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## Transcultural and Translingual Identities in the United Arab Emirates: Engagement with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean



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### Abstract

As researchers who have collectively spent over two decades living and working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), we have observed a growing interest in East Asian languages and culture amongst Emirati university students, especially with regard to Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Such interest stems from popular culture, soft power, and top-down strategic influence. In a nation dominated by Arabic, as the official language, and English as a lingua franca and a medium of instruction, research has tended to focus on the Arabic-English binary. This article addresses recent calls for deeper investigations into third languages, other than Arabic and English, in the Gulf and their use and effects on transcultural and translingual identities. Through the theoretical framework of the social construction of reality, this article presents data from a case study on language learning preferences and engagement with East Asian languages and culture amongst female Emirati students via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Findings from this study are discussed with implications for ‘third language’ learning, transcultural communication, and language policies in Gulf English-medium universities.

**Keywords:** translingual-transcultural, identity, intercultural learning, higher education, United Arab Emirates

### Introduction

Flying to London from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in April 2024, the first author browsed the ‘new movies’ list on Etihad E-box. Most were American or British-made movies - *Oppenheimer*,

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*The Barbie Movie*, *Wonka*. A rare non-Anglophone film listed in this category was *Past Lives*. In this Korean and English language production, the protagonist, Nora, reflects on her translingual and transcultural identity as a young Korean woman whose family moved to Canada when she was twelve. The film is full of reflections on language(s), culture and identities which flex and morph according to time, space, and interactions. The pace of the movie is slow, and the atmosphere is thoughtful, gentle, and moody. *Past Lives* is just one of many examples of Korean-origin cultural artefacts which have entered global consciousness and lives in the last few decades. The increased popularity of all things Korean is commonly known as ‘The Korean Wave (K-Wave)’ or *Hallyu* in Korean (Hadikin, 2014; Khedun-Burgoine & Kiaer, 2023; Rudiger & Baratta, 2025). The K-Wave, a neologism coined in the 1990s, refers to a range of concepts including K-drama, K-film, K-food, and K-beauty (Khedun-Burgoine & Kiaer, 2023; Lee, 2004). The mushrooming phenomenon of the K-Wave not only affects daily habits, but also the language and linguistic identities (Khedun-Burgoine & Kiaer, 2023) of many young people globally, with the UAE being no exception. Not only Korean, but other East Asian languages such as Japanese have also become popular globally due to cultural interest (Harlock, 2023; Willard & Tariq, 2021). In the case of Japanese, Manga, literature (J-lit), anime, *Kawaii* (cute) characters, and reality TV shows have a major appeal. This is evident at the start of each new semester in UAE university classrooms during ice-breaker activities, when students share their interests with their teachers and new classmates. Such interests often include Korean and/or Japanese language, dramas, books, music, and animation.

A third Asian language which is growing in popularity in the UAE is Chinese (Hopkyns & Wang, 2024). However, for Emirati university students, interest in Chinese tends to be more closely tied to future affordances such as its perceived usefulness for business and jobs (Hopkyns & Wang, 2024). As part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of large-scale Chinese-Gulf projects have been launched in the UAE due to the region’s geopolitically strategic position. Chinese has also increased dramatically in commercial spaces (Gu, 2023) and in a range of educational contexts such as schools and universities (Wang, 2020) with around 54,000 Emirati students learning Chinese as a third language in almost 160 public schools in the UAE (Abdulkader & Hassan, 2022) as well as students learning Chinese through the two Confucius Institutes attached to UAE universities (Hopkyns & Wang, 2024).

In a nation dominated by Arabic as the official language and English as a lingua franca and a medium of instruction, previous applied linguistics research in the region has tended to focus on the Arabic-English binary. This paper addresses recent calls for deeper investigations into third languages, other than Arabic and English. While previous applied linguistics Gulf research has looked at Turkish (Berg, 2020; Hillman, 2023), Chinese (Hopkyns & Wang, 2024) and touched upon Korean (Kocatepe, 2017; van den Hoven & Carroll, 2017), Japanese (Al-Nofaie, 2018; Palfreyman, 2011) and Hindi (Palfreyman, 2011), this paper brings together a focus on the East Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean in relation to their influence on Emirati university students’ translingual and transcultural identities.

The article begins with a brief background to the sociolinguistic setting of the UAE and the growing interest in East Asian languages. The theory of the social construction of reality is then presented in relation to the study. The article goes on to present the study’s case study approach, focusing on language learning preferences and the influence of Chinese, Japanese and Korean on linguistic identities amongst female Emirati students, via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Findings from this study are discussed with implications for ‘third language’ learning, transcultural communication, and language policies in English-medium universities.

### Chinese, Japanese and Korean in the UAE

Linguistic diversity and cultural hybridity are an everyday reality in the UAE, with its multilingual and multicultural population of residents from almost 200 countries (UAE Fact Sheet, 2024). Such

demographic and linguistic diversity relates to the UAE's rapid development after the mid-twentieth century discovery of oil, together with globalization, global English, the internationalization of higher education, and transcultural flows (Pennycook, 2006). The UAE currently has the highest percentage of transnational residents in the Gulf, together with Qatar, at just under 90 percent in both nations (UAE Fact Sheet 2024). Most transnational residents in the UAE are from South Asia and Southeast Asia, with increasing numbers from Northeast Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan due to growing business opportunities and strong relations (Hopkins & Wang, 2024). For example, numbers of Chinese residents in the UAE have risen markedly from 7000 in the year 2000 to an estimated 400,000 in 2022 (Zhang, 2023). Japanese companies are on the rise with 119 new companies registering with the Dubai Chamber of Commerce in 2023 alone, resulting in 310 in total (Khaleej Times, 2024). Such initiatives indicate the growth of Japanese (van den Hoven & Ahmad, 2025): a decade ago in 2014 there were only 3000 Japanese residents in the UAE (de Leon, 2014). Similar patterns are seen in Korean investments with 170 companies and 13,000 Korean transnational residents in the UAE in 2019 (Ahmed, 2019).

