

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FILIPINO LEARNERS IN KOREAN PROFICIENCY: A STUDY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

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Abstract

This study examined the opportunities and challenges faced by Filipino learners in the newly introduced Korean language course within the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) and its relationship to their proficiency. Using an explanatory sequential method, the research was conducted in three phases. In Phase 1, 32 students took the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK I) and completed a survey. The results indicated that 62.5% passed TOPIK I, suggesting that more than half had a solid grasp of the Korean language. The survey revealed manageable challenges in learning Korean, with a composite mean of 1.85 and a verbal interpretation of "Disagree." However, thematic analysis in Phase II identified specific challenges, such as difficulties with Korean tenses, particles, vocabulary, and anxiety over making mistakes, which affected students' comprehension. In contrast, the survey indicated positive opportunities for learning Korean, with a composite mean of 3.57 and a verbal interpretation of "Strongly Agree." Notable themes included improved college admissions, job prospects, and increased cultural awareness. Data also found no significant relationship between students' proficiency levels—high or low—and their challenges and opportunities in learning Korean. Based on these findings, an Action Plan was proposed to enhance areas for improvement in Korean language learning for SPFL enrollees, aiming to involve school stakeholders in supporting the development of Korean language skills.

Keywords: Korean Language Learning, Foreign Language, and SPFL

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INTRODUCTION

The launch of the Department of Education's Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) initiated the nationwide incorporation of various foreign languages in the Philippines, opening up new areas of exploration in critical language studies (Cabling et al., 2020). According to Estrada (2021), the SPFL, established under DepEd Memorandum 560, s. 2008, is a special program by the Department of Education designed to offer learners opportunities that will enhance their competitiveness both locally and globally.

Foreign language learning, or second language acquisition SLA, or second language learning, as defined in the theoretical study of Canale & Swain (1980), is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language. Andaya et al. (2020) emphasize that effective communication is essential for maintaining a connected world, aligning foreign language proficiency as a crucial social skill in the 21st century. Perez (2023) stated that learning a new language can be a challenging but rewarding experience. However, there are some common difficulties that many people face when learning a new language. One of these difficulties is proficiency.

Language proficiency refers to a person's ability to produce and understand a particular language. It is an invaluable skill for individuals worldwide and is considered to be the highest global employment skill. This concept reinforces the Department of Education to develop foreign language proficiency among the Filipino learners in SPFL. However, how can this be achieved if there is an impeding factor being experienced by the students in foreign language learning?

Among the six foreign languages offered by DepEd Memorandum 560 s. 2008, Korean was the latest to be added back in 2016. With the growing influence of Koreans in the country, be it in music, movies, and fashion, but least number of studies about Korean language as a foreign language taught in public and private secondary schools in the Philippines, the researchers see the need of focusing in Korean language out of the six foreign languages being offered.

Filipino graduates view Korean language learning as an agent of self-discipline, cultural appreciation, and new learning beyond the requirement of completing the course (Ancho, 2019). But how about the view and experiences of the students who are still in school and learning the Korean language? Thus, the researchers took this reason into consideration while looking into the schools that offer SPFL-Korean near and around their locality. With options at hand, the students in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School took the interest of the researchers and were chosen to be the respondents of the study.

The said school has been implementing the DepEd Memorandum 560, s. 2008 since 2022 and is expecting another set of enrollees in the school year 2024-2025. The SPFL in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School has well-integrated Korean language learning in their institution. However, no studies have been conducted about the SPFL in their school ever since it was established, unlike in the other secondary schools that offer Korean in their institution. Accordingly, the current SPFL enrollees struggle in Korean language learning. Thus, the researchers see this as a valuable factor to conduct the study in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School.

In relation, this study determined the proficiency level of the students in the Korean language using the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) and identified its relationship with the challenges and opportunities they experience in Korean language learning that were identified through survey and interview. The respondents of the study were the

Grade 8 SPFL enrollees since this study will look into their experiences and they have the longest exposure to Korean language learning. Determining the relationship of the said variables will contribute to the implementation of the SPFL-Korean and foreign language learning of SPFL enrollees in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School.

