

Open Library of Humanities

Embedding South Korean Topics into a College Composition Curriculum

Marcy L. Tanter, Adjunct instructor of English, Ranger College, English Teacher, Plano Independent School District, Plano, TX, PROFESSOR.TANTER@gmail.com

As the United States and South Korea strengthen political ties, it is important for citizens of both countries to understand each other culturally. Politics and culture are intertwined, and knowing important aspects of cultures helps citizens to be aware of the reasons for political decisions and to want to connect. Incorporating elements of Korean culture in American college courses is one way to broaden students' knowledge of South Korea as they enjoy and analyze the content.

In my first-year composition courses, I include topics that emanate from various areas of the Korean entertainment industry. I introduce students to the concept of *Hallyu* and to Korean literature in translation. While some students are aware of K-pop and K-drama, many of them come from small Texas towns where such things are not popular, so they are experiencing them for the first time. In my essay, I discuss how incorporating these elements into my curricula is a boon to students who are developing their writing and research skills especially. For most students, looking into these Korean topics academically provides a fresh perspective while they begin the journey of learning about Korean culture.



Introduction

One of my strongest childhood memories is of my father talking about his short time in the US Army. He was very proud to have served during something called “the Korean War,” which was nothing more to me than a period of time. Dad got an honorable discharge without going overseas due to a family emergency, so he never had anything to tell me about Korea. I heard more about Korea and the Korean War through the TV show *M*A*S*H*. I couldn’t locate Korea on a map, and I “knew” nothing about it other than it was hilly and dusty, and that the Americans were there to fight some bad people. And the army was a cool place to be a doctor or nurse. That was my sum total of knowledge about Korea from my birth until some thirty years later when I was teaching at a university. Throughout all my years of education, if I ever heard the word “Korea,” I don’t recall it.

Although the United States did not invade Korea or colonize it, there is a definite American influence in its history. After a few decades of Americans establishing relationships with Koreans in Korea (mostly through missionary and education work), in 1905, the United States helped to broker Japan’s annexation of Korea after the Russo-Japanese war. In exchange for this, Japan turned a blind eye to the US colonization of the Philippines, which had begun in 1898. Japan was ousted from Korea at the end of World War II; the United States Army Military Government in Korea was in charge of what became South Korea from September 1945 until August 1948, when the first elections of the new country were held.

One day in the summer of 2012, Korea became part of my life. I discovered a Korean drama, enjoyed it, and pursued more. As I watched K-dramas that summer, I became interested in learning about the country and its culture and thus began a journey that has led to my current professional focus and an expansion of my personal interests. In a short time, I learned that Korea was not an obscure element of a past era but rather an important country integrated into American history in ways I could not have imagined before. It struck me as a great omission in my education that I had never been taught about Korea in any of my courses in high school or college. I had no memory of learning about the Korean War or the dictator Park Chung-hee, who came to power less than a decade after the war ended; Korea was becoming a democracy while I was in my PhD program, and no one brought it to my attention or suggested it was something worth paying attention to. As I learned about it on my own, now a teacher myself, I realized that Americans need to know about some aspects of Korean history, at least from the start of the twentieth century to the present, because its story is intertwined with American international affairs; the United States has been involved in Korean domestic and international policy for over one hundred years. As an educator, I needed to make

sure that my students would learn about Korea. As an English composition instructor, I could find a way to do it that would be engaging, would be a logical part of the curriculum for the course, and would not come across as a personal agenda.

Considering Content

How to incorporate Korean history and culture into English classes was complex. Park et al. (2024) state, perhaps obviously, “With the growing popularity of Korean culture, Americans have an opportunity to engage in meaningful cultural opportunities through access to popular culture as well as participation in deeper elements of culture such as language learning, traditions, holiday customs, and religious practices” (3). For me to take this idea to heart, I had to make sure that what I chose to include in my course was intentional and not a “fangirl” response that was a selection of just what I liked best.

