

Learning Korean at Age 60: Insights from a Linguaphile

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Abstract

Although philosophers and educators have known for hundreds of years that children pick up new languages more easily than adults, what is not known is how that facility might be fostered in older learners. This article presents an interview with a linguaphile who began studying Korean at age 60. It highlights both the difficulties and possibilities of late language learning. Key themes include the emotional strain of performance-based lessons that can threaten the ego of the older learner, the importance of learner autonomy, and the role of meaningful interaction — particularly conversational practice — in fostering progress. The interview also identifies reduced urgency, cultural resistance, and limited opportunities for social engagement as factors that may hinder acquisition. Reflecting on her dual role as learner and teacher, the interviewee emphasizes the value of empathy, flexible pedagogy, and student agency, concluding that successful language learning depends less on any single method than on the alignment of motivation, instruction, and opportunities for authentic communication.

Keywords: Korean, Yonsei Institute, older language learners, Korean dramas, immersion

The following interview with Margaret Muench, emerita ESL faculty from San Jose City College, shows how older multilingual learners can bring a wealth of experience to the task of learning a new language, yet face an undeniable set of constraints as well. Professor Muench also reflects on the role of cultural engagement—particularly via Korean dramas, including those featuring American actors—as a valuable portal for language learning.

Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Professor Muench. I would like to begin by asking you: What sparked your interest in learning Korean?

It began when I started watching Korean dramas, as they are called. This was in 2008. My first drama was “The Emperor of the Sea” — a 51-episode drama about a famous merchant whose influence supposedly brought prosperity and justice to the Silla Kingdom in Southern Korea around 800 AD. The scenes and costumes and manners and sound of the language seemed beautiful to me. I enjoyed other dramas as well.

In your career you had successfully learned two foreign languages, lived in France, Africa, and Guatemala, and taught ESL full-time at the college level. What were your feelings about learning a new language?

Although I am fluent in French and speak good Spanish, I was nervous about whether or not, at this later stage of life, I could learn Korean. I was 60.

Nevertheless you decided to take it on. How did you approach learning it?

I decided that a good way to do it would be via a sabbatical from my college. In my application I proposed learning Korean language and culture in language classes in both California and Korea. My sabbatical was approved, and I started by studying at a private language school in Milpitas called Adroit College. Classes were small (about 5–8 students per class) and ran for three hours one evening a week for 10 weeks.

In your report you mentioned skipping Beginning Korean 1. Please explain.

Beginning Korean 1 had already started when I enrolled, so I decided to get private tutoring to learn the relevant material. The tutoring prepared me well for Beginning Korean 2. However, I had to repeat later courses, and take duplicate courses at another college.

These are the courses I took at Adroit:

- Beginning Korean 2: I took this course once.
- Beginning Korean 3: I took this course three times. This was the first course where the teacher spoke primarily Korean in the class.
- Advanced Beginning Korean 1: I took this course two times.

In addition to these courses, I took two quarters of Korean at De Anza College in Cupertino: Beginning Korean 1 and 2.

To what do you attribute the need to repeat courses? I assume it was a combination of factors.

The classes at Adroit were relatively unstructured. The instructors did not assign homework and they did not pressure students to perform in class. Marked progress in Korean was not a priority. The classes were meant to be enjoyable more than anything else.

In 2009 you went to the Yonsei Institute in Seoul for further study. How did you do on the placement test?

I did fairly well on the test, and was qualified to take the Level 2 course. But as I wrote in my sabbatical report, I decided to move to Level 1. The Level 2 class was really stressful. We had the same teacher and same method (teacher-ask, student-respond) for four hours straight. We had to answer questions and perform in the class over and over again. My brain (was it age? laziness? fatigue? insufficient motivation and confidence?) just couldn't concentrate that hard and that long, and I disliked the feeling of being put on the spot to perform each time the teacher demanded it.

Most applied linguists agree that younger learners acquire foreign languages with relative ease compared to older learners. What specific challenges did you face as an older learner?

I faced several challenges, which I described in my sabbatical report.

1. Values. We older learners tend to be pretty set in our values. We are no longer experimenting with possibilities of how to live our lives, and are less interested in trying things out. We are choosy about what we will and won't accept in a new culture. For me, it was very different from when I was younger, and wanted to try out everything in a new culture, without judgment. When I was twenty I studied abroad in France for a year. My academic program was completely in French. Later, I spent three years in Guatemala where I spoke primarily Spanish. I could adapt to the values of those cultures.

