



Exploring Cultural Motivation: A Case Study on the Fascination with the Korean Language

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Abstract

While communication and language can be the motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) [1] for some students to start learning a second language, that is not the case for many others, who learn the language motivated by the culture (Kramersch, 2012) [2] which attracted them. These learners show a deep intrigue with the culture of a country, which serves as their main motivation for foreign language learning. By examining the implications of media exposure, particularly in relation to Korean culture, we aim to bring into focus the factors that drive individuals to initiate their Korean language learning journey. This case study will analyse the motivation of five students of Korean language by using an interview as the instrument of research, validated through the Delphi method. Results suggest that these learners are predominantly motivated to learn the Korean language by an initial fascination with Korean culture, the aesthetic, costumes, and traditions, rather than solely by the language itself, which came after the fascination by Korean culture. This fact allows researchers to categorize these subjects as culturally motivated students, a new term in the literature. Through an in-depth exploration of this phenomenon, we uncover the intricate interplay between media, cultural motivation, and language learning, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of intercultural education (Byram et al., 2002) [3] dynamics. Conclusions lead researchers to continue exploring this phenomenon among other cultures and age participants, to confirm that the direction of this journey is not unidirectional (i.e., from the language to the culture), but bidirectional (i.e., also from the culture to the language).

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

1. Theoretical backdrop

The relation between language and culture is undeniable and has been widely studied by experts throughout the years. As stated by Brown (1994, p. 165) [4]: “A language is part of a culture and culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. Therefore, when learning or teaching a second language, we should strive to include culture as part of the curriculum. In fact, culture is fundamental for the proper acquisition of the language, to be able to communicate effectively in real social settings: “It has been widely recognised in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 4) [3]. This highlights the importance of culture in second language (L2) learning, and the opportunities it brings to the classroom.

However, while some students believe that culture should not be taught by the language teacher: “the language classroom is not really the place to learn about values, history, and culture... It’s debilitating.” (Kramersch, 2011, p. 361) [5], most students are willing to learn about culture in the L2 class: “Yet others, indeed a majority of learners of English around the world, are keen on learning the language precisely because it gives them access to a culture that they admire and a lifestyle they aspire to” (Kramersch, 2012, p. 59) [2]. Thus, it can be affirmed that this admiration for the culture of a different country may be the motivation for students to start learning a language even though, in most cases, language is seen as the key to culture and not the other way around.

The main objective of this research is to identify the cultural reasons that drive students to learn Korean as an L2. The hypothesis of this study is that these students are firstly motivated by culture



and not by language. Dörnyei and Ushioda describe motivation as: “What moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action” (2011, p. 3) [1]. Cultural motivation is a new term supported by the literature (e.g., Brown (1994) [4]; Byram (2002) [3]; Kramsch (2011; 2012) [5] [2]; Dörnyei (2011) [1]; and Coyle (2005) [6]), which describes a desire to learn a new language because of the student’s appreciation of the traditions, customs, aesthetics, history, or lifestyle of a country. This term describes a scenario where students learn first about a certain culture and, because of their desire to keep learning about the country and its people, they start learning the language as well.

This research will approach the Korean culture and the increasing number of students interested in learning Korean as L2, given the Korean wave phenomena: “Korean popular culture such as movies, TV dramas, and pop music is overwhelmingly powerful and TV dramas are one of the most remarkable popular cultures of these” (Huang, 2009, p. 1) [7]. Korean culture has had a great impact in the last few decades, which may also affect education, particularly when it comes to language learning. K-pop for example, has been used as a powerful tool for teachers and the main motivation for students in the L2 classroom: “As K-pop (Korean popular music) gains global popularity, a growing number of students want to learn Korean as a foreign language. K-pop is their major motivation in learning Korean, but it can be a great tool to learn Korean.” (Jung, 2021, p. 1) [8].

To sum up, this study will find out if five participants interested in learning Korean as an L2 are culturally motivated by discerning when and how these students discovered the Korean culture. We will also analyse which factors from the Korean culture motivate them, and whether language is one of these factors. These are the specific objectives (S.O.) of this research:

- S.O.1. To find out when and how participants discovered Korean culture.
- S.O.2. To find out what factors of Korean culture motivate participants.
- S.O.3. To find out whether language is one of the motivating factors.
- S.O.4. To find out the motivation of non-culturally motivated participants to learn Korean as an L2.

