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Cultural Motivation: A Comparative Study of Korean as L2 and English as L2

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Abstract

Cultural motivation (Gómez & Salinas, 2023) [1], a new term in the literature, can be the spark that some students need to start learning a second language (L2). Korean as a second language students are deeply interested in culture and are normally introduced to it for the first time through media (Wang & Pyun, 2020) [2]. Therefore, we can say these students are culturally motivated. This study aims to compare the experiences and motivations of students learning English and Korean, and how these factors have influenced their language learning journey. The primary aim is to explore the role of cultural factors such as food, makeup, music, and clothing in learning the L2 (RQ1), whether culture is a decisive factor to start learning a language (RQ2), and how important culture is for language learning (RQ3). This comparative study analyses the motivations of 20 Korean as L2 students, and 50 students of English as L2. The participants answered a questionnaire, validated through a Delphi method (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) [3] with internal validation. The findings reveal significant differences in cultural motivation among language learners, with students of Korean scoring significantly higher in both RQ1 and RQ2 compared to English students. These results show that culture is not only a tool for language learning but also an essential component of language learning motivation, that is, culture is not in the learning process, but before it even begins.

Keywords: *intercultural education, language learning, motivation, culture, media*

1. Theoretical Backdrop

Motivation is a driving force behind learning languages, but what exactly is motivation? As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) describe: “What moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action – such basic questions lie at the heart of motivation theory and research” (p. 24) [4]. For some learners, interest in a language is not initially about the language itself but rather the culture it represents. These students are culturally motivated and drawn to a language because of their fascination with the traditions, customs, or lifestyle of the people who speak it.

Cultural motivation, a term supported by the literature (e.g., Brown (1994) [5]; Byram (2002) [6]; Kramsch (2011; 2012) [7] [8]; Dörnyei (2011) [4]; and Coyle (2005) [9]), refers to the desire to learn a language driven by an appreciation for a culture’s traditions, customs, aesthetics, history, or lifestyle. It describes a situation where students, drawn to a particular culture, begin by learning about its people and heritage. Over time, their desire to deepen this connection leads them to start learning the language as well. (Gómez & Salinas, 2023, p. 2) [1]

Wang and Pyun (2020) state: “As more people become interested in Korean language and culture through these dramas, the products of Hallyu also rapidly expanded to K-pop music, K-film, K-food, K-beauty, K-games, and other areas” (p. 31) [2]. This cultural wave, known as Hallyu, has sparked interest not only in the culture but also in the language, creating a strong cultural motivation for many learners to pursue Korean.

On the other hand, many students learn languages due to external factors rather than culture, particularly when the language is mandatory. This is known as extrinsic motivation, where the motivation stems from outside influences such as educational or professional requirements. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) describe “Integrated regulation is the most developmentally advanced form of extrinsic motivation, involving choiceful behaviour that is fully assimilated with the individual’s other

values, needs and identity (e.g. learning English because proficiency in it is part of an educated cosmopolitan culture one has adopted).” (p. 24) [4]. This shows that some students may learn English not out of love for the language or its culture but because proficiency in English is considered essential in today’s globalized world. The main objective (M.O.) of this study is to compare the experiences and motivations of students learning Korean and English as second languages and to explore how cultural motivation influences their language-learning journey. Then, these are the research questions (R.Q.) of this study:

R.Q.1 What role do cultural factors such as food, makeup, music, and clothing play in learning a second language (L2)?
R.Q.2 Is culture a decisive factor in starting to learn a language?
R.Q.3 How important is culture for language learning?

2. Methodology

2.1 Type of study

This comparative research focuses on 20 learners of Korean as a second language and 50 learners of English as a second language, from whom data have been gathered through an online interview. Interviews focused on participants’ experiences and perceptions towards the Korean and the English cultures respectively, and their motivation to study the language.

2.2 Participants

The participants who are studying Korean as L2 (n = 20), were selected from the snowball sampling method (Goodman, 1961) [9] due to their interest in learning Korean as an L2 and in the Korean culture. Most participants are of Spanish nationality, but participant no. 1 (#1) is from Latvia. They are between 15 and 54 years old, and some of them (6 out of 20) are between 24 and 34 years old. Out of the 20 participants, 17 are female and 3 are male. Their academic levels are as follows: 7 students are either enrolled or have a master’s degree; 9 are either enrolled or have a bachelor’s degree; 1 participant has a Vocational Training diploma; 1 participant is studying at a secondary school; and 2 participants are PhDs. Out of the second languages of the 20 participants: for 15 English is their main second language; for 2 participants it is German; and for 1 it is French. As for how long they have been studying Korean: 6 participants have been studying for less than a year; 2 for one year; 1 participant for two years; and 11 participants for longer than two years.

