



USING HANCHA IN TEACHING KOREAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: NECESSITY OR OUTDATED TRADITION?

Akramova Shokhsanam Isomiddin Qizi

Teacher, Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Email: sh.akramova98@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of hancha (Chinese characters) in Korean language education has been widely debated in recent years. While some educators view it as an outdated tradition, others argue for its necessity in understanding Korean vocabulary and culture. This article analyzes the linguistic, cultural, and methodological aspects of using hancha in teaching Korean as a foreign language (KFL), offering a balanced view of its relevance in modern curricula.

Keywords: Korean language, hancha, language teaching, Chinese characters, language and culture, teaching methodology, vocabulary acquisition, KFL, education, tradition.

Introduction

Hancha (漢字), or Chinese characters, have historically played a central role in Korean language and education. Even after the invention of Hangeul in the 15th century, hancha remained dominant in academic, legal, and literary texts for centuries. Today, its relevance in teaching Korean as a foreign language is contested. Some scholars advocate for its integration due to its etymological and cultural significance, while others suggest that it overburdens students. This article seeks to assess whether hancha is a pedagogical necessity or an outdated tradition in the context of KFL. Furthermore, it evaluates the evolution of hancha usage in the South Korean education system and its adaptation in modern teaching methods aimed at foreign students.

1. Historical and Linguistic Background

The Korean language, although phonetic in script due to Hangeul, contains a substantial portion of Sino-Korean vocabulary. Over 60% of Korean words are



derived from Chinese. Hancha was historically the primary writing system and remains embedded in various compound words, legal terms, and formal expressions. For instance, terms such as 경제 (economy, 經濟), 교육 (education, 教育), and 사회 (society, 社會) are deeply rooted in Chinese-origin characters. Thus, hancha knowledge provides deeper lexical insights, especially in distinguishing homophones like “가구 (family)” and “건구 (building),” both read as "gagu," but written as 家口 and 建構 respectively. This capacity for semantic differentiation is particularly useful in academic and literary settings.

2. The Modern Relevance of Hancha

Though hancha is rarely used in daily conversation or informal writing, it persists in newspapers, academic texts, and legal documents. South Korea teaches hancha at the middle and high school levels, while North Korea has nearly eliminated its use. The disparity highlights the ideological divergence in language policies. For foreign learners, exposure to hancha can enhance understanding of Korean culture, increase vocabulary retention, and aid in reading historical or scholarly texts. Many standardized tests in Korea, such as civil service exams or university entrance assessments, include questions that presuppose basic hancha literacy. Moreover, the ability to interpret hancha adds nuance to understanding classical Korean literature, Buddhist texts, and Confucian philosophy.

3. Pedagogical Arguments for Teaching Hancha

a) Etymological Understanding: Students grasp semantic nuances and word origins, aiding long-term retention. Recognizing character roots strengthens vocabulary networks and enhances reading fluency. b) Cultural Literacy: Learning hancha introduces learners to Korea's historical ties with China and its classical heritage. It opens access to traditional literature, historical documents, and epigraphic records. c) Academic Preparedness: Advanced learners intending to pursue Korean studies benefit from hancha in literary and archival research. University-level courses often require hancha knowledge to interpret primary sources. d) Regional Comparability: Students from China, Japan, and Vietnam often find hancha familiar, facilitating cross-linguistic learning. It also enables comparative philological analysis across East Asian languages.



4. Arguments Against Including Hancha in Basic KFL Curriculum

a) Cognitive Load: Beginners may struggle with Hangul itself; introducing hancha early may cause confusion and frustration. For students without a background in logographic writing systems, hancha may appear impenetrable. b) Limited Practical Use: In everyday life, hancha is rarely required, particularly in spoken contexts. Most signage, digital communication, and public media use only Hangul. c) Curriculum Constraints: Time limitations in standard language courses may not allow for hancha without sacrificing essential grammar and communication skills. Especially in short-term language programs, the priority often lies in practical communication. **d) Technological Redundancy:** With the advent of digital tools and translation apps, the functional need for hancha literacy has decreased in casual and professional contexts.

5. Integrating Hancha Effectively

A compromise is selective introduction of frequently used characters (e.g., 200-300 key hancha), supported by visual aids, apps, and mnemonics. Curriculum designers may introduce hancha at intermediate levels, making it optional at the elementary stage. This aligns with practices at institutions such as Seoul National University and Yonsei University. Blended learning environments can integrate hancha into vocabulary modules, offering quizzes, stroke-order animations, and etymological trees. Moreover, project-based learning—such as comparing hancha-based words across Korean, Japanese, and Chinese—can increase student engagement. For learners pursuing careers in translation, linguistics, or East Asian studies, tailored hancha modules offer invaluable training.

Conclusion

The use of hancha in teaching Korean as a foreign language should not be viewed as a binary choice between tradition and modernity. Rather, its inclusion should be guided by learner goals, program duration, and linguistic background. While not essential for basic communication, hancha remains a valuable cultural and linguistic asset for deep learning. A flexible, level-based approach can preserve its benefits without overwhelming learners. As digital platforms evolve and global interest in Korean studies expands, hancha instruction, when properly scaffolded,



may serve not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a bridge connecting the past and present of Korean culture.

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