

# Changes in the Status of the “Second Foreign Language” Education in Korea

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## Abstract

Foreign language education in Korea has a long history. Since the introduction of Chinese characters in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, many foreign languages have been taught in Korea. European languages were introduced in the late part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the teaching of them experienced a setback during the Japanese colonial period. After liberation in 1945, English became the most important foreign language, while other foreign languages were called “second foreign languages”. German and French were the two most popular “second foreign languages” in the early years after liberation, but Japanese increased its weight as German and French gradually lost their appeal to high school students. Chinese is also steadily gaining in popularity. A corollary of this change was the government’s retraining program to convert German and French language teachers to Japanese or Chinese language teachers. The present paper discusses these and other changes in the status of “second foreign languages”, and recommends that the government take some drastic measures to revive the balanced development of “second foreign-language education”.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign languages in Korea are discriminated socially and academically. English is the language that enjoys unchallenged privileges as the most important and most sought-after foreign language. It is now officially and publicly taught from the third grade of elementary school as a required subject throughout the primary, secondary and tertiary schools. Other foreign languages are usually taught from high schools as optional and elective subjects, although the 7<sup>th</sup> national curriculum permits them to be taught optionally in middle schools also. The discrimination is even more dramatic in their status, for English is called “English” in the curriculums, while other foreign languages are lumped into a category called “second foreign languages”, implying that English is the “first foreign language”.

Foreign language education on the Korean peninsula is believed to have started in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, with Chinese as the target language. Ever since that time, learning the Chinese language has been the most important thing to Koreans as it was the official medium of record keeping on the Korean peninsula until very recently. However, the nature of learning Chinese has changed over the centuries, as the written language became the major target form of the language for Koreans, who hardly had any

opportunity to encounter people speaking Chinese. The absolute majority of Chinese instruction has been in the written language, deciphering the original texts imported from China or reproduced in Korea.

During the Goryeo Dynasty, there were other languages, such as Mongol and Georan, that were translated in the royal court. And during the Chosun Dynasty, foreign languages such as Okinawan and Vietnamese were also taught in the royal court (Maeng, 1998, p. 2392).

It is not clear who was the first European that landed on the Korean peninsula. According to records, the first European seems to be Gregory Cespedes, a Spanish Catholic priest who accompanied the Japanese army during the Japanese invasion in 1593-1594. However, his visit to Korea is not seriously considered, as it is not likely that he interacted with Koreans (Yun, 2005).

According to Professor Taegeun Park of Gwandong University, on June 15, 1604, a Japanese merchant ship sailing from Cambodia to Nagasaki, Japan, was stranded on the beach near Tongyoung, with a Portuguese merchant Juan Mendes, sixteen Chinese, thirty-two Japanese and a black man on board (Yun, 2005). However, their stay was a brief one, and the Japanese language must have been used for communication between them and the Korean officials who investigated them.

In 1627, three Dutch men, J. J. Weltevree, D. Gijsberta, and J. Pieterz, were caught by Koreans while they were trying to get drinking water for their ship, the *Ouverkerk*, on a beach on the east coast near Gyeongju. They were sent to Seoul to help make guns and cannons. Although there is no record about their use of the Dutch language in Korea, they may be the first speakers of a European language in Korea. Weltevree later married a Korean woman and was naturalized. He was given a Korean name Park Yeon, and functioned as an interpreter when another Dutch trade ship, the *Sperwer* or *Sparrow Hawk*<sup>1</sup>, was stranded on the beach of Sanbongsan, Jeju, in 1653. H. Hamel, one of the crew members, recorded later that Weltevree was dispatched from Seoul to interpret for them.

The first English speaker, according to Hamel's record, was Sander Basket, a Scot who was one of the crew members of the stranded Dutch ship, *Sparrow Hawk*. As he stayed in Korea for more than 13 years with other crew members, there might have been some type of English speaking between him and the other crew or Koreans (Kim, 2006).