The participants studying English as an L2 were university students, either of Primary Education’s Degree or English Studies’ Degree. The participants (n = 17) who were studying a bachelor’s degree in Primary Education were learning English as L2 were mostly of Spanish nationality, i.e., there were 16 participants, plus 1 Ukrainian student. They were between 15 and 54 years old with most of them (n = 14) being between 15 and 24 years old. Their academic levels were as follows: 17 participants were enrolled in a bachelor’s degree; 1 student mentioned having a Vocational Training Diploma; 1 participant mentioned his high school diploma. As for how long they have been studying English: 12 participants had been studying for more than 2 years; 4 students for less than 1 year; and 1 student for 2 years. 10 participants studied French; 1 participant studied Italian; 6 participants studied other languages. The participants (n = 33) who studied a bachelor’s degree and were learning English as L2 were mostly Spanish (27 participants; 2 Italians; 1 Turkish; 1 Honduran; 1 Czech; 1 Belgian). They were all between 15 and 24 years old. 30 participants were female, while 3 participants were male. Their academic levels were as follows: 33 were studying a bachelor’s degree; 1 had a master’s degree; 3 participants mentioned other type of studies; 3 participants mentioned that they had finished high school. They have been studying English for more than 2 years (n = 30); less than a year (n = 1); 1 year (n = 1); 2 years (n = 1). French was studied by 19 participants; German by 5; and other languages by 11 participants.

2.3 Research design

The design of this research started by addressing the main problem or issue, i.e., comparing the experiences and motivations of students learning English and Korean, and how these factors had influenced their language learning journey. Next, the selection of participants was divided into two

groups. The first one was made through the snowball sampling method (Goodman, 1961) [10], according to their desire to learn about Korean culture and the second group determined by their degree of choice: Students with English Studies bachelor's degree and Primary Education bachelor's degree. Then, the research instrument (i.e., interview) was designed and validated through the Delphi method (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) [3]. Finally, data gathered were analysed through Jasp considering the M.O. and the 3 R.Qs.

2.4. Instrument

The instrument used for this research is an interview validated through the Delphi process, which has the following sections:

a. Demographic data: Gender; age; academic level; other languages they speak; time studying Korean.

b. Research questions, whose answers were arranged on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree".

b.1. What role do cultural factors such as food, makeup, music, and clothing play in learning a second language (L2)?

b.2. Is culture a decisive factor in starting to learn a language?

b.3. How important is culture for language learning?

3. Results

3.1 RQ1: What role do cultural factors such as food, makeup, music, and clothing play in learning a second language (L2)?

The descriptive statistics highlight differences in how English and Korean learners perceive the importance of cultural factors in language learning. As shown in Table 1, the mean for the Korean learner group (M = 4.100, SD = 0.788) is slightly higher than that of the English learner group (M = 3.960, SD = 1.029). This indicates that, on average, Korean learners place more emphasis on cultural factors like food, makeup, music, and clothing in their language learning process. Additionally, the lower standard deviation for the Korean group suggests that their responses are more consistent and clustered around the mean, while the higher standard deviation for the English learners implies more variability in their responses.

Group	N	Mean	SD
English	50	3.960	1.029
Korean	20	4.100	0.788

Table 1. Descriptive statistics - Importance of cultural factors

To assess whether these differences in means are statistically significant, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The Mann-Whitney U test is appropriate here due to the small sample size. As shown in Table 2, the test results indicate no statistically significant difference between the groups (U = 479.000, p = 0.777), suggesting that the observed differences in perceptions are not statistically meaningful.

	U	p-value
How important is culture for language learning?	479.000	0.777

Table 2. Mann Whitney Test - Importance of cultural factors

Although the differences are not statistically significant (p = 0.777), the descriptive statistics suggest that Korean learners consistently view cultural factors as more important in their language-learning process. This aligns with previous studies (Wang & Pyun, 2020) indicating that learners of languages like Korean are often more culturally motivated.

3.2 RQ2: Is culture a decisive factor in starting to learn a language?

As it can be observed in Table 3, the distribution of motivational factors across the two L2s is shown, and they were categorized into School Obligation, Personal and Cultural Interest, Family Reasons, Practical and Professional Factors, and Internal Motivation. On the one side of the spectrum and in

terms of distribution, English learners show a more varied distribution, and it is worth noting that a vast majority (N = 25) reported School Obligation as the primary factor for learning English. On the other side of the spectrum, Korean learners reported an exclusive motivation due to Personal and Cultural Interest (100%). In this regard, it is important to highlight that no respondents indicated any other reason.

		School obligation	Personal and Cultural Interest	Family Reasons	Practical and Professional Factors	Internal Motivation	Total
Language							
English	Count	25	9	4	5	7	50
	% within row	50 %	18 %	8 %	10 %	14 %	100 %
Korean	Count	0	20	0	0	0	20
	% within row	0 %	100 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	100 %
Total	Count	25	29.000	4	5	7	70
	% within row	35.7 %	41.4 %	5.7 %	7.1 %	10.0 %	100.000 %

Table 3. Contingency Motivational factors

Table 4 contains the results of the chi-square test conducted to explore whether there were significant differences between English and Korean learners. In this regard, the chi-square statistic value is high ($X^2 = 39.586$), and it indicates a substantial difference across the language groups. The p-value (p-value < 0.001) suggests that the differences between the two groups in terms of their motivations are statistically significant. In other words, the likelihood that these differences occurred by chance is extremely low.