There were plenty of texts in translation that I could use, as well as films, documentaries, even some primary documents, and plenty of articles and books. What gave me pause was how to approach the subject in a respectful way. Some students might be resistant to a white professor telling them what they should know about an Asian culture, while Asian students might not be accepting of a white professor telling them about their own or an adjacent culture. As I was researching and learning about Korea from an academic perspective, I had the opportunity to take students there on a study abroad trip. I had been studying for just over a year when this happened, and since I had not yet included Korean topics into any of my classes, I used this trip not only to begin to teach Korean literature but also to expand my understanding of the culture through visits to museums and cultural sites; via Twitter, I was able to connect with a singer known as Big Baby Driver who wrote songs for a couple of Korean dramas and I invited her to meet with my class. She spoke English well, so she was able to discuss how dramas are made, how music is chosen for them, and how the songs written for specific dramas are integrated into the productions. All of those experiences, along with conversations I had with Korean literature professors, improved my understanding of Korea and its culture, so I felt more confident about bringing Korean texts and relevant history to my students.

Most American students hear about Korea in the context of the Korean War and, occasionally, in discussions of dictatorships and Communism. Since the Korean singer Psy became an overnight sensation around the world with his song and video “Gangnam Style” in 2012, Korean pop culture has infiltrated the American market, and many people, especially those under the age of thirty, enjoy K-pop and K-dramas regularly. This spread of Korean culture is known as “*Hallyu*,” which is translated to mean “the Korean wave.” Given the popularity of *Hallyu* among people who are in the

throes of education, I expected that using it in the classroom would be a popular way for teachers to approach a variety of subjects, but I found that my assumption was wrong.

Jung et al. (2022) report interesting findings in a study that assessed teachers' use of Korean cultural content (primarily K-pop) in Korean language acquisition classes where it would be a logical inclusion through song lyrics and music videos, for example. What I found surprising about their study is that these instructors, many of whom were native Korean speakers, had not considered using K-pop to support language learning. Once instructors completed a three-week pedagogy course developed by the study authors, they had a positive attitude about integrating such cultural artifacts. The authors note:

Understanding culture or incorporating cultural artifacts in language instruction is one of the best ways to immerse students in the world language classrooms. . . . Although many participants continued to believe that incorporating culture into their language teaching would be very challenging, data analysis indicated that the teacher participants' transformative perceptual experience was positive about how to approach learner-centered instruction with Korean cultural artifacts. (Jung et al. 2022, 42)

Prior to reading about this study, my assumption was that it would be natural for Korean teachers to use cultural products in their world language classes, but the authors conclude that it was not a common practice in Korean pedagogy, even though including English-language cultural content is often included in EFL (English as a foreign language) classrooms in Korea (see Lee 2005). The teachers who participated in the study taught at all education levels from primary to postsecondary. Their comfort with embedding Korean cultural content was somewhat tied to the ages of their students:

Whereas primary/secondary teachers made versatile choices, postsecondary teachers made somewhat narrow, but consistent choices. Their choices converge into K-pop, food, cultural norms, TV commercials, and K-dramas. For instance, this choice was driven by teachers' perception that K-pop is more age-appropriate and attractive to their post-secondary students rather than songs and poems. Overall, we observed slight changes, but teachers—regardless of level—tended to stick to the topics with which they were familiar when designing lesson plans for their final project of the third week of the workshop. (Jung et al. 2022, 45)

The latter observation is not surprising and would result in more successful classroom experiences, most likely, than if teachers tried to incorporate content with which they

were not familiar. My own experience parallels this finding, as I tend to present music videos, snippets of dramas, and literature with which I am familiar. Occasionally I will look for something that is new to me, but I will not use it in a class until I am comfortable with it. The inclusion of cultural artifacts is common in American classrooms, but these are mostly from American or European cultures (see Alvermann et al. 1999, 108–20).