In 1836, three French catholic priests, Maubant, Impert, and Chatan, arrived in Korea to preach the Christian belief. A Korean, whose christened name is known to be Paul, helped them, and in doing so, might have learned French from Maubant, who had

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<sup>1</sup> Myeongbae Kim (2006) writes the name of the ship as "Sperver", while others call the ship "Sparrow Hawk."

arrived first of the three. The three priests were martyred three years later in 1839. A French-Korean dictionary was published by Korean and French priests in 1860.

Official foreign language education in European languages began in the 1880s, with the opening of Dongmunhak (同文學) in 1883 to teach English (Moon, 1976). However other European language education had to wait until the 1890s.

The purposes of this paper are (1) to review foreign language education in Korea (with a focus on 2<sup>nd</sup> foreign languages), (2) to discuss the perception of foreign language education in Korea, and (3) to explore the future direction of foreign language education

## II. EARLY OFFICIAL SCHOOLS FOR MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

### 1. The Government Foreign Language School System (官立外國語學校官制): 1895–1911

In 1895, the Korean royal government promulgated the Government Foreign Language School System Law, to teach foreign languages. The following is the plan for the school (Jeong-heui Song et al., 1999). According to the plan for the school, two types of courses were offered: 3-year courses for Japanese and Chinese; and 6-year courses for English, French, German, and Russian. The age range of the students who enrolled in the school system was from 15 to 23. The plan adopted a semester system for an academic year: Spring and Fall semesters. The students took a Korean essay writing test as an entrance examination.

The curriculum consisted of courses on (1) general knowledge in foreign language, (2) reading Chinese characters (comprehension), (3) foreign language composition, (4) translation into Korean, (5) Korean history, and (6) Korean geography. The faculty and staff were Korean, with foreigners teaching the relevant foreign languages.

### 2. Individual Schools in the Government Foreign Language School System

Before the Government Foreign Language School System Law was promulgated, there had been already an English school, named the English Language School (英語學校). This English language school was a successor of Yugyoung Gongwon (育英公院), which had succeeded Dongmunhak in 1886. The English Language School became part of the Government Foreign Language School (GFLS) in 1895. The foreign language schools under the umbrella of the GFLS were established as follows:

- 1894: English Language School (英語學校)  
 1895: French Language School (法語學校)  
       Japanese Language School (日語學校)  
 1896: Russian Language School (露語學校)  
 1897: Chinese Language School (中語學校)  
 1898: German Language School (德語學校)

### 3. Total Enrollment in Each School

The numbers of students in different schools varied, reflecting the relative weights of the languages. Table 1 shows the numbers of students in the five foreign language schools over a certain period. The numbers in parentheses are the numbers of applicants for admission. English was an important language from the beginning, and one thing to note in the table is a sudden increase of students in the Japanese Language School in 1907. This increase can be explained by the Korea-Japan Protocol, often called the “Eulsa Treaty”(乙巳保護條約), signed in 1906, which enabled Japan to exercise substantial control over Korea.

**TABLE 1**  
**Student Enrollment in the Government Foreign Language School**  
**(Yong Moon, 1976; Jeong-heui Song et al., 1999)**

	1897	1900	1901	1906	1907	1910
English	50	47	70	127	97 (100)	106 (208)
Japanese	ND*	8	57	88	210 (350)	136 (1290)
Chinese	120	82	25	54	27	36 (45)
French	34	81	37	44	25 (25)	21 (38)
German		ND	32	20	30 (30)	17 (27)

\* ND = No data available

### III. THE JAPANESE COLONIAL PERIOD (1910–1945)

Korea was annexed to Japan in 1910, and the Japanese colonial period of 35 years after that is considered a dark age for foreign language education on the Korean peninsula. In August, 1911, the Japanese Governor closed the Governmental Foreign

Language School and promulgated the Chosun Educational Creed (朝鮮教育勅令), which emphasized Japanese language education. Second Chosun Educational Creed was promulgated in 1938. Japanese became a required subject in secondary schools, while Chinese, German, French and English became elective subjects (Doo-bon Bae, 1998). Among the elective languages, German was weighed more than other foreign languages (Gi-sang Han, 1998; Jeong-heui Song et al., 1999, p. 82), as Japan was allied with Germany.

