

# The Korean Writing System: Comparisons with English, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese

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**Title/Theme:** The Korean Writing System: Comparisons with English, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese

**Level:** High school

## **Essential Questions:**

- How do different writing systems around the world work?
- What makes a good or bad writing system?
- How does the Korean writing system work?
- How can we tell by looking whether text is in (modern) Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, or Vietnamese?

## **Learning Objectives:**                      *Students will be able to:*

- Analyze the ways in which different writing systems represent spoken language
- Understand that English spelling is needlessly arbitrary and difficult
- Understand the nature of Chinese characters, and where they are and were used in the world
- Know the history of how the Korean language has been written throughout time
- Understand the distinctive nature of how the modern Korean writing system (hangul) works.
- Identify Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese writing on sight

## **Standards addressed by this lesson:**

- World Languages: Cultures: Analyze and describe relationships among products, practices and perspectives and compare them across cultures.
  - Identify, examine and demonstrate how people meet their basic needs [in this case, writing down information] in different ways
  - Identify, examine and compare products, practices and perspectives of the U.S. and target cultures
  - Recognize and identify instances of when languages and cultures have interacted with, influenced, or changed each other over time
  - Identify and compare variations in products, practices and perspectives among and within target language communities.
  - Solve and complete problems and tasks while taking into consideration diverse cultural perspectives.
- World Languages: Cultures: Experience the target language and cultures(s) and share information and personal reactions with others.
  - Use authentic digital and print media
  - Develop an understanding that people in other cultures might view aspects of U.S. mainstream culture differently than the majority of U.S. residents view them

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- Social Studies: Historical Thinking: Historians develop theses and use evidence to support or refute positions
- Social Studies: Historical Thinking: Historians analyze cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events
- Also focus on: English spelling, critical thinking, global cultural literacy, and reducing ethnocentrism.

### Instructional Activities:

- 1) Warm-up: Understanding the English writing system (and its pluses and minuses).
  - a. Follow the powerpoint slides
  - b. Goals:
    - i. Students understand that the English writing system uses symbols to represent sounds
    - ii. Students understand that English does not do a great job of having symbols represent sounds in a consistent way.
  - c. Slide #1: Title
  - d. Slide #2:
    - i. How do students feel about the English writing system: what is good, bad, confusing, what could be made better, etc.
    - ii. Letters that can make more than one different sound: g, c, x, all the vowels, maybe more
    - iii. Sounds that can be made by more than one letter: /s/ (by “s” or “c”), /z/ (by “z”, “x”, or “s”), etc.
    - iv. Sounds that don’t even get one letter but have to be spelled as “digraphs”: “ng”, “sh”, both pronunciations of “th”, that sound in the middle of “measure” and “treasure”, maybe others.
    - v. In groups or individually, students brainstorm all the different ways the sound /i/ (“ee”) can be spelled (e.g., “ee” in “meet”, “ea” in “meat”, etc.)
  - e. Slide #3: English is inconsistent; there are so many ways to spell the same sound
  - f. Slide #4: The letter “f” sounds like /v/ in the word “of”
  - g. Slide #5: Not only are there multiple ways to spell the same sound, any given spelling could also be several different sounds. Two different issues; both of them cause problems.
  - h. Slide #6: Reviewing how the English writing system represents English words.
    - i. Symbols represent sounds, not meanings.
    - ii. Symbols are written in a line from left to right.
    - iii. Note: the pronunciation symbols used in between slashes are based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (read it as if it were Spanish). For example, /ei/ is the “ay” sound in “day”.

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- 2) Starting at slide #7: Discussion of how Chinese characters work.
  - a. The characters at the top are the Chinese characters that mean “Chinese characters” (first the simplified version, used in modern mainland China, then the traditional version, used in other places)
  - b. The pronunciation underneath (hàn zì, etc.) are how those characters are pronounced in each language.
  - c. Slide #8: Students guess the meanings of the Chinese characters (if they want to)
  - d. Slide #9: The first character means “I”, the second character means “love”, the third character means “you”. It is pronounced “wo ai ni” in Mandarin Chinese.
  - e. Slide #10: in Mandarin, mouth is “kou” and water is “shui”. Saliva is “kou shui”. The next line is “huo shan”. Then “huo shan kou”.
  - f. Slides #11-15: Continue to discuss the characteristics of Chinese characters.
  - g. Slides #16-18: These slides attempt to answer the question “How many Chinese characters are there?”
    - i. For more info see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_characters#Number\\_of\\_characters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_characters#Number_of_characters)
  - h. Slides #17-22: Continue to discuss advantages and disadvantages of a meaning-based writing system like Chinese characters, as opposed to a sound-based system like the Roman alphabet (used in English).
    - i. Goals:
      1. Students analyze and compare how different writing systems work and their relative advantages and disadvantages
      2. Students can analyze why Koreans would choose to transition to a sound-based system.
- 3) Slides #23-27 (Examples of old and modern Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean text):

Goals:

  - a. Familiarize students with the idea that Chinese characters can be used to write languages other than Chinese, just as the Roman alphabet (A, B, C, ...) can be used for many languages.
  - b. Start to introduce what various languages look like written
- 4) Slide #28: Activity in small groups: We have concluded that the English writing system is not perfect. In the 1400s, King Sejong decided that the system then used to write Korean (i.e., Chinese characters) was not good enough and created a new writing system from scratch. If you were going to create a totally new writing system for English, how would it work? Students actually start to plan out the symbols of their new system. This is not just about answering the questions on the powerpoint slide, but about planning a new writing system like King Sejong did in Korea.
  - a. Teacher: circulate and discuss each group’s system with them, along the lines of the questions on the screen. Students can make their system whatever they want it to be, but should make intentional decisions and explain their reasoning. Teacher should challenge students to defend their choices.

