

The Current Situation of Japanese-language Education in South Korea: Based on Cases That the Author Experienced in Three Universities

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Abstract: In this paper, I show the current situation of Japanese-language education in South Korea with some instances that the author experienced at three universities. Since Korean people as of late have a strong desire to learn Chinese and a negative impression of Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, students and teachers of Japanese are decreasing in high schools. In most cases, Korean students take interest in Japanese through Japanese pop culture and study the language according to their interests and needs. However, they often face harsh realities in their studies and job hunting. As mentioned above, Japanese-language education in South Korea is influenced not only by the historical situation but also by the social and cultural situation.

Keywords: South Korea, Japanese, Japanese-language education, college education.

1 Introduction

EBUCHI defines intercultural education as “cultural action for the foundation of the human being that is developed by intercultural contact and interaction or under a complex situation in which they constantly exist” (EBUCHI 1998: 28). By this definition, Japanese-language education in South Korea, which was under Japanese rule until 1945, does not merely mean an encounter with a foreign language and learning it. The language education is conducted under a situation in which there is intercultural contact and interaction constantly, as EBUCHI mentions. Therefore, we have to take the situation based on the history in consideration when studying the language education, whether we like it or not.

Japanese-language education in South Korea is affected by several factors. One of them is a structural factor peculiar to East Asia that brings back memories of history. Furthermore, language education is influenced by social and cultural as well as political and economic circumstances in the country. Based on my experience, the domestic circumstance surrounding students seems to affect a situation of the language education than the political situation over the history between South Korea and Japan.

In this paper, while paying attention to circumstances of Korean society, I describe Japanese-language education there as unstable intercultural education with some instances that I experienced at three private universities. First, I show the outline of Japanese-language education in South Korea. Second, I also mention the language education at high school with a case before referring to that in university. Finally, I give a glance into the current circumstance surrounding Japan and the language while introducing characteristics of university students majoring in Japanese and their opinions with examples of their educational practice.

I would appreciate if I could provide data on the influence upon Korean society by the current undesirable relationship with Japan.

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2 The outline of Japanese-language education in South Korea

According to a survey conducted by the Japan Foundation, Korean learners of Japanese account for 20 percent of the foreign learners in the world, and the total number of learners is 840,000.² However, since Korean people have had a negative impression of Japan and the language for quite a while, even the learners have conflicted emotions about Japan.

Japanese-language education in South Korea can go back to native language education conducted by Japan. However, after World War II, the language education was not conducted by South Korea until immediately before the country resumed diplomatic relations with Japan. This was because the country was under Japanese rule and then pressed an ideology to oppose Japan and the communist bloc. Therefore, Korean people used to avoid studying and speaking Japanese officially.

Japanese-language education in South Korea started at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (hereafter, "HUFSS")³ and then spread throughout high schools and junior high schools. Japanese began as a required elective subject of the second foreign languages in high school in 1973 and in junior high school in 2001. Even in elementary school, the language has been adopted in extracurricular activities at present.

Moreover, Japanese was accepted as a required subject of the second foreign languages in the College Scholastic Ability Test for university admission in 2001. However, since foreign languages were removed from required subjects of the national examination in 2012, examinees of Japanese have been decreasing since then.

3 Japanese-language education in high school

3.1 The outline

In 1973, Japanese was introduced into the high school curriculum, which changes every few years. The seventh curriculum conducted from 2002 sets the following educational target (BAE 2002): "We let them develop their Japanese skills of daily conversation and communication."

At present, 646 junior high school teachers have a license to teach Japanese, and 1,558 high school teachers teach Japanese in South Korea.⁴ Whereas they have high Japanese skills, the fact is that they have nothing but time to teach the fundamental grammar and sentences with hiragana and katakana. While they share with their students about Japanese lifestyle and culture such as table manners and traditional games as well, most of the students speak only simple verb sentences even after one year's study. Some of the students who are interested in Japanese study it by themselves and/or major in it in high schools of foreign studies, which were established specially.