When Japan became engaged in war against the US in the Second World War, English education was forbidden in the Korean peninsula, because the Japanese colonial regime considered English the enemy’s language.

#### IV. THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD (1945-PRESENT)

##### 1. The Reinstatement of Foreign Language Education

With the liberation of Korea from Japanese imperial bondage came the reinstatement of foreign language education, especially English language education. English now became the most important foreign language. It acquired the status of the “first foreign language”, and became a required subject in secondary schools. Other foreign languages were named “second foreign languages” and became optional/elective subjects in high schools (Ministry of Education, 1986, 1992, 1997).

The reinstatement/reintroduction of the “second foreign languages” in high schools was implemented in the following order.

**TABLE 2**  
**The Introduction of the “Second Foreign Languages” in the Curriculum**

Year	1945	1963	1969	1974	1992	1997
Language	German, Chinese	French	Spanish	Japanese	Russian	Arabic
Curriculum	The “Syllabus”	2nd	Revised 2nd	3rd	6th	7th

The 7<sup>th</sup> Curriculum allowed 2<sup>nd</sup> foreign languages to be taught optionally in middle schools. Thus, seven foreign languages are now taught in secondary schools. In reality, however, second foreign languages are rarely taught in middle schools.

## 2. The Rise and Fall of the “Second” Foreign Languages

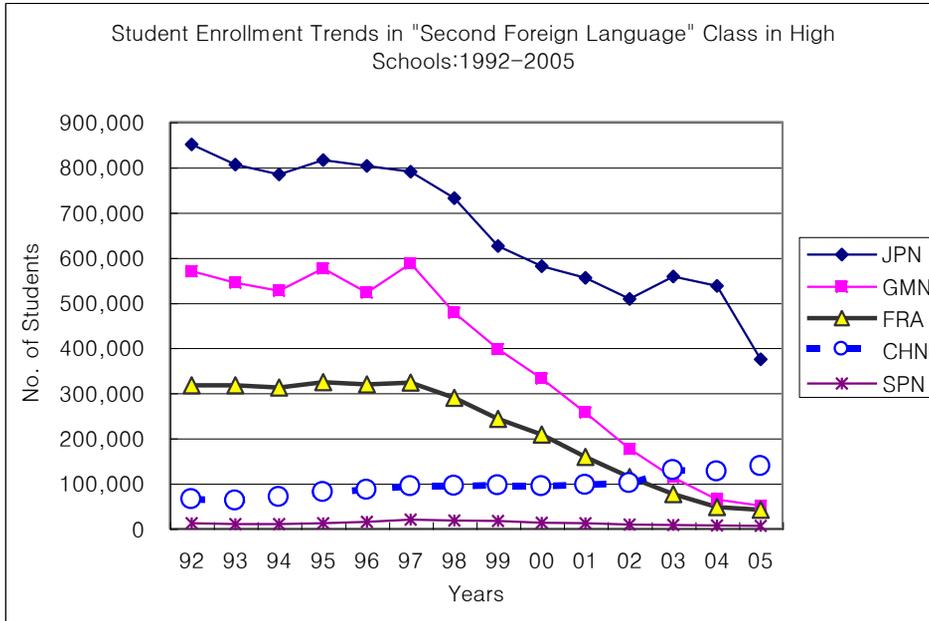
“Second foreign languages” have experienced a steady decrease in student enrollment, except for Chinese, which showed gradual increase in enrollment. The biggest and the most significant change in the history of foreign language education over the past sixty years is the rise and fall of the German and French languages. Among the “second foreign languages”, German had been the most popular foreign language until 1985. French had been second, until Japanese overtook it in 1975 (Jeong-huei Song et al., 1999, p. 86).

