ARTICLE

Online informal language learning: Insights from a Korean learning community

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Abstract

Informal language learning in online communities represents a growing area of interest. In part, this interest is due to the potential for meaningful second language (L2) communication, rather than the "learning about language" argued to be prevalent in L2 classrooms (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009, p. 804). This study reports on a netnographic investigation (Kozinets, 2010) of an online community for learning Korean. Data collection took place over seven weeks and included observation of a Reddit forum, observation of a chatroom, and an open-ended questionnaire. Activity theory (Engeström, 2001) informed the analysis of the community learning activity. Contrary to what has been reported about language learning in many online communities, findings revealed relatively little target-language use and a great deal of learning about language. English was used 93% of the time on the forum, and 81% of the time in the chatroom. Other findings include highly-participatory interactional patterns for learning about linguistic forms, community rules designed to promote learning on a democratically organized web platform, and a stark division of community labor between language learners and language experts.

Keywords: *Collaborative Learning, Computer-Mediated Communication, Learner Autonomy, Social Networking*

Language(s) Learned in This Study: *Korean*

Introduction

It is fairly uncontroversial to claim that most language learning occurs outside of classrooms. This claim has increasingly motivated investigations into beyond-classroom language learning, with two edited volumes published in recent years on the topic (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015). Much of this beyond-classroom learning is *informal*, occurring without a planned syllabus. With advances in and the continued spread of Internet communications technology, informal language learning in online communities represents a growing area of interest, in part due to the potential for meaningful second language (L2) communication and socialization rather than the "learning about language" found in L2 classrooms (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009, p. 804).

While research in computer-assisted language learning has examined online communities, most of the literature is based on the learning of English or other commonly-taught languages (e.g., Ryu, 2013; Sockett, 2013), and many of the online communities studied are formal extensions of classroom instruction (e.g., Lord & Harrington, 2013). Within online informal language learning (OILL) literature, Korean learning has scantly been reported.

The current study seeks to address this research paucity by using the lens of activity theory (AT; Engeström, 2001) to investigate the practices of a community for online informal Korean learning: /r/Korean, a community housed within the social link-aggregation website Reddit. Reddit has the fifth highest Internet domain traffic in the United States, and ranks seventh worldwide (Alexa, 2018), yet it has received little attention in academic studies of online language learning in comparison with social networks, blogs, or

audio/video platforms.

Online Informal Language Learning

Sockett (2013) describes *informal language learning* as "generally incidental" with a focus on "activities being communication and enjoyment rather than language learning" (p. 49). In online spaces, this might involve participation in social networks (e.g., Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011), computer games (e.g., Ryu, 2013), or interest communities (reviewed in Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015). Generally, OILL studies are characterized by a high degree of L2 use tied to meaning-focused activity. Ryu (2013), through an AT lens, found that computer gamers used English to engage in play of the game *Civilization* and also participated in an English-medium discussion forum related to the game, with very little non-English language used as a communicative tool. Sockett's (2013) French students communicated with European friends on social media using English as a lingua franca and consumed popular American and British media online. In cases such as these, foundations for language use are often built in classroom learning environments; once learners have sufficient proficiency, they go off into the *digital wilds* to use the language for communication (Thorne et al., 2015). Gao (2007) reveals a somewhat different dynamic at work in his tale of informal English learning in China: members of the *Blue Rain Café* frequently shared their real-life learning experiences via Chinese on an online forum connected to the café, and often came to the online forum with specific questions about English. The learners of Japanese in Pasfield-Neofitou's (2011) study, who spoke English as a first language (L1), also reported mixed L1 and L2 use in their online communications with Japanese peers.

In contrast, Korean OILL has received relatively little attention in the literature (the aforementioned studies, for instance, all dealt with English learners, except for Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011). Some of this research has focused on heritage learners, investigating informal learning in blogs (Lee, 2006) and community websites (Yi, 2008), showing how activity is driven by a desire to maintain language and culture. Kim and Brown (2014), adopting a sociocultural perspective, examined the pragmatic competence of four non-heritage adult learners in the UK who frequently used Korean in online social communication, finding interactions between proficiency, identity, and pragmatic performance.

Activity Theory

On a basic level, AT attempts to explain learning outcomes through consideration of connections between subjects (learners), tools and signs, and objects (goals). Engeström (2001) has expanded AT (see Figure 1) to better accommodate collective activities, now including rules (official or implicit), community (members of a group), and division of labor (roles and responsibilities). This framework makes Engeström's version of AT, cultural historical activity theory, particularly useful for examining OILL communities, which are inherently collective.

AT also accommodates the consideration of multiple activities in concert and development of activity over time, making it popular in research that tries to capture dynamic, socially-contextualized, and multi-modal language learning (e.g., learning through online gaming, Ryu, 2013; vocabulary learning in an extensive reading computer program, Juffs & Friedline, 2014; developing L2 academic writing strategies, Park & De Costa, 2015).
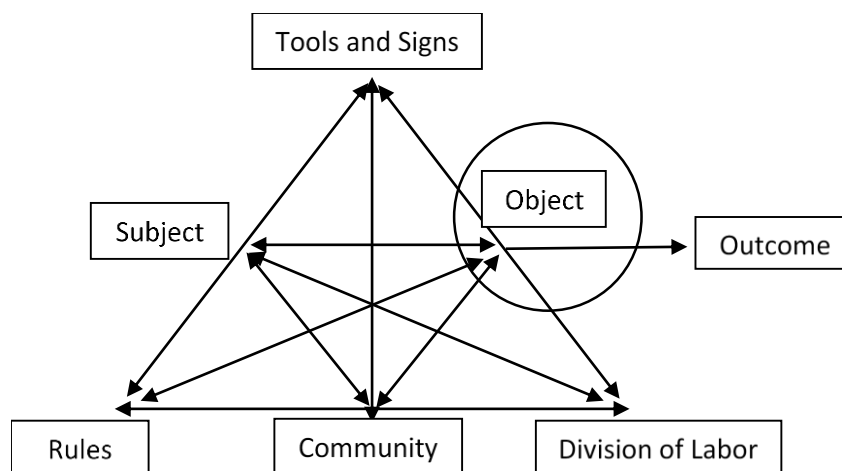
Figure 1. An activity system.

Research Questions

My goal in this study was to investigate the language learning activity of a Korean informal online learning community (r/Korean), broadening the landscape of OILL by focusing on a language and a web platform that have received little attention in the field. The following research questions (RQs), informed by AT, guided my investigation of the Korean OILL community:

1. What activities and tools are used in r/Korean to foster language learning?
2. What patterns of interaction characterize Korean language-focused activities?
3. What rules govern language-focused activities?
4. How is labor divided among community members?