### Third Languages in the UAE Linguistic and Semiotic Landscape

After English and Arabic, the most common languages spoken in the UAE are Hindi, Farsi, Urdu, Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, and Tagalog (Hopkins & van den Hoven, 2022a). However, in the UAE's linguistic landscape, English and Arabic dominate with the inclusion of third languages in textual form being relatively rare (Hopkins & van den Hoven 2022a, 2022b). Third languages on signage in public places tend to be strategic in terms of warnings to speech communities which frequent an area, as seen during COVID times with the inclusion of Urdu on social distancing signs at petrol stations on trucking roads and Filipino on signs outside daycare centres (Hopkins & van den Hoven, 2022b). In other cases, third languages such as Chinese and Russian appear on signs in malls and hotels. The inclusion of Chinese symbolizes its growing power in the region via a range of strategic agreements (Bains, 2019; Hopkins & Wang, 2024). Chinese appears in 'high profile' spaces such as Dubai's Burj Khalifa skyscraper and major shopping malls and districts (Gu, 2023) as seen in Figure 1a. The use of Russian symbolizes growing numbers of tourists and residents due to less public hostility around the Russian-Ukraine war (Hashmi, 2022) than would be encountered in European countries, amongst other factors.

In the UAE's semiotic landscape, growing interest in Chinese, Korean and Japanese is evident via many concerts and cultural events hosted in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. For example, the 2025 'Year of the Snake' Lunar New Year celebrations made headlines around the globe for their spectacular extravagance (Ali, 2025). Two UAE branches of the Japanese bookstore *Kinokuniya* were launched in 2019 (Hawksley, 2019) with large sections dedicated to Japanese novels by authors including Haruki Murakami, Emi Yagi and Osamu Dazai, as well as Manga comics (e.g. *Sailor Moon*), displays of *Sakura* (Cherry blossom), and *Kawai* (cute) figures (Figure 1b). A similar Korean presence in the semiotic landscape can be seen through events such as the *Korea Festival* (Figure 1c) and K-pop concerts (see Lau, 2022), to mention just a few.

In UAE higher education, English-medium instruction (EMI) dominates, with languages other than English and Arabic mainly absent from official signage (Hopkins, 2025). However, interest in East Asian languages is evidenced by the popular Korean and Japanese university clubs, which have been present for at least a decade (Khondker, 2015) and Confucius Institutes and Chinese centres in universities (Hopkins & Wang, 2024). In these East Asian clubs and centres, students take language courses and participate in cultural practices such as *Hanbok* (traditional Korean dress) and *Hanami* (Japanese Cherry Blossom) festivals on campuses. In addition, students, who often have varied linguistic repertoires, produce translingual handmade notes or signs within educationscapes (Hopkins, 2025). For example, Emirati students decorated a sculpture in a UAE university with messages written in multiple languages and transnational faculty use translanguaging in work-related emails (Hopkins & Sultana, 2024).



**Figure 1 (a–c)** *Chinese, Japanese and Korean in the UAE's Linguistic and Semiotic Landscape.*

### World Englishes Influenced by Chinese, Japanese and Korean

Not only in linguistic and semiotic landscapes of public and semi-public places but also in everyday conversations, East Asian words are becoming part of translingual repertoires and world Englishes. For example, Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer (2023) note that 26 Korean words were added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) in 2023. These include food-related words such as *japchae* (잡채) (sweet potato noodles) and *bulgogi* (불고기) (a beef dish) and kinship terms such as *eonni/unni* (older sister) and *oppa* (older brother). The latter have taken on new meanings related to the K-wave: *unni* now often shows affection rather than respect and is used by anglophone speakers online to 'refer to each other (and idols) and to establish a friendly, playful relationship with one another' (Khedun-Burgoine & Kiaer, 2023). Equally, *oppa* is used for favourite Korean male celebrities, regardless of age. Hybrid words have also entered the OED such as *chimaek* (chicken and beer) which combines *chikin* (from the English word 'chicken') and *maek* (from the Korean word for 'beer'). From the most-viewed K-pop video to date 'Gangnam Style' (2012), to the hugely popular recent Netflix series *Squid Game*, the K-Wave continues to have a global reach and impact which affects language use, to the extent that Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer (2023) suggest we are entering an era of 'World Korean(s)', in some ways similar to 'World Englishes'.

Regarding Japanese, 23 new Japanese words were added to the OED in 2023. These also included food lexicon such as *okonomiyaki* (literally 'what you like to fry', a pancake-like dish), *katsu* (breaded meat or seafood), and *donburi* (rice topped with other ingredients) (Creamer, 2024). Other additions highlight the influence of Japanese creative arts and literature, such as *kintsugi* (the art of repairing broken pottery by filling the cracks with powdered gold) and *isekai* (a genre of fantasy fiction when a character is transported to an unfamiliar world) (Creamer, 2024). Finally, Chinese words recently added to the OED include *guanxi* (personal connections in Chinese business culture), *yum cha* (Cantonese phrase for drinking tea while eating dim sum) and *wā* (哇) ('wow', expressing delight). Especially, the addition of words such as *guanxi* point to connections between business and Chinese, globally.