Enrollment in German classes decreased most rapidly, from 570,077 students in 1992 to 50,482 students in 2005. French enrollment decreased second most, from 317,433 students in 1992 to 41,736 students in 2005. Japanese enrollment also decreased steadily from 850,219 in 1992 to 374,857 in 2002. However, as shown later its relative proportion among the second foreign languages increased.. Chinese enrollment increased steadily both in the number of students and their proportion, from 64,082 (3.5%) in 1992 to 137,768 (22.6%) in 2002. Table 3 and Figure 1 show the trend in the numbers of enrolled students in five major “second foreign languages”: German, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese.

**TABLE 3**  
**Trends of Student Enrollments in “Second Foreign Languages”**  
**in High Schools, 1992-2005 (MOE, 2006)**

	GMN	FRA	SPN	JPN	CHN	TOTAL
1992	570,077	317,433	12,190	850,219	64,082	1,814,001
1993	544,181	316,736	10,366	806,237	61,452	1,738,972
1994	526,365	312,019	9,788	784,449	69,121	1,701,742
1995	575,461	323,907	11,992	815,672	79,802	1,806,834
1996	522,273	318,885	14,814	802,654	85,438	1,744,064
1997	587,044	323,229	19,481	790,264	93,267	1,813,285
1998	477,287	289,164	18,232	731,416	93,808	1,609,907
1999	397,424	242,864	16,952	625,655	95,376	1,378,271
2000	331,686	208,386	13,143	581,329	92,890	1,227,434
2001	256,759	158,593	11,566	555,304	95,951	1,078,173
2002	176,898	114,146	8,814	508,661	99,781	908,300
2003	112,842	76,331	7,846	557,674	129,111	883,804
2004	64,325	48,007	6,979	537,347	125,416	782,074
2005	50,482	41,736	6,092	374,857	137,768	610,935

**FIGURE 1**  
**Student Enrollment Trends in “Second Foreign Language” Classes**  
**in High Schools: 1992-2005**



One thing to note in Figure 1 is the beginning of a sharp decrease in the number of students from 1998. This is an inevitable consequence of the introduction of the 7<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum in 1997, which excluded the “second” foreign languages from the curriculum of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and included them in the optional curriculum for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Before the 7<sup>th</sup> Curriculum, a course in a second foreign language (e.g., German I) was offered to 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and another course (e.g., German II) was offered to 11<sup>th</sup> graders. In the 7<sup>th</sup> Curriculum, only one course (e.g., German I) was taken by 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders did not have to take the next course (e.g., German II). This explains why the total number of student enrollment dropped to less than half over the years. This drop was also partly attributable to the decreased number of high school students resulting from a lowered birth rate. Because of the social changes in terms of women’s advancement in the occupational arena, life style, and improved standard of living, Korea’s birth rate is now the lowest among OECD countries.