It is said that Chinese follows English in terms of utility at present. Due to Chinese economic development and a growing concern regarding China in South Korea, Chinese-language education in South Korea is in great vogue. In addition, a negative impression of Japan there was made by Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

Hence, principals of schools and parents in South Korea now tend to recommend their students or children to study Chinese, which will help students when

² [http://www.jpf.go.jp/j/japanese/survey/result/\(3/3/2015\)](http://www.jpf.go.jp/j/japanese/survey/result/(3/3/2015))

³ However, as for Seoul National University, which is at the top of university rankings, it did not have a department and major of Japanese until establishing the major of Japanese language and civilization in the faculty of Asian languages and civilizations in 2012.

⁴ *The annual statistical report on education 2013*. The Department of Education of the Republic of Korea.

job hunting in the future, instead of Japanese. Furthermore, since the second foreign languages were removed from required subjects of College Scholastic Ability Test for university admission in 2012, the examinees including those who select Japanese have been decreasing.

The employment of Japanese teachers in South Korea is also being affected by this trend. The employees have drastically been decreasing and have been restricted to only a few persons since around 2005.

3.2 A case at a high school in Gyeonggi Province

As a result, it was decided that Japanese teachers at public schools would be reduced starting in 2015, while it could be expected. Twenty teachers were forced to change their subjects in Gyeonggi Province, the metropolitan area. According to a Japanese teacher at a high school in the province,⁵ the cutbacks also reflect that native Chinese speakers for the extracurricular activities of elementary school are now being employed due to the increasing popularity of China mentioned above and the cheap labor costs.

Additionally, parents are sensitive to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011. In fact, students studying Chinese have risen in numbers since the disasters. The turn might be a mirror of harsh criticism against the Abe administration in South Korea.

Paradoxically, students who are used to Japanese through modern Japanese pop culture including anime and are satisfied to understand Japanese to some extent select to study Chinese by either their own or their parents' choice. This is because the students think that it is easy for them to study Japanese because of the similarity with their mother tongue.

In the case of the schools in which Japanese-language teachers work, the principal who reduced the number of Japanese teachers from three to two this year have a will to cut it down to one in the future. In contrast, the principal would like to add one more Chinese teacher to the roll of current teachers.

Actually, the Japanese-language instructor had been ready for such an occurrence. She went to evening graduate classes for three years and then got a license to teach the national language. She realized that she would be certainly fired according to an unwritten rule based on the seniority system in her school because of her license. She was quite distressed that she would not be able to teach Japanese. However, she agreed to a change of her subject, since otherwise she might be fired. Since she has two children, she took childcare leave to prepare for national language education. She will come back to her job as teacher of the national language in a year and will be assigned to the area that she hopes to work.

Such a demand to slash the positions of Japanese-language instructors and to increase Chinese-language instructors is spreading all over South Korea. Since students wanted to study Japanese about ten years ago, German or French teachers tended to change their subject to Japanese. However, Japanese teachers are being forced to change their subject to the national language or Chinese. Universities and graduate schools at which students and Japanese-language teachers are trained are influenced by the downward trend of the students and the teachers. Therefore, Japanese-language education and Japanese departments at universities will undergo a great change in the future.

⁵ The high school of the humanities has only a general course, and the number of the students is 500. The students in eight classes out of fifteen classes take Japanese in 2014.

4 Japanese-language education at university

4.1 At the author's universities

There are 101 Japanese departments⁶ at 197 four-year universities all over South Korea, and the number of students there is 2,984.⁷ Incidentally, the rate of university enrolments in the country is 68.2% and is higher than that in Japan.⁸

From this section, I give examples of Japanese-language education that I experienced at the following three private universities from March 2007 to present:

Semyeong University (March, 2007 to August, 2009): It is famous for the faculty and the hospital of Chinese medicine based on local traits including the history. It has many students from the metropolitan area, in spite of a two-hour ride by bus from the area.