RQ1 targets the objects and tools in the AT framework. RQ2 seeks to describe how subjects in the community interact in object-oriented activities. RQ3 and RQ4 address the rules and labor roles that underpin the community activity system.

Methodology

Netnographic Observation

Kozinets defines netnography as "a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social worlds" (2010, p. 1). Like traditional ethnography, netnography typically entails extensive observations of a community with the aim of describing and understanding culture. Netnography differs, however, in that modal affordances of digital spaces allow for a much larger degree of unobtrusiveness and expedience in data collection.

Two methodological tensions within netnography are particularly relevant to the present study. The first is related to blending netnography and traditional ethnography; that is, does the study straddle the online–offline border? In many cases, netnographies remain fully online (Tunçalp & Lê, 2014). This is a defensible methodological decision if the topic of study is focused on culture in digital spaces, but it is also a weakness if research seeks to integrate the digital and physical activities of individuals (Kozinets, 2010). The second issue is observer participation. Although Tunçalp and Lê (2014) found no participation to be more frequent than participatory observation in netnographies of management, Kozinets (2010) and Hine (2008) argue for the value of participation as a means of gaining deeper, embedded understanding of culture that eludes purely observational or textual analyses.

In the present study, I adopted a netnographic approach that focused exclusively on online activity and involved some community participation on my part. I also shared my preliminary findings and solicited feedback from the community as a form of member checking.

Settings and Participants

My observation of the r/Korean community took place in two online settings: a public *subreddit* on Reddit (henceforth r/Korean) and a chatroom called *#korean* which was directly linked to on the r/Korean main page.

What Is a Subreddit?

A *subreddit* is a user-created page for sharing links and discussions within the Reddit domain. When visiting Reddit for the first time, topics from a set of default subreddits are visible on the site's front page. Registering for the site involves creating a username; users may subscribe to additional subreddits of their own choosing, or create their own subreddits. In this way, users can create a customized front page of Reddit based on their interests.

Each subreddit has its own unique front page. On the bar at the top of r/Korean's front page, you see a name and subreddit logo (a character holding a Korean flag, with *Korean* written in Hangeul), and options for sorting topics. The default sorting option, *Hot*, considers popularity and recency when ordering topics (hotter topics rise to the top of the page). Immediately below the top bar is a link inviting users to the r/Korean chatroom (see next section). Immediately below is the main portion of the front page: a list of submitted links and discussion topics (henceforth *topics*). The column on the right of the screen is referred to as the sidebar and contains a search bar, a new topic submission link, a user counter (*current* and *total*), subreddit rules, and other important information.

Popularity of topics is determined by voting: *upvoting* (clicking on triangles pointing upward) indicates approval or interest, and *downvoting* (clicking downward-pointing triangles) is used to indicate lack of quality or interest. The numbers between the triangles are *scores*, which indicate the aggregate rating of a topic (default score is 1, upvotes add 1, and downvotes subtract 1).

A final important note on the front page of r/Korean is the *flair* option, contained in the sidebar. Flair is a small icon that is displayed by your username everywhere within a particular subreddit. r/Korean flair indicate one's L2 Korean proficiency (beginner, intermediate, or advanced; user flair is denoted with curly brackets in this article for clarity, e.g., {Beginner}) or native speaker (i.e., {Native Speaker}) status. This icon also shows up next to your username in topics you create.

Clicking a topic (or submitting your own) leads to a *comments* page. Comments allow any user of the site to reply directly to a topic creator or commenter by typing and submitting a message. Comments are organized by nested threads rather than a single stream, prioritizing interactional coherence over temporal order. Additionally, each individual comment is subject to voting. Under the default *best* sorting option (similar to *hot*, but with less emphasis on recency), popular comments and their nested responses are displayed higher on the page. Under default settings, comments receiving large negative scores (-4 or below) become invisible to other readers.

The Chatroom

#korean, the chatroom linked to r/Korean, is more straightforward in terms of features. Usernames are created before entering, and the chat window dominates the display. A column on the right displays a list of all users in the room, and a text input bar runs along the bottom of the screen. Discourse in #korean is displayed chronologically in a single stream.

In addition to human-to-human chatting, #korean also features *bots*, small programs that automatically carry out tasks and display results in the room. One bot continuously scans the front page of r/Korean and posts an alert when a new topic or link is submitted. Another bot allows users to query Naver Dictionary. By typing *.dic* followed by a Korean or English word, a user can prompt the bot to broadcast the top definition

for all to see.

The r/Korean Community

Delineating the r/Korean community is a difficult task. At the end of this study, r/Korean had 13,824 subscribers. This number included duplicate and inactive accounts. At the same time, it did not include people who visited infrequently and never subscribed. Raw counts aside, dozens of regulars and a stream of drop-in questions or translation requests kept the subreddit consistently active, typically generating 5–10 topic submissions and 15–35 comments per day. In total, 660 unique users posted on r/Korean during the study. Of those users, only 60 had 10 or more posts, and only 25 had 20 or more posts. The #korean chatroom was occupied by a smaller set of r/Korean subscribers. Typically, around 50 people were logged in to the chatroom, with 5–15 active at any given time.

Given Reddit's pseudo-anonymity (Massanari, 2015), describing the community by gender, age, ethnicity, and other common identifiers is difficult. However, subscribers who visited frequently tended to use the optional flair function, indicating that the community was home to a dozen or so native speakers of Korean and several dozen learners ranging from beginning to advanced proficiency. Their real-world locations varied; some native speakers revealed that they were living abroad while some learners were in South Korea.

