16
EARLY LITERACY POLICY AND PRACTICE IN KOREA
Jeung-Ryeul Cho

Korean students rank top in the international comparisons of students’ performance in reading, maths and science (PISA, 2012). In Korea, as in other Asian countries, this accomplishment might be related to early literacy education as well as parents’ high expectations for their children’s educational attainment from a young age (e.g. Lee et al., 2000). This chapter begins with a description of the key characteristics of the Korean language and writing, followed by a description of early literacy provision, policy and practice. Note that Korea is divided into two: South and North. Both Koreas use the same language and script ‘Hangul’ although their usage has been changed since they were separated after the Korean War (1950–1953). Only the literacy education and policy of South Korea is reviewed in this chapter.

Early literacy education system
Korea has two types of early education institutions: kindergarten and ‘Children’s House’. Kindergartens are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education whereas Children’s House is a day-care centre under the supervision of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Korean children start attending kindergarten between the ages of three to five. Kindergartens are independent of primary schools. In general, kindergartens are for children from middle-income families, whereas Children’s House is for welfare and childcare facilities especially for working mothers and lower-income families. Children’s House takes care of children from ages nought to five. Most kindergartens operate from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. for five days a week, whereas Children’s House is open from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. for six days a week. About 47 per cent and 43 per cent of three- to five-year-old Korean children attend kindergarten and Children’s House, respectively (Kim et al., 2014). The average student number in a preschool class is 30 or fewer. Children enter primary school at the age of six. Elementary school education is compulsory but preschool is not. The preschool education fee depends on parents’ family income.

Preschool teachers
There are two groups of kindergartens: public kindergartens (53 per cent) and private kindergartens (47 per cent) (Kim et al., 2014). Kindergarten teachers should have a certificate
Early literacy policy and practice in Korea

...after graduation of an early education major from a four-year university or a two-year college. Public kindergarten teachers should get a teacher’s licence after passing a teacher’s licence examination that is administered by the Ministry of Education. Teachers in Children’s House should have a nursery school teaching certificate issued from the Ministry of Health and Welfare after taking classes and engaging in teaching practice for three or four semesters from an open university, a digital university, a life-long education centre, a two-year college or a four-year university.

Characteristics of Korean language and early literacy development

Korean alphabet and syllable blocks

A new phonetic script, Hangul, was invented in the fifteenth century to facilitate the literacy of the Korean people. Before the creation of Hangul, Chinese characters called Hanja had been used to write for more than ten centuries. Through an almost 500-year revision since its creation, contemporary Hangul has alphabetic letters of 21 vowels and 19 consonant letters. Each Hangul letter makes a sound, representing transparent letter–sound correspondences. Each Korean consonant has a name and represents one sound, but each vowel has the same name as the sound it represents. The names of Korean basic consonants consist of two syllables in a CV (consonant + vowel) VC (vowel + consonant) or CVC (consonant + vowel + consonant) form. In general, each consonant name starts with its own sound and ends with the sound value of the letter made at the syllable-final position. For instance, the letter ‘ㄱ’ has the name 기역 /gi. jag/ and represents the sound /g/ or /k/.

Hangul letters are written in a square block, called Gulja, to depict each Korean syllable, which includes letters systematically from top to bottom and from left to right. The Korean Gulja structure is simple, having mostly CV (e.g. 나 /na/ ‘I’, 코 /ko/ ‘nose’), CVC (e.g., 별 /bjal/ ‘star’, 곰 /gom/ ‘bear’), and CVCC (닭 /dak/ ‘chicken’) structures. Hangul Gulja shows a clear syllable boundary within a Korean Hangul word, which is similar to Chinese characters. Gulja is visually salient and it is considered to be the basic unit of Korean written word recognition (Simpson and Kang, 2004). For these reasons, Hangul is called an alphabetic syllabary. That is, Hangul is considered as an alphabet and/or a syllabary (Taylor and Taylor, 2014). Phonological alternations occur in reading multi-syllable words, although they are often predictable from sound context due to the phenomena of simple coda, resyllabification and consonant assimilation.