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (September 2009 to August): It is a prestigious institution for foreign-language education and is famous for the first establishment of a Japanese department in South Korea. It has produced a large number of company executives at large enterprises, diplomats, and so on. The sophomores at the department select their major among Japanese language, literature, and area study.⁹

Keimyung University (September 2013 to present): It is a middle-class university that is proud of the beautiful campus. The department of Japanese language and literature before the reorganization in 2015 (the present major of Japanese language and literature) was famous for a high quality of Japanese-language education.¹⁰

The location	The quota of the Japanese department	The number of the native Japanese professors
Semyeong: Jecheon, Chungcheongbuk-do	50	3
HUFS: Seoul, (the metropolitan area)	85	4
Keimyung: Daegu, Gyeongsangbuk-do	60	2

4.2 The author's classes and the details

Generally speaking, Korean professors teach Japanese grammar, literature, and so on that require students' understanding by native language, and native Japanese professors are in charge of conversation classes.

The classes of native Japanese professors are occasionally changed, based on their major and condition of the university concerned. Depending on the university, the gap of a class occurring during somebody's sabbatical leave is temporarily filled by the professors. Whereas a curriculum is left to an individual professors' discretion,

⁶ While most of them were named as Japanese language and literature, they are named variously after 2000 (KIM 2002).

⁷ *The annual statistical report on education 2013*. The Department of Education of the Republic of Korea.

⁸ The rate reflects a great gap in academic ability among the universities in another aspect. Furthermore, there is also a gap in university education as well as political and economic influence between the metropolitan area and the other areas. Even limited to my experience, a university at Seoul is variously different from two universities at local areas other than in academic ability.

⁹ The department was reorganized and was divided into "Division of Japanese Language, Literature and Culture" and "Division of Integrated Japanese Studies" in 2014.

¹⁰ There is also the department of Japanese studies (the present major of Japanese studies) in which the students study Japanese area study.

depending on the university, a textbook published by the department concerned independently is rarely used in a class held for all students.

As for me, I am able to teach Japanese culture and society other than Japanese because of my major, cultural anthropology of South Korea. Consequently, I have so far taken charge of various kinds of classes whose contents as well as names differ from each other by year and curriculum. For the sake of convenience, I explain what I do in my lessons according to the classification by the categories:¹¹

(1) In the classes of Japanese language, I teach knowledge and skills of Japanese conversation and composition and train their communicative competence through practice. As for beginners (including students in liberal arts course) and intermediates, I spend much time to let them talk with their classmates and me in a particular situation and repeat the training. On the other hand, I give advanced students much freedom for choosing a topic and a situation.

For example, I organized “Advanced Japanese conversation” that I was in charge of at HUFS as follows: Basically, the students give a presentation on Japanese culture, society, and current events and have a group discussion among them. They are able to choose even a topic not related with Japan and have to logically debate it with a question instead. In the debate, they take a few breaks to summarize their opinions and to dig deep into the issue. Hence, they are required to have proficiency in Japanese, a large amount of knowledge, a logical mind, communication skills, instantaneous power, and so on.

Before the debate, I taught them a way to discuss and support their presentation in order to keep the quality and to let them speak easily. Since I permitted any topics and give a chance to discuss the world in which we live, I received high evaluation scores.

(2) In the classes of Japanese in business, I teach Japanese in business and skills of Japanese interpretation and translation. Moreover, as for HUFS, I instructed my students in how to interview and to give a presentation in Japanese.

While I try to encourage speaking or writing Japanese, actually, I unconsciously tend to only teach knowledge and skills. However, the students seem to feel that they studied hard in such a lesson, since they are used to spending much time to gain knowledge due to their study for the entrance exam. In addition, some of them are not good at communicating with others and attach greater importance to memorization than peer learning including conversation with classmates.

