

# Korean Language Learning among Students in Myanmar during Civil Disobedience:

## A Preliminary Study on its Current Status and Potential Healing Effects

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** A report investigating the positive effects of Korean language learning on the psychological healing of local students studying Korean during the period of disobedience in Myanmar.

**Methods:** 37 students studying Korean at local foreign language universities in Myanmar and unable to attend school anymore due to their opposition to the military regime are experiencing psychological symptoms of distress and anger.

**Results:** In this survey, Most Myanmar students responded that they receive psychological healing through self-study of the Korean language.

**Conclusion:** It can be inferred that Korean language learning has psychological healing effects.

**Keywords** Second language acquisition, Language learning outcomes, psychological well-being, Quality of life, Korean language learning, Cultural competence, Healing through language learning

### INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is currently suffering under a military coup. The military regime, which has transformed from the vanguard of the revolution and protector of the nation since 1941, has become a group of profit-seekers and plunderers, appearing as a dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> The dictatorship enforces obedience, and teachers and students who do not pledge allegiance cannot attend school. Four hundred thousand elementary and high school teachers have played a decisive role in leading nonviolent resistance against the military junta. Many of them participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau saw the nation as existing for the people, not to dominate them<sup>3</sup> and vehemently criticized governments and armies that demanded unconditional submission, while advocating

for the necessity of civil disobedience movements.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps his advice is what Myanmar needs now.

There are Korean language departments at two universities in Myanmar: Yangon University of Foreign Languages and Mandalay University of Foreign Languages.<sup>5</sup> However, due to the situation, proper education is not provided in these departments. Currently, most students, except for freshmen, cannot attend school, and the level of teachers has drastically declined as qualified teachers were fired for participating in the civil disobedience movement.<sup>6</sup> The lack of qualified teachers is another reason students turn away from universities.

When a stable school curriculum and lessons are maintained, students can comfortably learn the Korean language. It is commonly believed that effective learning is challenging in a politically unstable environment. Korean language learners in Myanmar struggle to find viable methods to continue their studies beyond self-study. Our questions for them are as follows: How are learners in Myanmar continuing their Korean

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language studies? Why do they persist in studying Korean even in a politically precarious situation? What ultimate purpose can be found in their language learning? Typical language learning research identifies various objectives for study, such as academic, employment, and hobby-related reasons. At the outset, using conventional research methods, this study explored why Myanmar students learn the Korean language. However, for those who have dropped out of formal school classes, a different purpose for psychological healing was identified. If these findings are clearly presented, this paper's distinctiveness and significance will stand out compared to other studies.

This study examines the healing effects of learning Korean for Korean language students in Myanmar concerning their language learning. To do so, I intend to investigate the current state of self-study of the Korean language among students who cannot attend school. Although students are known to be learning Korean in various ways, relatively accurate research on the subject has not been conducted. I plan to conduct a survey targeting students who are self-studying Korean to listen to their firsthand opinions on whether Korean language learning has a therapeutic effect on their psychological well-being. Students will likely feel great anxiety and anger about their future under military dictatorship oppression. These emotions are likely to lead to mental health issues such as depression. Therefore, studying Korean has educational and psychotherapeutic significance if psychological problems can be reduced to some extent.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Setting of Survey**

**Research design:** To capture the current perspectives and situations of Korean language students in Myanmar, a ten-question survey was designed. The questions varied between binary-choice (B.C.) and multiple-choice (M.C.), based on the content and nature of each question.

**Data analysis:** It would detail the method used to analyze the collected survey responses.

**Instrument:** The primary research tool for this study was the survey, which encompassed both binary-choice and multiple-choice question formats.

**Participants:** The survey engaged 37 students currently studying the Korean language in Myanmar.

**Study site:** These students had departed from formal schools with existing websites, rendering visits to these schools' sites irrelevant for the context of this study. Direct individual contact was the only viable method to administer the survey to them.

**Ethical considerations:** Given the prevailing conditions in Myanmar, obtaining formal ethical approval poses significant challenges. Nevertheless, this research was initiated with preliminary consent from the participants, many of whom were hesitant to disclose their identities.