As so many of my students are aware of some aspects of *Hallyu*, I seize on the opportunity to use it in my first-year composition courses to teach the basics of how to conduct research for formal essays. Songs by BTS, Blackpink, and other Korean groups are often in the Billboard charts, but their fans might not know many facts about the groups, Korea, or the history of K-pop. In addition, it is likely they haven't thought much about the connections between Korean culture and American culture that make *Hallyu* popular in the United States. For example, fans might know that Twice had a successful tour in the US in 2022, but they might not know that Twice was the first Korean “girl group” to hold a stadium show in the country and that in 2023, they were the “first-ever girl group and first ever Asian female act to sell out Los Angeles’ SoFi stadium” (Gomez 2023). It is unusual in the United States for a foreign music act to do so well, especially when they sing in a language most Americans cannot speak or understand; however, fans of these groups find or create translations of the songs or learn the Korean lyrics phonetically so they can sing along, and many of them are becoming students of Korean language. In 2023, the Modern Language Association released a report on the popularity of foreign language courses in the US. The report found that as of the fall of 2021, “three of the fifteen most commonly taught languages saw an overall increase in enrollments. Korean continued its remarkable growth, rising by 38.3%, followed by Biblical Hebrew (9.1%) and American Sign Language (0.8%)” (Baer 2023).

The Specifics of Embedding Cultural Content

Hallyu is not just K-pop; it encompasses television dramas, movies, food, beauty products, fashion, webtoons, *manhwa* (Korean manga), and even medical procedures such as plastic surgery. South Korea is a country that relies on tourism for a great deal of its annual revenue (OECD 2020), and it is seeing a strong recovery after hard losses during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2023, “the number of visitors from the United States [was] 1.09 million, [a] 103.6% recovery rate” (MCST 2024). Young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five may seem to be the “target audience” of *Hallyu* because most of the celebrity singers and actors are young, but it appeals to people of all age groups. Gi-Wook Shin (2022), who has been writing about *Hallyu* for many years, notes that “the fascination with K-pop and K-dramas is no longer confined to specific

demographics, such as young women or Asian Americans. Korean culture is a topic of daily conversation not only on college campuses, but also in restaurants, shops, and on the street,” showing that its appeal in the US is widespread and not limited to young people who spend a lot of their time scouring social media and streaming services. With all of this interest and the increasing popularity of Korean culture each year, it makes sense that the subject should come up in college courses.

As I design my first-year composition courses, I vary the texts and assignments so that I won't become bored with them over time, but I have made sure to include at least one assignment each semester that is focused on Korean culture. I have had students read a short children's novel titled *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* by Sun-Mi Hwang (2013), a sweet modern fairy tale that lends itself to discussions about adoption, parent-child relationships, friendship, bullying, and acceptance. The protagonist, a lonely hen named Sprout, unexpectedly adopts an abandoned duckling she names Greentop. The novel was published in 2000 and was made into a Korean animated film in 2011; I have had students make their own films based on the novel, giving them the choice to make it live-action or animated. Although they do watch the official Korean film, they always come up with their own inventive short films. The students' interpretations focus on the bullying and acceptance themes of the novel more than the others, which I suspect is more cultural bias than anything else, since we focus on these two issues in the American education system as part of SEL (social/emotional learning) curricula. When I explain about how adoption has impacted Korean society in the decades following the Korean War, students appreciate the positivity of the Sprout-Greentop relationship and how Sprout loves her baby regardless of his origin; the students do realize, also, that when Greentop becomes old enough to leave home and joins a flock of ducks, he is returning to “his people,” which may be Hwang's way of saying that it is right for adoptees to return to the place from which they come.

Using translated works is a good way to introduce a foreign culture to students because it eases them into concepts and ways of thinking they have not encountered in their lives, and it allows me to explain that translation is an art in itself, and I discuss how a translation is like a collaboration between the original author and the translator, even if they never have a conversation about the text. With the *Hallyu* phenomenon, though many K-pop fans will read subtitles or get song lyrics in their own language, many also learn the songs in Korean so they can sing along; this often connects to their desire to learn Korean. I have not met anyone who is learning Korean in order to read literature in its original form, but I have met many people who are studying it so they can understand songs and not have to read subtitles as they watch music videos and Korean dramas. This dichotomy interests me and led me to devise

an assignment in which I have students research why *Hallyu* has such an appeal in the United States. I vary the assignment from time to time, but the basic idea remains the same: spend time with content you have likely not seen before (though some students are already aware of the content, some are even big fans) and figure out why it has a large following in our country.