Objectives

This study aims to identify the relationship between the Korean proficiency level and the challenges and opportunities of the SPFL Enrollees in Korean language learning.

Specifically, this study aims to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of Korean Language Proficiency of the SPFL enrollees using the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) I?
2. What are the challenges of the SPFL enrollees in Korean Language Learning?
3. What are the opportunities of the SPFL enrollees in Korean Language Learning?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the SPFL enrollees' proficiency level and challenges and opportunities in Korean Language Learning?
5. What plan of action could be proposed for the Korean Language Learning of the SPFL enrollees?

METHODS

Methodology and Design

To answer the questions of this study, the researchers used a mixed-method research design incorporating explanatory sequential and correlational methods. According to Subedi (2016), mixed-method research enhances the quality of findings by reducing biases associated with using a single method. The choice of research methods is guided by the nature and complexity of the research questions, often necessitating a mixed-methods approach. In light of this, the researchers utilized a standardized test called the Test of Proficiency in Korean to assess the proficiency levels of the students. A survey questionnaire based on a four-point Likert scale was constructed to determine the challenges and opportunities faced by the students. These quantitative data served as the basis for the qualitative phase of the study. The qualitative phase employed focus group interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in Korean language learning. The interviews were coded to generate themes, a process known as thematic analysis. The data gathered from the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study were compared to determine if there was a significant relationship between Korean proficiency levels and the challenges and opportunities experienced by the students in learning Korean.

Population and Sampling

The researchers of this study employed convenience sampling under the non-probability sampling technique for the Special Program in Foreign Language enrollees, specifically focusing on Grade 8 Shin Saimdang, one section with 32 students, at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School. This focus is due to the students' longer exposure to SPFL-Korean, which is a valuable factor in determining their Korean proficiency levels and identifying the challenges and opportunities in Korean language learning.

Instrumentations

To accomplish the main objective of the research study, the researchers used three data collection instruments, namely: TOPIK, a Likert Scale, and focus group interview. TOPIK, which stands for Test of Proficiency in Korean, is an exam

that assesses the language skills of non-native speakers in Korean. The Likert scale was utilized in this study by designing a survey that asks foreign language learners to rate their challenges and opportunities in Korean language learning on a scale. Interviews were also employed during the qualitative phase of this study to further understand the challenges and opportunities of the participants in Korean language learning. This study utilized a focus group interview. This method involves gathering data from a deliberately chosen group of participants rather than from a statistically representative sample of the general population.

Data Collection

To accomplish the objectives of the study, the researchers undertook the following steps. In the quantitative phase, the researchers accessed the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) I to measure the Korean proficiency levels of the students. The next step involved constructing indicators for the various challenges and opportunities in Korean language learning. This survey questionnaire underwent validation and pre-testing to ensure its validity and reliability. The instruments were disseminated among the respondents, starting with the TOPIK I examination, a standardized test developed in Korea to assess the proficiency levels of test takers, followed by the survey questionnaire. In the qualitative phase of the study, the researchers invited five students to participate in a focus group interview to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities they experienced in learning the Korean language.

Data Analysis

To interpret the data effectively, the researchers employed the following statistical treatments: TOPIK Level Indicator for SOP 1 to determine the Korean proficiency level of the respondents, indicating whether the test takers' proficiency ranged from Level 1 to Level 6; Weighted Mean for SOP 2-3 to assess the respondents' evaluations of their personal profiles (McKenna et al., 2023). It indicated whether the SPFL enrollees' responses fell between "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree."; and the Pearson Chi-Square Formula for SOP 4 to test for a relationship between the expected frequencies in two or more categories (Turhan, 2020). In this study, the variables examined were the students' proficiency levels in Korean and their challenges and opportunities in Korean language learning.