Reflexivity

In this study, I assumed a partially-emic, partially-etic position. I am a learner of Korean, and at the time of the study, I had been a member of the r/Korean community for over 2 years. In that sense, I was familiar with r/Korean activity prior to beginning my investigation. However, in order to achieve a broader understanding of the community, I limited my activity during the fieldwork period. During the first four weeks, I retreated to primarily non-participatory observation. After making a public entrée as a researcher, I participated directly for three weeks, exchanging personal messages with community members, joining conversations in the #korean chatroom, and occasionally posting comments on r/Korean topics.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data from several sources across two virtual spaces. These data included archived communications from r/Korean, chatlogs from the #korean chatroom, open-ended questionnaire (OEQ) responses from eight community members, and personal field notes (see Table 1). In addition to reflecting on my experiences as a participant-observer, I applied additional analyses in order to triangulate findings. This involved ongoing and iterative coding throughout and after data collection, drawing on AT to frame my analytic decisions. As such, I treated the data in this study as observations of a community rather than texts. A total of 55 codes emerged across data sources (Appendix A). The following sections explain how I collected and analyzed data from each source.

r/Korean Submissions

Over the course of seven weeks, approximately 293 submissions were made by r/Korean community members, with resulting interactions totaling over 165,000 words. I archived this data with a Python (programming language) script utilizing the Public Reddit API Wrapper package, allowing me to save the contents of each topic in text files along with useful metadata (i.e., topic titles, URLs, timestamps, usernames, and scores). At the topic level, all submissions were descriptively coded for the object of each topic. Additionally, for a subset of topics dealing with *language knowledge* and *language practice* (*n* = 192), I applied a discourse analytic approach at the comment level, focusing on interactional patterns. I drew on (a) the trigger for noticing in the framework by Varonis and Gass (1985) for L2 negotiations of meaning, (b) an initiation–response–follow-up framework commonly used in conversation and online communication analysis (Benson, 2014; Stenström & Stenström, 1994), and (c) multi-modal discourse analysis (Kress, 2012) to consider non-verbal semiotic expressions.

Table 1. *Data Collection and Analysis*

Type of Data	Description	Analytic Approach
r/Korean Submissions	298 topics, 2,600 comments, 165,000 words of archived r/Korean communications	Content Analysis Discourse Analysis (for a subset of 192 topics)
#korean Chatlogs	Approximately 6.5 hours in six separate visits, 9,000 words of chatroom discussion	Discourse Analysis
Open-Ended Questionnaire	Responses to 10 questions from 8 community members, 3,600 words	Content Analysis
Field Notes	63 pages of observation notes and observer comments (18,106 words)	Content Analysis
Artifacts (e.g., community documents, shared links)	313 links, 5 documents	Content Analysis

#korean Chatlogs

In total, I spent 6.5 hours in the #korean chatroom. I selected active times for visits; these mostly occurred during the evening in eastern North America (late-morning to midday in Korea). I archived the chatlogs, collecting over 9,000 words from 29 users across six visits, and analyzed chatroom discourse in the same manner as the r/Korean submissions.

Open-Ended Questionnaire

I collected OEQ (Appendix B) responses from eight community members. I approached these participants in two ways: (1) an open solicitation in my r/Korean entrée topic, and (2) personal contact based on field-note-worthy participation. The former strategy helped to include *lurkers*, members whose visible activity is low but may be frequent readers in the community. The latter approach sought the perspectives of members who filled key roles in the community and were known to have rich historical knowledge of r/Korean. I conducted a thematic analysis of the OEQ responses, synthesizing insights across members.

Field Notes

On a near-daily basis, I visited r/Korean for seven weeks. During each visit, I wrote field notes, recording observations of topics, interactions, and community members of particular interest. Additionally, I logged my personal opinions, questions, and analyses of activity. I subjected these field notes to thematic analysis, which helped focus emerging themes based on my impressions during fieldwork.

Findings and Discussion

My analysis of the data yielded four major themes: the use of English to learn about Korean, participatory learning interactions, rules to promote useful content, and learner–expert division of labor. These themes are subsequently situated in the larger activity system of r/Korean. Findings are illustrated with excerpts; brackets are used for translations and to supply context where necessary. All usernames are pseudonyms.

The Use of English to Learn About Korean

Ostensibly, the object (in AT terms) of r/Korean community activity is "to learn, study, and practice the **Korean language**" (www.reddit.com/r/Korean, emphasis in original). However, in practice, this primarily means learning about Korean and is most often accomplished via English as a mediational tool. Figure 2 below details the foci of the 298 submissions observed. Across all archived topics, there were 153,536 English words (92.9%) and 11,701 Korean words (7.1%).[1]
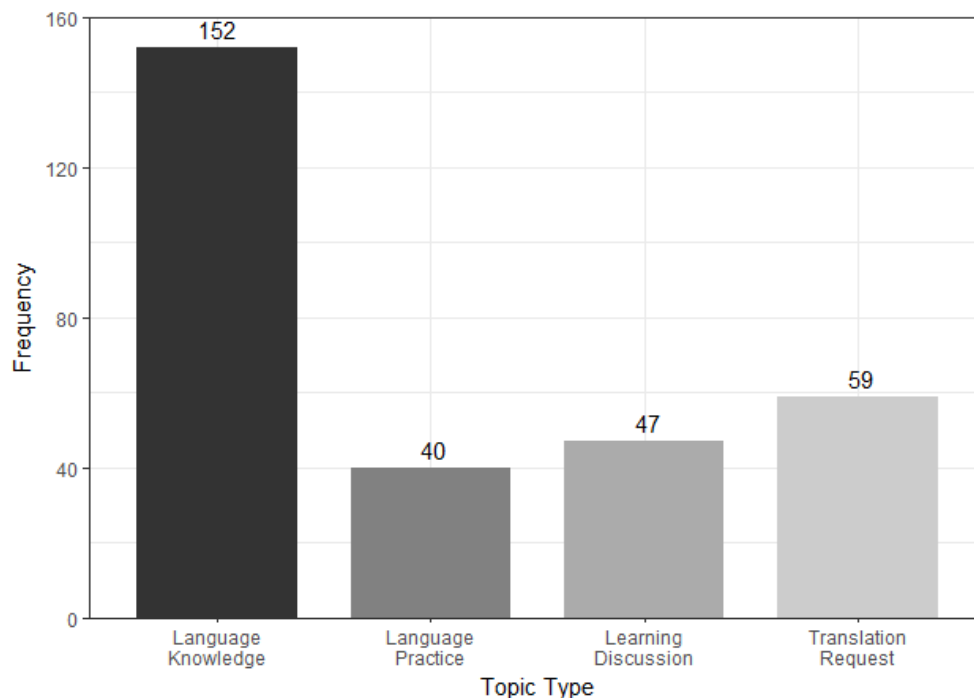
Figure 2. Bar plot showing frequencies of r/Korean topic submission types.

Submissions focused on Korean language knowledge dominated r/Korean activity, outnumbering all other submission categories combined. The language knowledge topics could be secondarily categorized as *requests* (*n* = 131) or *shares* (*n* = 21). Further unpacking of these topics revealed trends in the type of knowledge sought and shared in the community: 51 submissions focused on grammar, followed closely by vocabulary (49), and then pronunciation (25). Other sub-areas of language knowledge (e.g., pragmatics, graphology) received less attention. Within these topics, Korean was the object of activity, with concepts and meanings conveyed through English as a primary mediational tool, as in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1. *A Language Knowledge Topic*[2]

Topic: whats this mean? 그대로인데

Author: zfate

Score: 7

Body: topic :) thanks!!

