

# Meaning and Value of Learning Korean Language in the Graduate School

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study aims to determine how Filipino students view Korean language learning in the graduate school in terms of its meaning and value. The influence of Korean pop culture in the Philippines has created an impact on the number of Filipinos who become interested in learning Korean language and culture. Also, the Philippine's Commission on Higher Education (CHED) through Memorandum Order 23, Series of 2010, has mandated the study of foreign languages in higher education to promote "understanding among nations". Based on the gathered data, three themes emerged referring to the meaning of learning Korean language: self-discipline, cultural appreciation, and new learning. Also, the respondents see the value of the learning experience which was eventually clustered into two themes: realizing the world beyond the Philippines and professional growth. Overall, Filipino graduate students find learning Korean as a foreign language to be very meaningful and valuable. Findings of this study contribute to limited local literature in the Philippines concerning foreign language learning, particularly Korean language which is gradually gaining popularity in the country.

**Keywords:** Korean language, learning, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

An individual who is learning a foreign language is motivated by a variety reasons: interest, academic mandate, social need, etc. The entire foreign language learning encompasses numerous challenges and fulfilling experiences, all at the same time. One may study a new language because of cultural interests: curiosity about other people's way of life, popular culture, foreign food and tradition. Filipinos are hooked on watching Korean dramas and Korean-related cultural contents, thus the increased interests in learning Korean as a foreign language.

As state universities and colleges in the Philippines comply with Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order 23, Series of 2010, "understanding among nations" is given emphasis through curricular offerings in higher education programs. These policies could be attributed to globalization and Asean integration and Mantra (2017) sees the contemporary time offering "opportunities for self-development". It is hoped that as Filipino students complete their respective academic programs, foreign language electives would contribute to the attainment of goals mandated by CHED. Korean, along with Japanese and Spanish and other languages are made available for students to choose and study for two academic terms.

According to Kondo & Ling (2004), language anxiety may cause potential problems for those who learn languages. Attitude and perspective towards a foreign language greatly impact how a learner may perform. If the student considers the language interesting and worthy of learning, he or she eventually cultivates a positive outlook no matter how challenging the situation may be. Gregersen (2005) even found out that "anxious learners" have the difficulty in reacting to their own mistakes. Pappamihiel (2002) added that "learners' limited competence in foreign language use, such as lack of vocabulary, builds up anxiety." On the other hand, if uneasiness and apprehension exist when it comes to the language being studied, unfavorable situations may arise like failure to fully gauge language lesson, and others. Realizing the meaning of the language learning experience could eventually contribute to the success of the process. A meaningful experience could break the stigma of those who feel anxious in their foreign language learning and consider it less enjoyable" (Gregersen, 2005).

Numerous assessment models (Lumadi, 2013) should be facilitated by the teacher in order to effectively measure student performance. Ineffective teaching strategies may hinder successful class discussion, and consistent "thoughtless repetition" is inefficient (Shaidullina & Ivanenko, 2012). Carefully planned lessons along with meaningful activities must comprise daily classroom experience so students would eventually capture the meaning of learning a foreign language. Later on, students begin to develop a connection to the foreign language being studied, thus, its value is being recognized. A better performance is at stake to those with positive mindset towards the target language. The value of foreign language learning is discovered over time and as it happens, the experience becomes more beneficial.

This study is an attempt to contribute to the limited available literature on foreign language learning of Filipino students in the graduate school. Korean language is relatively new field of study in the Philippines, thus the need for more related inquiries.

### **METHODOLOGY**

For this study, the researcher used qualitative research design through content analysis. A researcher-made survey questionnaire was utilized and distributed to the participants of the study who are Doctor of Philosophy students enrolled in a teacher education institution located in the City of Manila, Philippines. Participants are specializing in educational leadership and management, curriculum and instruction, and math and sciences education, respectively. The research instrument was sent to student's email addresses to give ample time for respondents to complete the survey. There were 19 responses received, which were eventually tabulated and interpreted. Responses were analysed for emerging themes regarding the meaning and value of learning Korean as a foreign language in the graduate school.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the results of the study, along with the analysis of responses gathered. The first part of the study captures how the respondents interpret the meaning of their Korean language learning experience. Based on the gathered data, three themes emerged referring to the meaning of learning Korean language: self-discipline, cultural appreciation, and new learning. The second half of the discussion talks about how the respondents see the value of the learning experience which was eventually clustered into two themes: realizing the world beyond the Philippines and professional growth.

