

The Current Status, Problems, and Countermeasures of the “Practical Chinese” Curriculum in Korean Middle Schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the “Practical Chinese” curriculum in Korean middle schools as the research object, reviewing its evolution and current implementation status, and analyzing prominent practical difficulties. Since the 1997 curriculum reform, Practical Chinese has become the mainstream second foreign language in Korean middle schools, with a national coverage rate of 75.8% by 2023; however, an obvious unbalanced regional distribution exists (only 28.5% in rural Jeollanam-do). Three core bottlenecks restrict teaching quality: huge regional gaps, insufficient and unevenly distributed Chinese teachers, and unsystematic curriculum design plus outdated teaching materials. Targeted countermeasures are proposed from five dimensions: optimizing policy and resource allocation, improving teacher training and deployment, updating curriculum and textbook systems, reforming teaching and evaluation modes, and deepening Sino-Korean educational exchanges. This research can provide references for boosting local Chinese teaching in South Korea and offer insights for the global development of international Chinese education.

KEYWORDS: Curriculum status, Countermeasure research, Korea, Middle school, Practical Chinese

1. INTRODUCTION

As China’s close neighboring country, the Korean Peninsula is an important spread base of Chinese culture. As recorded by Kim (2003), Chinese characters had been widely used on the Korean Peninsula as early as 18 BCE, and formal Chinese education originated in 372 CE when the national academy was built in Goguryeo. South Korea is not only one of the earliest regions accepting Chinese culture but also a major source country of international students studying in China for a long time.

Since the 1950s, Seoul National University, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and Sungkyunkwan University have successively opened Chinese-related majors. The South Korean Ministry of Education has classified Chinese as a compulsory elective second foreign language for middle and high school students; many primary schools and kindergartens in Seoul, Daegu and other metropolises also set Chinese elective courses. Therefore, South Korea boasts a long-standing Chinese education tradition and a relatively complete teaching system, ranking as a typical representative of overseas Chinese education worldwide (Park, 2004).

National basic education determines the overall level of local Chinese education, and the middle school stage shapes students' language learning habits and cross-cultural awareness, exerting a decisive influence on reserve Chinese talent cultivation. In recent years, Korean middle school Chinese teaching has shifted from interest-oriented learning to exam-oriented learning, accompanied by contradictions such as disconnection between textbook content and daily communication demands, which are more prominent in middle school education. Accordingly, exploring the current situation, predicaments and solutions of Practical Chinese courses in Korean middle schools bears strong practical value. It can help lift the overall quality of Chinese teaching in South Korea, promote Sino-Korean cultural communication, and enrich the theoretical and practical models of global international Chinese education.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE “PRACTICAL CHINESE” CURRICULUM

The “Practical Chinese” course for Korean middle schools was officially introduced during the 1997 Seventh National Curriculum Reform. Classified as an elective under the “Practical Foreign Languages” category—alongside German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, and Arabic—it was distinct from exam-oriented core subjects. Its initial rationale was to foster basic daily communication skills and stimulate interest in cross-cultural exchange, aiming to build a solid foundation for future foreign language learning.

In its early implementation, schools were granted significant autonomy in curriculum arrangement, allowing for flexible placement across Grades 7 to 9, with a recommended guideline of two class hours per week. Since its inception, the curriculum has undergone four targeted revisions in 2007, 2009, 2015, and 2022. These iterations have continuously refined teaching orientations, learning standards, and assessment mechanisms to align with societal shifts and student needs. Broadly, this evolutionary process can be categorized into two distinct phases: the initial stage of standardized exploration and the subsequent stage of comprehensive optimization and literacy-oriented reform.

2.1 Initial Standardized Exploration Stage (2007–2009)

The 2007 and 2009 revisions marked the preliminary standardization of Practical Chinese education in Korean middle schools, establishing a foundational framework for future development. The 2007 revision retained the course's status as a Practical Foreign Language elective and established a comprehensive pedagogical system covering five core modules: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and cultural cognition. The curriculum design at this stage prioritized functional language teaching, focusing on basic oral expression and simple application. However, the absence of hierarchical and differentiated evaluation standards led to a somewhat uniform teaching approach, failing to adequately address the specific needs of students at varying proficiency levels.