2. Specific characteristics of Korean. One area of difficulty I had was with "honorific" language and forms of address. Most of the students at Yonsei were in their teens and twenties, and we were taught mainly the style of language used to speak to someone older. Outside of class, I was often reluctant to start a conversation with a Korean because I didn't have experience in addressing someone younger — or even my own age (and I rarely talked to anyone older). In addressing me, sometimes Koreans called me the equivalent of "ma'am," and sometimes they called me "grandmother." Grandmother! That was supposed to be honorific? In my younger years I would have been fascinated with these different ways of addressing people and so excited about trying out the different forms of address with different people. But as an older learner I struggled with this aspect of Korean culture and language and its threat to my sense of self and deeply-held values about how people should relate. It affected my comfort and willingness to speak.

3. Less urgency to learn a new language. For most older learners, learning a new language does not represent the opportunities it does for young people. Older learners will not likely be starting new careers or establishing new significant lifetime relationships. They can already predict the circumstances in which they will, or will not, be using the new language. Knowing a new language may enhance their later years, but it is not as likely to deeply change them. There is not the same sense of excitement and hope in what the new language will bring. Thus the motivation required for deep and intensive study may not be as present for older learners.

4. Fewer opportunities for significant encounters with native speakers. Young people all over the world want to meet each other. They organize parties, mixers, events. Young men and women find each other, spend hours talking and getting to know each other, as I remember doing as a young single student and teacher living abroad. That's how I used to practice so much. That's how I got introduced into families. That's how I always had someone from the target culture to venture out with. That's how I came to feel so at ease.

In Korea I did get to know a number of Koreans, and did things with them, but only sporadically. I had no Korean friend that I saw on a regular basis, someone that I could call up at any time, someone that I could share my daily life with. My language skills remained so poor that I never got to feeling at ease with anyone. I'm sure that with more time I might have deepened some of those relationships — I was there for only four months — but the time and effort involved would certainly be greater for the older me than for the younger me.

5. Fear of change. Most of us fear change as we get older. We become rigid and inflexible, we lose our brain power, we become bored and unexcited about life's opportunities, we become disconnected to mainstream modern life, and we lose touch with the affairs of the broader world.

Speaking of fear, you told me about a student at Yonsei who was clearly uncomfortable with question-and-answer exercises. Yet the teacher persisted in putting him on the spot.

Ironically, that teacher was my favorite at Yonsei. In my report I wrote, "Committed to the Yonsei method, she executed it with liveliness and enthusiasm, sweeping us along, giving us no time to question it, making us committed too, inspiring us to work hard. She paid attention to the individual student, helping or challenging each of us at our particular level. It was good, and I learned a lot!"

But I also wrote that there was "a mystery toward the end with this teacher. I still think about it — the student who crumpled. It was another American student, the only one who was having more trouble than I was. For some reason, she stopped helping him out. When he had to perform a dialogue he couldn't remember or answer a question he didn't understand, she started letting him squirm in front of everyone. Sometimes she laughed at his struggles. The student

started to be absent, started to do worse and worse. Another method might have worked better for him, and he did begin to complain about the Yonsei method, determined to go to another institute for the following term. But I don't believe that's the reason his learning stalled. How could he possibly do better, with any method, when he worried about being humiliated every day?"

So being asked to perform was routine at the Yonsei Institute.

In the classes that I took, yes. The teaching was very traditional. The institute didn't use a language lab. They didn't use video. They didn't utilize or promote language-learning apps. We had listening tapes; that was it. The rest was teacher-centered classroom instruction, meaning lectures and question-and-answer exercises.

Perhaps the student who crumpled would have done better in relatively unstructured immersion activities.

I think so. I myself felt more confident in unstructured immersion activities — that is, conversing naturally with a Korean-speaking partner. That was true in both Korea and California. I met with a different student each day of the week. In our sessions we usually spent about 30 minutes using English and 30 minutes using Korean. These conversations were the main times I felt successful in using the language. My partners and I got used to each other; we took time to explain and re-explain and draw pictures and laugh and drink coffee together; we shared pictures and gave gifts to each other; we used the target language to actually communicate. [Note: Murphey (1995) describes a similar strategy in "Meaningful Communicative Repetition," *English Teaching Forum*.]

Did your years as a college ESL instructor help you in any way as a student of Korean?

By being a student again, I became more acutely aware of how I and other students learn — and don't learn — from teachers, curricula, modalities, native speakers of Korean, and non-native speakers of Korean.

You mention learning — or not learning? — from non-native speakers of Korean. Do you mean instructors?

No, actors. I wrote in my report that after I came back to California, I learned from a Korean drama called "Jejoongwon," about the establishment of the first Western-medicine hospital in Korea. One of the main characters was American.