Reply

Author: Apprentm {Advanced}

Score: 8

Body: it means "it is as it is" or "it's the same as its been" or just "normal" so like you could say

직장이 어때요? (how is work?)

그대로 예요 (it's as it usually is)

or if we use 인데 you could say

자동차 고장 났어요? (did your car break down?)

그대로인데... 왜요? (its normal... why?)

그대로 means "as it is", "normal"

인데 means 이다 + ~은데

이다 is the copula meaning "is" as in "equals"

and 은데 means that theres some implied meaning or in a simple way, the "..." as in ...why?

As seen in Excerpt 1, English was used to make the initial request and explain the meaning of the phrase, frame examples, and provide grammar details. No translations for this excerpt are provided, as community member Apprentm[3] had already done so in his reply.

The next two most common submission types were *translation requests* and *learning discussions*. Translation requests (Korean into English) were frequently submitted by drop-in visitors rather than community members. Learning discussions were generated within the community and primarily involved English-language discussions of study tips, learning experiences, and motivations for learning.

The least frequent submission type was *language practice*. These topics were secondarily coded as *offers* ($n = 21$; e.g., sharing a reading practice resource, posting a writing prompt) and *requests* ($n = 19$; e.g., seeking a Korean-language computer gaming group, requesting beginner-level listening materials). Many of these submissions simply involved the sharing of an Internet resource or served to organize a practice time on another platform (e.g., exchanging usernames for a Korean messaging app). For practice activities that were well-suited to the modal affordances of r/Korean, such as writing practice, Korean was used for communication (Excerpt 2).

In this excerpt featuring two community members discussing music, Korean is both an object of the activity and the mediational tool. The two users were expressing meaning and communicating in their L2 (Korean as a tool, sharing thoughts on music as an object), with the superordinate goal of improving their Korean abilities (Korean as an object). There is no explicit discussion of linguistic features, highlighting a difference between this sort of activity and the kind exemplified by Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 2. *Writing Practice about Music.*

Comment

Author: annyeong_kiwi {Beginner}

Score: 2

Body: 저는 보통 발라드와 힙합 아티스트를 들어요. 이 아티스트들은 다비치, 산 이, 아이유, 범키, 에픽하이 등예요. 감정적 음악은 제에게 항상 마음을 들어서 다비치와 아이유를 너무 좋아해요. 그리고 수업에 걸얼 때 낙관적인 음악을 들는 것이 좋아해서 힙합도 자주 들어요. [*I usually listen to ballad* (a full genre in Korean popular music) *and hip-hop artists. These artists are Davichi, San E, IU, BumKey, Epik High, etc. Emotional music is always good to me so I really like Davichi and IU. Also when I walk to class I like listening to upbeat music so I often listen to hip-hop, too.*]

Comment

Author: intothewild99

Score: 2

Body: 저는 힙합 밖에 안 들어요. 어렸을때 랩 음악을 좋았어요. 요즘 한국에는 힙합 인기가 많아요. 우리 부인 unpretty rap star 프로그램 자주 봐요. 사실 나는 여자 mc 별로 안 좋아해요. 내 자동차 운전하면 힙합 꼭 들어요. 힙합 들으면 기분이 완전 좋고 스트레스를 풀어요. [*I don't listen to anything outside of hip-hop. When I was young I liked rap. These days in Korea hip-hop is really popular. My wife watches the program "Unpretty Rap Star" often. But in fact I don't really like female MCs. When I drive my car I gotta listen to hip-hop. When I listen to hip-hop I feel good and stress goes away.*]

I interpreted this disparity in learning about Korean through English versus learning Korean through communication as a contradiction in the community (Engeström, 2001). Mainstream theories of SLA emphasize input, interaction, and output in the target language (Gass & Mackey, 2006) which was found primarily in the relatively small number of language practice topics. In contrast, the much more numerous language knowledge topics lacked such L2 communicative activity and instead were characterized by L1-mediated vocabulary and grammar explanations (though such explicit focus on lexical and grammatical forms is not unhelpful in language learning; see Norris & Ortega, 2001). This finding also contrasts other OILL contexts where learner L2 use was more prevalent (e.g., Ryu, 2013; Sockett, 2013), though it is somewhat similar to Gao (2007), where L1 Chinese was seen as a useful support when focusing on linguistic form. Community members were also cognizant of this, summed up by the user petericn in Excerpt 3 below.

Excerpt 3. *petericn ({Native Speaker}, OEQ)*

There are pros and cons. If you want to be good at Korean, you should try using it more… On the other hand, when you learn a new language, you should partially rely on your mother tongue. By discussing some words in English, they can understand the meaning more easily and help them use it better.

petericn supports my own observations about the reliance on English as a mediational tool, but also notes the need to use the language in order to develop proficiency. However, r/Korean was not the only online space utilized by the community; others appeared to better facilitate Korean interaction. Geurim, r/Korean moderator with a 4-year history in the community, placed particular value on communicating in the #korean chatroom (Excerpt 4):

Excerpt 4. *Geurim ({Advanced}, OEQ)*

I've seen a lot of people improve their Korean through using whatever resources they use, along with practicing in the chatroom. Sometimes people ask questions in new threads when they need help too. But it's easier to see people improving when I see them frequently in the chatroom.

Geurim's comments on the value of the chatroom for practice opportunities aligned with my own experiences. Across my visits to #korean, 1,721 out of the 9,137 words were Korean (18.84%). While this was not a large or even balanced portion of Korean use, it was a considerably larger portion than what I observed on r/Korean. The Korean I saw and used in the chatroom was mostly communicative, such as discussing the weather and travel plans, though there were language knowledge-oriented discussions, too.

Nonetheless, two users made astute observations about the dominant language of Reddit filtering down to r/Korean. "Reddit is a website based on English" (FallZelda, OEQ) and as such, r/Korean exists as "a resource for Korean learners on the overwhelmingly English-speaking mothership that is Reddit" (m_guishin, OEQ). These comments echoed responses from Pasfield-Neofitou's (2011) Japanese learners about English-dominant sites like Facebook leading to relatively little Japanese communication. And

although moderator Geurim did value people using Korean, he was simultaneously "happy with users in the subreddit using English to learn Korean" (OEQ). Beginners also shared appreciation for the use of English: "I need it!" (FunCreatures, OEQ).