To begin the work for this assignment, I show two or three K-pop videos in class and ask the students to take notes as they watch. They usually ask me how they should do that since they don't understand Korean. The first time we watch the videos, I keep the subtitles off and ask them to pay attention to the visual aspect of the video: look at the costumes, the use of color, the setting, and how the characters interact, if they do so. Then we watch again with subtitles, and I ask the students to pay attention to the narrative and whether or not the lyrics and the action pair up. We discuss the videos as texts, and then I ask them how the videos differ from American music videos. They note similarities in the videos before the differences, but they do also identify differences; then we compare the students' findings with a focus on what elements seem particularly cultural and which seem typical of international music video fans' expectations.

To further highlight the cultural indicators of *Hallyu*, I assign a couple of episodes of a Korean drama. For this, I have the students watch the material outside of class and bring in their notes. Sometimes they get together and watch in groups; often, I have students who already watch K-dramas and recommend titles to their classmates. I provide a list of a few I think will appeal to students, but I allow them to choose what they want. A few titles I include often are *My Love from the Star* (*Byeoreseo on geuda*, 2013–2014), *Crash Landing on You* (*Sarangui bulsichak*, 2019–2020), and *Stranger* (*Bimirui sup*, 2017–2020). The first two are romances, and the third is a thriller police drama. I have not assigned this since *Squid Game* (*Ojingeo geim*, 2021–2025) came out, but I assume a lot of students will choose it now since it is the most popular K-drama ever shown in the US.

Explanation of a Specific Assignment

The discussion about Korean dramas is a bit different than the K-pop discussions because there are so many cultural references and items of note. Dramas often showcase relationships that depict the various levels of required politeness and respect in Korean society, they often show aspects of the education system such as university life, and they give us glimpses into how the interplay between class and status functions in the workplace. I show clips and explain moments where tropes are exaggerated for the sake of entertainment, but I also talk about how what we see in the dramas is based on a long history and how Korea is slowly changing. Students find fewer similarities when they

compare Korean dramas to American television programs than they find when they compare music videos, and this helps to set up the premise for the assignment.

In the assignment, I ask students to

Investigate why Korean cultural products such as K-pop and K-drama have gained traction among American audiences who claim to be fans of either/both genres. To do this, you will create at least 5 research questions to guide your investigation; you should consult a variety of sources including academic articles, fan sites, and publications from companies such as Netflix that address the popularity of what they offer the public. You can also survey people on campus; make sure you include people from different age groups and from different areas of campus (students, profs, staff, etc). You may find it necessary to consult the web sites of Korean companies and blogs; for these, you can use Google translate. It will be harder to vet those sites, but you can ask me for help if you need to verify the credibility of a site.

Once you have gathered enough information and have evaluated what you found to answer the research questions you formulated, write an essay of 1000-1500 words in which you discuss why the Hallyu wave has covered the entire US and why Americans are so drawn to it. You may tailor this as you see fit, but you should use at least 2 primary and 3 secondary sources to support the claims you make.

Because I ease students into the assignment through class discussions of K-pop videos and K-drama episodes, they are ready to tackle a discussion of *Hallyu* on their own. As they explore what draws American audiences to Korean cultural content, they learn about that content and come to understand more about Korea than they knew before they began the project. As they discover aspects of the videos and dramas that seem to resonate with their fellow Americans, students are discovering elements of Korean society that writers and directors choose explicitly to showcase, especially in work they know will be exported abroad. For example, “Daechwita,” a solo music video by Suga from BTS, features Korean historical sites and the ancient dramatic form *pansori*, while the lyrics refer to “king,” “tiger,” and “dragon,” all nods to the Korean past that bore Suga (or his alter ego Agust D, the name under which the song was produced and released); the lyrics speak of his life in the present, flying around on jets, starting his career, and earning money because of “Bang PD,” the man who created BTS. The video’s appeal for American audiences combines the romantic feel of the juxtaposition of the ancient with the modern music and dance, and the individualism Suga feels even though he is part of a large group. That feeling of individualism is a cornerstone of American society, so audiences can enjoy the unfamiliar Korean elements of the video and song

and can feel connected to Suga with their shared sense of personal achievement and individualism. For my students, a video like this piques their interest in visiting Korea to go to the historic sites to learn more about them. When I led study abroad trips to Korea, students often cited K-pop video locations as an impetus for their wanting to go on the trip, proving that embedding this cultural content does more than provide topics for writing assignments: it opens students' interest in new places, people, and ideas.

