority in the classroom as a revolutionary professional woman, the dissension with Nika reached its peak after the student threw their book on the desk:

I know boys like you. Violent boys. Boys who scare the girls. Boys who look down on female teachers, female doctors, female employees (...) Miju walked over to Nika’s desk, picked up his book, and handed



it to him. “Please do it again.”...Sustaining eye contact with Nika, she threw the attendance log on his desk. (...) “I’m going to do the same thing as you, Nika. Is that okay?” (...) His face had turned red. “I not like you, Teacher.” (...) She wrote ‘I not like you, Teacher’ on the whiteboard and drew an X next to it. “It’s not ‘not like’—you have to say ‘do not like’.” (p. 99-100, Korean teachers)

As Miju perceives the student’s behavior (not cooperating and making noises by throwing books) as inappropriate (coming at her to humiliate her), she attempts to correct both Nika’s behavior and language as a Korean teacher in the classroom. However, after this scene the writer reveals a truth that Nika was not “him” or “boy,” but an individual who was offended because of misgendering and corrective feedback from the teacher the entire time. When Nika used a simple grammar structure, Miju did not give points for it because she thought Nika should be able to use more complex grammar

structures. When Nika sat close to her female friend, Miju made jokes about it while asking if they were dating (as a heterosexual couple). All these discomforts and troubles in the novel point out that students and teachers could encounter such different structures bounded to and resisted by individuals, encompassing patriarchy that undervalues women professionals, queer culture underrepresented and unrecognized, and native-speakerism that linearly set up language learners' linguistic tasks to be completed in a pre-determined order.

Therefore, the space of impossible-no arises when individuals are within and against multi-layered power dynamics: students want to reverse imbalance in the classroom when it's teacher-centered, which could be seen as demanding and self-involved by teachers who may think catering to only a few students are the source of imbalance in the classroom.

***Finding 3: Disorienting Marginality Among Korean Teachers***

Spivak suggests that postcolonialism, as a deconstructive project, can lead us to a negotiable agenda of a cultural commitment to marginality. However, committed membership to the marginality for deconstruction may be challenging for Korean teachers when they feel like their marginality is not even recognized by the society. Blue shared how the system and field undervalue educators of Korean as a Second Language (KSL) as follows:

The regular teachers (working at primary and secondary schools) are treated well, annually sent to workshop or something. Young and old KSL teachers also deserve more and new trainings like that because the world is changing with lots of data piled up, like teaching methods, learners from diverse nationalities and different situations than before. (...) It feels dejecting when Korean teachers are treated poorly while other native-speaking foreign language teachers are credited and appreciated in South Korea.

Korean language teachers' marginality has yet to be said and heard enough. The job environment does not pay enough to cover living expenses, forcing Seung-hyun's co-workers into "doing a part-time job at a flower shop or a cafe during weekends." Seung-hyun expressed ambivalent feelings, feeling "lucky" to work at such a prestigious language school but at the same time feeling "skeptical" as to whether she could continue doing the work. Another interviewee, Seo-young, also shared the skeptical vision of the job environment regarding how employers in the field devalue teachers' experience with diverse students and are obsessed with the name value of the schools. When teachers fear being substituted with other less trouble-making individuals, being told "you should quit if you have complaints" (Seung-hyun), barriers that forbid the potential bond among underrepresented groups are the social pressure not to stick out.

Such reluctance was also described in *Korean teachers*. For example, the fiction depicts a conflict between the novice

teacher (Seon-yi) and experienced teacher (Han-hee) as Han-hee stood with the institution's side by discouraging Seon-yi's police report accusing a student of posting photos of teachers on his social media without permission. However, Han-hee's loyalty and commitment to protecting the school's reputation eventually did not pay off after the school office figured out Han-hee's pregnancy and fired her for the foreseen unproductivity from it.

What might be an ideal is acting together to demand better things and protect teachers' dignity within and against the system based on marginality shared, but the novel and teacher interview data point out the precarious nature of teaching positions in a capitalist society, where teaching roles are seen as replaceable while the exploitative institutions remain untouched and unchallenged.