The 2009 revision achieved a critical breakthrough in hierarchical teaching and differentiated assessment. While preserving the five fundamental learning modules, it introduced a three-tiered achievement standard system—basic, intermediate, and advanced—complete with detailed, operable behavioral indicators for each level. For instance, the basic level required mastery of simple greetings, whereas the advanced level demanded the ability to formulate standardized, complete sentences for daily communication. This tiered design enabled differentiated instruction for students of different abilities, ending the previous “one-size-fits-all” teaching mode and laying a standardized groundwork for the course's refinement. In summary, during this phase, Practical Chinese remained an elective covering listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture. While learning objectives were defined by functional standards (e.g., mastering simple oral expressions), the curriculum was still in the process of developing a robust system for hierarchical evaluation.

2.2 Comprehensive Optimization and Literacy-Oriented Reform Stage (2015–2022)

The 2015 and 2022 revisions represented a comprehensive optimization and innovative upgrade of the Practical Chinese curriculum, marking a paradigm shift from simple functional language training to the cultivation of competency and cross-cultural literacy. The 2015 revision further refined the tiered achievement standards and tightly integrated language learning with real-life communicative contexts. It incorporated practical content such as self-introductions, expressions of personal hobbies, and comparative analyses of Sino-Korean culture, significantly enhancing the curriculum's practicality and contextual relevance. Furthermore, the proportion of cultural teaching content was increased, emphasizing students' cross-cultural cognition. A percentage-based scoring system was also adopted for academic assessment, creating a more scientific and comprehensive mechanism compared to the previous single-ability assessments.

The latest 2022 revised curriculum, scheduled for full national implementation in 2025, has realized a comprehensive literacy-oriented reform. Building upon the five classic learning modules, it integrates knowledge acquisition, practical operational skills, and cultural value cultivation into a unified system, emphasizing the organic combination of language application and cultural understanding. In terms of evaluation, a graded system ranging from Level A to Level E replaced the traditional percentage method, allowing for more refined and diversified learning assessments. Most notably, the curriculum formally defined three core literacy objectives for Chinese teaching: communicative competence, cross-cultural awareness, and digital learning capability. It also categorized Practical Chinese electives into general, vocational, and integrated types, while explicitly highlighting the application of digital multimedia teaching tools. These changes signal that Korean middle school Practical Chinese education has entered a new stage of high-quality development characterized by diversification, digitalization, and a central focus on student literacy.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF THE “PRACTICAL CHINESE” CURRICULUM

3.1 Popularization and Development of Practical Chinese Courses

At the beginning of the 2000s, the enrollment rate of second foreign language electives was low; most schools chose classical Chinese or computer courses. According to the 20-year evaluation report of the Seventh Curriculum Reform issued by the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (2017), merely 12.7% of middle schools offered Practical Chinese in 2001, and the proportion rose to 58.3% in 2015.

In 2016, 190 out of 383 middle schools in Seoul carried out Chinese teaching, with a 49.6% implementation rate (Kim et al., 2016). In 2020, 188 Seoul middle schools opened Practical Chinese courses, compared with 72 Japanese courses, 2 French courses and 1 Spanish course. Chinese has occupied nearly half of all second foreign language elective resources in Seoul for years. Kim (2023)'s survey indicated that among 1,128 nationwide middle schools offering second foreign languages, 855 (75.8%) set Chinese courses, and 523 (46.4%) offered Japanese; French ranked third with only 5% coverage. After roughly 25 years of development, Practical Chinese has become the dominant second foreign language in Korean middle schools. In 2024, 73 out of 128 Daegu middle schools provided Practical Chinese, accounting for 57%, far higher than other foreign language subjects.

3.2 Class Hour Arrangement and Supporting Textbook Construction

Regional weekly class hour arrangements differ greatly. Schools in northern Gyeonggi Province generally arrange 1–2 class hours weekly, while popular schools in Daegu allocate 2–3 hours per week due to strong learning demand. Such regional differences in curriculum arrangement further widen the gap of foreign language education quality across South Korea (Shin, 2020).