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- 5) Slides #29-30 (“Chinese characters to write Korean”): Finish the discussion of why Korean stopped using hanja (Chinese characters) and switched to the new sound-based hangul system.
- a. Review: reasons Koreans would have wanted to switch to hangul (sound-based) over hanja (Chinese characters):
    - i. Huge number of characters to learn [although, they still do learn to read them in Korea, although maybe not to write them]
    - ii. Characters are complex (makes them more difficult to learn, and take longer to write)
    - iii. Low literacy rates (this is probably the biggest reason to change, and is a direct result of (i) & (ii))
    - iv. Inconvenient to look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary (due to number of characters)
  - b. Additional reason hangul is more convenient than hanja (we haven’t yet discussed): the issue of inflection
    - i. In Mandarin Chinese, “one person” (一个人) is “yi ge ren”. “Three people” (三个人) is “san ge ren”. The point is that the word “ren” does not change (inflect) for singular and plural, like most nouns do in English: it’s the same word.
    - ii. In Mandarin Chinese, “I love him” is “wo ai ta”. “He loves me” is “ta ai wo”. The point is that “ai” is the same in both sentences but in English it changes from “love” to “loves” for purely grammatical reasons. This is unnecessarily complicated. (By the way, notice that “ai” and “ta” are the same in both sentences as well.)
    - iii. Main point: a language like Chinese (that doesn’t have a lot of “inflection” changes like the -s and -ed and -ing endings in English) is well suited to using a system based on unchanging characters representing each meaning. If we were going to write English using Chinese characters, either (i) we wouldn’t know whether to pronounce 人 as “person” or “people”, or (ii) we would have to modify the characters in some way to indicate the singular/plural distinction. In Chinese, it is pronounced “ren” either way, and the character looks the same either way. Korean is like English: it has inflection. Japanese is too. In fact, the way Japanese is written is essentially choice (ii) described above: they use the Chinese characters (kanji) for their meaning-based properties, but then add new Japanese symbols for grammar. Like the equivalent of writing “人 s” for “people” and “爱 s” for “loves”.
  - c. Additional reason Chinese characters don’t work as well for non-Chinese languages as they do for Chinese: because they do in fact (at least sometimes) represent the sounds of Chinese, as shown by the bao/pao examples: The right side of these characters contains 包 which is a clue to the pronunciation of the characters. The left side of each character contains a radical – a meaning-based component – that gives a clue to the meaning of the character. For example, 足

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is a foot radical, so 足 plus 包 is a character that means “run” (something you do with your feet) which is pronounced “pao”. 氵 is the water radical, so the second character means “soak” and is pronounced “pao”, etc. (Side note: they are not homophones due to tones – an issue we won’t get into here.)

- 6) Slide #31 (“Writing Korean”): Notice at the top right the two ways of writing the Korean language: the first is the word “hanja” written in hanja. The second is the word “hangul” written in hangul. Goal: students can start to distinguish between the modern Korean writing system (hangul) and Chinese characters.
- 7) Slides #32-39: Continue to introduce how hangul works and how modern Korean writing looks.
- 8) Slides #40-42 (“How to form syllables”):
  - a. We normally think of just writing one letter after (i.e., to the right of) the other, but in fact there are many ways to organize phonetic symbols into syllables, words, and sentences.
  - b. The way Thai does it is interesting and perhaps confusing to English speakers, though by no means unique in the world.
  - c. The way Korean does it is creative, distinctive, elegant, and fascinating. It results in regular, block-like shapes (like Chinese) where each block is a syllable (like Chinese), but instead of the characters being largely meaning-based (sometimes with an imperfect phonetic component) like Chinese characters, hangul blocks are just composed of the sounds of the syllable.
- 9) Slide #43: This is what common, modern Korean text looks like. Now students have seen examples of modern Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. We are ready for the final game.
- 10) “Identify the language” activity:
  - a. Slide #44: rules
    - i. Note: as seen at the beginning of this lesson, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese used to be written using exclusively Chinese characters. At that time, these languages would **not** be distinguishable on sight (except perhaps via intimate knowledge of the actual languages, to recognize usage patterns). But now, it is possible to tell the languages apart based on the script (at least when given a large enough sample of text) because they use different scripts. The only confusing part is that Japanese still uses Chinese characters, but uses them as only one of its 3 writing systems (all of which are used in combination). So if you see hiragana and/or katakana along with the Chinese characters, you know it’s Japanese, and if not, it’s probably Chinese.
  - b. Slides #45-50: First, practice examples with discussion after each one (students saying why they chose what they chose, and hopefully teacher explaining why it is what it is)
    - i. Split into teams
    - ii. Decide as a team what to guess;
  - c. Slides #51-73: Then as a game for points, with discussion after each one as necessary

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- i. Suggested rules: right answers gain points; wrong answers lose points; you can pass if you have no clue; team with most points wins
  - ii. I suggest playing with small whiteboards so all teams can write down their guess and then show the answers at the same time, but other systems could work too
- d. Slides #74-75: Review what you have learned: how to identify these 5 languages.

### **Resources & Materials Required:**

- Powerpoint on screen to guide lesson – attached
- Perhaps: blank paper for students to use to plan their own writing system
- Perhaps: small whiteboards for the game, or (less ideally) they write on scraps of paper and teams send runners up to the front with the answers like at pub trivia (make sure they write team names on all their answer sheets!), or another system for getting guesses from each group (maybe just calling them out out loud, and rotate who says their answer first).