### Interest in Learning Languages other than English in the UAE

Previous studies in UAE EMI universities have tended to concentrate on the linguistic and cultural influence of English on Emirati translingual identities (Hopkins, 2020; Hopkins & Elyas, 2022; Wyatt

& El Gamal, 2023). Less attention has been given to Emirati university students' interest in and use of 'languages other than English' (LOTE) (Lanvers, 2024), however some previous studies in the Gulf examining language learning and language preferences reveal an interest in Japanese and Korean, amongst other languages. For example, Tariq (2021), who wrote her doctoral thesis on the Hallyu / K-Wave phenomenon in the UAE, found that the Emirati women in particular were fascinated with Korean food, fashion, TV shows and K-pop bands, which in turn led to a desire to learn more Korean. Similarly, van den Hoven and Carroll's (2017) study on Abu Dhabi's rich linguistic context revealed that female Emirati college students used Korean and Konglish (a mix between English and Korean) (Lee, 2023) as part of their linguistic repertoires: participants commented on their initial interest in Korean stemming from enjoying Korean dramas, however, they later incorporated Korean words into everyday dialogue to create circles of belonging. Such 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2004) with Emirati peers sharing the same interest thus became part of their social identities and gave them a sense of belonging within a group. Palfreyman's (2011) study of language learning 'in the wild' (Hillman, 2023), or outside the EMI university context, found that Emirati students were particularly drawn to Japanese due to an interest in Manga comics, as well as to Hindi due to Bollywood movies.

Studies in the neighboring Gulf country, Saudi Arabia, by Al-Nofaie (2018) and Payne and Alman-sour (2014) found that students engaged in informal learning of LOTE. Participants in Al-Nofaie's (2018) study were drawn to Japanese due to anime and culture as well as a feeling that Japanese was more unusual than English, so they felt special or distinct when speaking it. Participants in Payne and Almansour's study (2014) had a wide range of language learning interests, including Japanese and Korean, with some participants learning Korean script and using it to text friends. In the UAE context, Aljanahi (2019) looked at affinity spaces, literacy and identities of male Emirati high schoolers with an intense interest in the Japanese anime series *Dragon Ball Z*. This affinity space was shown to positively affect language development and translingual identities. Although findings from these previous studies indicate Gulf students' interest in Asian languages, the primary focus was either informal language learning in general or spaces of belonging. An exception to this broad focus can be seen in Hillman's (2023) study which specifically looked at Qatari university students' interest in Turkish, as well as Al-Nofaie's (2018) study which focused on two Saudi Arabian children's interest in Japanese. The current study aims to add to the literature base by investigating the influence of the East Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese and Korean on Emirati translingual and transcultural identities.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Construction of Reality and Translingual Identities**

For our study investigating the translingual and transcultural identities of Emirati university students in relation to engagement with Chinese, Japanese and Korean, we use Berger and Luckmann's (1971) theory of 'the social construction of reality' as a framework to explore how transmissions and negotiation of knowledge through social interaction take place across different levels of socialization. Elsewhere (van den Hoven & Hopkyns, 2025) we discuss how Berger and Luckmann's (1971) theory of 'the social construction of reality' can be 'reread' and applied to intercultural communication research in the Gulf with an openness to local lived realities rather than directly applying norms from other centres. Here, social constructionism, as a first-level theory, demonstrates a philosophical logic about how reality can inform methods of how and why to study perspectives of social and intercultural realities (van den Hoven & Hopkyns, 2025). Rather than viewing cultures as something people have, we look at how people use the languages and cultures they know. We recognise that in multilingual contexts such as the UAE, linguistic and cultural identities, along with interest in LOTE, change according to interaction patterns, shifting identity aspects and stages of life. Berger and Luckmann (1971) recognise that knowledge develops dynamically via lifelong social and communicative processes, describing two main stages of socialization: *primary socialization* (communication and learning at home in early childhood) and *secondary socialization* (communication and learning at school, often in relation to teachers and classmates). A third type of socialization which is particularly relevant for developments

in intercultural relations is *tertiary socialization* (Alred & Byram, 2002) which takes place through interactions with people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. In tertiary socialization, learners are surrounded by subjective realities as they interact with other social actors. Here, *alter-nation* can occur, that is, taking on the worldview of another group, akin to brainwashing (Berger & Luckmann, 1971) or more commonly *partial transformation* occurs, which involves linguistic and cultural hybridity due to daily experiences of intercultural encounters (Alred & Byram, 2002). Thus, intercultural encounters can lead to new ways of viewing the world and its phenomena, which sit side by side with existing worldviews or entangle with languages and culture existing from earlier stages of socialization. Emirati university students' interest in and use of LOTE, which influence their translingual and transcultural identities, can be examined in relation to tertiary socialization as part of the social construction of reality. Diverse ways of incorporating 'third languages' (Hopkins & van den Hoven, 2022b) into repertoires through a range of interculturally mediated choices and actions are explored in the current study.