Additionally, lower-proficiency members sometimes felt shut out of activities and unable to contribute. LivingInROK ({Intermediate}, OEQ) expressed this sentiment, writing "I am still high beginner/low intermediate, so I do not feel that I have much to contribute." This tension highlights the important role of language proficiency in community activity and tool use.

In summary, community activity largely focused on learning about Korean, achieved through the actions of asking questions or sharing knowledge about grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. To do this, English was commonly used as a mediational tool, meeting the needs of the generally lower-proficiency learners. This sort of language-learning activity and L1 reliance is at odds with other accounts of informal online language learning (Sockett, 2013; Thorne et al., 2009). However, using an L1 to explain elements of the L2 is hardly uncommon in formal learning settings. For example, Nakatsukasa and Loewen (2015) found that almost half of form-focused episodes (FFEs; i.e., where attention is brought to linguistic form during interaction) in a tertiary Spanish classroom primarily utilized the students' L1. Furthermore, the most common types of FFEs were grammar- or vocabulary-related, not unlike the language knowledge topics submitted to r/Korean.

Participatory Learning Interactions

Participatory culture drove interactions in the r/Korean community. All submissions to the forum were initiated by community members, and the discussions within it relied on community participation. All links to outside artifacts, such as YouTube videos or dictionary entries, were selected and shared on the initiative of community members; there was no central entity providing content on Reddit (Massanari, 2015).

Discussions within individual r/Korean topics were characterized by this participatory culture, involving learner-initiated questions and detailed, well-exemplified answers and resource links from potentially numerous respondents. Importantly, these discussions were subjected to voting, affecting discourse with single clicks and potentially changing its very structure.

Excerpt 5 provides examples of several common interactional patterns on r/Korean. To begin, OddChoice's initiation (I) was approved by the r/Korean community, indicated by a score of 15. Presumably, the topic telling someone to "Get over it!" was of interest to many other community members. This caused it to rise to the top of the r/Korean front page. Additionally, I noted that this topic was an example of language not typically found in textbooks, highlighting the informal setting and learner-driven activity.

Next, the topic spawned multiple interactions when it received two accurate, informative responses (Rs). DonggiAUS and duck50 both received several upvotes for their posts, which included more than just a translation of the phrase in the initial question. DonggiAUS provided additional pragmatic information, and duck50 provided information on appropriate contexts for using the phrase he provided. Responses such as these, including helpful information, examples, or links to relevant external resources, were elevated by the community through upvotes. OddChoice followed-up (F) on the response by DonggiAUS, indicating the satisfaction of his request by expressing gratitude.

qwerty, another community member who clicked on OddChoice's popular topic and read duck50's response containing a trigger (T), initiated a new interaction by asking about the use of the phrase in a different situation. duck50 responded, received more upvotes for his accurate response, and qwerty followed-up with an expression of gratitude. Below this, we can see OddChoice's follow-up to duck50, which appears after the qwerty-initiated interaction due to comment score ranking and nested threading of interactions.

Excerpt 5. *Participatory Interaction (r/Korean)*

Topic: How can I say "Get over it!" with the same nuance as in English?

(I) **Author:** OddChoice {Beginner}

Score: 15

Body: For example, someone's complaining about something you did and you just want to tell them "oh just get over it already". I'm not looking for a kind meaning such as "try hard and you'll get over it". Thanks.

Comment

(R) **Author:** DonggiAUS {Advanced}

Score: 6

Body: 그냥 받아들여! [*Just deal with it!*] (This is in 반말 [*casual speech*] as if talking to a friend of course.)

Comment

(F) **Author:** OddChoice {Beginner}

Score: 1

Body: Thank you kind sir!

Comment

(R, T) **Author:** duck50 {Native Speaker}

Score: 4

Body: 그냥 좀 넘어가라! [*Just get over it!*] Is what I would say.

Ex)

A: 어제 간 식당 진짜 별로였어. 비싸고 맛도 없고.. 넌 어떻게 그런 곳에 날 데리고 갈 수 있어? (The restaurant we went yesterday was really bad. Expensive and the food isn't good either... How can you take me to a place like that?)

B: 아, 그냥 좀 넘어가라! (Oh, just get over it!)

Comment

(I) **Author:** qwerty

Score: 2

Body: Can this also be used when someone will not get over someone? E.g. Guy friend keeps complaining about why some girl isn't interested in him, friend wants to say "Just get over it"

Comment

(R) **Author:** duck50 {Native Speaker}

Score: 3

Body: Nope that would be something like 그냥 잊어 (just forget about her)

	Comment
(F)	**Author:** qwerty
	Score: 1
	Body: Thank you :)
	Comment
(F)	**Author:** OddChoice {Beginner}
	Score: 1
	Body: That example is what I'm looking for. Thanks!

The two modes of communication, written words and votes, were both necessary to understand the patterns of interaction on r/Korean. Excerpt 8, a complete topic, was relatively simple; other topics involved dozens of comments in numerous interaction chains with larger numbers of upvotes and downvotes. Users also brought audio recordings, video tutorials, blog posts, dictionary links, images, and other web resources into these interactions via hyperlink or embedding. The resulting webs of interaction, which might appear chaotic in comparison to community blogs (Lee, 2006) or social networks (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011), embodied the participatory nature of r/Korean's informal learning activity. In AT terms, participatory culture could be seen as a product of a democratically-structured community, where tools were selected and actions were carried out ad hoc by numerous subjects.

Rules to Promote Useful Content

In AT, rules play an important role in regulating individual and group activities. The officially stated rules of r/Korean were few in number. To summarize, members were asked to be respectful, to have accounts older than 3 days, to label topics with objectionable content *NSFW* (not safe for work), to refrain from piracy, and to avoid directly linking to external sites. However, I also found unwritten rules for r/Korean: be accurate, use Hangeul, and give sufficient effort. I interpreted these rules as community responses to the potential chaos of the decentralized, participatory Reddit platform. When these rules were followed, members believed that better learning would occur.

Be Accurate

In order to recognize and validate resources and information about Korean, I observed a great deal of negotiation on r/Korean. Perhaps due to the informal environment without teachers or other authorities, members needed to take it upon themselves to evaluate the accuracy of submissions and comments. Member Tom88 shared how inaccurate resources were handled by community members (Excerpt 6):

Excerpt 6. *Tom88 ({Intermediate}, OEQ)*

> There are often sources linked that are good, but also links to some blogs which offer incredibly inaccurate Korean… the poor sources are usually downvoted and pointed out in the comments to deter users from using them.