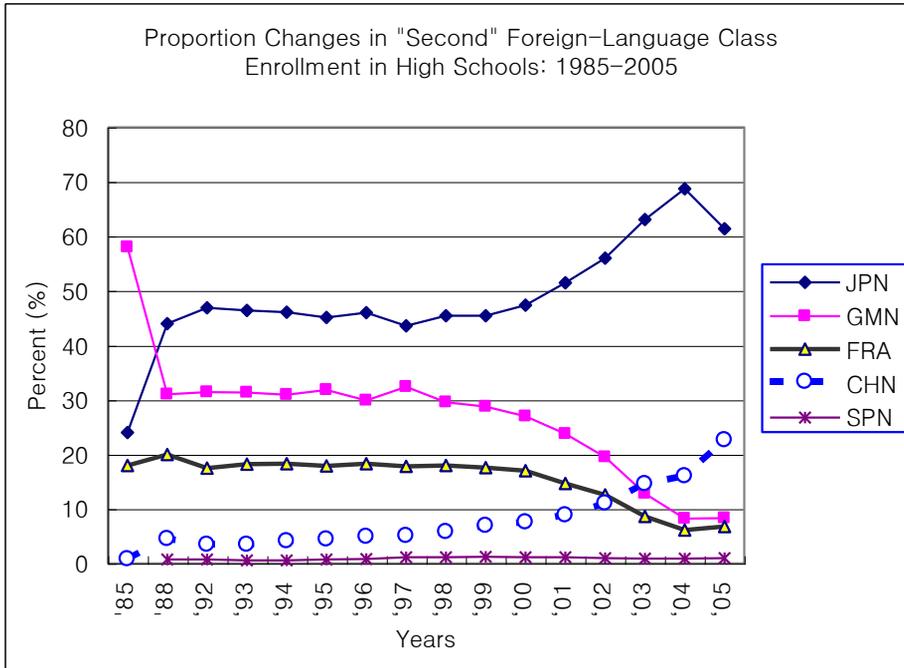
Despite the overall decrease in the number of students enrolled in “second foreign language” classes, there have been important changes in the proportions of these

languages in the past twenty years. German and French have experienced the biggest loss in proportion, while Japanese has won the battle overwhelmingly and Chinese has gained the momentum of a steady increase. Table 4 and Figure 2 illustrate the rise and fall of “second foreign languages” during the past two decades.

**TABLE 4**  
**Proportion Changes in “Second” Foreign Language Class Enrollment**  
**in High Schools, 1985-2005 (Song et al., 1999; MOE, 2006)**

	GMN	FRA	SPN	JPN	CHN	TOTAL
1985	58%	18%		24%	0.8%	100%
1988	31%	20%	0.7%	44%	4.5%	100%
1992	31.4%	17.5%	0.7%	46.9%	3.5%	100%
1993	31.3%	18.2%	0.6%	46.4%	3.5%	100%
1994	30.9%	18.3%	0.6%	46.1%	4.1%	100%
1995	31.8%	17.9%	0.7%	45.1%	4.4%	100%
1996	29.9%	18.3%	0.8%	46.0%	4.9%	100%
1997	32.4%	17.8%	1.1%	43.6%	5.1%	100%
1998	29.6%	18.0%	1.1%	45.4%	5.8%	100%
1999	28.8%	17.6%	1.2%	45.4%	6.9%	100%
2000	27.0%	17.0%	1.1%	47.4%	7.6%	100%
2001	23.8%	14.7%	1.1%	51.5%	8.9%	100%
2002	19.5%	12.6%	1.0%	56.0%	11.0%	100%
2003	12.8%	8.6%	0.9%	63.1%	14.6%	100%
2004	8.2%	6.1%	0.9%	68.7%	16.0%	100%
2005	8.3%	6.8%	1.0%	61.4%	22.6%	100%

**FIGURE 2**  
**Proportion Changes in “Second Foreign Language” Class Enrollment**  
**in High Schools: 1992-2005**



These changes in the proportions of some “second” foreign languages reflect the changes in the perceived importance of the countries speaking the languages in question. Japan and China have become increasingly important to the economy and culture of the Koreans, while Germany and France have been perceived as less important by Korean students.

Another reason for the popularity of Japanese among the students can be found in the linguistic similarities between Korean and Japanese. Since Korean and Japanese share syntactic and lexical similarities, Japanese is considered the easiest language for Koreans to learn.