## The Study

The study is part of a larger project looking at language use, attitudes, and identities in an UAE EMI university, including a focus on Chinese in UAE higher education (see Hopkins & Wang, 2024). The current paper focuses on language learning preferences of Emirati university students and the influence of Korean and Japanese on Emirati identities by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: Which languages other than English (LOTE) are Emirati university students interested in learning and why?

RQ2: Do East Asian languages and cultures influence Emirati university students' identities? If so, in which ways?

## Approach

The study takes a case study approach. Characteristic of the case study approach, and to enhance validity and reliability, multiple forms of data were collected: questionnaire responses ( $n = 40$ ), semi-structured interviews of approximately 25 minutes each ( $n = 2$ ), field notes, and visual data on the influence of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean at the university in which the study takes place. Participants in case studies are bound by temporal, geographical, institutional, and other contexts. In our descriptive case study (Yin, 2003), the case includes multiple individuals who are bound by space (a large government university in Abu Dhabi) and time (spring semester 2023). Case studies allow for the close reality of participants' lived experiences to be explored via 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) which reveals the 'complexity and embeddedness of social truths' (Cohen et al., 2007, 254-256). In addition, the study draws on visual data (photographs) from a walking ethnography of the university social, learning, and online 'educationscape' (Krompák et al. 2022). The pictures presented in this paper were part of a larger corpus of signage and language objects collected from the university as part of a larger study looking at transnational university educationscapes.

## Participants

The 40 questionnaire respondents were female second-year undergraduate students taking mandatory English courses at a large government university in Abu Dhabi (Table 1). They were all female due to the first author only having access to classes on the female side of the campus at the time of the study. The students were aged between 19 and 24, and all named Arabic as their first language and English as their second language.

**Table 1** *University Student Questionnaire Respondents*

| Class | Course                     | Number of students | Number of questionnaire respondents |
|-------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1     | English Composition II     | 20                 | 18                                  |
| 2     | English Composition II     | 16                 | 12                                  |
| 3     | English in the professions | 12                 | 10                                  |
| Total |                            | 48                 | 40                                  |

Cluster sampling was used for the questionnaire respondents as the students were already in groups (classes). Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and that data used in the writing up of the study would be anonymised. Participants were also told that they could withdraw from the research at any time. From a total of 48 students present on the day the study was presented, 40 chose to take part. This was a high response rate of approximately 83 percent.

The questionnaire was designed for an earlier related study on Chinese in the UAE (Hopkins & Wang, 2024) but two of the questions had a broader focus on LOTE and attitudes toward LOTE which were relevant to the current study. Thus, the current study analyses responses to these items:

- 1) Which languages are you interested in learning and why?
- 2) Does attraction to cultural aspects of a country inspire you to want to learn the language?

To gain more in-depth responses, particularly related to East Asian languages, volunteers were asked to participate in face-to-face recorded semi-structured interviews, based on the same questions which appeared in the questionnaire but with room for expansion and diversions. Two student interviews were included in the current study, from three interviews conducted overall, due to the interviewees' specific interest in Korean and Japanese. One interviewee was from Class 1 (Table 1) and the other was a friend of a student in Class 2. In this case, purposive and snowball sampling was used as students identified themselves and fellow students who were interested in answering questions on the topic of East Asian languages. Further details about the two student interviewees can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2** *University Student Interviews*

| Pseudonym | Approximate duration | Details                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fatima    | 25 minutes           | Student in Class 1 who opted to take part in the interview instead of completing the questionnaire due to her strong interest in LOTE, especially Japanese      |
| Maryam    | 20 minutes           | Second-year student at the university, majoring in international relations, who wanted to be interviewed as she had an interest in Korean language and cultures |

The questionnaires were distributed to students in their classrooms, and they were given 20 minutes to complete them. An alternative activity was arranged for those who chose not to complete the questionnaire. The interviews took place in the first researcher's office during the university lunch break and were recorded using the voice memo app on her iPhone. The interviews were conducted in English and were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews were sent to the interviewees via email for informant validation.

## Positionality of the Researchers

Especially for qualitative research, it is important to consider researcher positionality and reflexivity. As part of the ‘reflexive turn’ (Blackman, 2007) which takes into consideration researcher bias in terms of origins, biography and locality amongst other factors, researcher reflexivity embraces the human dimensions of all those involved in a study, including researchers themselves (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). As researchers, we recognized our ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ roles (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Rather than aiming to ‘bracket off’ our connection to the topic, we saw our ‘life capital’ (Consoli, 2022), or previous experiences and humanity as enriching the data collection and analysis.

We are both dual citizens of countries other than the UAE. Sarah is a dual citizen of the UK and Canada, and Melanie is a dual citizen of Canada and the Netherlands. This meant we did not share the same nationality and linguistic background as our student participants, giving us outsider roles in this regard. However, as transnationals or ‘global citizens’ due to having lived and worked in multiple countries, we identify as ‘mobile academics’ (van den Hoven & Hopkyns, 2023) rather than being attached to any one country. We have collectively spent over two decades living and working in the UAE (11 years for Sarah and 16 years for Melanie) and have previously lived and worked in Japan (Sarah) and Korea (Melanie). Familiarity, as residents, with the UAE, Japan and Korea gave us insider roles. Especially, in the case of Melanie, after her nine years in Korea, her connection with Korean language and culture continued in the UAE as she spent six years working in an industry which had a large percentage of Korean employees, and for three years managed a team of Korean interpreters.