***RQ1. What is the meaning of learning Korean as a foreign language to Filipino graduate students?***

#### **Self-Discipline in the Midst of Language Learning Challenges**

According to Kondo and Ling (2004), there is a possibility that language anxiety poses potential problems for language learners. While there are a hundred reasons to be motivated to learn a new language, the list is also complete with thousands of challenges to hurdle. When ask about the meaning of their foreign language experience, participants of the study reported values developed along with the problems and concerns they faced.

*R-9 It means awareness and self-improvement for me. One would be blind to not feel the presence of “Korean Wave” because it encompassed everything from music, movies, drama to online games and Korean cuisine. I am drawn to watching Korean dramas from the time of the global commercial success of “Jewel in the Palace” during my free time, if there is any. Learning a new language is more of a plus than a minus, it makes me more open-minded.*

The response above captured how learning Korean has led the student to be more aware and be improved as a person. Also, the experience is considered to be an opportunity that brings advantages and benefits. Another response also echoed this sentiment as Korean language is considered a tool in expanding one’s personal perspectives:

*R-8 Learning such language is actually challenging and needs a lot of effort. It is because we are not accustomed to it. It is not our own language. However, learning it is an opportunity for me to widen my horizon in terms of language and through it; I was given an idea of what Korean culture is all about.*

More than academic and professional growth, one respondent noted a very personal meaning of the learning experience:

*R-1 Learning Korean Language means a lot to me. It’s my way of bonding with my daughter, we watch Korean Movies at home together. Before, I kept on telling her about what she’s watching. I was thinking that probably those are already bad words. Now that I learn Korean Language (though I am not that good) at least I already know how to read some of the words and its meaning.*

One respondent considered the class a balancing factor in the graduate school, given the tedious and heavy demands of doctorate classes. The experience is being attributed to inviting classroom atmosphere, despite being challenging. The other respondent also considers it a “break” in the graduate school.

*R-5 As a PhD student, learning Korean language is my stress reliever in graduate studies. Though learning Korean language is not really easy, the class atmosphere is very relaxing and very enjoying.*

*R-11 It means a break from the usual academic work, an opportunity to use a different part of my brain.*

Significant and positive traits were also associated with Korean language. Patience, perseverance, and tenacity were identified to be developed among students based on the first two responses below.

*R-6 I viewed Korean language as an important factor in my life as a PhD student because it thought me how to be more patient and more persevering in making things better even during tough times.*

*R-19 Since Learning Korean language is sort of time consuming, I firmly believe that it is important in graduate school for it strengthen our tenacity and perseverance. It is an intellectual stimulated activity that requires much attention, but it is fun and interesting at the same time.*

Since the curriculum starts with the basic learning of reading and writing Korean alphabet, a respondent found humour and fun in the midst of the challenge. Succeeding responses also reflect how new interest could bloom in the course of their studies.

*R-14 More than just a requirement is the learning and fun that I get from learning Korean language. I can't help but laugh at times seeing myself in the first grade learning ABC's which are very foreign in my senses.*

*R-17 Learning Korean Language is tiring yet fulfilling because of its level of difficulty. My learning experience in Korean Language class means a lot to me for its boost my self-confidence; it helps me believe that I can do things beyond my ability.*

*R-10 Years before, my self-confidence was oozing with pride knowing that I pocketed with me English mastery. Wherever I go I can speak English fluently and understand it well. Now, it has changed gradually, whenever I see writings in Korean language I suddenly stopped and read them. My interest in Korean language, though not that expert, has blossomed.*

There has been a mention on how their self-confidence has improved by attending Korean classes. These are evident perceptions on how elective classes could not just serve as an avenue to fulfil credits in completing a degree program, but also to improve students' perspectives and personalities.

