

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody. I'm joined here today by Jaerin Ahn, Faculty Associate in Korean Language who recently completed her PhD here at UW Madison in Curriculum & Instruction. I really appreciate that you took a couple of minutes to speak with me today!

Jaerin Ahn

Hi!

Claire Darmstadter

So you have a super unique linguistic and educational background. And it'd be great if you could just give us a brief overview of what that looks like and how you kind of ended up here in Wisconsin specifically at UW.

Jaerin Ahn

All right before I get started, thank you for this introduction, and my name is Jaerin. And I am currently a faculty associate in Korean at the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at UW Madison. I've been teaching Korean for about nine years now. And I double majored in Korean and English language and lit in my undergrad when I was in Korea. I earned my master's degree in teaching Korean as a foreign language in Korea too. So in doing my master's, I started to teach. And my first job was teaching migrant workers in Korea, so most of them were from Vietnam. And I taught them TOPIK, which is the Korean version of TOEFL, like a Korean proficiency test, because their company required them to acquire a certain level of the test just like Americans do. And then I got an offer from one of the best university language centers in Korea. And I taught there for about three semesters teaching students from all over the world. Here most students were seeking to apply to Korean universities. So they were mostly students. And then I joined a startup company, which tried to develop a mobile and online Korean language teaching and learning materials. And while I was working there, I thought I needed to keep up with my teaching. So I had a part time teaching job at a law firm, teaching expatriates, like attorneys. And then I had experiences in teaching individualized lessons there. Then, when I studied, like, developing mobile and online curriculum, I thought I needed to study more. So that brought me to Wisconsin.

Claire Darmstadter

Wow, Oh, my gosh. That is incredible. And I know you've been involved with the STARTALK, a Language Institute program here through the university. So can you just kind of explain to us what that's about what their approach to language learning is, and what you kind of do there?

Jaerin Ahn

So STARTALK, I should explain this really good to promote our program. But STARTALK is a program that we've started in 2017. And this is for high school language learners and Korean is increasing in their popularity for high school students, and there are no official Korean courses in high school. So we are offering a Korean intensive program for summer only for high school students. So we had such wonderful experiences with high school students. This is more like a cultural and language learning. So we have cooking sessions, like martial arts, and paper

folding in all kinds of hands-on experiences with language learning. Our theme is a virtual trip to South Korea. So students start from Madison, and then they pack their things. And then they create the itineraries and they go, they buy their tickets, and they go to the airport and get on an airplane. We do all kinds of these activities, and learn the language that you need, along with this, this content. So it'll be really fun and we visit three to five cities based on their language proficiency. But we go to Seoul, which is the Capital of Korea and Busan and Jeju Island. So we have different activities for different cities. And after all these travels, we come back to Madison or Chicago and we actually visit Korean restaurants or Korean grocery stores in the Madison area.

Claire Darmstadter

Wow. Oh my gosh, that sounds incredible. I leave a link in the show notes if people want to check that out, because that just sounds so cool. And you've been able to engage with language and education and language education and a lot of different ways. And I'd imagine you've seen and engaged with a bunch of different styles of language education. So are there any similarities or stark differences you can kind of identify between here in Wisconsin or the US in general versus how it's taught in Korea?

Jaerin Ahn

Well, the major difference I could recognize is that students here have very limited access and exposure to Korean culture. Like in Korea, whether language learners are students or like skilled workers, or they are from varying countries, but they are able to access and be exposed to Korean language and culture frequently, both inside and outside the classroom. But where my students here, they have very limited access, and once they step outside of the classroom, so there are very few Korean speakers. And it is very difficult to create a meaningful context for students because we are using textbooks made in Korea and there are some like visual expressions that it's not related to them. So sometimes it's kind of hard to create a meaningful context so that they can actually use this language. So what we need to do in our Korean program is called my conversation partner program, which asks students to find their own conversation partner to practice Korean, at least an hour a week. So these partners can be like native Korean speakers or students who are in advanced class, so they can learn from each other, and they can actually do a real conversation. In the classroom, I don't know if you have any experiences in teaching languages, but in the classroom, we strive to create a meaningful context and use authentic materials, but it's not real. But for those conversation partners they can create, they can actually interact with each other and learn from each other. So this is not a lecture mode class, but more like a casual meeting to practice and improve their listening, speaking and interpersonal mode of speaking.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, there's so many opportunities that technology gives us with learning languages. And I know that's kind of like a focus or an area of specialty for you. And obviously, COVID has forced teachers in general to embrace a lot more technology and education than they might necessarily want. So, do you think this shift to being forced to use technology as our main modality of education is going to be beneficial for language learning? Or do you think more of

like, a balanced approach is better? And then do you have any tips for teachers who might be navigating this whole new space of online digital education and are really having difficulties kind of adapting?