In Tom88's comment, a Reddit-specific means of addressing quality was revealed: downvoting. Massanari (2015), in her ethnographic account of Reddit at large, emphasized how downvotes and upvotes played central roles in mediating the activity of Reddit communities, and this was certainly true for r/Korean. Member m_guishin even noted that "bad advice [in comments] is downvoted and practically invisible" (OEQ), highlighting the powerful effect votes can have. In extreme cases, comments below a certain threshold do not appear on other user's screens, while highly upvoted comments or submission rise to the top.

Excerpt 7 shows how inaccurate information is downvoted and addressed verbally, with a correction receiving approval in the form of upvotes. The response by Rootarcs to BBWilson's question about saying

thank you was highly inaccurate, poorly explaining the pronunciation of 감사합니다 (/kam.sam.ni.da/) as "come-sum-knee-da" (/kʌm.sʌm.ni.da/). Adhering to the rule of accuracy, community members piled on downvotes, eventually causing the comment to disappear from the displays of most users. Imprisonedrye addressed the inaccuracy verbally, and quite politely, explaining where Rootarcs went astray. This response was rewarded with upvotes from the community. While it is common sense for accuracy of information to be valued in any learning context, it was interesting here that the maintenance of accuracy was a community responsibility rather than a task left to moderators or some other authority. It is important to note, however, that reactions to inaccuracy mostly applied to knowledge topics. Making mistakes in practice topics (i.e., communicative interaction in the L2) was often corrected but rarely downvoted. Additionally, in the words of community member m_guishin, while "downvoting and correcting [were] fine" to address inaccuracies, it was not okay "to be disrespectful," as that violates the officially stated rules.

Excerpt 7. *Addressing an Inaccurate Response (r/Korean)*

> **Topic:** What was wrong with my context
>
> **Author:** BBWilson
>
> **Score:** 9
>
> **Body:** I was traveling through Incheon Airport on holidays. My handy travel guide advised that "Gamsahamnida" is Korean for "Thank You". I practiced as I went through the airport and said "Gamsahamnida" to the passport guy. He did a double take and smirked but didnt reply. Was this too formal or too informal? Or is thanking an employee not "correct". I was taken aback by his response and didnt say it again.
>
>> **Comment**
>>
>> **Author:** Rootarcs
>>
>> **Score:** -21
>>
>> **Body:** I agree... probably just the butchering of pronunciation. Phonetically it is said 'come-sum-knee-da' with flowing the syllables together, as usual. (i.e not saying loudly... come....sum...knee...daaaa)
>>
>>> **Comment**
>>>
>>> **Author:** Imprisonedrye{Intermediate}
>>>
>>> **Score:** 6
>>>
>>> **Body:** Yeah, I do think it gets run together a lot, but I wouldn't say it changes from 감 [note: this is the first syllable of "Gamsahamnida"; the vowel is /a/] to come... I think that's mostly what your downvotes are about. And I think it's probably better for beginners/vacationers to learn the full pronunciation rather than trying to rush through it like a native... Better chance that they'll be understood, you know?

Use Hangeul, Not Romanization

By and large, r/Korean discouraged the use of Romanization to represent Korean words or explain sounds. This unwritten rule governing an aspect of language use invoked the *English only* and *English grammar* rules found among L2 users in a gaming community by Ryu (2013). The word family *Romanize* appeared 52 times (in English or Korean) in the subset of language-focused r/Korean topics, and every mention of the word fell within the context of either telling people not to use Romanization or explaining why Romanization was confusing or unhelpful. In many other discussions, community members implored true beginners to learn the Korean script, Hangeul, as soon as possible. The use of Romanization also spawned

criticism of two language-learning apps shared on r/Korean. In a highly upvoted comment, user Derikk humorously captured the spirit of this rule (Excerpt 8).

Excerpt 8. *Do not use Romanization (r/Korean)*

Comment

Author: Derikk

Score: 19

Body: Just don't romanize. The english alphabet and korean alphabet don't translate into each other at all, they're completely different. Learn your hangul and disregard the sins of the romanization.

Generally, community members believe that Romanization of Korean leads to misunderstandings for learners, as Romanization generally does a poor job of representing Korean sounds. When the sounds of Korean required explanation, I saw a preference among members for pointing out similar sounds in the context of English words (e.g., the *a* in *father* corresponding to the vowel ㅏ /a/ in Korean) or using the international phonetic alphabet.

Give Sufficient Effort

Putting forth sufficient effort is a rule for posts. Low-effort posts were downvoted or ignored, while high-effort posts were rewarded with upvotes and verbal support. The response from Apprentm, discussed previously in Excerpt 1, provides a good example of this rule at work. Addressing a relatively simple vocabulary question, Apprentm posted a 94-word explanation with several illustrative examples. Accordingly, Apprentm's comment was rewarded with a high score, ensuring that his comment would be the first thing anyone read when they entered the topic. Goosetown, a native Korean speaker with a background in linguistics, appeared several times in my field notes due to his high-effort posting. Goosetown's responses were often essay-length, were extremely detailed, and frequently featured links to trustworthy resources. In these and other cases, I frequently observed verbal thanks or compliments in addition to large numbers of upvotes.

Low-effort posts were treated differently. Very simple requests for linguistic knowledge (e.g., vocabulary questions that could be answered with a dictionary search) were sometimes ignored or sparsely responded to. These topics attracted few upvotes, and as a result slid down r/Korean's front page quickly. Low-effort comments were also subject to the effort rule. For example, in a topic requesting information about the phonetic realization of the letter ㅅ in the word 곳 (*place*) when different suffixes are attached, several members posted informative, effortful responses. However, one member simply posted a list of several possible affixations: "곳은, 곳이, 곳에, 곳을" (*place-SUBJ, place-TOPIC, place-at, place-OBJ*). This was downvoted to a score of -1 as a reaction to the lack of effort. While nothing in the response was inaccurate, it did not involve sufficient effort to answer the question. Notably, this comment was the first response chronologically, yet it appeared below the more effortful responses on the page.

Learner–Expert Division of Labor

In AT, division of labor relates objects of activity to specific members of a community. In the bustling activity of r/Korean, labor was primarily divided between community members who were either Korean learners or experts. In Excerpt 9, beginning learner annyeong_kiwi refers directly to an {Advanced} non-native Korean speaker, m_guishin, and a {Native Speaker}, petericn, as sources of expert advice. He also makes the broad distinction between learners (*those who need language help*) and experts (*those … who can speak and write in fluent Korean*).

