

The Value of Korean Proverb Education for Foreign Learners

Kyung Ae Kim

Teacher in the Department of Korean Philology, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Uzbekistan

Received: 25 February 2026 **Accepted:** 22 March 2026 **Published:** 11 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This study explores the multifaceted educational value of Korean proverbs for foreign language learners, focusing on two primary dimensions: communicative efficiency and cultural integration. Language acquisition extends beyond linguistic systems to encompass the immersion into a nation's ideology, history, and customs, with proverbs serving as a quintessential medium for this cultural transmission.

From a communicative perspective, this research distinguishes between accurate and efficient communication, positing that proverbs are uniquely effective tools for persuasion. While their conventional nature makes them less suitable for fresh emotional expression or social bonding (phatic communion), they excel in educational settings by correcting learner behavior through the “authority of collective intelligence.” By utilizing proverbs like “A needle thief becomes a cow thief” 바늘 도둑이 소 도둑 된다, educators can provide immediate, visual moral lessons that mitigate psychological resistance and encourage self-reflection.

From a cultural perspective, proverbs are analyzed as oral literature that encapsulates the wisdom and practical values of the Korean people. They provide a multidisciplinary foundation—spanning folklore, classical literature, and linguistics—that enables learners to internalize the inseparable link between language use and cultural principles. Ultimately, the appropriate use of proverbs by foreign learners serves as definitive evidence of their deep understanding of the Korean sentiment, allowing them to achieve a level of communicative competence that resonates with native speakers.

Keywords: Korean Proverb Education, Foreign Language Learners, Communicative Efficiency, Persuasive Function, Cultural Literacy, Oral Literature, Linguistic Folklore, Intercultural Competence.

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a medium for conveying human thoughts and emotions, manifesting in diverse systems and forms according to nations and regions. When learning a foreign language amidst such linguistic diversity, understanding the differences between languages and their unique expressive characteristics significantly enhances learning effectiveness. Foreign language acquisition is not merely the study of a linguistic system but an immersion into the culture through that language. A nation's ideology, culture, history, and customs are expressed through various lexical forms, among which proverbs are the most representative. Proverbs clearly convey profound meanings within concise sentences and contain practical

lessons for daily life; thus, once learned, they are not easily forgotten. The educational value of proverbs can be examined through two primary lenses: the communicative perspective and the cultural perspective.

Communicative proficiency can be categorized into accurate communication and efficient communication. Proverbs appear to be utilized more frequently when efficient communication is required rather than mere accuracy. This characteristic suggests that proverbs are used far more often when the addresser intends to persuade the recipient rather than simply convey information. Due to their conventional nature, proverbs are difficult to use for phatic (social bonding) purposes and are rarely used for

emotional or expressive purposes as they lack a sense of freshness. However, they are often highly effective in persuasive discourse. This implies that the inherent persuasive function of proverbs makes them an exceptionally useful resource in educational settings.

In communicative situations aimed at emotional rapport or social bonding, the familiarity of idiomatic expressions may hinder genuine impressions and risk appearing as mechanical responses. For instance, employing proverbs such as “No tree fails to fall after ten ax strokes” 열 번 찍어 안 넘어가는 나무 없다 or “Pleasure follows pain” 고생 끝에 낙이 온다 during a romantic confession or when comforting someone in sorrow can easily lapse into cliché rhetoric that obstructs the sincere delivery of emotions.

Conversely, the status of proverbs shifts significantly when considering educational scenarios where a learner’s bad habits must be corrected through persuasion. While a teacher’s detailed explanation—such as “Leaving small errors unattended may lead to serious crimes in the future”—might be effective in terms of communicative accuracy, it is highly likely to be perceived by the learner as a tedious lecture, thereby triggering psychological resistance. In contrast, the single proverb “A needle thief becomes a cow thief” 바늘 도둑이 소 도둑 된다 provides an immediate visualization of the catastrophic consequences of trivial actions through the stark contrast between a ‘needle’ and a ‘cow.’ Furthermore, by presenting a universal principle of poetic justice recognized by society rather than a personal criticism from the teacher, it mitigates the learner’s defensiveness and induces voluntary self-reflection.

Ultimately, proverb education transcends the mere expansion of vocabulary; it is a process of internalizing the social influence of language. Therefore, while acknowledging the bluntness proverbs may possess in phatic usage, one must focus on the unique efficiency they demonstrate in the realm of persuasion. The active utilization of proverbs in educational settings serves as a vital mechanism for equipping learners with the “wise speech competence” necessary to navigate and persuade the world.

From a cultural standpoint, proverbs possess immense educational value. As they have been forged within the daily lives of the common people over centuries, they constitute an integral part of Korea’s traditional culture.

Having been used as spoken language and passed down orally, proverbs carry deep cultural attributes and are classified as a form of oral literature. Furthermore, as a type of idiomatic expression, they are categorized as essential lexical items within the Korean language. Consequently, research on proverbs has been conducted across diverse fields, including folklore, classical literature, and Korean linguistics.

The findings of these studies form the knowledge and emotions that underlie the principles of Korean language use. This is because the principles of language use and the principles of culture are inextricably linked. As seen in examples such as “Even Mt. Geumgang is best seen after a meal” 금강산도 식후경 or “Don’t drink the kimchi soup before you’re even offered the rice cake” 떡 줄 사람은 생각지도 않는데 김치국부터 마신다, proverbs folklorically project Korea’s unique food culture and practical values. Moreover, they vividly reveal their oral-literary attributes through the narrative nature of satire and humor—personifying animals, as seen in “When the tiger is away, the rabbit acts as the teacher” 호랑이 없는 골에 토끼가 스승 노릇 한다.

These multidisciplinary research results serve as a foundation for shaping the knowledge and emotions of learners. Ultimately, they suggest that the principles of language use and cultural principles are inseparable, acting as a valuable medium in educational settings for simultaneously acquiring the structure of the Korean language and its cultural context. In essence, proverbs possess significant cultural-educational value because their content encapsulates the wisdom and mindset of Korean ancestors, while their form reflects traditional, uniquely Korean modes of expression.

The ultimate goal of learners studying Korean is to achieve a level of communication comparable to that of native speakers. Since communication is realized through speech, the effect of that communication varies depending on how one utilizes the language. To truly know a nation, one must understand its proverbs; without them, one can neither claim to know nor fully understand that people.

When a foreign learner quotes an appropriate proverb while speaking Korean, observers no longer question their proficiency but instead are met with astonishment. This is because the use of proverbs serves as evidence that the learner understands, to a significant degree, the underlying sentiments and culture flowing within the hearts of the

Korean people.

REFERENCES

1. 이종철(2003), 우리 속담 바르고 창의적으로 쓰기, 이화문화사, p.23.
2. 안경화(2001), 속담을 통한 한국문화의 교육방안, 한국어교육 12권1호(2001), p.2
3. T.Davronbek, Jahon xalqlari maqollari, Toshkent: O'qituvchi, 2018, 160-164b
4. 김정아, 한국어 교육에서 속담 활용 방안 연구, 한국외국어대학교 석사학위논문, 2002
5. 박해숙, 속담의 문화적 배경을 활용한 한국어교육 방안, 인하대학교 대학원 석사학위논문, 2009