Jaerin Ahn

Well, honestly, I've been a huge fan of using technology, because, well, my research area was concerning like, teachers' technology use, and I was always interested in using technology, but when I was forced to use technology, it's getting more stressful and challenging. And it's kind of hard to, you know — language, is for using right. I always think that language is meaningful when you use it. But with like black screens, staring at you, I don't feel like speaking or having conversation with my students. So that was the most challenging thing that I faced in this forced online environment. But, so I tried to use my class time, focus more on practicing speaking and interchanging while we are in lesson. So what I did was flipping the classroom, you know, the flipping mode of the classroom. So for my regular lecture class, we have lectures and discussion sessions. So for 75 minute lecture sessions, I broke that into asynchronous mode, and I created videos for the lectures. So, when students are learning new concepts, they are watching video lessons, and I broke that into like three to four videos, because students get really tired when they are to watch like one 75 minute videos, right? So there will be three to four video lessons that students can watch before coming to the real discussion session. So in this discussion session, we have 15 to 20 students in a class. And we use that time all practicing speaking. So those are full of breakout session rooms. So they are required to practice speaking, not learning anything. So they had to learn the new concepts before coming into the discussion session. And then we prepared a lot of Breakout Room activities, pair activities, and group activities to practice their speaking, and then extended into the real life task. Like if we've learned, so today, we've learned body parts in my elementary Korean class, and they were required to learn all the new expressions and words in the video lesson. And then when they come to the discussion session, they with their pairs, they just practice asking *oh, where are you sick, and oh, what's the symptom*, and then they describe their symptoms. And then after those kind of small group activities, we do another group activity that extends to real life tasks, like going to a hospital. We just give them a situation, and then they practice what they can do. So with this mode, I think students can focus more on practicing speaking so that compensates like online modes, and for video lessons one good thing that I thought was I can incorporate, like, all kinds of resources on the internet. Most of my students are interested in Kpop, and Korean culture and Korean dramas, and I use those clips into my videos, so that they can see that what they've learned are actually used in those kind of resources or media, then in the end of the video, I always add one video of the day and one song of the day, which would motivate students to learn more about Korean culture and language. So when I was in real class, it would be a little hard for them to all go find this material and watch it, it'll be fun, but students will forget that but if I incorporate that in a page, that in a video lesson page, then students like naturally see those content. And when I surveyed my students, students said they love those content and they felt more close to Korean culture and language. So I thought that was kind of an advantage. But I can utilize it in online technologies mode.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. Yeah. And I like what you said about those authentic resources, because that's so important. So finally, in celebration of multilingualism. Can you give me one reason why we should celebrate speaking multiple languages? And if you want to answer in Korean or English, or both, whatever you think is best to represent how you feel?

Jaerin Ahn

Well, you know, there are like many reasons to learn foreign languages. And many have argued the benefits of multilingualism, like cognitively challenging, understanding others and learning different perspectives. Ah, well, for me, actually, when I learned English, I think I had limited options to develop my English skills because I had to learn to survive. I had to learn to enter a prestigious university English was the subject that I needed to learn. But if you learn other languages like that, it's never fun. But if I see my students, my students are very passionate about learning Korean, because they really want to learn. I think it is very important to find a reason for yourself to learn and enjoy the language. For my students, most of them became interested in learning Korean because of Kpop, and K culture. And I think that's a great start to learn the language, you have the motivation, and then you want to understand more about what you enjoy. And then you will find joy about learning others and understanding more different cultures.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, oh, thank you so much. Your perspective is so interesting, and I will definitely link a lot of those things you mentioned below. But I really appreciate your input and I hope you have a great day.

Jaerin Ahn

Thank you.