(3) In the classes of Japanese culture, I taught Japanese culture, society, history, and so on as liberal arts. As for juniors at HUFS, I taught them Japanese pop culture and comparative study of communication between South Korea and Japan. I gave these lessons as lecture by direct method.

When I teach juniors who major in these subjects, I am able to make them give a presentation and consider contemporary social problems as aging population combined with diminishing number of children and solitary death. In contrast, I am preoccupied with teaching the basics of Japanese culture and the keywords. That is why I feel impatient with having to evaluate them in a memorization-only exam.

5. University students who major in Japanese

5.1 The characteristics

According to a survey conducted by the Japan Foundation, the top three motivations of foreign learners of Japanese are as follows:

¹¹ Whereas I was exceptionally in charge of literature, guidance counseling, and lecture at graduate school as well, I omit to refer to them.

1st:	Interest in Japanese itself	(62.2%)
2nd:	Communication in Japanese	(55.5%)
3rd:	Manga, anime, J-pop, and so on	(54.0%)

Employment that university students are concerned over ranks fifth. Actually, I feel the tendency when teaching Korean university students in their country. When I ask my students at Keimyung University about their motivation, most of them answer that it is modern Japanese pop culture (that their brother or sister was enjoying) as well as communication with native Japanese speakers. Some of the students have a favorite anime and voice actor or actress. Moreover, they consider themselves to be an anime “geek” or to have that sort of mentality and everyone acknowledges it. There are also students motivated by music, movie, and TV drama. They would like to understand what their favorite persons including even Korean persons who expanded their business to Japan speak and/or sing in Japanese.

Thus, we can see such university students who have a particular interest regardless of their motivation. One the one hand, some of them took an interest in Japanese literature through manga, novels, young-adult fiction, on the other hand, in Japanese traditional culture through “kotatsu (low table with a heating device),” “matsuri (festival),” and “yukata (informal cotton clothes for summer)” seen in those pieces. Most of the students start studying Japanese in junior high or high school and then specialize it when entering university.

However, some of the students passively decide to major in Japanese similar to Korean, since they have not been able to adapt themselves to an English-education that starts early in South Korea now. Furthermore, there are students who have been forced to change their major due to low grades. In these cases, they tend to be reluctant to study Japanese.

There is a large number of Korean students who specialize in Japanese in order to get a job related to it. However, most of them are able to have only a vague hope, since the employment rate of university students is not beyond 60%. On the other hand, the students at HUFS tend to select their major according to their hope, maybe because of the rate that is relatively high.

5.2 The Japanese learning

Korean university students coincide with Japanese ones in facing many difficulties in their job hunting a few years after their entrance. The formers are clearly required to get a high grade, to acquire language skills, and to experience studying abroad and volunteer work by Korean society including the companies there. The students are sensitive to the career that is reflected in their scholarship. It is said that university students should major in more than one subject. In fact, they are recommended to do so.

Additionally, there is enthusiasm for improving their “spec,” or getting a high test score, qualification, and a license. Whereas they do not need to write their dissertation, they have to achieve a high grade in a foreign language test instead. The students at Keimyung University have to get more than 700 marks in JPT¹² or N1 level in JLPT, and those at HUFS more than 700 marks in FLEX.¹³ Hence, they are forced to study hard for the examinations during a certain period.

¹² JPT (Japanese Proficiency Test) is a Japanese language test conducted by YBM Sisa.com only in South Korea, and the full marks is 990.

¹³ FLEX (Foreign Language Examination) is a foreign language test uniquely developed by HUFS. It covers seven languages including English, Japanese, and Chinese and is utilized for civil service examination and employment examination.

As for Japanese learning programs, the students are able to join various types of the programs at each university. The students at Keimyung University can go to Japan as exchange students. In addition, twenty students under “the Study-Abroad Program of the Local Semester” study at Baiko Gakuin University in Yamaguchi Prefecture for a period, instead of the same number of Japanese students there.¹⁴

The students at Keimyung University are eager about extracurricular activities and have actually so far achieved brilliant results at the competitions of Japanese speech and drama conducted by Japanese consulate in Busan. Furthermore, they organize a couple of events related to Japanese culture and Japanese conversation circles under the direction of native Japanese professors.