Morphology

The Korean language has a rich morphology that has the three major types of morphological structures of compounding, inflection and derivation. Korean has many compounds and homophones as in Chinese. More than half of Korean vocabulary words consist of Sino-Korean words that originated from the Chinese language and have been used in Korea from ancient times. Sino-Korean words can be written in both Hangul and Hanja (Chinese characters) such as 학교 /hak.gjo/ ‘school’. Multisyllable Sino-Korean words as well as many native Korean words are compounds. Homophones are prevalent in Korea as well. Korean Hangul also has a rich morphology of derivational complex word formation, just as in English. Most derivations are generated through affixation. Korean suffixation in verbs and adjectives is the most productive and complex formation of inflectional words.
Emergent literacy

Korean children learn to read with the CV Gulja in their names and high frequency words at the ages of four or so. Only later do children learn to divide these Gulja into component letters. Korean children learn CV Gulja earlier than alphabet letter names and sounds. For example, in one study, four- and five-year-old Korean children identified 78 per cent and 96 per cent of CV Gulja, respectively, 54 per cent and 76 per cent for consonant letter names; 29 per cent and 68 per cent of consonant sounds (J.-R. Cho, 2009). Later, Korean children learned to add a consonant letter at a coda position to CV Gulja to make CVC Gulja. In addition, CV Gulja reading at Time 1 contributed longitudinally to Time 2 Hangul word reading six months later even with Time 1 letter knowledge and reading were controlled (J.-R. Cho, 2009). When they enter a primary school, most children master reading regular and irregular words.

Interestingly, Korean people tend to divide syllables into CV body and coda rather than onset-rime phonological units (Yi, 1998; Yoon et al., 2002). Korean children develop coda awareness earlier than onset awareness (Cho and McBride-Chang, 2005). This coda sensitivity is facilitative of regular and irregular Hangul word recognition among kindergartners (Cho et al., 2008). On the other hand, letter name and sound knowledge have moderate relations with Hangul word reading, which may be related to the syllable block printing of Hangul and long names of Korean consonant letters (J.-R. Cho, 2009).

Traditional Hangul instruction

From the mid-fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century before the influence of Western methods, the CV Gulja chart had been used typically for teaching Hangul (Taylor and Taylor, 2014). A typical CV Gulja chart contains 14 basic consonant letters in rows and ten basic vowel letters in columns to form 140 CV Gulja. Children learn to read and memorize CV Gulja in order and later learn to add a coda to the CV Gulja. However, the use of this chart has been reduced since the 1980s partly because of the strong influence of foreign literacy instructional methods of whole word and phonics methods. Although a CV Gulja chart is not popularly used these days, it was favoured as an effective method for less educated people before the twentieth century. Using the CV chart, children are often taught to read all of the syllable blocks in the order of the vowels or consonants. CV Gulja are almost always regular in their pronunciation, following the grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence rules of the Korean language, whereas the reading of multi-syllable words is often subject to phonological changes due to the morphophonemic writing and assimilation phenomena of the Korean language.

Early literacy education policy and private education

Literacy policies and curriculums

The first kindergarten curriculum was started in 1969 in Korea and revised seven times between then and 2007. The first curriculum included listening and speaking as language skills, whereas reading and spelling was included from the third curriculum (Lee, 2004). In 2012, a new curriculum called Nuri (meaning ‘the world’ in Korean) was implemented to combine the curriculums of kindergarten and Children’s House in order to attempt to realize childcare as welfare (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology and Ministry of Health
and Welfare, 2013). As in the previous kindergarten curricula, the Nuri curriculum focuses on language and communication skills and includes reading and writing, as well as listening and speaking. Nuri and the previous curricula emphasize the need for children to have an interest in reading and books. The teachers’ manuals of the seventh and Nuri curricula explicitly specify that alphabet letters and decoding skills are not taught to children. Instead, it is suggested that kindergartens use whole-word methods and informal play-oriented methods to encourage children’s motivation to read and write. The teachers’ manual of the Nuri curriculum specifies not to teach children to read Gulja but to help them find familiar Gulja in daily lives. According to the manual, teachers are supposed to expose children to many reading materials to provide a readable environment for them, to encourage children to read and to read out picture books to children.