### **Discussion and Suggestions**

As Wang (2022) pointed out after her extensive review on research about Korean language teachers, there has been a scarcity of literature investigating the context of Korean as a

Second Language (KSL) published in America. Therefore, this paper attempted to both diversify the topic and research methodology while exploring Korean language teachers' subjectivity within the complex power dynamics through the lens of Spivak's (1993) postcolonial marginality. As South Korean identity and culture have been constructed and deconstructed by colonialism, nationalism, modernization, globalization, and cultural hybridity throughout the nation's history (Schmid, 2002), subaltern groups in South Korea, especially young elite women teaching Korean languages in this paper, have struggled between a cosmopolitan stance and an ethnocentric stance as honorary Korean ambassadors (Park, 2023).

In answering Research Question 1, this paper examined how the teaching machine (Spivak, 1993), the Euro/American universities constituting knowledge/power structure over the world, dispatch students who prefer a certain way of communication and classroom behaviours over East Asian ones, which can be discursively perpetuating

“modernising project” with liberator/west- savage/east assumptions (Kennedy, 2013, p. 12). As explained in Finding 1, teacher interview data pointed out that the postcolonial teaching institutions in Seoul entrench such Western ideals to correct teachers according to those students’ feedback. This led to Korean teachers being trapped into the space of impossible no (Spivak, 1993) between tradition and modernity, East and West, center and periphery in language classrooms. As shown in Finding 2, such contradictions and ambivalences of the postcolonial South Korean classroom management, along with the coexistence of democracy and authoritarianism, prosperity and inequality, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, would need more scholarly attention to eventually challenge the homogenizing and essentializing tendencies of both Western and Eastern classroom discourses. It is also worth noting how Korean learners who are not from Western countries could be further marginalized in the classroom.

In answering the Research Question 2, this paper focused on how Korean language teachers' subjectivity works to resist and/or reproduce those power dynamics. The teacher interview process, along with scenes from fiction data, revealed that teachers could fear being called out as individuals disrupting the teaching institution's reputation as depicted in Finding 3, but also frowned upon individual students who they think are disrupting the classroom teaching as stated in Finding 2. Teachers confront multi-faceted discourses that position teachers with privileges and marginalities: commodification of teachers and students within neoliberal capitalism, globalization, and orientalism in classroom discourses, national pride and shame, patriarchal society, native-speakerism within the language education field, and so on.

Suggestions for areas of future research are 1) to follow up with what happened after the publication of the novel, as there has been a spark of collective actions among teachers since 2019, such as strikes and protests for better



teaching conditions and protection of Korean language teachers; and 2) to involve Korean language teachers beyond Korea to explore the regional interplay of power dynamics and subjectivity in diverse classroom contexts.

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**Appendix. Interview questions (asked in Korean, translated here into English)**

*I would like to hear your experience and thoughts as a teacher who has taught Korean language abroad, and/or taught the language to foreign workers or cross-cultural kids. I'm interested in what has changed and/or challenged your Korean teaching experience, how you position yourself in the globalized and capitalized Korean language classrooms that demarcates natives and foreigners, and how you have been aware of and addressed 'foreignness' in current Korean language curriculum and classroom practices.*

1. I'd like you to tell me about your Korean teaching experience. Who have been your students and how diverse were they in terms of level, age, nationality, background and motivations?
2. How do you position yourself as a native or non-native Korean language teacher? How has being a native/non-native affected your teaching? How have you experienced culture shock in the classroom?
3. How have your Korean teaching reshaped and negotiated different goals? For example, what has

been your goal in the classroom between having your students perform native-like fluency and having your students develop communicable fluency?

4. How do you perceive unique linguistic/cultural assumptions in the Korean language, and how do you teach those? How successfully your students learn those or How do your students struggle?
5. How do you acknowledge/appreciate students' various experiences/backgrounds in the classroom?
6. Regarding the way you give feedback based on how native speakers speak/write, can you share your challenges or inspirations in the classroom?
7. If you can make a change in current Korean language curricula and classroom practices (ex. delivery and order of content, inclusivity of vocab and topics, new needs in virtual/digital setting, authentic/relevant learning activities...), what would it be? (If you don't think changes are necessary, why do you think so?)

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Table 1. Self-identified profile of teacher informants.

Table 2. Profile of three figures in “Korean Teachers”