Without looking at the subtitles, I could understand about double what he said compared to the Koreans. That made it exciting to watch. And there were other American characters, including a woman, all of whom spoke fluent Korean with English accents.

I began to realize how useful American actors speaking Korean are. I could catch what they were doing to approximate the Korean sounds. Their sounds, their intonation, seemed halfway between a beginning Korean speaker's speech and a native Korean's, and they served as a really useful learning bridge.

When I listened to native Korean actors, I would get discouraged because native Korean speech seemed so distant and unattainable. But to be able to speak like the American actors would be enough. More than enough. And they made it seem attainable.

In terms of instructors, I assume you preferred native Korean speakers.

I never had an instructor who was not Korean. But my intuition is that, yes, a native Chinese-speaking or native Japanese-speaking instructor teaching Korean would present unnecessary additional challenges.

I would now like to ask you about writing. Learning to write in an L2 is seldom enjoyable. Was there anything in your lessons that motivated you?

The writing assignments provided sufficient motivation for learning, but the real learning took place outside of class. I remember thinking that the teacher had no idea how much effort I put into a writing assignment — looking up words, grammar rules, and my notes on fixed expressions (no Google Translate back then). I also remember resenting getting back corrections or negative feedback — it was too late to do any good. I did not want to go back over my errors, I just wanted to go forward.

What pedagogical adjustments did you make in your own teaching based on your experience learning Korean?

I believe that almost any methodology can work if the teacher is committed to it and the student is motivated. That said, I made some changes in how I relate to students. Below is a distillation of what I wrote in my sabbatical report:

1. When I give an assignment or a test or ask a student to perform in class, I try to be more conscious of how the student may be feeling, and am more likely to take the feeling into account. I try to offer more choice. I am more ready to change something that seems to make students uncomfortable. I am more patient with slowness and error.
2. Rather than lecture students on how they should study or practice, I rely more on the students to share what they have found useful and effective with each other. I try to give students more time to talk to each other in pairs and groups, and don't worry so much that I can't be on top of each group to make sure they are doing what I want.
3. I don't rely on high-stakes tests so much. I don't call tests "midterms" and "finals" or place so much importance on them. I try to give students several chances to show what they can do and make sure there are other ways besides single tests (portfolio, makeup test, alternate assignment) to find out if the student knows the material and has the needed skills.
4. For stressful assignments like speeches and class presentations, I try to offer alternatives to coming in front of the class. Students can videotape, or present to a small group, or present just to the teacher or even do an alternative assignment. I found that if a student can control whether or not to speak, and how long to speak, and whether to sit or stand, and so on, the student is much more likely to choose to do the assignment and do it well.
5. I try to schedule more time for student practice, and less time for teacher lecture.

All of these are things that I wanted more of as a student. They seem like obvious things, but they are easy for a teacher to forget. Too much stress and too much arbitrary control by the teacher can hurt a student's internal motivation. Finding ways to foster that inner motivation, to help students feel that they have the power to learn and succeed within themselves, are among the best things a teacher can do, particularly for older students.

At the beginning of our talk you mentioned how watching Korean dramas inspired you to learn the language. You are still a fan of them. I'm curious: What is it about them that attracts you to Korean culture?

In these dramas, when the "good" characters review their life, they tend to ask, "Did I serve enough? Did I help my friend (or family or country) enough? Was my life used well enough to protect what I value?"

Americans, it seems to me, tend to ask, "Did I live life fully enough? Did I dance, love, risk, etc. enough?" Our focus tends to lean more toward individual fulfillment—whether we lived fully and pursued what we wanted.

When things go wrong in Korean dramas, the "good" characters generally accept responsibility. If a friend betrays them, it is because they did not care enough, did not inspire enough, did not help enough. If a battle is lost, it is because they did not lead enough or plan well enough. The "good" characters look to see how they (not someone else) could and should have done better to avert a bad outcome.

I find the value of personal responsibility attractive, at least how it is expressed in the dramas.

Thank you, Margaret.

Note: Interview edited for clarity and length.

About the Author

Scott Alkire teaches writing at San Jose State University and serves as editor of the World Languages Translation and Niche Book Club. TESL-EJ Publications has published three of the club's translations, all by the late Dr. Kató Lomb: *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages* (3rd ed., 2025); *Harmony of Babel: Profiles of Famous Polyglots of Europe* (2nd ed., 2018); and *With Languages in Mind: Musings of a Polyglot* (2nd ed., 2021). Kató Lomb has been called "possibly the most accomplished polyglot in the world" by linguist Stephen Krashen.

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