Specifically, the reading curriculum includes the educational purposes of ‘having an interest in the contents of the text’, ‘identifying familiar Gulja around you’, ‘enjoying reading books and taking good care of books’ and ‘consulting books about what children are curious about’. As for popular activities, teachers help children to find familiar Gulja around them from cookie boxes, cartoon characters, lunch boxes, friends’ names and magazines. Teachers encourage children to read friends’ names from the day’s menu, find important information from books, introduce their favourite books to friends, borrow books from the library and repair damaged books.

The writing curriculum aims to encourage children to ‘understand that speech can be written’, ‘try to write their own name and familiar Gulja’, ‘try to write Gulja or similar forms to express their own feelings, thinking and experience’ and ‘have an interest to learn about writing tools’. As for writing activities, teachers are to encourage children to scribble, draw or write anything, teach them how to hold a pencil and write strokes, give ideas about relations of speech and print, make story books and book covers, write records after observation and learn to use writing utensils such as chalk, a marker pen and the computer.

A national survey showed that Korean teachers and parents strongly supported whole-language approaches in literacy education. Cho (2003) reported that 70 per cent of kindergarten teachers believed that children automatically learn reading and writing in daily lives; 27 per cent of teachers believed that children learn by themselves by playing with reading materials and texts. Similarly, 52 per cent of parents believed that automatic literacy learning takes place in daily lives and 20 per cent believed children learn on their own. However, only 2 per cent of teachers and 15 per cent of parents believed that children learn literacy via adults’ supervision and intervention.

Private education

About 90 per cent of children attend kindergartens and Children’s House (Kim et al., 2014). Meanwhile, about 85 per cent of children have had additional learning opportunities at home, such as studying commercially available workbooks as part of home education or through enrolment in private institutions (e.g. Korean Association of Child Studies and Hangul Education Research Center, 2002). Specifically, about 76 per cent and 85 per cent of children aged three to five received private education respectively in 2006 and 2009 for Hangul reading from commercial worksheets (S.-S. Cho, 2009; Lee, 2006). Therefore, 70 per cent of children master Hangul reading before entering elementary school although kindergartens do not teach decoding skills, and official literacy education is supposed to begin in primary school. The high rate of private education might be related to Korean parents’ high expectations for children’s educational attainment from a young age (e.g.
Lee et al., 2000). The high proportion of private education is considered as the highest in OECD countries and it costs more than 10 per cent of family income on average (Statistics Korea, 2015).

Since the start of the commercial worksheet business in 1976, its popularity has dramatically increased so that eight million Korean children and students were enrolled in commercial worksheet companies in 2008 (S.-S. Cho, 2009). In this worksheet business, teachers visit once a week each child’s house for ten to fifteen minutes and check children’s performance. The price is not very expensive compared with private tutors and private institutions. Children study 20 and 30 pages of worksheets that consist simply of drill and practice. Private education teachers employ a focused and directed teaching method rather than informal play-oriented methods (S.-S. Cho, 2009). The major purpose of Hangul worksheets is to help children to master Hangul decoding. The curriculum focuses on decoding and encoding skills including alphabet names and sounds, and letter–sound correspondences.