## Data Analysis

Data were examined via thematic analysis (TA), conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2022) as ‘a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (p. 79). Six stages of coding were used: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and labelling themes, and (6) reporting the data (Braun & Clarke 2022). To authentically represent the data in the participants’ own words, representative quotes were selected to demonstrate nuanced experiences and attitudes.

## Findings

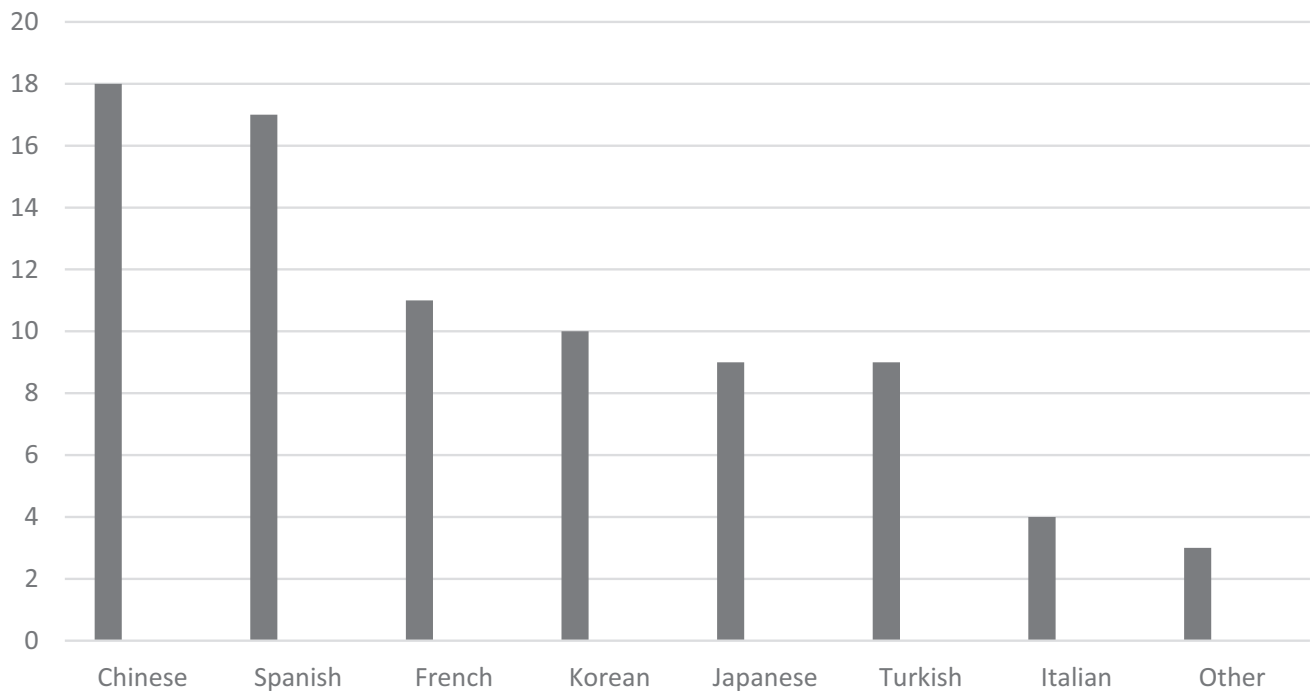
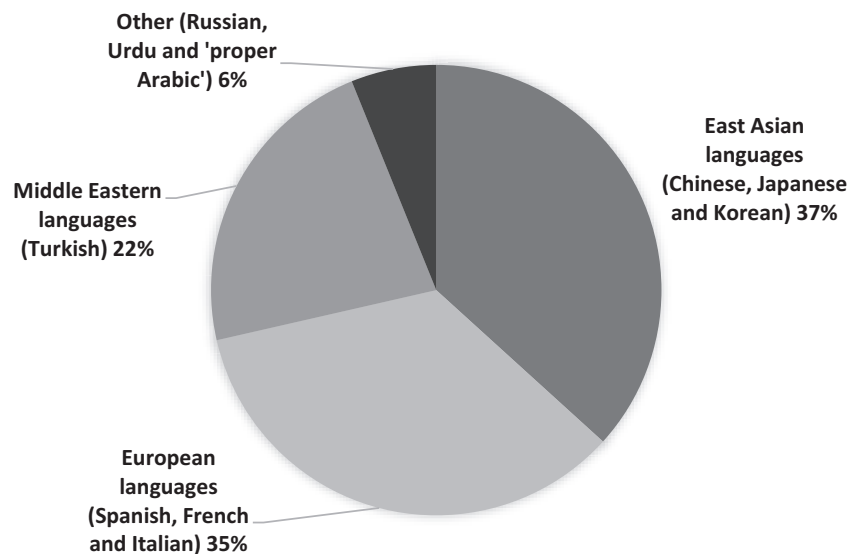
The findings are divided into two subsections which address RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. As thematic analysis was used across the data sets (questionnaire, interview data, linguistic landscape corpus), main themes are identified and presented in the form of charts and summaries.

### RQ1: Interest in Languages other than English (LOTE)

For RQ1, questionnaire participants were asked to state which LOTE they were interested in learning. Since the two interviewees were asked the same question the number of participants responding to this question was 42 in total. As seen in Figure 2, participants showed ample interest in learning LOTE, some listing multiple languages. Collectively, the East Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese and Korean were the most popular LOTE (Figure 3) with European languages (Spanish, French and Italian) also popular choices. The only Middle Eastern languages students showed an interest in were Turkish and ‘proper Arabic’ which refers to modern standard Arabic rather than local Emirati dialects. Finally, Russian and Urdu were mentioned by only one or two students (Figure 3).