*R-12 Learning Korean Language is tiring yet fulfilling because of its level of difficulty. My learning experience in Korean Language class means a lot to me for its boost my self-confidence; it helps me believe that I can do things beyond my ability.*

*R-13 Learning Korean Language gives me confidence to brace new ideas in my chosen field. This makes me realized that in everything we do, we must find for its purpose to have a better understanding of the thing around us. Learning Korean Language broaden my horizon for my professor in the Korean Language also gave great insights about the working culture of the Koreans.*

While it is worthy to note that learning Korean in the graduate school entails numerous challenges, it is undeniable that self-discipline is also developed in the classroom, along with other positive traits and values. The responses are significant indicators of how difficulties in the foreign language classroom could also mean favourable episodes to the students. As Korean language learning is equated to developing self-discipline, students' interest could further be nurtured, making the entire learning experiences meaningful.

#### **Cultural Appreciation Highlighting Being a Filipino**

Learning a new language entails being exposed to new culture, society, and way of life. It is also an opportunity to come up with a comparative analysis of one's own belief and practices, relative to the language being studied. The classroom is a canvass of experiences being explored, as daily classroom encounter means deepening one's cultural appreciation while being sensitive to foreign way of life.

One response has shown empathy and sensitivity by appreciating history and the lessons of the past.

*R-17 I have learned to understand the Korean people, the pain they've experienced and how they have overcome those obstacles and survived.*

As the students learn day after day, they also tend to extend their experiences to their workplaces. True enough, cultural understanding through language classes could connect people of different backgrounds.

*R-2 When some of my Korean students noticed that I can write their names in Korean and can read Korean words even if I do not understand most it. They seemed to open up more to the point that some of my Korean students are asking for help in their Korean math class.*

One's identity of being a Filipino is also revisited by just merely looking at other people's cultures and languages. In the long run, it is hoped that the experience could yield positive attitude towards appreciating Filipino culture. The responses below have led the students to advocate for Filipino heritage preservation and the realization of cultural exchange.

*R-6 Learning Korean language leads me to the realization that I need to love and appreciate more our own native language same with what Koreans do to show their nationalism. For me, it is a real call for future leaders to preserve the context and heritage of our culture in spite of all the trends and demands of various foreign countries.*

*R-10 Learning Korean language has impact to me on the level of curiosity and interest to understand such language. Our country has opened the door to various East Asian influences and Korea is one of those.*

A response reflected how the class has bridged cultural retrospection and eventually being able to replicate favourable practices and learn from other people's culture.

*R-4 Language is a significant part of a nation's culture. That is why for me, learning Korean language also meant an opportunity to appreciate and understand Korean culture. It allowed me to have a glimpse on Korean's history and its influence on their way of life. Lastly, it made me re-examine our own culture as Filipinos and determine what positive things we could also learn from them.*

There are numerous ways to highlight Filipino culture and the Korean language classroom could serve as a space where appreciation and examination of one's heritage could be done. More than just solely focusing on the foreign language being studied, students were able to grab the opportunity of retracing their own roots.

### **New Learning Along the Way**

Some responses focused on how the experiences have given the students new learning in the graduate school. More than just knowing the basics of the Korean alphabet and essential grammar points as stipulated in the foreign language curriculum, the respondents of the study revealed that learning was beyond the usual academic notion.



*R-10 Learning Korean language is a leap of challenge for a non-native speaker of such language: A challenge because of non-familiarity of that language to us as a Filipino. It is considered a secondary language that can be explored which can be a special skill for the style of communicating people.*

*R-12 Learning Korean makes me realize the importance of knowing the culture of our fellow Asian country. I learn to appreciate the uniqueness of others. It also provides me possibilities of exploring Korea to see its beauty and to practice the new language.*

One respondent positively related “understanding some aspects of Korean culture” to being culturally competent. It appears to create an impact that as students expose themselves to facets of Korean culture, they develop a sense of accepting and empathetic attitude towards other culture. Another response equated the class to be a “challenging and humbling experience,” with an apparent greater goal of examining our own ways and practices.