Private education teachers at commercial markets are hired from private education companies. A survey (S.-S. Cho, 2009) reported that 30 per cent of private education teachers graduated from two-year college; 70 per cent graduated from four-year universities or above. About 36 per cent of private education teachers had a kindergarten teachers’ certificate or nursery school teaching certificate; 11 per cent had an elementary and secondary school teachers’ certificate. About 78 per cent of them reported that they regularly attend workshops for children’s reading and writing. On the other hand, 26 per cent of kindergarten teachers had training and workshops about literacy teaching methods (Cho, 2003). This difference shows that private education teachers are more trained and updated on children’s literacy acquisition of Hangul.

Current practices

Hangul literacy instructions

Different institutions use different instructional methods for early Hangul acquisition. Korean kindergartens employ a whole-word method, based on the Korean governmental kindergarten curriculum, whereas a phonics method is used by most private learning places and private tutors who visit homes with commercial worksheets (e.g. Lee and Lee, 2007; Lee et al., 2000). The whole-word method emphasizes having an interest in books and reading books rather than decoding skills. In contrast, the phonics method emphasizes learning of letter names and sound–letter correspondences. Both methods of whole word and phonics were first introduced from Western countries after the Independence of Korea from Japan in 1945 and have been implemented for early literacy education since then.

Practices of Hangul education

A survey (Cho, 2003) investigated Hangul teaching methods with which kindergarten teachers taught children to read. The result showed that 70 per cent of teachers taught children with familiar words; 19 per cent taught words in sentences and context; 8 per cent taught alphabet letters and combination of letters; 3 per cent taught the basic CV Gulja chart. In a recent survey (J.-R. Cho, 2009) of kindergarten teachers, 100 per cent of the teachers presented their children with stories to read, 81 per cent taught the children to read and spell words, 48 per cent taught reading and spelling of Gulja, 44 per cent taught alphabet letters and 31 per cent used the CV Gulja chart.
Early literacy policy and practice in Korea

Effective Hangul literacy instructions from Korean mothers

Cho et al. (forthcoming) examined literate mediation strategies that Korean mothers use when individually coaching their four- and five-year-old children about writing Hangul words, and they investigated effective maternal strategies that facilitate children’s Hangul reading. The whole episode of mother–child joint writing was videotaped, and eight strategies of maternal literate mediation were identified. These eight strategies focused on Gulja matching, meaning, visual strokes, holistic visualization, Gulja structure, alphabet letters, CV Gulja and coda. Among the strategies, there were developmental differences in the use of the coda strategy, which was mentioned more often by the mothers of five-year-old children. The maternal CV and coda strategies in particular were highly associated with CV Gulja reading and word reading in children, respectively. However, other strategies were not associated with Hangul reading. This study further demonstrated the unique contribution of the maternal CV strategy to children’s independent CV Gulja reading and the unique contribution of the maternal coda strategy to children’s word reading after controlling for children’s writing skill, vocabulary and demographics such as children’s age and mother’s education.

Home literacy environment

A Korean study (Lee, 2006) analysed parental questionnaires reporting on 152 children aged four and five from middle socioeconomic status (SES) regarding home literacy environment. The survey reported that 13.2 per cent of Korean families had fewer than 40 children’s books, 26.3 per cent had 41–80 books; 21.7 per cent had 81–120 books; 38.8 per cent owned more than 212 books. The frequency of monthly visits to the library was none for 42.1 per cent of parents, one to two visits for 50 per cent of parents, and more than three to four times for 7.9 per cent of parents. Korean children read books for 25 minutes a day on average. By way of comparison, Foy and Mann (2003) reported on a survey of American parents from middle SES and of children aged four. The average number of children’s books in American homes was 81.30 books (range: 0–250) and the frequency of visiting the library was 1.10 visit (range: 0–4) per month.