Conclusion

It is an impossible task to teach a person everything they should know through any college course; indeed, it's impossible to learn everything during a college degree or even a single lifespan, but those of us who are lucky enough to spend our working hours sharing our knowledge have an obligation to do what we can to spark our students' interest in the world beyond their own space. When I bring Korean culture into my curricula, my students are usually surprised, as they don't expect to encounter the topic in a writing course. The extant scholarship on embedding Korean cultural content into educational settings is focused on language courses rather than on using it in English literature classes. As it is unusual to encounter Korean content in "regular" English classes (albeit in translation), some students balk at the unfamiliarity of the material, but most are willing to engage with it and embrace learning about a country and a people they don't know well, if at all. Once they are more comfortable with Korean culture as a subject, they notice it more in the news and even in the products they buy such as Samsung phones, LG washing machines, and, of course, a food they consume often, ramen. What I am bringing to them is not isolated to the one semester they are with me and makes many of them want to learn more about the political and social issues that crop up on sites like TikTok and Snapchat. The more aware these students are about connections between the United States and South Korea, the more they understand about the world and are better prepared to be engaged global citizens.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Alvermann, Donna, Jennifer S. Moon, and Margaret C. Hagood. 1999. *Popular Culture in the Classroom: Teaching and Researching Critical Media Literacy*. Routledge. EPUB.

Baer, Colleen. 2013. "New MLA Report Highlights the Need for Investment in Language Study." *MLA Commons*, November 15. <https://news.mla.hcommons.org/2023/11/15/new-mla-report-highlights-the-need-for-investment-in-language-study>.

Gomez, Sophia E. 2023. "Inside SoFi Stadium At TWICE's Record-Breaking L.A. Show." *Music News* (blog), Grammy Awards, June 12. <https://www.grammy.com/news/twice-ready-to-be-tour-los-angeles-inside-sofi-stadium-videos>.

Hwang, Sun-mi. 2013. *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. Translated by Chi-Young Kim. Penguin.

Jung, Young A., Sungshim Choi, Heye Young Shin, Sherry Steeley, and Marjorie Hall Haley. 2022. "Korean Teachers' Perceptions of Embedding Pop Culture into Classrooms." *NECTFL Review*, no. 88 (March): 37–53.

Lee, Kang-young. 2005. "A Content Analysis of Korean Adolescent EFL Conversation Textbooks Regarding Their Treatment of Culture." *English Teaching* 60 (3): 139–66.

MCST (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism). 2024. "Korea is to Attract International Visitors with 'Uniquely Korean Travel Experiences.'" Press release, January 22. <https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/policy/pressView.jsp?pSeq=355>.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2020. "Tourism Policy Responses to the Coronavirus (COVID-19)." *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, June 2. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tourism-policy-responses-to-the-coronavirus-covid-19-6466aa20>.

Park, Soseul, Crystal K. Harden, and Andrea R. Lee. 2024. "Incorporating Cultural Activities in K-16 Korean Curriculum in Tennessee: Enhancing Motivation and Engagement." *Tennessee Educational Leadership Journal* 50. <https://aspire.apsu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/721e50ed-3578-4747-8a58-e325f9a61ec1/content>.

Shin, Gi-wook. 2022. "Will Hallyu Swell to a Tidal Wave? Korea's Future as a Cultural Superpower." *Shorenstein APARC Newsroom*, Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, August 1. <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/will-hallyu-swell-tidal-wave-koreas-future-cultural-superpower>.