2. Methodology

2.1 Type of study

This research is a case studies of three Korean as a second language learners, where qualitative data will be gathered from an online interview to participants. Interviews will focus on their experiences and perceptions towards the Korean culture and their motivation to study the language.

2.2 Participants

Participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) were selected from snowball sampling method (Goodman, 1961) [9] due to their interest in learning Korean as an L2 and about the Korean culture. The five subjects are female, between twenty and fifty years old (P1, P2 and P3 are 23; P4 is 29; and P5 is 41), and of Spanish nationality. Their academic levels are as follows: P1 is enrolled in a bachelor’s degree in Tourism; P2 has a bachelor’s degree in advertising and PR; P3 is enrolled in a bachelor’s degree in Fashion Design; P4 is a PhD; and P5 is doing Vocational Training. All participants speak English, and four speak at least another language.

2.3 Research design

The design of this research starts by addressing the main problem or issue, i.e., the motivation for students to learn Korean seems to differ from those who want to learn majority languages such as English. Next, selection of participants was made through snowball sampling method, according to their desire to learn Korean culture. Then, the instrument (i.e., interview) was designed and validated through the Delphi method (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) [10]. Then, data gathered were analysed through content analysis methodology by considering the objectives of this study.

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.
- b. 2 questions about participants' first contact with Korean language (S.O.1).
- c. 2 questions on participants' cultural motivation to learn the Korean language (S.O.2).
- d. 2 questions on the factors in the culture that motivate participants to learn Korean as an L2 (S.O.3).
- e. 2 questions to identify the motivation of non-culturally motivated learners to study Korean as L2 (S.O.4).

3. Results

3.1 First contact with Korean language (S.O.1)

Most participants (P1, P2, P4, and P5) had their first contact through friends or partners (e.g., P1: "Thanks to a friend who liked both Korean music and Korean series", or P4: "The first thing was K-pop music that a friend of mine shared with me in high school"). P3 discovered the Korean culture through a magazine. The first factor of the Korean culture for all of them was K-pop, K-dramas (P1, P2, P4) and Taekwondo (P5).

3.2 Cultural motivation to learn the Korean language (S.O.2)

Participants listed K-pop, food, make up, skincare, K-dramas, fashion, beauty standards, aesthetics, and *manhwas* as the cultural factors that motivate them to learn about Korean culture and language. E.g., "In my daily life, especially music and make-up, but also food and skincare products" (P1); "I am most interested in Korean entertainment, and music as well as series and films, which I consume on a daily basis" (P2); "As a student of fashion design, I am particularly interested in the beauty standards they have, as well as their modern yet traditional society." (P3).

3.3 Factors in the culture that motivate participants to learn Korean as an L2 (S.O.3)

The factors that motivated participants to start or to be interested in studying the Korean language are: P1: to study a bachelor's degree in Asian Studies; she was already interested in Asian cultures. P2: Korean is the language of the content she consumes the most. P3: to study fashion design in Korea, to understand K-dramas, and to read or speak in Korean. P4 has not started to learn Korean yet, however she is interested. P5 has not studied Korean and does not provide further information.

3.4 Motivation of non-culturally motivated learners to study Korean as L2 (S.O.4)

Even though most participants (P1, P2, P3, and P4) said that the Korean language is one of their reasons to start learning Korean, it is not identified as the first or main reason for any of them.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Cultural motivation is the reason for students to start learning Korean (Jung, 2021) [8], and media play an important role regarding participants' first contact with both Korean language and culture (Huang, 2009) [7]. Language is not identified by participants as the main reason to start learning Korean. Therefore, including culture in the L2 classroom should be a priority for teachers (Kramsch, 2011) [5] to boost motivation in the L2 classroom (Dörnyei, 2005) [11].

These findings encourage further investigation of this phenomenon across diverse cultural backgrounds and age groups to understand why some culturally motivated students do not initiate their language learning journey. Conclusions underscore the significance of considering culture as a factor influencing students' motivation to learn a second language (L2). As a result, this study points toward a future research direction centred on a novel methodology where the second culture, rather than the L2, takes precedence in L2 learning.



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