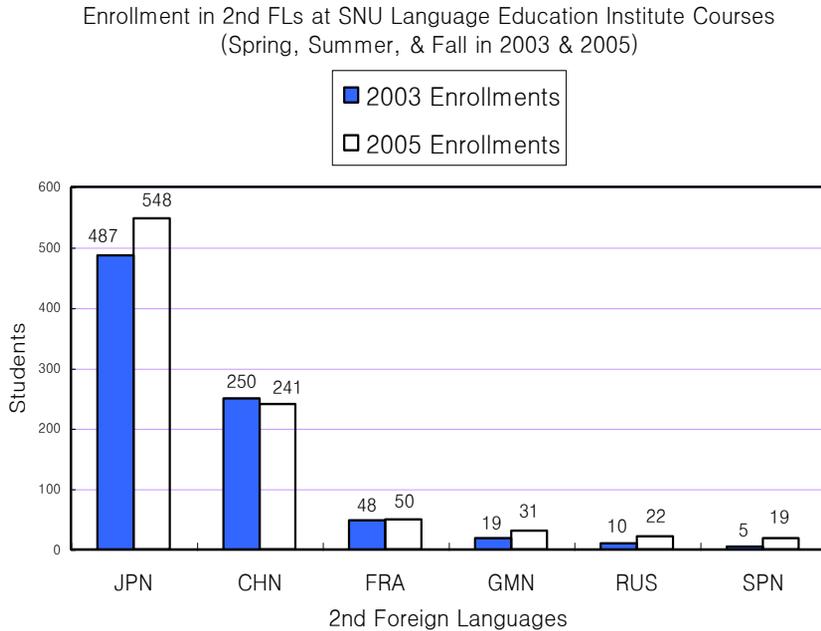
This popularity of the Japanese language is even more evident in vocational high schools. For example, Table 5 shows the number of students taking “second foreign language” classes in humanities track high schools and vocational high schools in the year 2004. In case of Japanese, the number of Japanese class students occupies 45.4 percent of all students taking a “second foreign language” in humanities track high school, while the number occupies 88.8 percent in vocational high schools.

**TABLE 5**  
**The Status of the Second Foreign Languages in 2004**

H. S.	Students			Teachers			Students/Teacher		
	Gen	Voc	Total	Gen.	Voc	Total	Gen	Voc	Total
GMN	62,056	2,269	64,325	393	22	415	158	103	155
JPN	371,563	165,784	537,347	1,699	810	2,509	219	205	214
FRA	45,739	2,268	48,007	278	18	296	165	126	162
SPN	6,979	0	6,979	37	0	37	189		189
CHN	112,487	12,929	125,416	585	70	655	192	185	191
Total	598,824	183,250	782,074	2,992	920	3,912	200	199	200

The popularity of the Japanese and Chinese languages is further evidenced by the number of students taking these languages at the college level. Figure 3 shows the number of students who enrolled in second foreign language courses that were offered by the Language Education Institute of Seoul National University in Spring, Summer, and Fall of the years 2003 and 2005. Japanese is by far the most popular, followed by Chinese.

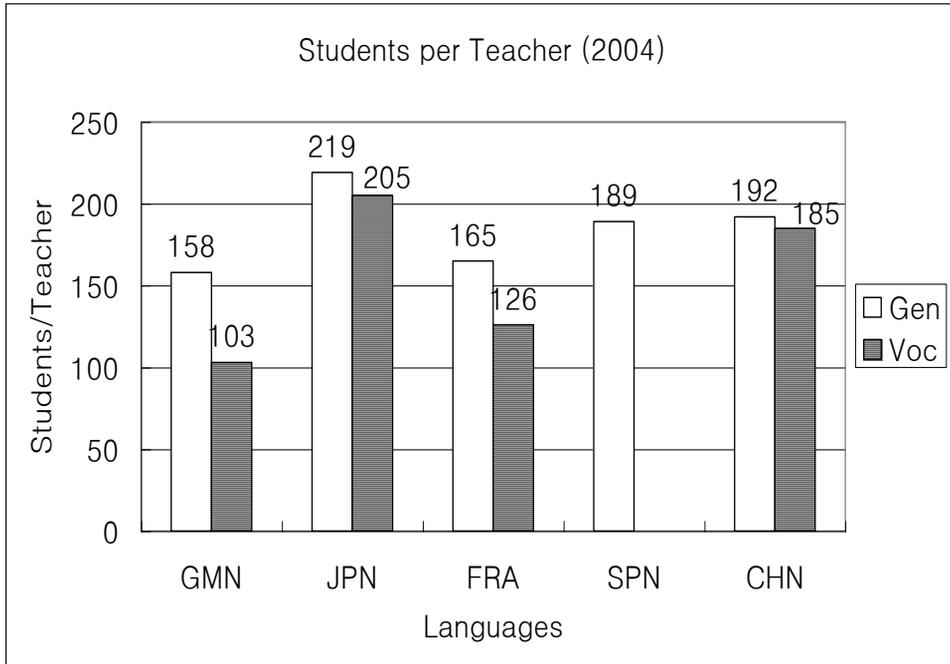
**FIGURE 3**  
**Enrollment in “Second Foreign Language” Classes at Seoul National University**  
**Language Education Institute: Spring, Summer and Fall in 2003 and 2005.**