- 1) What is your gender? (B.C.)
- 2) What are your university affiliation, final grade, and cohort? (M.C.)
- 3) What is your current Korean language proficiency test (TOPIK) level? (M.C.)
- 4) What is your current emotional state? (M.C., stable, anxious, depressed, angry)
- 5) What is your current educational institution and course for studying Korean? (M.C.)
- 6) What method do you use to self-study Korean? (M.C.)
- 7) Why do you continue to study Korean amidst the difficult situation in Myanmar? (M.C.)
- 8) Does learning Korean help you psychologically in the current situation? (B.C.)
- 9) Among speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which field of learning do you think has the greatest psychological healing effect? (M.C.)
- 10) Among the methods you use to study Korean, which method has the greatest psychological healing effect? (M.C.)

## **RESULT**

A total of 37 graduate students responded to the survey, all of whom were female (100%). Thirty-one students (83.8%) were from Mandalay College of Foreign Languages, while the remaining 6 (16.2%) were from Yangon University of Foreign Languages. They had all discontinued their studies at various points, with 19 students (51.4%) having stopped in the first semester of their fourth year, seven students (18.9%) in the first semester of their third year, seven students (18.9%) in the first semester of their first year, and four students (10.8%) in the first semester of their second year. The most students had to discontinue their studies during their fourth year due to pressure from the military regime. Their Korean language proficiency levels

were evenly distributed from beginner to advanced, with five students (13.5%) not having an official proficiency level due to not taking the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK). The number of students by proficiency level was as follows: 5 students (13.5%) at level 2, 3 students (8.1%) at level 3, 11 students (29.7%) at level 4, 2 students (5.4%) at level 5, and 11 students (29.7%) at level 6. Most students fell into the intermediate level of level 4 or the highest level of level 6. Despite their circumstances, their dedication to studying Korean persisted.

Most of these Burmese students continued their Korean language studies by watching Korean dramas or variety shows (possible multiple responses, 29 students, 78.4%) and searching for unknown vocabulary and sentence structures while listening to Korean songs (possible multiple responses, 24 students, 64.9%). They appeared to be striving to maintain their Korean language skills through self-study. For example, they read posts written by Koreans on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, looked up unfamiliar expressions, and even wrote their posts in Korean (possible multiple responses, 16 students, 43.2%). In addition, some students read Korean books or materials and translated them (possible multiple responses, eight students, 21.6%), steadily solved past Korean language test questions (5 students, 13.5%), or even taught Korean to others to enhance their Korean language skills (5 students, 13.5%, although this was less common).

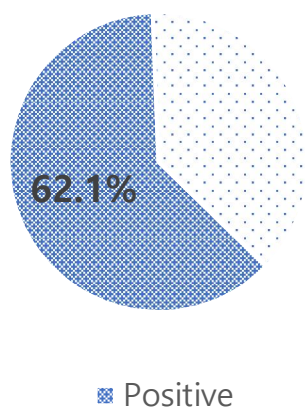
Due to their support for the disobedience movement, most of the Korean language learners among the Myanmar students surveyed (25 people, 67.5%) did not return to their university classrooms. Some students (9 people, 24.3%) did not attend even the academy run by Myanmar teachers and stayed at home, apparently still affected by the shock of the ongoing political oppression in their daily lives. Education and learning, including language learning, are important parts of their daily lives that should continue without disturbance.<sup>7</sup> In the section where students were asked about their current psychological state, most responded that they felt anxious (32 students, 86.5% of the total). Many students also reported feeling angry (24 students, 64.9%) or depressed (28 students, 75.7%). Most of the students displayed negative psychological states. Notably, however, despite their circumstances, they continued to study Korean. They

each found ways to continue their studies, even though they could not study at university formally.

Despite the difficult situation in Myanmar, 13.5% students were noteworthy for saying that they continue to learn Korean because it helps them forget the pain and difficulties they are currently experiencing. They answered that they continue to learn Korean for psychological reasons, without mentioning any vocational goals. This raises the question of whether students who learn Korean to study abroad or find a job know the healing function that Korean language learning can provide.

When additional questions were asked to clarify whether Korean language learning provides psychological comfort to Myanmar students living in a difficult reality, 23 out of 37 students (62.1%) responded that it does provide psychological comfort. Only 2.7% of respondents said it was not helpful at all. This is clear evidence that Korean language learning provides comfort to more than half of the Myanmar Korean language students who have passed the disobedience period. The graph below shows the results in a pie chart, indicating that Korean language learning has provided psychological help to most Korean language learners in Myanmar during the disobedience period (**Fig. 1**). It is necessary to investigate concretely what type of Korean language learning and which areas comfort these learners. They feel that they receive psychological healing not through reading or writing activities but through communication activities such as speaking with others (16 people, 43.2%) and listening to others speak (13 people, 35.1%). This means that interactive activities in Korean language learning comfort their wounded hearts more than reading or writing activities alone.