Nine official publishing houses are authorized to compile supporting textbooks, including Shishi Chinese Publishing, Nexus, NE Neungyule, MiraeEN, YBM, Darakwon, Pagoda Books, Genius Textbook and Dongyang Books. All textbooks comply with national curriculum frameworks yet differ in the proportion of vocabulary, grammar and cultural content, resulting in uneven teaching effects in practical classroom application (Choi, 2021).

3.3 Current Situation and Dilemmas of Teaching Staff

Chinese teaching staff consist of local Korean Chinese teachers, native Chinese teachers and volunteer teachers from Confucius Institutes, who need to pass standardized training and qualification certification. However, continuous student population decline lowers the overall teacher demand. In addition, the 2022 revised curriculum (implemented in 2025) expands school autonomy, which may widen the urban-rural teacher allocation gap. Urban schools with sufficient student resources can hire full-time Chinese teachers, while rural schools rely on part-time and itinerant teachers due to limited student numbers and educational funds.

4. PROBLEMS IN CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN KOREAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

4.1 Severe Regional Imbalance in Course Implementation

According to Statistics Korea (2024), the coverage rate of Practical Chinese courses reaches 100% in Incheon, while the rural areas of Jeollanam-do record only 28.5%, presenting a regional gap of 71.5%. Uneven regional economic development, inconsistent policy implementation efficiency, and unbalanced educational resource distribution have resulted in prominent educational inequity across South Korea.

4.2 Severe Teacher Shortage and Uneven Distribution

The 2023 foreign language teacher supply and demand forecast report released by the Korea National University of Education indicates an overall Chinese teacher shortage rate of 41.8% nationwide (Korea National University of Education, 2023). Urban agglomerations including Seoul, Gyeonggi, and Incheon are equipped with sufficient teaching staff, whereas the Chungcheong and Jeolla regions retain merely 15.6% of the required Chinese teachers, showing an extremely uneven spatial distribution of human resources.

4.3 Lack of Systematic Curriculum Design

Restricted by insufficient faculty scale and limited educational budgets, most middle schools regard the Practical Chinese course as a marginalized short-term elective. Insufficient weekly class hours make it difficult to construct a continuous and progressive learning system spanning Grade 7 to Grade 9, which breaks the integrity and coherence of Chinese language teaching.

4.4 Outdated and Low-Practicality Textbooks

Several middle schools still adopt outdated textbooks that fail to match students' real learning needs. The repetitive and homogenized cultural content in textbooks cannot match the diversified cognitive needs of contemporary students, which greatly reduces classroom learning effectiveness (Kim, 2022). Most students have already acquired such basic cultural knowledge through daily media exposure, which significantly reduces their learning curiosity and motivation. The superposition of the above four major problems collectively restricts the comprehensive and sustainable improvement of Chinese language teaching quality in Korean middle schools.

5. COUNTERMEASURES AND SUGGESTIONS

Targeted solutions are proposed in accordance with the aforementioned problems from five dimensions, including policy guarantee, teacher construction, curriculum optimization, teaching evaluation reform, and Sino-Korean educational cooperation, so as to promote the high-quality and balanced development of Practical Chinese education in Korean middle schools.

5.1 Strengthen Policy Support and Optimize Regional Resource Allocation

National and local educational authorities should issue targeted supportive policies and establish urban-rural Chinese education community and pairing assistance mechanisms to realize cross-regional sharing of high-quality educational resources, so as to bridge the regional education gap. Model schools in Seoul and other core urban areas can arrange backbone teachers to provide on-site teaching guidance for rural and underdeveloped schools. Remote synchronous classrooms supported by video conferencing technology can effectively compensate for the shortage of offline teaching resources in remote areas. Meanwhile, the itinerant teacher system should be standardized and improved. Itinerant Chinese teachers should be incorporated into standardized staffing management, with corresponding transportation subsidies and stable career guarantees provided to enhance the job attractiveness and stabilize the grassroots teaching team.

5.2 Optimize Teacher Training and Dynamic Deployment Mechanism

It is necessary to appropriately expand the enrollment scale of Chinese language education majors in the Korea National University of Education and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies to cultivate high-quality local reserve Chinese teachers. Regular online and offline systematic training should be launched for in-service teachers, covering innovative teaching methods, digital teaching competencies, and cross-cultural communication skills (Lee, 2023). In cooperation with Hanban (Chinese Language International Education Center), a unified and standardized Chinese teacher qualification certification system can be established to raise the overall professional threshold of Chinese education in Korea. In addition, a flexible teacher dynamic deployment mechanism can be implemented to encourage outstanding teachers to take temporary posts in under-resourced areas and alleviate the regional imbalance in teacher distribution.