Excerpt 9. *annyeong_kiwi ({Beginner}, OEQ)*

> I think some users like m_guishin and petericn are incredibly insightful and helpful. I always pay attention when they answer questions because I think they know what they're talking about. … There are people at /r/Korean who can speak and write in fluent Korean too, though, so they always have much to contribute to those of us who need language help.

Native speakers and advanced experts took on most of the question-answering labor, while simpler questions could be handled by other learners (Excerpt 10).

Excerpt 10. *Tom88 ({Intermediate}, OEQ)*

> …there are a fair number of native, and advanced users who give great advice and even the intermediate and 'beginner' users chip in for lower level questions as well.

These two excerpts signal how proficiency characterizes the implicit assignment of question-answering labor: learners look to experts to provide helpful explanations. When particularly challenging requests are introduced, the reliance on expert labor is magnified. In Excerpt 11, two learners specifically request expert responses to a question about subordinators. An intermediate learner, techyou, readily referred to native speakers and advanced learners together in his request for an answer to the difficult question. Member Beautiful even forgoes mentioning native speakers entirely, highlighting that expert status is not directly tied to being a native or non-native speaker.

Excerpt 11. *Call for Help (r/Korean)*

> **Comment**
>
> **Author:** techyou {Intermediate}
>
> **Score:** 2
>
> **Body:** can an advanced/native speaker comment please, i've heard so many conflicting opinions on this.
>
> > **Comment**
> >
> > **Author:** Beautiful
> >
> > **Score:** 2
> >
> > **Body:** Same, where dem [them] 고's [advanced proficiency] at? This is arguably the hardest nuance to grasp alongside 이/가 [subject markers] vs 은/는 [topic markers] with the most differing explanations out there.. Every resource says something different. Actually, after thinking about it some more, I'd say it's even more divisive than 이/가 [subject markers] vs 은/는 [topic markers].

Other sorts of labor are also completed by these experts, even when it may be difficult or time consuming (Excerpt 12):

Excerpt 12. *petericn ({Native Speaker}, OEQ)*

> …but no one makes that practice questions each week. When I had no post to upload I did it once, but it is hard to correct their posts, so I gave up too. It's one of the thing that I want to try again if I have time and energy.

petericn's comment reveals how labor carried out by experts can feel taxing. This raises the question of what rewards experts might receive for their labor. Those who need help or practice receive it, allowing them to move toward their learning goals, while those who do not need help give answers, make corrections, and provide opportunities, presumably in exchange for less-obvious rewards. Perhaps, like some high-

proficiency members of the *Blue Rain Café* (Gao, 2007), the experts of r/Korean enjoyed fulfilling a central community role.

While responding to questions, creating practice opportunities, and correcting language errors all represent crucial labor in the r/Korean community, the importance of asking questions should not be overlooked, as FunCreatures pointed out (Excerpt 13):

Excerpt 13. *FunCreatures ({Beginner}, OEQ)*

> …people around here help out so much in simple ways—when people share something or they work through a grammatical problem, they help us all out, really.

Moderator Geurim noted that "the active posters are more commonly high-beginner+" (OEQ). One notably active beginning learner, AVgoku, was responsible for submitting 15 of the 192 language knowledge and language practice topics. He additionally made 68 comments in these and other topics. These learners are responsible for creating a large portion of topics and fill an important role in maintaining the liveliness of community activity.

The r/Korean Activity System

The four themes I have described paint a vivid picture of activity in the r/Korean OILL community. RQ1, about the objects and tools, found an answer in the breakdown of r/Korean topic submissions and the choice of language: the primary object of activity in r/Korean was learning about Korean, an activity mediated by the English language. Meaning-focused activity mediated by the L2 was present, but much less prominent. Investigating RQ2 about interactional patterns yielded a description of smaller activity units and revealed how Reddit's participatory culture and voting system shaped the discourse of activities in the community. Looking beyond officially-stated rules, exploring RQ3, saw the emergence of several rules thought to promote Korean learning in the community. Last, in examining division of labor, I found that language proficiency largely determined who carried out which activities, with lower-proficiency learners asking questions while higher-proficiency experts were responsible for answering questions and creating language practice opportunities. These findings contribute to a broader, more robust picture of the r/Korean activity system, as shown in Figure 3. The two subsystems represent learning about Korean and communicating in Korean, and their difference in scale reflects the relative proportion of activity in the overall system. I argue, based on experiences reported in community comments and OEQ responses, that genuine Korean learning can be an outcome of this system, though the degree is questionable and likely idiosyncratic to each learner, depending on time, activity level, and a constellation of factors straddling both online and offline spaces.

In AT, Engeström (2001) assigns great importance to contradictions in activity systems as catalysts for transformations: "As the contradictions of an activity system are aggravated, some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norms. In some cases, this escalates into collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort" (p. 137). A contradiction also emerged from my findings: a tension between learning about Korean and using Korean. In the response to sharing my initial findings on r/Korean, over 50 comments were made that included the questioning of norms. Some members began submitting their own topics which included hyperlinked references to my findings, such as a writing practice topic for beginner learners to introduce themselves in Korean. Another topic, which did not directly refer to my findings but seemed to be in the same spirit as the others, involved a native speakers sharing a popular Korean essay appended with vocabulary glosses. This initial evidence of change efforts was a surprising and pleasing finding. It also highlights the value of participation and member-checking in netnographic research, not just for enhancing insights but also for increasing the ethical quality of the study by providing an opportunity for contradictions to be aired and potential change efforts to begin.
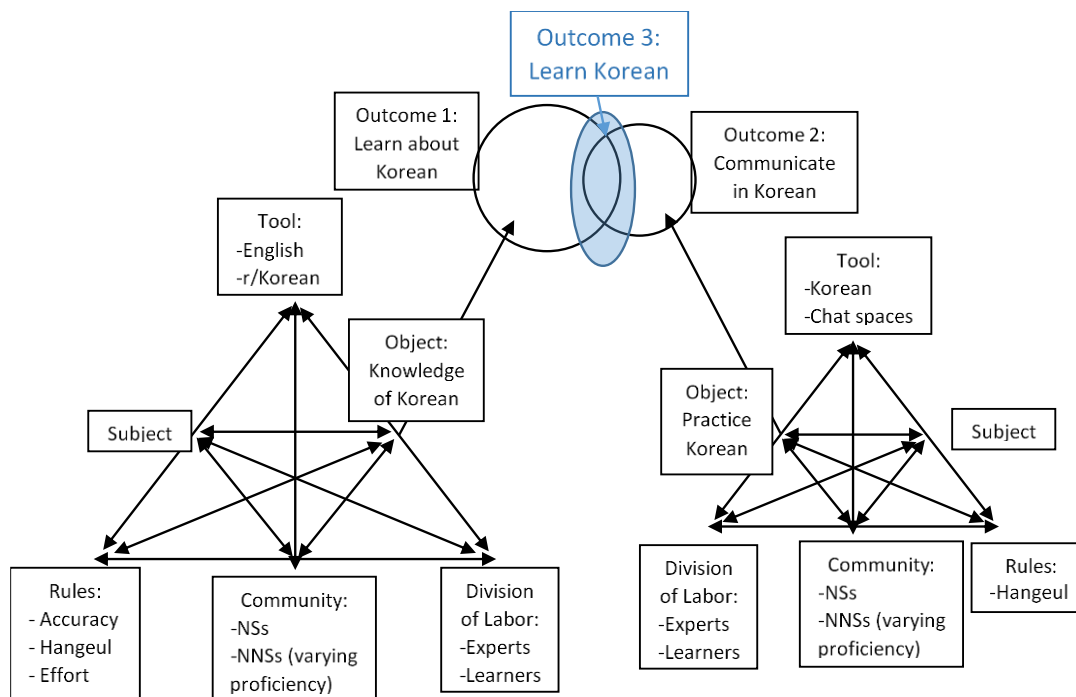
Figure 3. Learner view of the r/Korean activity system.