Moreover, most of them responded that they receive great emotional comfort while watching Korean dramas (27 people, 73%) or listening to Korean music (26 people, 70.3%), which is a much higher percentage than those who find comfort in reading books in Korean (9 people, 24.3%). It has been revealed that Myanmar Korean learners, especially women, are greatly interested in Korean dramas and music, in addition to Korean-related employment and study abroad.<sup>8</sup> Krashen has argued that an affective filter in second language learning restricts the input of a new language.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1. Does Korean language learning provide psychological benefits in the current situation?**

(The Psychological Healing Effect of Korean Language Learning on the Students in Myanmar During the Period of Disobedience) \*P (Positive) =  $23/37 = 0.621$ , \*N (sample size) = 37, \*Confidence Level: 95%, \*Standard Error =  $\sqrt{[0.621 \times (1-0.621)/37]} \approx 0.121$ , \*Margin of Error =  $\pm 0.237$ .

Thus, when language learning is accompanied by emotional content such as dramas and music, the defensive filter seems to be disrupted, and learning is facilitated. Considering Myanmar's harsh current situation, it can also be seen that learners can project themselves onto various situations in dramas and take emotional stability and relaxation while listening to music to escape from their harsh reality. It is anticipated that with the eventual stabilization and improvement of Myanmar's political landscape, there will be an imperative need to institute a formalized educational framework for the domestic student population.<sup>10</sup> Concurrently, the establishment of specialized curricula addressing potential psychological trauma should be seriously considered to facilitate comprehensive student well-being.

### Summary of Results

The study analyzed responses from 37 female students from Myanmar, all of whom had pursued Korean language studies. These students had predominantly discontinued their studies due to pressures from the military regime. Despite this adversity, an overwhelming majority continued their Korean language education through self-study methods, such as watching Korean dramas, engaging with Korean

content on social media, and even teaching Korean to others.

The political unrest and the subsequent disobedience movement led to most students avoiding formal educational setups. Their current psychological state reflected the turmoil, with a vast majority expressing feelings of anxiety, anger, and depression. Intriguingly, a significant portion of students continued their Korean language studies for its therapeutic value. Specifically, 62.1% confirmed that learning the Korean language provided them with psychological comfort. Interactive activities like speaking and listening, along with emotional content like dramas and music, seemed to facilitate their learning and offered a reprieve from their challenging circumstances.

### Considerations

Language education is not solely for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. Of course, it is true that language education also plays an important role in advancing one's academic or career goals. The general purpose of language learning is closely related to the educational policies and pedagogies that exist in each country and region. The challenge is that in situations of political oppression, like in Myanmar, these policy-driven approaches struggle to achieve their intended effects. In such cases, there's a particular focus on the personal aspect of language education. Evidence is emerging that language education can have therapeutic effects for individuals. Research on language-related fields such as bibliotherapy, poetry therapy, and writing therapy demonstrates the therapeutic effects of language education, which is worth noting.

Despite the current unrest in Myanmar, Korean language students studying there seem to find psychological comfort in studying Korean. According to a survey, these students are currently receiving significant psychological benefits through communicative activities such as speaking and listening, while attending private language academies. They also find solace in watching Korean dramas, projecting themselves into the various situations depicted on the screen, or listening to Korean music for emotional relief. Through this research, it was newly discovered that learning Korean provides

comfort and hope to people in difficult situations like those in Myanmar, serving as a psychological outlet for their frustration.

For Myanmar students, learning Korean as a foreign language has a healing function in addition to the tangible goals of studying abroad or securing employment. The psychological aspects of language education can be also overlooked as an effect of foreign language education. Of course, to better understand the psychological healing function of language learning, more specialized and scientific research and analysis need to be conducted. In the future, i may be able to verify the therapeutic effects of language education in more diverse ways.

This study may not provide clinical results, but it supports the potential of language education as a therapeutic tool. Further research should be conducted to explore the psychological benefits of learning Korean in times of distress. This could lead to the development of a new field in language education that focuses on promoting psychological healing. I strongly encourage more researchers to participate in research on the functions and effects of learning Korean.

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#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflicting financial interests.

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