5.3 Improve Curriculum System and Develop Localized Textbooks

It is essential to redesign a hierarchical and progressive Chinese curriculum system suitable for the cognitive characteristics of Korean middle school students, forming a coherent learning progression from Grade 7 to Grade 9. In view of the defects of existing textbooks, localized and student-centered teaching materials should be compiled, reducing redundant written grammar exercises and increasing situational listening and speaking training. Furthermore, diversified interactive teaching activities such as role-play and situational dialogue should be added. Comparative Sino-Korean cultural chapters, contemporary Chinese social hot topics, and rich multimedia auxiliary resources can be integrated into textbooks to optimize the outdated and repetitive cultural content system, enhancing the novelty, practicability and interestingness of teaching content.

5.4 Innovate Teaching Modes and Diversified Evaluation Systems

Schools should popularize task-based language teaching and student-oriented teaching modes, and optimize traditional single teaching methods through diversified teaching design. Authentic practical tasks, such as ordering food in Chinese restaurants and designing China travel plans, can be adopted to strengthen students' ability to apply Chinese knowledge in real scenarios. Digital teaching tools including AI pronunciation correction systems and VR cultural simulation technology can be fully utilized to create immersive cultural

experience such as virtual visits to the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, thereby deepening students' cross-cultural cognition. In addition, the single written examination-oriented evaluation mode should be reformed. A diversified comprehensive evaluation system covering listening, speaking, reading, writing and cultural cognition can be constructed by combining classroom performance, situational dialogue assessment and cultural practice outcomes.

5.5 Deepen Sino-Korean Bilateral Educational Cooperation

Both countries should further expand the sister-school pairing project between Chinese and Korean middle schools, carry out long-term reciprocal student exchange programs, and organize Chinese summer cultural camps for Korean teenagers and short-term cross-cultural experience courses for Chinese students in South Korea. Academic institutions of the two countries can jointly carry out cooperative research on curriculum reform, teacher training, and balanced development of Chinese education. By sharing mature teaching experience and jointly tackling common teaching difficulties, both sides can continuously promote the sustainable development of Chinese language education in Korean middle schools under the framework of Sino-Korean educational exchanges.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper systematically sorts out the development context, current implementation status, core predicaments and corresponding optimization paths of the Practical Chinese curriculum in Korean middle schools. After 25 years of promotion, Practical Chinese has become the primary second foreign language elective in South Korea's middle school education system, with a national coverage rate of 75.8% by 2023. Nevertheless, four major obstacles persist: extreme regional development gaps, widespread Chinese teacher shortage and uneven allocation, fragmented unsystematic curriculum layout, and outdated low-practicality teaching materials with homogenized cultural content.

Corresponding to the above practical dilemmas, this study proposes five targeted improvement countermeasures. Specifically, strengthening policy support and optimizing cross-regional educational resource allocation, improving teacher training systems and flexible dynamic deployment mechanisms, constructing progressive curriculum frameworks and developing localized textbooks, innovating digital teaching modes and diversified multi-dimensional evaluation systems, and further deepening multi-level Sino-Korean educational cooperation and academic research.

Booming Sino-Korean cultural exchanges continuously bring new opportunities for the high-quality development of Chinese education in Korean middle schools. The 2022 revised national curriculum, which is fully implemented in 2025, clearly defines communicative competence, cross-cultural awareness, and digital learning literacy as core cultivation objectives, indicating the future reform orientation of Practical Chinese courses. The balanced and sustainable development of middle school Chinese education in South Korea requires joint efforts from educational authorities, schools, frontline teachers, and social sectors. Systematic policy support and multi-stakeholder collaboration can further maximize the educational value of Practical Chinese courses, cultivate adolescents' global cross-cultural vision, facilitate long-term Sino-Korean cultural communication, and deliver high-quality reserve talents for bilateral cross-border exchanges and cooperative development.

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