Various reasons were given for interest in LOTE. For Japanese and Korean, students’ interest was mainly connected to forms of entertainment and culture, with comments such as, ‘Japanese because

Female Emirati university students' interest in learning languages other than English

**Figure 2** *Interest in Learning Languages other than English.***Figure 3** *Most Popular Languages to Learn Based on Region.*

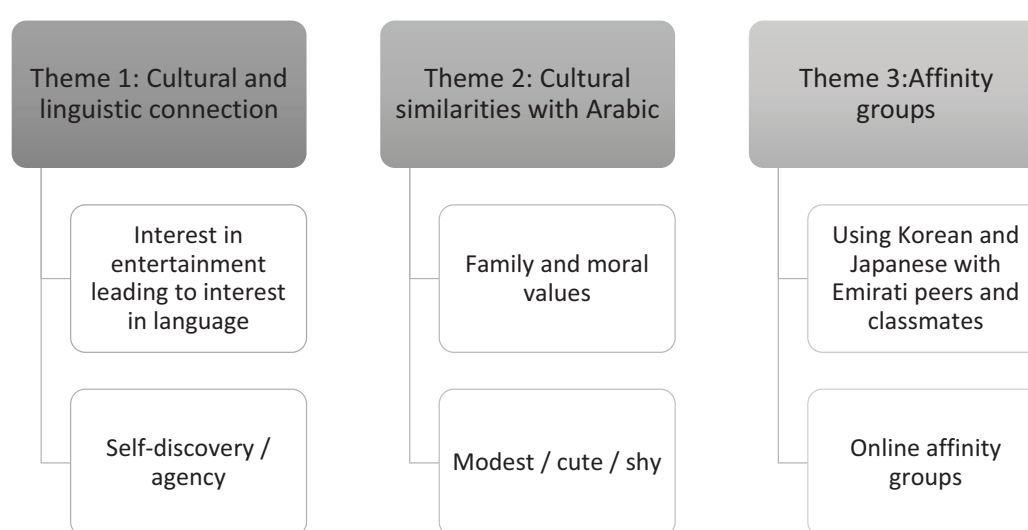
of anime and manga. Korean because of K-dramas and K-pop' (Arwa). Korean was also seen as appealing due to its global presence as stated by Ameera, 'Korean, since it is global', which speaks to the K-Wave's global reach and Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer's (2023) prediction of an era of 'World Korean(s)'.

In the questionnaire and the interviews, students were also asked to comment on how closely they felt language and culture were connected, and whether being interested in a country's culture would lead to interest in the language. The majority of students (96%) stated that language and culture were related.

For example, Samia stated ‘when I think of anime, I can’t think of it in Arabic. It doesn’t fit with other languages because of the way they present it. They go above and beyond’ and Rania stated, ‘It is a huge motivator for attraction to that specific culture which absolutely makes me want to learn their language to fit into their cultural perspective’.

## RQ2: The Influence of Korean and Japanese Languages and Cultures on Emirati University Students’ Identities

The second research question looked more deeply at the influence of East Asian languages and cultures on identities, specifically at Japanese and Korean due to connections with cultural elements from these countries. Two interviews were conducted with Fatima, who had a deep interest in Japanese and Maryam who was intensely interested in Korean (pseudonyms used). Thematic analysis revealed three key themes as seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4** Themes and Sub-themes from the Interviews.

### Theme 1: Cultural and Linguistic Connection

In the interviews with Fatima and Maryam, a common theme was their interest in entertainment which led them to learn Japanese and Korean. Fatima described her interest in J-lit (Extract 1) and Maryam talked about K-drama and variety shows (Extract 2).

#### Extract 1

I mainly wanted to learn Japanese because of the culture and because of the literature they have and I would love to go to Japan one day and interact with the people and understand the culture, like in depth. I like novels by Banana Yoshimoto and Osamu Dazai. I’ve read a lot, I’ve read ‘No Longer Human’, ‘The Flowers of Buffoonery’ and ‘Early Light’. (Fatima)

#### Extract 2

I mainly like K-drama and variety show. I learned Korean by self-study about six months. Then I stopped and now in the university there were ‘Korean 2’, so I registered in the class, and I continued to learn Korean. The variety show I like to watch daily, it’s called ‘Running Man’. I like how in each episode they change the costumes and there’s a game they play. For drama, there are actually a lot of dramas but now I watch, the

most drama I like is ‘Goblin’. It’s really interesting. It’s about, it’s all fiction, it’s not real. There is man, the one is Goblin, I don’t know he can stop the time, he can make a train, he can make it go. It’s all fiction, but in the end, I like the moral. (Maryam)

For both Maryam and Fatima, elements of learner agency and self-discovery made the languages more appealing to learn (Extracts 3 and 4).