Ethical Considerations

This study included a request letter to seek approval from the administration's office to allow the participation of their students as respondents. Prior to conducting the interviews and administering the survey questionnaires, the respondents were provided with a consent form stating that their answers would be treated with the utmost respect and confidentiality. They were also oriented about the content of the consent form concerning their participation in the study. Respondents were not required to include any identifying information in the survey questionnaires.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Table 1

Result of the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) I of the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang

TOPIK Level	Frequency	Percentage
Failed	12	37.50%
1	19	59.38%
2	1	3.13%
Total	32	100

In Grade 8 Shin Saimdang, the 32 students demonstrated varying levels of proficiency in Korean. Among them, one student achieved Proficient Level 2, which represents 3.125% of the group. This finding indicates that very few students reached the higher proficiency level of TOPIK I. Nineteen students passed as Proficient Level 1, making up 59.375% of the total and reflecting the most common proficiency level attained. Meanwhile, the remaining 12 students did not pass either Level 1 or Level 2 of TOPIK I, accounting for 37.5% of the total. This situation underscores a significant number of students who have not yet attained proficiency in Korean according to TOPIK I standards.

Table 2

Survey on the Challenges of Grade 8 Shin Saimdang in Korean Language Learning

Indicators	WM	VI	R
1. I struggle with understanding written texts in Korean.	2.16	Disagree	5
2. I have no access to Korean language learning materials.	1.31	Strongly Disagree	13
3. I cannot relate to the Korean language learning activities.	1.41	Strongly Disagree	12
4. I encounter difficulty in comprehending the spoken Korean language.	2.28	Disagree	4
5. I face difficulties in expressing my thoughts and ideas in written Korean.	2.16	Disagree	6
6. I cannot engage myself in collaborative Korean language activities.	1.5	Strongly Disagree	11
7. I experience trouble with the pronunciation of Korean words and phrases	1.97	Disagree	8
8. I find it challenging to learn and remember new Korean vocabulary words.	2.38	Disagree	3
9. I face challenges in applying Korean grammar rules in my language learning.	2.41	Disagree	2
10. I am not interested in learning the Korean language.	1.06	Strongly Disagree	14
11. I feel afraid of committing mistakes when expressing my ideas in Korean.	2.44	Disagree	1
12. I struggle to stay motivated in my Korean language learning journey.	1.72	Strongly Disagree	10
13. I find it hard to master the Korean language because no one speaks it at home.	1.94	Disagree	9
14. I feel anxious every time my teacher calls me during our Korean language class.	2.09	Disagree	7
15. I find Korean Language class boring.	1	Strongly Disagree	15
Composite Mean	1.85	Disagree	

Legend: 3.26-4.00 Strongly Agree; 2.51-3.25 Agree; 1.76-2.50 Disagree; 1.00-1.75 Strongly Disagree

Table 2 shows the different challenges encountered by the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) learners in their journey of learning the Korean language during the academic year 2023-2024.

At the forefront, finding the Korean language class boring ranks as the fifteenth (15th) challenge, with a weighted mean of 1.00, signifying strong disagreement in the verbal interpretation. This suggests that there is positive engagement or interest in the SPFL-Korean class, indicating effective teaching and learning methods experienced by the students. This statement is supported by Dunbar (2017), who stated that learning another language can be fun, depending on the person and their learning style. He noted that some people may find it boring or difficult, while others may view it as an exciting and interesting challenge. On the other hand, the top challenge faced by Grade 8 students in learning Korean is the complexity of the language itself, with a weighted mean of 2.44 and a verbal interpretation of disagree. This suggests that while the complexity of the Korean language is acknowledged as a challenge, it may not be viewed as a major obstacle. A strong disagreement indicates that students may find the Korean language manageable and can navigate its complexities through effective teaching and learning methods. As noted by Andrade (2023), learning Korean can be simplified with the right techniques.