### 3. The Consequences of the Changes in the Status of “Second Foreign Languages”

One of the most serious consequences of the fall of the German and French languages and the rise of the Japanese and Chinese languages is the oversupply of the two European language teachers and the shortage of the Asian language teachers. Dwindling numbers of students taking German and French reduced these language teachers’ job opportunities, while the increase in the number of students taking Japanese and Chinese necessitated an increase in teachers who could teach the Asian languages. As shown in Figure 4, a Japanese or Chinese teacher teaches much more students than a German or French teacher does.

**FIGURE 4**  
**The Numbers of Students Per Teacher for “Second” Foreign Languages**  
**in General High Schools and Vocational High Schools in 2004.**



In order to solve this oversupply and shortage of second foreign language teachers, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources set up a very “creative” program to convert teachers of the European languages to teachers of the Asian languages. The program, called the “Special Training Course”, was a one year program that lasted for two years from 2001 to 2002. It was an intensive language program, implemented by the College of Education, Seoul National University, sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources. Table 6 shows the details of this program as implemented in 2001 and 2002.

**TABLE 6**  
**The Foreign Language Teacher Conversion Program**  
**of the Ministry of Education: 2001-2002**

Year	Total Trainees	Offered Courses	Trainees in each course	German teachers	French teachers	Hours of training	Overseas training
2001	72	Japanese	41	22	19	1,268	4 weeks
		Chinese	31	18	13		
2002	96	Japanese	55	21	34	1,310	4 weeks
		Chinese	41	23	18		

As this type of special training program demonstrates, the status of German and French language education is grim, and its future is not bright. As the number of German and French language teachers newly employed is almost none, the departments of German language education and French language education at colleges of education are suffering from a lack of students who want to major in those areas.

Although Japanese and Chinese are not so severely affected as German or French, the Asian languages are not flourishing as much as they were before, as the 7<sup>th</sup> Curriculum limits “second foreign languages” in the optional course category for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. While English language education has become increasingly important in both the public and private education sectors, “second foreign language” education is not receiving as much attention as it deserves. Among the students who took the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) in 2001, which is the national college entrance examination, only 28.1% took the test in a second foreign language (The Hangyoreh, 2001).

## V. CONCLUSION

The so-called “second foreign language” education has been dwindling in Korea, because of curriculum constraint and the increasing interest in English. Unless some drastic measures are taken by the government, the future of “second foreign language” education is not going to be improved. Considering the fact that internationalization and globalization requires fluent speakers not only of the English language but also of many other important international languages, it is recommended that necessary measures be taken and policies are made to revitalize “second foreign language” education in Korea.

More specifically, increasing the credit hours for “second foreign languages” is necessary (Geun-nim Lee, 2003, p. 56), and national efforts to improve foreign language teaching methods and materials are also required.

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