

# Korean beats French

If you could choose to learn a foreign language, which one would it be? And why?

Such choices are usually constrained by what is on offer. However, someone must choose the offerings – e.g., language policy makers around the world have for the past couple of decades decided that English is a must-have first foreign language for anyone and everyone who doesn't speak it as a first language.

Rarely do language students get an actual say in institutional offerings and a current polling initiative by the Student Council at [Zayed University](#) is therefore the more exciting. This internal poll has been running for a couple of days and I can't take my eyes off it: for a sociolinguist this is like Melbourne Cup Day without the hats!

The way the survey was first published a few days ago, the choice was between Chinese, French, German, Italian and Spanish. "Chinese plus the usual choice of European languages" I thought and noticed particularly that none of these languages are widely spoken in the UAE while some of those spoken by large segments of the UAE population such as Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu or Tagalog are absent.

This is not particularly surprising as language learning is often about the desire to reinvent oneself and that desire is crucially influenced by media discourses and these discourses often set up Western identities as the pinnacle of desirability as Kimie Takahashi and I have shown in a study of the Occidental longings of young Japanese women and how they are exploited by the English language teaching industry (available from [our Resources Section](#) (click on "Language learning, gender & identity" > "A passion for English").

محمد إدريس, who blogs on "[Language and Globalization](#)," has a similar, even if somewhat more sinister explanation for [the reasons why learning Spanish has become so popular in Germany](#): he sees Germans' desire to learn Spanish as mindless copying of US tastes and preferences, an acceptance of US hegemony. He argues that learning Spanish is undoubtedly in the interests of US-Americans and so that preference is mediated by Hollywood to the world, even if German foreign language learners would be better served with the languages of neighboring countries such as Czech, French or Polish. So, that's similar to my own observation that there were no regional languages offered in the Zayed University Student Council Poll.

Well, it's not all that simple, at least not here at ZU: after the original poll was published, the members of the Japanese and Korean clubs demanded the inclusion of these languages, and since then Korean had been gaining ground steadily on French, the initial leader, until it drew ahead yesterday.

So, does that invalidate the idea that the desire to learn another language is influenced by hegemonic discourses? It doesn't – it just shows that the center of gravity is shifting. The West is no longer the only source of desirable identities, and particularly cool youth identities, on offer. South Korea has been an exporter of popular melodramas for about a decade and the popularity of Korean youth culture has become known as [Korean Wave](#) or even "Korean Fever" in China and Japan. Little surprise then that this also opens up a market for Korean language teaching!

I'll keep watching that poll – for now, I'm betting on Korean.



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Piller, Ingrid, & Takahashi, Kimie (2006). A passion for English: desire and the language market Aneta Pavlenko. Ed. Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression, and representation. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 59-83