*R-16 Learning Korean language means learning to be culturally competent. Though I am not entirely fluent in Korean language, I was able to understand some aspects of Korean culture I can now read, write and communicate simple Korean words, phrases and sentences.*

*R-4 Learning Korean has made an impact on me personally because it made me realize even more that a person is sometimes a beginner at something and that it is okay. Learning something new is always a challenging and a humbling experience. As a future specialist of my chosen field, this learning experience allowed me to further understand the importance of continuously exploring the educational systems of other nations. This way, we can re-visit our own curriculum and see its positive aspects, as well as learn constructively from another culture.*

Careful and thorough analysis of the data gathered revealed underlying themes which captured the ideas on how students construe the meaning of their Korean language learning experience. These themes are summed up and reflect that students' academic ventures do not solely remain a scholastic endeavor, but rather a personal and eventually social and cultural involvement.

***RQ2. How do Filipino graduate students see the value of learning Korean as a foreign language?***

Appreciating the value of an experience may take a long and gradual process. A connection between the learner and the subject being studied needs to be established to realize the value of the experience. This section presents two themes: realizing the world beyond the Philippines and professional growth to be the essential concepts.

**Realizing the World Beyond the Philippines**

The meeting of Korean and Filipino culture in Korean language class is one aspect that is considered favorable to students. It gives them a wider perspective of comparative and retrospective outlook: a view on being a Filipino through the lens of Korean language classes.

*R-6 I believe that the inclusion of Korean Language in the graduate school curriculum is beneficial because it provides an avenue for a culture – based learning to all information – driven students. It will help them to be more aware in the origin and context of other languages aside from learning various philosophies and theories related to Philippine education. Aside from that, since Korean language was considered as an elective subject in the tertiary education, it can also provide an employment opportunity to some students who will become proficient in learning the Korean Language.*

The dawn of ASEAN integration has been mentioned in one response, citing the gains of learning a new language. This time, the emphasis is not just on the country one belongs to, but the interaction and partnership that could be forged in the future. Being exposed to classroom activities has helped the students develop a wide perspective and relate linguistic and cultural components.

*R-7 With the ASEAN integration, it is an advantage to learn the language of the nearby countries to which we are having linkages. And Korea is one of them. It could help foster some partnership opportunities since the people they will be working with can understand their language.*

*R-2 Learning Hangul is indeed a great awakening for me because the class has broadened my perspective about the Korean culture, hence the discussion did not focus only on the language itself but how certain Korean words correlate with other words and their culture. Now, I somehow have an understanding why my Korean students in the academy are behaving as such, like when they talked to some Korean adults in the academy there are certain words that they include in the sentence. I now understand that just like us Filipinos, they have certain ways of communicating to older people.*

### **Professional Growth: Opportunities and Linkages**

According to most respondents, learning Korean language is valuable because of the opportunities it brings in the future. Responses have revealed that knowledge on the foreign language brings a new kind of familiarity and know-how. Moreover, the experience does not just entail academic pursuits but also an avenue to hone personal skills like friendship and cooperation with others.

*R-1 Learning Korean Language in the graduate school is another experience. I think it's more than learning any other Foreign Language, like Spanish or French. Experience, connection camaraderie, and unity are the hidden learning that I gained in studying the Korean language.*

One response revealed a related statement that being in the class is an impact of current interests which could eventually lead to professional opportunities in the future. The response is also coupled with an affirmation that with individual styles, strategies, and interests, Korean language may be learned in the midst of its difficulty.

*R-10. There are graduate students who will be interested to enrol it because of the trends and possible opportunities that they may encounter along the way of their professions. Although it is very difficult to learn, it can be learned and explored depending on the styles, strategies and interest of the students to study this language.*

For another student, Korean language has been valuable because it allows them to discover new areas of knowledge. As this happens, the class is considered a 'breather', given the fact that the course is offered in the doctorate level of study. Learning Korean has also been considered a quest for growth and continued challenge in terms of personal interest and undertaking.

