

Learning motivation of students of Korean as a foreign language

What this research was about and why it is important

This study argues that current understanding of language learner motivation has been biased by previous research focused mostly on students of English and conducted with surveys. Therefore, it was important to investigate how learners of a less commonly taught language such as Korean see themselves as future speakers of that language, since their future vision can help understanding their motivation. This study adopts a holistic approach, called Q methodology, used to highlight participants' point of view about a given topic. Researchers asked the participants to sort out, from the more relevant to the less relevant to them, a set of statements describing possible events about their future as Korean language speaker. Four major points of view emerged among the participants. Depending on their individual perceptions, students saw themselves either studying Korean in the future just for leisure, living in Korea as a fluent speaker, finding a job thanks to the knowledge of the Korean language, or acquiring more intercultural communication skills.

What the researchers did

- We asked to 39 students of Korean as a foreign language enrolled in an Australian university to sort out a set of 45 cards from the more relevant to the less relevant.
- Each card reported a statement regarding a possible future situation, in which the participants imagined themselves using the Korean language.
- After displaying the cards, the researchers conducted a short interview with the students to better understand their individual perspective.
- The researchers analyzed students' cards disposition, and statistically individuated and divided into groups participants who displayed the cards in a similar fashion.
- The statistical analysis identified the presence of four main groups; students in the same group shared a similar point of view about their future as speaker of Korean.

What the researchers found

- A first group of students seems to enjoy studying Korean only for leisure purposes, since they are attracted by the Korean culture, and think of enjoying Korean popular culture in the future as well.
- A second group of students see themselves becoming a fluent speaker and living in Korea for an extended period of time, working in a language-related field, such as teaching or translating/interpreting.
- A third group of students considers the Korean language helpful to find a good job, such as working in the diplomatic field or for international or government organizations.
- A fourth group of students see themselves with a broader multicultural understanding and with enhanced communication skills.
- All students had in common that they see themselves in a more close friendship relation with Korean speakers.

Things to consider

- The interest in Korean contemporary culture products clearly defined the motivation of a group of students, who might not be interested in reaching a high level of language proficiency.
- We think that the perspectives characteristic of the first group (consuming Korean cultural products) and of the second group (living in Korea) are possible when students can connect the language they are learning with a specific country and culture, which is not possible for more globalized languages.
- All students participating in this study were non-heritage learners. If heritage students had participated, there might have been a well-defined perspectives where students see themselves with more connection with the Korean community.
- Unfortunately the methodology used does not allow to see how motivation and self vision change with time.
- Previous research had demonstrated in part similar results for learners of Japanese as a second language. It is worth asking how the characteristics of the future language self vision are affected by the language studied, and by its degree of globalization.