Table 3

Interview on the Challenges in Korean Language Learning

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Challenges in Korean Language Learning	Academic Challenges	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5: Korean Vocabularies
		S2, S3, S4, S5: Korean Particles S4: Korean Verb Tenses
	Personal Challenges	S1, S3, S5: Anxious in committing mistakes

Table 3 presents the collected codes based on the responses from five recommended Grade 8 Shin Saimdang students—two males and three females—from Jose Lopez Manzano National High School during a focus group interview regarding the challenges they face in learning the Korean language for the school year 2023-2024. Contrary to the survey results indicating an overall interpretation of "Disagree" regarding students' challenges in Korean language learning, the focus group revealed two distinct categories of challenges. These categories were derived from the responses, who were also the respondents in the survey. The identified challenges reflect the experiences of Grade 8 Shin Saimdang Korean language learners at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School for the academic year 2023-2024.

"Okay lang magkamali kasi he [Korean language teacher] will be there to guide us." (*It is okay to commit mistakes because he [Korean language teacher] will be there to guide us.*) – Student 1

"Nahihirapan po kami sa mga past, present, and future tenses." (*We struggle in the past, present, and future tenses.*) – Student 4

The participants experience difficulties in learning the Korean language, but they do not see this as a hindrance in effectively learning the Korean language. With the help and reminders of their Korean language teacher, the Grade 8

Shin Saimdang students overcame their personal challenges in learning the Korean language together. According to Suyunovna and Qivi (2021), the role of the foreign language teacher is crucial in fostering student motivation. Despite having only one trained foreign language teacher at Grade 8 Shin Saimdang in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School, students enrolled in the Special Program in Foreign Language express confidence in the support provided by their teacher.

"Nahihirapan po kami sa Korean particles kagaya po ng mga i/ga. 'Pag po sa mga objects, nakadepende pa po kung yung subject po na yun nakafocus or sa object po nakafocus yung mga sinasabi." (*We struggle in Korean particles such as the i/ga. The use of particles depends on whether the focus of the sentence is on the subject or the object.*) – Student 2

"Minsan may mga vocabulary po nandoon parang hindi po namin napag-aralan kaya naman po yung mga grammar [rules] naman po doon ay nakalimutan na po namin." (*Sometimes, there are unfamiliar vocabularies that we encounter and we tend to forget the grammar [rules].*) – Student 1

"Sa mga pinapanood po namin or binabasa, marami pong mga particles, mga vocabularies na pinag-aaralan namin na naghahalo-halo na po. So, minsan po, nalilito na rin po kami if yung mga yun ay naiintindihan namin." (*From what we view or read, there are lot of particles and even vocabularies that goes one after the other and it brings us confusion. Sometimes, we wonder if we really understood them.*) – Student 3

These responses indicate the students' struggle with Korean vocabulary because of Korean particles. Korean particles play a vital role in sentences by marking the function of words (such as topic or object) and ensuring clarity in communication, according to Toyryla (2024). Ignoring these particles can obscure the speaker's or writer's intended meaning. There are particles for topics, subjects, objects, locations, links, plurals, and possession, totaling around 128 in the Korean language, as Sacasas (2021) notes. Mastering all these particles is a gradual process, reflecting the understanding of Grade 8 Shin Saimdang participants.

Overall, the personal and academic challenges in Korean language learning experienced by the participants from the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School revolve around the concepts of Korean vocabulary, particles, and tenses. Unlike the result of the survey about the different challenges they experience in Korean language learning with a composite mean of 1.85 and a verbal interpretation of Disagree, the answers of the five participants who were also respondents of the survey deny that they totally disagree having no challenges experienced in Korean language learning.

Table 4

Survey on the Opportunities of Grade 8 Shin Saimdang in Korean Language Learning

Indicators	WM	VI	R
1. I see great potential in learning the Korean language because it enriches my learning experience.	3.72	Strongly Agree	2.5
2. I feel motivated to overcome language barriers and improve my Korean vocabulary.	3.63	Strongly Agree	7.5
3. I have easy access to a variety of Korean language learning materials (books, online resources).	3.41	Strongly Agree	13
Indicators	WM	VI	R
4. I believe that Korean language learning is a valuable asset that can enhance my academic credentials.	3.66	Strongly Agree	5.5