Digital devices

Today, young children grow up in very different social conditions from previous generations, mainly through the ubiquity of digital technologies. Digital devices are diverse and include computers, game players, DVD players, mobile phones, smartphones, tablets and digital cameras (see Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume). The use of digital devices is popular in Korea, and young children use them from an early age. In particular, the use of smart devices (tablet and smartphone) has increased among children as well as adults in Korea. Kim (2014) reported that 69.4 per cent of children under age six used a computer, 45.9 per cent used mobile phones, 90.3 per cent used a smart phone, 21.9 per cent used a tablet and 17.9 per cent used a game player. Children first used mobile phones on average from the ages of two to three, smart phones from the ages of three to five, computers from age three and the tablet from age five. Kim (2014) reported that children used computers and smart devices most often when their parents did housekeeping. Children used many different types of computer programs for a range of activities, including social networking, language learning and entertainment.
Most classrooms have a library and a separate place for reading and writing in preschools. The average number of children's books in kindergartens is 25 books (range: 12–36) in and near Seoul (Cho, 2001). The average number is 23 books in kindergartens and Children's House in a local province where most children are from multicultural families in which mothers have come to Korea for marriage (Lee, 2013). In addition, most preschool classrooms have a computer, a TV, a video player, video tapes, a calendar, word and picture cards, and other devices for literacy education.

Practising early writing

Before 1990, in Korea, young children learnt to draw lines and copy Gulja with drill and practice (Lee, 2004). Their writing was based on directive instruction methods and activities including copying Gulja, consonant and vowel letters and words with repetition. In the era, kindergarten teachers used worksheets to teach Hangul and gave homework to children with worksheets. Children learned Gulja and consonant and vowel names from worksheets.

Writing activities, however, have decreased after the whole language perspective became popular in Korea. Cho (2001) surveyed 110 kindergarten teachers regarding their beliefs about writing education for four- and five-year-old children. The study also observed writing activities of 26 teachers and rated the literacy environment of kindergartens. The results showed that 63 per cent of teachers reported having a whole language perspective whereas 37 per cent reported having a traditional view of drill and practice. Various writing activities of children were observed in the classrooms such as writing simple words and sentences, copying Gulja after the teacher, writing and making a story after reading a picture book or a picture, writing the child's name, writing consonant and vowel letters, writing a friend's name, and writing numbers in the activities of birthday card making and others. Choi (2009) conducted a survey with 190 teachers of kindergarten and Children's House in a southwest province of Korea regarding writing education. Although about 85 per cent of teachers believed that writing education is not necessary for the kindergarten level, 79 per cent of teachers taught writing to their children due to parents’ demand. Many teachers reported that they know little about a specific curriculum for writing, they got information about writing education from other teachers and workshops. Thus, preschool teachers need to be informed about effective literacy instructions about Hangul reading and writing.

Early literacy responses to particular needs

Children with special needs

Special education programmes are provided for children with special needs from the age of three to promote appropriate education opportunities and high-quality education services from an early age in Korea. Three stages have been suggested to classify children with special needs. First, local schools or parents refer children who may need special education to a Special Education Supporting Centre (SESC) with the consent of parents and the inclusion of a child’s screening test. Second, the SESC conducts IQ testing and other diagnostic tests for suspected disorders in children. Finally, a Special Education Management Committee is appointed to select children with special needs and assign them to schools based on parents’ request. The number of preschool children with special needs increased from 3,303 in 2010 to 3,367 in 2011 (Ministry of Education, Science, & Technology, 2011). About 76 per cent
of preschool children with special needs receive inclusive education and the rest of 24 per cent attend special education preschools. Among the children receiving inclusive education, 60 per cent of them study in inclusive classes and 40 per cent in special education classes. Kindergartens that are subject to inclusive education have to make a classroom of special education for every four children with special needs. The Korean government supports preschool children with special needs with free preschool education, free after-school activities and vouchers for free therapy and counselling according to their needs.