### Extract 3

I discovered Japanese by myself, and I chose it over other languages. For example, we have English because we had it in school, and we have it in university. Everyone had to learn it. Not everyone learns Japanese, only people who are interested in it for their own reasons. It’s difficult to learn *Kanji*, ahh, it’s much more difficult than *katakana* and *hiragana* and yes, because the symbols look a bit complicated and they have complicated meanings, some of them and they’re like over a 1000 I think, I’m not sure. I want to learn a lot of languages, but I’m really excited about Japanese. (Fatima)

### Extract 4

With Asian languages, it feels like it’s more difficult to learn because of the writing so it makes you more interested in learning about these languages because they have a different writing system. For example, when I did learn Korean language, I got interested more when I first started because every letter or every three letters together, they make a sound or others make, because of its shape, this letter, because of how it’s written, *yani*, that’s how I make connections. (Maryam)

Wider interest in Japanese and Korean can be seen on the Abu Dhabi campus. For example, festivals held at the university include the Korean Hanbok Festival (Figure 5a) and there is a notable interest in Japanese anime and *kawaii* characters which can be seen on students’ notebooks, pencil cases and backpacks (Figure 5b).



**a**



**b**

**Figure 5** Korean and Japanese Fashion on Campus:  
5a) Hanbok Festival at a UAE University and 5b) Gudetama Backpack.

Specifically in Figure 5b, we see transcultural interests and identities expressed with an Emirati student entering her university classroom dressed in traditional Emirati dress (*abaya* and *shaila*) with a Japanese-style backpack depicting the Sanrio character ‘*Gudetama*’ (ぐでたま), an apathetic anthropomorphic egg-yolk who is perpetually tired. *Gudetama* is part of the *kimo-kawaii* (gross-cute) trend which pushes back against typically cheery and sweet *kawaii* culture and values associated with neo-liberalism such as high productivity (Bonnah, 2018).

## Theme 2: Cultural Similarities with Arabic

When asked why they were interested in Japanese and Korean culture and entertainment, both Fatima and Maryam saw many similarities between Emirati cultural values and those shown in Japanese novels and Korean dramas. Key similarities related to hospitality, family, and societal expectations as seen in Extracts 5 and 6.

### Extract 5

Koreans really care about how they welcome their guests like here in the UAE. It’s the same. Also, they also like to help others like here in the UAE, Emirati citizens like to help others. There are the same cultural values about family too. (Maryam)

### Extract 6

In Japan they have kind of like society standard they have to live up to which I feel like here it’s the same. Society expects things of you and there’s a lot of people who go against that for example but could be shunned, which the Japanese culture has as well. They expect you to work, they expect you to have a family by a certain age so I feel like that’s a similarity they might have. (Fatima)

Similarities between Emiratis, Koreans and Japanese relating to modesty and shyness were also remarked upon by Fatima in Extract 7.

### Extract 7

|               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fatima:       | Modesty as well, we have that in common. One thing I noticed in Japanese and Korean shows that are different than English shows is the modesty and shyness. There’s a lot of modesty. So, like in American TV shows they would be like showing affection way more whereas in Korean and Japanese shows affection is a really big thing. Something as small as holding hands would be something very big. |
| Researcher 1: | I’ve been watching <i>Terrace House</i> recently. It’s a Japanese reality show, I don’t know whether you’ve seen it.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Fatima:       | I’m not familiar with it but it sounds interesting.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Researcher 1: | It’s on Netflix and it’s about these six young people who are co-living. They do have relationships, but they are very modest, but I think if the same programme were set in America...                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Fatima:       | It would be way different                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

## Theme 3: Affinity Groups

A final key theme to emerge from both interviews was the importance of affinity groups /spaces Gee (2004) and communities of practice for engagement and interest in Japanese and Korean. Affinity

groups were often made from a circle of friends, as in Maryam's case (Extract 8) and also wider groups such as Korean language classmates from various parts of the world or those attending J-lit events, such as Banana Yoshimoto's book talk, as mentioned by Fatima (Extract 9).

#### **Extract 8**

My friends are interested in Korean. Me and my friends started to learn Korean together and all my friends like to watch Korean drama. We practice Korean with each other. The Korean class I take there are 15 or 16 students. They are from my university and from other places. There are two from Russia, Malaysia, there were some from India also. (Maryam)

#### **Extract 9**

I got amazing news that the author of *Kitchen* was going to give a talk in Abu Dhabi. I went last week, and it was amazing. They had the talk in Japanese translated into English and Arabic. It was a great event. It was really lovely meeting there, but I completely forgot all the Japanese I could speak when I saw her. For some reason I got too nervous and only said thank you in Japanese, *Arigato*. But my friend had a conversation with her, and Banana asked her if she read it in English, which she did, and then she signed our books. (Fatima)

Affinity groups were not only comprised of peers and classmates but also wider international communities. For example, Fatima explained that she connected with other fans of J-lit through the website 'Good Reads', which guided her choice of new books to read and gave her a forum for sharing her thoughts on J-lit she had read (Extract 10).

#### **Extract 10**

I like 'Good Reads' for getting ideas about Japanese authors and books. You have a virtual bookshelf and can meet others who also like Japanese fiction. I review books and read others' opinions and recommendations there. (Fatima)

Although Maryam mentioned that her Korean teacher was from Korea, mostly Maryam and Fatima used Korean and Japanese with their Emirati friends in the UAE and international affinity groups online. In this sense, they use the languages to suit their own purposes and as part of their everyday lives as Emiratis rather than as a means to assimilate into another culture or communicate with people from the target language group.