5. I am determined to enhance my comprehension of written Korean texts through consistent practice.	3.53	Strongly Agree	11
6. I recognize that mastering Korean will open doors to academic achievements for a Filipino student like me.	3.75	Strongly Agree	1
7. I value building fluency in Korean as it empowers me to engage with other languages besides the Filipino language.	3.5	Strongly Agree	12
8. I see Korean language learning as helpful for my future profession.	3.59	Strongly Agree	9
9. I believe that learning Korean will contribute to my personal growth.	3.72	Strongly Agree	2. 5
10. I see myself living in South Korea because of Korean language learning.	3.25	Strongly Agree	15
11. I believe that learning Korean will provide me with better career opportunities.	3.66	Strongly Agree	5. 5
12. I appreciate Korean language learning for expanding my network of friends.	3.31	Strongly Agree	14
13. I believe that Korean language learning would deepen my understanding of Korean traditions and values.	3.69	Strongly Agree	4
14. I enjoy exploring the Korean language through learning, as it broadens my awareness and enriches my personal experiences.	3.63	Strongly Agree	7. 5
15. I see personal opportunities in Korean language learning as a gateway to understanding a rich culture and expanding my global perspective.	3.56	Strongly Agree	10
Composite Mean	3.57	Strongly Agree	
<i>Legend: 3.26-4.00 Strongly Agree; 2.51-3.25 Agree; 1.76-2.50 Disagree; 1.00-1.75 Strongly Disagree</i>			

Table 4 presents data on the various opportunities for learning the Korean language among Grade 8 students in the Shin Saimdang Special Program in Foreign Language at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School for the academic year 2023-2024.

The data reveals that among the challenges in learning Korean, the intention to live in South Korea ranks fifteenth (15) with a weighted mean of 3.25, indicating strong agreement among respondents. This suggests that many students are not particularly interested in residing in Korea for various reasons. Gupta (2024) notes that South Korea is a global economic powerhouse, attracting numerous tourists and international companies each year. As the sixth-largest exporter and the seventh-largest trading partner of the USA, mastering the Korean language is appealing for learners interested in living and working in Korea. On the other hand, recognizing the mastery of Korean as a bridge to greater academic opportunities ranks first (1) with a weighted mean of 3.75, achieving a verbal interpretation of strongly agree. Students perceive proficiency in Korean as a significant factor that opens doors to enhanced educational opportunities. Participants in the focus group interviews expressed pride in their involvement in the Special Program in Foreign Language, highlighting how this exposure facilitates academic and personal achievements. According to the University of North Georgia, studying a foreign language offers numerous benefits, including enhanced communication skills, improved problem-solving abilities, and better performance in standardized exams due to language skills.

Overall, the opportunities in learning the Korean language are evident, with a composite mean of 3.57 and a verbal interpretation of strongly agree. This indicates that Grade 8 students in the Shin Saimdang program at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School for the academic year 2023-2024 strongly believe that learning Korean offers numerous opportunities for Filipino learners.

Table 5

Opportunities in Korean Language Learning Encountered by the SPFL Learners

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Opportunities in Korean Language Learning	Career Opportunities	S1, S2, S3, S5: Mastering the Korean language is a gateway for many job opportunities
	Academic Opportunities	S2, S3, S4: Learning the Korean language could land us a job abroad
	Cultural Awareness	S3, S4: Learning the Korean language could be a good credential when applying to college
		S2, S4: Learning Korean helps in forming a deep connection to other countries' cultures and traditions

Table 5 shows the collected codes based on the answers of five recommended Grade 8 Shin Saimdang students, two males and three females, in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School, school year 2023-2024, during the focus group interview regarding the opportunities they experienced in Korean language learning.

Cultural awareness is recognized as a significant aspect of Grade 8 Shin Saimdang students' Korean language learning journey. According to the Department of Education, the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) seeks to equip learners with skills for effective participation in diverse global environments, both linguistically and culturally.