*R-4 For me, learning Korean language or any other language is valuable in the graduate school because it allows students to explore other fields of knowledge. Some students may be already be well-versed in their fields and learning Korean language provides a breather from the usual workload and also breaks the monotonous tendency of academic work. Lastly, learning Korean language could also be a reminder that for graduate students to have continuous growth they must also continue to challenge themselves with new things and take time to explore other areas of interest as well – not just language but it could also be art, music, sports, etc.*

A related response has viewed the learning Korean as an experience which “balances and pacifies” the level of difficulties of graduate courses. Moreover, students enrolled in the class were able to realize innovative perspectives and mind-set while at the same time ascertain personal abilities. To them, the value of learning Korean lies in self-realization and discovery despite academic challenges.

*R-5 In the graduate studies, the value of learning Korean language is like a soup and a salad that boost your appetite for the main dish. As a subject, it is not so heavy that you can relax and enjoy while learning something new. It is something that balances and pacifies the seriousness and difficulties of other subjects. It is something that opens new perspectives and discovering your other potentials.*

Professional growth has been the main valuable point of learning Korean for a student who stated that a PhD degree could lead to prospects of professional network and exposure to various cultures, thus Korean language learning is deemed valuable and essential. The response has also asserted the usefulness of Korean language because of this.

*R-12 Being in the graduate school and finishing a doctorate degree will open new opportunities for growth & professional development. This might include the chance of travelling, meeting and interacting with new people of diverse culture. So learning Korean will definitely be useful to graduate student like me.*

One student sees the foreign language requirement in the doctorate program to be beneficial. The response captured specific activities (i.e. international research presentation) that concern graduate students in which knowledge in Korean language could eventually be useful. Research opportunities involving Korean language and learning science was also mentioned, highlighting the value of the experience.

*R-13 From the very start that Korean class is offered, I asked myself about its purpose. As science educator, why there's a need for me to learn the subject. Graduate school students specializing language should be into this subject instead. Then, I came into realization that inclusion of foreign language in our curriculum will be an advantage. The university hone us to be in the field of research and someday we will be presenting papers abroad (e.g. in Korea). I need to have basic Korean terms or even I could write and speak simple Korean sentence. For future research, I could find topics of interest to include Korean language in teaching and learning science.*

The value of learning Korean language could also be seen in making it a profitable skill. One response stated that with the possessed Korean language competency, one could teach basic Korean language and earn from it. With the popularity of the language and interest of Filipinos to learn it, chances are there would be opportunities to teach it and eventually earn a little extra from it.

*R-17 I might use this language in the future and maybe as a source of extra income to fellow Filipino that wanted to learn the basics of Korean Language.*

### CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed how meaningful and valuable Korean language learning is for Filipino graduate students. Respondents have attached a different meaning to their Korean language learning experience and it is beyond the academic mandate of their doctoral program of studies. More than simply completing required credits for the course, learning Korean language to Filipino graduate students serves as an agent of self-discipline, cultural appreciation, and new learning.

Also, the value of Korean language learning is fuelled by the realization that there is a wider perspective beyond one's own country and professional growth impact. These meaning and value have captured more than what is intended to be learned after the course. As foreign language classes are offered to establish "understanding among nations," the experience in Korean language class has eventually taught students to understand themselves in order to understand others.

Examining how Filipino graduate students interpret the meaning and value of their foreign language learning experience could guide teachers in careful planning of their lessons and in crafting programs suitable to learners. Findings of the study could serve as inputs to policies of foreign language curriculum: refining course intended learning outcomes and assessment practices and teaching strategies.

Future researchers could explore the performance of graduate students in Korean language classes, in relation to identified course intended learning outcomes. Attempts could be done on how Filipino graduate students do well in terms of class activities and their competencies achieved in relation to their period of foreign language studies. This inquiry could eventually gauge instructional materials, teaching strategies, assessment, and others to be effective or not based on student's classroom performance.

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