Thus, Korean university students have a great opportunity to improve their Japanese and to deeply understand Japanese culture.¹⁵ However, some of them passively join the programs for a grade, since they are interested only in improving their “spec,” or writing a strong resume.

5.3 The perception of Japan

What impression of Japan do Korean university students have? When I ask my students at Keimyung University about this, they often mention something related to Japanese pop culture, as represented by manga, anime, and TV drama and, moreover, Japanese foods that are popular in South Korea such as sushi and “takoyaki (ball-shaped snack filled with diced octopus)” (NAKAMURA 2014). In addition, they admire Japanese festivals and school festivals and have a good impression of the cleanness of towns, the kindness of people, a low crime rate, and so on. Through travel, study-abroad, a working holiday program, some of them experienced the people and culture of Japan first hand.

Needless to say, whereas they have a bad impression of the Japanese history, they have calmly taken the issue without convicting Japan. A student may say, “We had a painful experience under Japanese rule, but I love the culture. I distinguish the history from the culture,” and another might say, “I was unfavorably impressed with the history of Japanese rule when having learned it. However, Japan has good points as well.” As just described, they have taken the history of Japanese rule separately and study Japanese language and culture without considering the history.

According to a Korean professor who studied Japanese in the 1980s, former Korean researchers of Japanese were studying to catch up with Japan with a strong sense of mission. Therefore, they were not able to say, “I love Japan” at that time. On the other hand, current Korean university students are used to Japanese language and culture and have started studying these things from their curiosity. They seem to come in contact with Japan, the object of their study, out of their curiosity and necessity, pretending to be indifferent to Japan’s historical relationship with their country.

6 Conclusion

When considering Japanese-language education as intercultural education, we have to think over a complex situation within East Asia. However, we should not emphasize the situation and, instead, we need to grasp that language education is more influenced by the social and cultural situation than the current political and economic

¹⁴ While the number of Korean exchange students sharply decreased after the Great East Japan Earthquake, it has returned now. However, a certain number of parents hesitate to let their children go to Japan for their study.

¹⁵ For example, students at the other university locally translate signs and explanation panels in tourist sites into Japanese as part of contributory community activities.

situation. As described above, Korean young people universally have a sense of closeness to Japan and the language and start studying the country and the culture out of curiosity. However, Korean learners of Japanese in junior high and high school are affected by the entrance examination system and parents who worry about the future of their children. Furthermore, Korean universities have to go all out to help their students find employment instead of educating them.

We do not see the anti-Japan movement in daily life in South Korea, although many Korean people are sensationally reported as if they hate Japan. For instance, we can see a comic skit in which Japanese is spoken without an explanation on a popular TV program “Gag Concert.” In the skit, a Korean cook who pretended Japanese prepares a horrible dish and then says to a male guest, “Sumamisen” (a slip of the tongue of “Sumimasen” [I’m sorry]). The guest point out to the cook, “You should say, “Sumimasen”, right?” in order to make audiences laugh. Likewise, the cook says, “Agaritogozaimasu” (a slip of the tongue of “Arigatôgozaimasu” [Thank you]), and then the guest says, “What you should say is “Arigatôgozaimasu” to correct his pronunciation. Korean people laugh at the slip of the tongue by a Korean person and not Japanese people. This instance reflects that Japanese has broadly spread into Korean society. Do I only estimate future prospects of the position of Japan and the language there?

Japanese-language education in South Korea is influenced not only by the relationship with Japan but also by the political and economic power of China under the current social and cultural situation. The number of students who take Japanese class in liberal arts study are actually decreasing, although an increase of Korean students studying Japanese has not influenced the Japanese departments in Korean universities yet. I will keep an eye on the influence in the future.

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