"Agree po ako gawa 'pag namaster po namin pwede po kami magturo dito sa Pilipinas ng Korean language or pwede rin po sa Korea or ibang countries." (*I agree because if we master this [Korean language], we can teach the Korean language here in the Philippines or Korea or other countries.*) – Student 1

Academic opportunities were also identified in the Korean language learning of the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang. According to the Department of Education in Western Australia, there are numerous benefits of learning a language in one's academic pursuit. Learning a new language could (1) enhance literacy skills, (2) improve memory and brain function, (3) develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and (4) improve overall performance in school. The participants showed enthusiasm upon answering the questions concerning the opportunities that they think are waiting for them.

"If namaster namin 'to [Korean language] like ngayon po nagkameron po kami ng TOPIK, 'pag pumasa po kami, pwede po kami[ng] mag-apply sa ibang schools in Korea." (*If we master this [Korean language], and if we passed the TOPIK, we could apply in other schools in Korea.*) – Student 3

The most coded category under the opportunities in Korean language learning based on the answers of the participants during the focus group interview is about career opportunities. We are constantly moving into a more globalized world. The ultimate goal of the Department of Education in DepEd Memorandum 560, s. of 2008, is to provide Filipino learners with opportunities that will make them both locally and internationally competitive. This means that the skill level of the students will not be confined to the Philippines but will extend beyond the nation's borders.

"Nowadays, napakapopular ng Korean and meron mga companies na mas nagugustuhan nila yung Korean kasi nagugustuhan sya ng mga tao." (*Korean is very popular nowadays and there are companies that are more interested in Korean since most people like it.*) – Student 2

The opportunities foreseen by the participants from the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang in Jose Lopez Manzano National High School, the school year 2023-2024, revolve around cultural awareness, academic opportunities, and career opportunities. They are all positive that the Korean language would be an edge for them both in academics and careers.

Table 6

Significant Relationship of the Challenges in Korean Language Learning and the Proficiency Level in Korean of the Special Program in Foreign Language Learners at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School

Variable	df	Pearson Chi-Square	p-value	Description	Decision on Ho
Challenges	24	19.64 ^a	0.72	Not Significant	Accept

Legend: Reject Ho if $p < 0.05$

In this analysis, the Pearson Chi-Square test, a statistical method for assessing categorical data (Turhan, 2024), is employed to determine whether the gathered data significantly differs from the researcher's expectations. The variables identified in this study include (1) the proficiency level of students in the Korean language and (2) the challenges faced by students in their Korean language learning.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between the challenges and opportunities of SPFL learners in Korean language learning participating in the special program in foreign language and their Korean language proficiency level.

Table 7

Significant Relationship of the Opportunities in Korean Language Learning and the Proficiency Level in Korean of the Special Program in Foreign Language Learners at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School

Variable	df	Pearson Chi-Square	p-value	Description	Decision on Ho
Opportunities	26	24.36 ^a	0.56	Not Significant	Accept

Legend: Reject Ho if $p < 0.05$

In this table, Pearson Chi-Square, a statistical test for categorical data (Turhan, 2024), is used to determine whether the gathered data are significantly different from what this research expects. The variables present in this study that were identified by the researcher through a set of tests are the following: (1) proficiency level in Korean of the students and (2) opportunities of the students in Korean language learning.

As shown in Tables 6 and 7, the proficiency level in the Korean language of the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang students at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School for the academic year 2023-2024 does not significantly relate to their challenges and opportunities in Korean language learning. This finding is supported by the computed Pearson Chi-Square value of 19.64a for the relationship between proficiency level in Korean and challenges in Korean language learning, which corresponds to a P-value of 0.72—greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Similarly, the computed Pearson Chi-Square value of 24.36a for the relationship between proficiency level in Korean and opportunities in Korean language learning also shows no significant relationship, with a P-value of 0.56, again exceeding the 0.05 significance threshold. These results indicate that the proficiency level of the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang students at Jose Lopez