Conclusion

These findings should be considered alongside the two major limitations of my investigation. In OEQ responses, r/Korean comments, and chatroom discussion, many r/Korean members revealed that they engaged in Korean learning activity in numerous spaces, both online and offline (e.g., chatting apps, Skype tutors, daily life in Korea, classroom study); this was reiterated when I publicly shared my initial findings. Second, my netnographic observation was limited to seven weeks. Although the asynchronous, archival nature of r/Korean allowed for comprehensive observation and collection of large amounts of data, a longer observation period would have allowed more participation in #korean (and potentially other synchronous environments) as well as an examination of historical change in greater depth.

Limitations notwithstanding, I argue that the present findings revealed an interesting contradiction in the r/Korean community that challenges a popular characterization of OILL as for-pleasure L2 communication and leisure (Sockett, 2013). The dominant use of English and prevalence of explicit discussion of Korean linguistic forms also seems to contrast the suggestion of Thorne et al. (2009) that Internet spaces provide a context for socialization into L2 user communities. Instead, what I found in r/Korean suggests that when the interest of a community is language itself, different patterns of language use and learning activity may emerge. Interestingly, I also found similarities between r/Korean and traditional classroom language-learning activity (i.e., a focus on linguistic forms and the use of L1 in FFEs). It seems natural for motivated language learners, particularly those of lower proficiency who are not engaged in formal language instruction, to seek out online communities to answer their questions about linguistic forms. In this sense, Sockett's (2013) strong emphasis on communication for personal enjoyment in his definition of OILL may be overly restrictive, as the kind of user-initiated ad hoc activity observed in this study could hardly be considered formal learning.

Compared to gaming, interest communities, and social networks, there is less known about language learning activities in online spaces where language is the primary focus. This study demonstrated that going on the Internet with a general goal of L2 learning is no guarantee of abundant meaningful L2 input and

interaction for a learner. At the same time, future research examining how knowledge about a language gained online might influence learning or transfer to other contexts of L2 use would be valuable.

When studying or promoting OILL, considerations should also be made for platform language dominance and the proficiency level of learners. Many of the web's most popular sites, including Reddit, are predominantly (if not exclusively) English-medium, which may present an obstacle for learners of other languages seeking to improve their skills. Similarly, the aggregate language abilities of a community appear to be an important factor. Without a critical mass of speakers possessing sufficient linguistic competence, it is unreasonable to expect much spontaneous L2 communication. Thus, lower-proficiency members of OILL communities need to deliberately seek out or create community-supported L2 communication opportunities until they reach a point where the digital wilds become genuinely accessible.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Korean words were counted based on *eojeol* units, which are composed of content words and any attached morphemes (e.g., case markers, conjunctions, adpositions). As such, proportions of words are slightly biased toward English: The adposition *to* in *to school* as is a separate word in English but not in Korean.

2. Indentation in r/Korean excerpts indicates the nesting of comments, reflecting how threads are actually seen by users.

3. All usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were constructed to reflect the types of usernames seen in r/Korean, which included the use of irregular capitalization and non-alphabetic characters.

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Appendix A. Analytic Codes

Codes for Submissions

1) Language Knowledge
   a) Requests
   b) Shares
      i) Grammar
      ii) Vocabulary
      iii) Pragmatics
      iv) Pronunciation
      v) Graphology
      vi) Discourse
      vii) Culture
      viii) General
      ix) Misc.
2) Language Practice
   a) Offer
   b) Request
      i) Reading
      ii) Listening
      iii) Speaking
      iv) Writing
      v) Grammar
      vi) Reading & Writing
      vii) General
3) Learning Discussion
   a) Study Tips
   b) Experiences
   c) Motivation
4) Translation Request

Codes for Discussions

1) Answer Questions
   a) Explain
   b) Exemplify
   c) Provide source
2) Evaluate
   a) Correct
   b) Downvote
   c) Self-edit/delete
   d) Comment
   e) Upvote
3) Follow-up
   a) Indicate comprehension
   b) Seek clarification
   c) Probe further
4) Participate (engage in talk, in Korean when appropriate)
5) Moderate
   a) Warn
   b) Delete
6) Translate (to English, usually)

Codes for Roles

1) Community Identity
   a) Lurker
   b) Newbie
   c) Regular
   d) Moderator
   e) Troll
2) Language Status
   a) Learner
   b) Expert User

Appendix B. Open-Ended Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer the questions below. Your experiences and opinions are valuable, and you may write as little or as much as you wish, or nothing at all. Please type your answers in a reply to this message. Thank you for your participation!

1. How long have you been a subscriber of /r/Korean?
2. Why did you come to /r/Korean?
3. How you participate in the /r/Korean community?

4. How do you see yourself within the r/Korean community?
5. What do people in r/Korean do to improve their Korean ability?
6. On r/Korean, people frequently share links to Korean learning resources. What do you think about these resources?
7. What do you think about the language knowledge and advice of r/Korean users?
8. Subreddits, like other communities, have unwritten rules and values. In your words, what are the rules or values of r/Korean?
9. Looking at r/Korean, most of the discussion is in English rather than Korean. How do you feel about that?
10. Are you involved in Korean language learning (or teaching) outside of /r/Korean? Please explain.

About the Author

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