**Children from multilingual families**

Korea has been known as a racially homogeneous country until the late twentieth century. However, people from other countries have moved to Korea to work, study and get married since 1980. In 2010, about 2 per cent of the Korean people (about 1.2 million people) were from foreign countries (Statistics Korea, 2010). About 10 per cent of them came to Korea for marriage. Most of the multicultural families live in underprivileged environments such as remote rural areas and urban slums. Children from multicultural families tend to have low levels of Korean language skills, literacy and school achievement (Park et al., 2014). Recently, the Korean government has attempted to provide academic and social support to the children from multicultural families in order to improve their school adjustment through educational intervention, consulting and counselling. However, there have been no special curricula for the early literacy education regarding the acquisition of Korean language and literacy among young children.

**Major concerns for current and future literacy provision in Korea**

**Teaching Hangul in formal education**

Basic skills for Hangul decoding have to be taught in formal education such as in kindergarten and grade 1 rather than in private education. Note that about 80 per cent of children aged four and five receive a private education in Hangul reading and over 70 per cent of children master Hangul decoding before they enter primary school (e.g. Cho and McBride-Chang, 2005). Although Hangul decoding is supposed to be taught in grade 1, grade 1 actually does not focus on Hangul reading because over 70 per cent children already know how to read Hangul. In other words, 30 per cent of children are not taught Hangul adequately either at kindergarten and grade 1 or in private education and this is partly due to living in underprivileged environments that typically are families that are poor, rural, multicultural or a combination of these factors. Those children may be at high risk of developing reading difficulties and learning underachievement. A recent study (Cho, 2015) reported that 28 per cent, 20 per cent, 6 per cent and 8 per cent of children, respectively, had not yet mastered reading of CVC Gulja with transparent letter–sound correspondences at the end of kindergarten, in the middle of grade 1, at the end of grade 1 and in the middle of grade 2. The data show that children are not taught to read CVC Gulja in the first semester of grade 1 and about 8 per cent of Korean second graders still had not yet mastered reading of CVC Gulja. Kindergartens need to teach children basic Hangul Gulja such as CV Gulja. In addition, children who have not yet mastered Hangul decoding at the start of grade 1 should be extensively trained with extra literacy reading programmes in grade 1; otherwise they face long-term literacy failure.

In addition, private education for literacy education should be decreased in Korea. The high dependency of private education prevents public education from working normally and
making progress. Eventually, it polarizes further differences between students: that is rich versus poor.

**Teacher education**

School teachers in kindergarten and elementary school need to be educated about the processes of Hangul acquisition and specific reading and writing learning difficulties in Korea. Many Korean people including teachers and parents believe that Hangul can be learned easily, that Korean children learn Hangul by themselves without any help of adults (e.g. Cho, 2003) and that Korean children do not have reading difficulties. This is partly why Korean literacy development and impairment were not the focus of many scholarly investigations in the past. More research about acquisition of Korean language and literacy should be conducted and the findings should inform the practices of teachers and parents of young children.

**Effective teaching instructions of Hangul**

Effective teaching methods of Korean literacy should be studied in depth. Early Hangul education in kindergartens and private education favour whole-word and phonics methods that were imported from Western societies. But Korean language and script have a specific characteristic as an alphasyllabary (Taylor and Taylor, 2014). A recent study on effective maternal strategies to teach Hangul reported that instructions focused on CV and coda were associated with children’s Hangul reading in young Korean children (Cho et al., forthcoming). Specifically, it would be ideal to teach CV Gulja within a CV chart first and then coda information for optimally teaching how to read and write Hangul words. CV charts could be particularly useful to teach Hangul to young children with poor emergent literacy skills and in poorer environments.

In conclusion, Hangul has some specifics as an alphasyllabary. More Korean researchers continue to study specific methods of promoting literacy based on the characteristics of Hangul and Korean language, as well as general methods from abroad. Major findings from research can and should now be better reflected in early literacy policy and practices to advance early literacy education in Korea. Ultimately, researchers, educational administrators, preschool teachers and parents should collaborate to increase early literacy development and to reduce literacy impairment among young Korean children.

**Acknowledgement**

This paper was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2016S1A2A2912359).

**References**