Manzano National High School in Korea does not correlate with the challenges and opportunities they encounter while learning the language under the Special Program in Foreign Language implemented by the Department of Education. The findings of this study are somewhat inconsistent with the research conducted by Aizawa et al. (2020), which suggested that higher scores on the English Medium of Instruction (EMI) Challenges Scale correlate with greater ease in students' EMI experiences; conversely, lower scores indicate increased challenges. Furthermore, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels appeared to impact the challenges reported by students for each skill area (Aizawa et al., 2020), with more pronounced differences across group boundaries in academic listening and reading. The results of their study indicated that the proficiency level of Japanese students in the English language significantly affected their perceived challenges in various academic skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Given that Japan has no official second language (Kagawa, 2023), English is regarded as a foreign language within the country, despite its dominant role in Japanese education. In contrast, this study reveals that the proficiency level of the students in Korean does not correlate with the challenges and opportunities they face in learning a foreign language.

Korean Language Learning Action Plan (KLLAP)

This section of the paper outlines specific actions in improving the Korean language learning of the Special Program in Foreign Language students at Jose Lopez Manzano National High School rooted in the results of the survey and focus group interview on the challenges and opportunities they have in Korean language learning. There are five main areas consisting of strategies, objectives, target date, persons involved, expected outcome, and success indicators based on the following areas: personal, academic, cultural, professional, and learning resources.

The researchers proposed the Korean Language Learning Action Plan (KLLAP), which consists of five key approaches. The first is about the Personal Ways. Learning a language is not a one-size-fits-all process. It is important to tailor strategies to individual students. This includes personalized study plans, interactive resources, and peer support groups to help learners strengthen their skills in ways that work best for them.

Academical Ways focuses on improving the curriculum by balancing grammar, vocabulary, and cultural learning. The researchers recommend more performance-based activities and regular proficiency tests to monitor student progress and adjust teaching methods accordingly.

Another essential approach is Cultural Ways. Language and culture go hand in hand. Therefore, encouraging immersion experiences and interactions with native speakers will provide students with real-world practice, enhancing both their proficiency and cultural understanding.

Professional Ways highlights the role of educators. Regular feedback sessions, continuous teacher training, and collaboration with fellow educators will ensure that teaching methods remain effective and up-to-date.

Finally, Resourceful Ways emphasize the importance of accessibility. Students need quality learning materials, online resources, and financial support when necessary to create an inclusive and well-equipped learning environment.

By implementing these strategies, a more engaging, effective, and sustainable approach to Korean language education could be provided, helping students develop not only their language proficiency but also a deeper appreciation of the culture.

CONCLUSION

TOPIK I consists of 200 items intended to examine the reading and listening skills of non-native Korean speakers. 80-139 points would mean Level 1 proficiency and 140-200 points would mean Level 2 proficiency. In the case of the Grade 8 Shin Saimdang, only one achieved Level 2, 19 for Level 1, and the 12 remaining failed the examination. This further proves that with the current grade level of the students, in which everyone is expected to be above the beginner level in the Korean language, they struggle to learn the said foreign language.

The respondents unanimously disagreed on the possible challenges they encounter in Korean language learning based on the results of the survey. However, the survey and focus prompted questions about their comprehension of the survey's content. These challenges revealed in the focus group interview include anxiety about making mistakes and difficulties with Korean tenses, particles, and vocabulary.

The survey and interview results underscored consistent opportunities identified by SPFL enrollees in their Korean language learning. They express optimism that mastering Korean will enhance their cultural understanding, academic achievements, and career prospects.

It gives the impression that the proficiency level of the SPFL enrollees in the Korean language could either be extremely high or low, and it is not related to the challenges and opportunities they experience in Korean language learning. This may be because they have a reliable foreign language teacher, whom they repeatedly mentioned in the focus group interview, who reminds them that committing mistakes is normal.

Having addressed the primary research question, it is evident that there is no significant correlation between the proficiency of SPFL enrollees in Korean and their identified challenges and opportunities in language acquisition. As a result, an action plan is proposed to improve the Korean language learning experience for SPFL enrollees. This action plan includes particular activities for the improvement of the Korean language learning of the SPFL enrollees, focusing on the following areas: personal, academic, cultural, professional, and learning resources.

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