### **Discussion**

In a world where English has long been considered the global language (Crystal, 2012) it is perhaps surprising to see such a broad interest in LOTE from Emirati female university students. Although universities in the UAE are dominated by English in terms of EMI courses and English-dominated educationscapes (Hopkins, 2024, 2025), which mirror the dominance of English in wider society's linguistic landscapes (Hopkins & van den Hoven, 2022a), there was a marked interest in learning East Asian languages. For Chinese, this was mainly connected with its perceived importance for the future in terms of it being a powerful language related to business, jobs and the economy. The fact that the UAE government has made strategic efforts to promote Chinese in the domains of commerce and education may also be an underlying reason for its popularity as a third language in the university space (Hopkins & Wang, 2024). However, when discussing cultural interests attached to learning LOTE, Korean and Japanese took center stage. It seems that while students are studying in EMI universities, their hearts are often with languages and cultures that *they* choose and are drawn towards. In relation

to RQ1, although students named a wide range of LOTE, collectively East Asian languages were the most popular, and the reasons for choosing these languages often related to entertainment and cultural phenomena as part of the K-Wave and Manga/J-lit passion. Moreover, most students connected interest in culture with interest in the associated language.

In relation to RQ2, K-wave and manga/J-lit passion can sometimes result in an obsessive interest from fans who reject their own culture in favour of their target one, as reflected in *alternation* described by Berger and Luckmann (1971) in the theory of the social construction of reality. Such obsession, especially in relation to anime and manga is also known as the ‘*otaku* phenomenon’ or ‘*Weeaboo* and *Koreaboo* identities’ for obsessive fans of Japanese and Korean respectively (Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer, 2023). However, in the case of the current study, interest in Korean and Japanese did not result in rejection of Arabic or Emirati identities but rather translingual and transcultural identities, as seen through Maryam and Fatima’s interviews. While Maryam and Fatima were passionate about Korean and Japanese entertainment, culture, and language, they mainly enjoyed these elements with friends and global affinity groups rather than seeking to assimilate into the cultures of these languages. This pattern positively aligns with Willard and Tariq’s (2021) observation that the *otaku* phenomenon rarely applies amongst Emiratis. In Willard and Tariq’s study investigating the Instagram posts and perspectives of 14 Emirati illustrators, anime and manga expressionism was often combined with *khaleeji* (Gulf) attributes and therefore Emiratis localised their Japanese-inspired illustrations to represent transcultural identities. Similarly, the first Emirati manga author, Qais Sedki, used Japanese style in his manga *Gold Ring* but included Emirati cultural content such as falconry (Good, 2009). Here, we see efforts to merge a love of Japanese and Korean culture and language with local values and cultural dynamics. In the current study, sharing an interest in Japanese and Korean led to ‘affinity spaces’ (Gee, 2004) or ‘small cultures’ (Holliday, 2007) being formed: rather than Maryam and Fatima identifying with national cultures, they found they shared a ‘small culture’ with other Emiratis who were interested in Korean and Japanese. This was also the case in van den Hoven and Carroll’s (2017) study on the learning of Korean as well as Willard and Tariq’s (2021) study of Japanese. Through the theoretical lens of the social construction of reality, in the case of students in the study, tertiary socialization reflects ‘partial transformation’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1971) of linguistic and cultural identities whereby students’ interest and use of LOTE merged with languages and culture existing from earlier stages of socialization to create translingual and transcultural social realities.

Finally, the similarities between Emirati values and those of Korea and Japan attracted Maryam and Fatima to entertainment and cultural phenomena from these countries. Key similarities such as family values, modesty and hospitality were seen as compelling, especially when compared with contrasting values shown in Western shows and music. This was voiced by Fatima when comparing Japanese and Korean modesty on reality shows to open displays of affection often seen on similar shows in the USA. This finding reminds us of Tariq’s (2021) findings whereby her Emirati participants commented on the many similarities between Emirati and Korean cultures and how K-drama’s sensitive approaches and ‘cute and shy’ relationships were more fitting with their own values than Hollywood representations.

## Conclusion

Based on the key findings discussed in the previous section, we make two practical recommendations for the inclusion of translingual and transcultural learning in English-medium universities. Firstly, to better harness interest in LOTE, inclusion of LOTE in EMI contexts via the legitimization of translingual and transcultural communication is important. This could take the form of diversifying the representation and presence of third and fourth languages in educationscapes. Although Chinese centres, Japanese clubs, and Korean clubs exist at the university in which the study takes place, their visible presence tends to be restricted to special events, such as the *Lunar New Year Festival*, *Sakura Festival*

and *Hanbok Festival*. In addition, despite language classes in Chinese, Japanese and Korean being popular, they are not credit-bearing. Increasing the presence of LOTE on campus would serve the dual purposes of taking steps toward decolonising the English-dominant space and allowing students' translingual and transcultural identities to reside in the space for increased levels of belonging (Hopkins, 2025). Secondly, inside EMI classrooms, teachers can embrace students' interest in LOTE and associated cultures by encouraging affinity spaces for multimodal and translingual project work. The notion of increased choice and agency in classroom spaces is particularly important in EMI contexts where students have no choice over the official language policies related to medium of instruction. By focusing more on students' interests and enjoyment levels rather than on neoliberal values centered on academic ranking and success in the job market, the soft power of the K-Wave and Manga/J-Lit passion can be used as a motivating language learning tool.

The findings from this study indicate a strong interest in the East Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese and Korean culture and language amongst Emirati university students and demonstrate ways in which these languages interact with translingual and transcultural identities. However, limitations to the study include its small size with only 42 female participants and only two in-depth interviews. We thus call for further investigations into interest in LOTE with mixed-gender and larger participant groups, especially as linguistic and cultural influences in entertainment and media are highly fluid and changeable.

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