	Value	df	p-value
X^2	39.586	4	< .001
N	70		

Table 4. Chi-square test - Motivation to start learning a language

Although the chi-square test results indicate significant differences between the motivational factors across the two groups ($X^2 = 39.586$, $p < 0.001$), further analysis is necessary to explore the specific importance learners assign to each motivational factor depending on the language they are studying. This study seeks to investigate not just the presence of differences, but how these differences manifest in the importance learners place on cultural factors in relation with their language learning.

The descriptive statistics (Table 5) reveal that Korean learners (N = 20, M = 4.300, SD = 0.657) rated the importance of the triggering factor higher than English learners (N = 50, M = 3.720, SD = 1.126). The larger standard deviation for the English group indicates more variability in their responses, reflecting a wider range of opinions. In contrast, the lower standard deviation in the Korean group suggests a more consistent and convergent view of the importance of the triggering factor.

	Group	N	Mean	SD
How would you evaluate the importance of the triggering factor?	English	50	3.720	1.126
	Korean	20	4.300	0.657

Table 5. Descriptive statistics - Importance of the triggering factor

To determine whether the differences in means are statistically significant, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The results, shown in Table 7, indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups (U = 362.000, p = 0.030), with a p-value below the 0.05 threshold. This suggests that the differences in how the English and Korean learners evaluate the importance of the triggering factor are significant.

	U	p-value
How would you evaluate the importance of the triggering factor?	362.000	0.030

Table 6. Mann Whitney Test - Importance of the triggering factor

The Mann-Whitney U test shows a p-value of 0.030, which is less than 0.05, indicating that the differences between the groups are statistically significant.

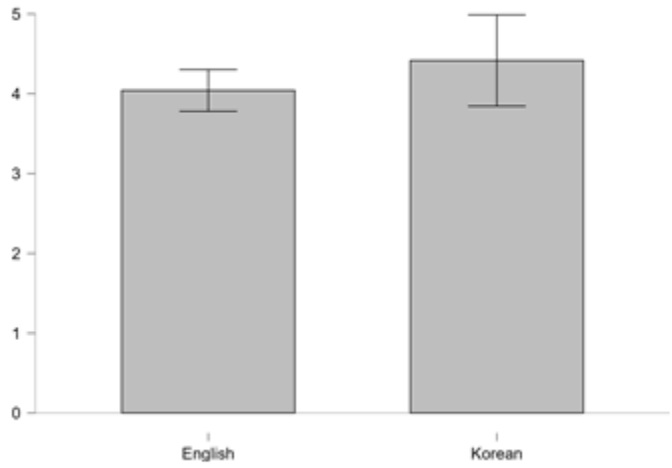
3.3 RQ3: How important is culture for language learning?

The descriptive statistics show that both groups—English (N = 48, average = 4.042, SD = 0.898) and Korean learners (N = 12, average = 4.417, SD = 0.900)—rated the importance of culture for language learning similarly. It is important to note that some participants did not respond to this question, which explains the smaller sample sizes. Despite this, the averages are close, and the standard deviations indicate comparable variability in responses, suggesting that both groups perceive culture as highly important, with a similar level of consistency in their views.

Group	N	Mean	SD
English	48	4.042	0.898
Korean	12	4.417	0.900

Table 7. Descriptive statistics - Importance of culture

This can be clearly seen in the following Table.



To compare the averages, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted, which is the non-parametric equivalent of the t-test, as was done in the previous case. This was necessary due to the smaller sample size.

	U	p-value
How important is culture for language learning?	210.000	0.061

Table 8. Mann Whitney Test - Importance of culture

The inferential test shows that there are no statistically significant differences (p-value = 0.061) at the 95% confidence level. However, if we lower it to 90% ($\alpha = 0.10$), it would be significant, which can be considered. Despite the differences not being significant at the 95% level, the descriptive data show that Korean students place greater importance on culture in language learning.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Culturally motivated students often begin learning a language because of their interest in cultural elements rather than the language itself. For example, Korean learners are drawn to the culture through media such as music and dramas, which act as motivating factors in their language learning journey. This demonstrates how cultural products can significantly influence the decision to learn a language.

The findings also show that motivation varies between learners of different languages. While Korean learners tend to be drawn by culture, English learners often study the language for external reasons, such as academic or professional needs. This contrast highlights the different motivational factors at play for each group.

These insights suggest that educators can use cultural content to enhance language learning, particularly for students who may not initially be focused on the language itself. By integrating cultural aspects into the curriculum, teachers can encourage both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, making the learning process more engaging and effective. This study points to the need for further research on cultural motivation in language acquisition.

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