

Realistic conditions for sustaining Korean language education

The World Association of Korean Language Educators is a professional community formed by professors and teachers who teach Korean overseas. We go beyond language education to spread Korean culture worldwide and organize various forums, training programs and academic exchanges so that the next generation can preserve their cultural roots.

Recently, the spread of the Korean Wave has heightened global interest in the Korean language. However, the patterns vary by region. In developed countries like the United States, while there is significant positive sentiment toward the Korean language, enrollment in university Korean language majors has plateaued. Conversely, in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, demand for Korean language learning has surged significantly due to the practical motivation of potential employment with Korean companies. This demonstrates that the prospects for Korean language education are ultimately tied to learners' career paths.

I have been teaching Korean at a university during the week and at a Hangeul school on weekends. These two educational settings differ in nature. The Hangeul school focuses on teaching history, culture and identity alongside the language to second- and third-generation Korean descendants. In contrast, the university centers on teaching Korean as a foreign language. Credits and achievement levels are important, and systematic, practical teaching methods are applied. Learners are initially drawn by K-pop or dramas but gradually expand their studies to encompass understanding of Korean society, economy and culture. These two educational tracks, while distinct, are complementary and share the common goal of broadening the foundation for Korean language and culture.

However, career prospects for Korean language majors remain a significant challenge. In North America, even with a Korean major, related job opportunities are limited, leading many students to choose other paths. Conversely, in emerging economies, opportunities for employment with Korean companies or within Korea itself are relatively abundant, translating into tangible outcomes for Korean language education. For Korean language education to remain vibrant, governments and businesses must actively create job and internship opportunities where Korean language majors can utilize their expertise. This will strengthen motivation for learning Korean and sustain the passion within educational settings.

Another point I wish to emphasize is institutional cooperation. While organizations like the National Institute of International



Shim Yong-hyu,
president of the World Association of
Korean Language Educators (Former
president of the National Association of
Korean Schools (NAKS) USA)

Education, Sejong Academies and the Overseas Koreans Agency each play important roles, they do not fully reflect the unique nature of teaching Korean as a regular curriculum in university settings. This is because training programs remain focused primarily on elementary and secondary school teachers, and Sejong Academies are limited to non-regular courses. Strengthening support for the academic forums and field experience sharing that our association organizes would be essential to ensure both the professionalism and sustainability of Korean language education.

Every time I see young people who grew up in Hangeul schools blossoming into leaders within American society, I truly feel how identity education can transform the future of both individuals and communities. At the same time, it is always disheartening to see students who majored in Korean at university struggling to find their career paths. Korean language education transcends mere language instruction. It holds the power to preserve roots and identity while simultaneously serving as a practical task directly linked to the future. When national-level support and on-the-ground efforts interlock, Korean language education will become an even more enduring and powerful current.

As president of the International Association of Korean Language Education, I will continue to dedicate my utmost efforts to enabling educators to share experiences, exchange effective teaching methods and develop sustainable Korean language education models tailored to local educational environments. This is because Korean language education transcends mere language learning and is a precious journey of sharing the identity of the Korean people and the values of Korean culture with the world. 장