

New Year, New Insights: Interpreting the Cultural Nuances of Nowruz and Seollal for Iranian Students Learning Korean

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With proper education, students would be better equipped for life in a more diverse and globally integrated world. To foster intercultural conversation and global citizenship among students, various cultural practices should be brought to their attention, and they should be encouraged to develop respect for these traditions. This study compares the cultural significance, rites, and customs, traditional meals, social interactions, and symbolism of the Iranian New Year (*Nowruz*; نوروز) with those of the Korean New Year (*Seollal*; 설날) to determine whether or not Iranian students could benefit from learning Korean in terms of language acquisition, cultural understanding, and celebratory behavior. The findings shed light on the importance of instituting policies that foster intercultural conversation and including cross-cultural studies in educational programs. Some recommendations include increasing access to multicultural education, teaching languages, sponsoring international and intercultural activities, developing an appreciation of diverse cultures, and educating instructors.

Keywords: New Year celebration, Nowruz, Seollal, Iranian students, Korean language

Introduction

The nexus between language and culture is undeniable in today's interconnected landscape. By disseminating norms, practices, and ideas, culture fosters the development of shared worldviews, and language stands as its foundational component, facilitating the transmission of these traits (Синява, 2020). Indeed, mastering a language is essential for communication, but comprehending the culture that engenders it is of equal, if not greater, significance. True understanding hinges on grasping how the customs and beliefs of a particular culture impart meaning to its members. For effective intercultural communication, general communication abilities must be complemented by this depth of cultural insight (Sheeraz, Kazemian, & Hussain Mahar, 2015).

The importance of language as a channel for passing down norms and beliefs to succeeding generations is accentuated by Emitt and Komesaroff (2003). They stated that the essence of the cultural acquisition lies in adhering to the established norms and values that societies are built upon. Historically, every human society has evolved, producing a shared language and a constellation of shared values. Complications emerge when individuals from one culture attempt to communicate with members of another using their native language constructs (Emitt & Komesaroff, 2003).

Schmidt (2000) highlighted that adapted training programs that bridge cultural gaps can bolster the efficacy of communicators. By molding discussions in domains like world history, politics, and economics to reflect the

backgrounds and inclinations of students, educators can spark an enhanced appreciation for the target culture. Furthermore, exposure to cultural events, encompassing realms like religion, cinema, literature, and particularly festivals, can amplify this appreciation (Getz, 2013). Among these, New Year's celebrations stand out as age-old traditions with roots tracing back thousands of years (Stanley, 2013). The customs, rituals, and performances associated with these festivities echo ancient times, serving as a cultural attraction and a means of unity (Zamani-Farahani, 2013).

Building upon this cultural framework, the study zooms in on the Korean New Year (*Seollal*; 설날) and Iranian New Year (*Nowruz*; نوروز) as pedagogical tools for Iranian students learning Korean. *Seollal*'s profound cultural significance offers a compelling focal point for intercultural exchange. The overarching aim is to provide these students with a unique opportunity to tap into the rich cultural reserve of *Seollal*, thereby enhancing their Korean language fluency and fostering active classroom discussion.

This study not only enriches the current understanding of cross-cultural studies, but also paves the way for future explorations in intercultural communication. Specifically:

1. It puts the spotlight on *Nowruz* and *Seollal*, thereby filling a noticeable gap in the literature that demands a comprehensive comparative examination of these culturally resonant festivities.
2. It provides valuable insights for Iranian students studying Korean by immersing them in the customs, traditions, and symbolic elements tied to *Seollal*.
3. It repeats the imperative of cross-cultural knowledge in intercultural communication by drawing parallels between *Nowruz* and *Seollal*.
4. It contributes to the broader discourse on cultural adaptability and intercultural competence by investigating the cultural nuances of these New Year celebrations.
5. It proposes novel avenues for cross-cultural inquiries, suggesting that expanding this comparative lens to capture other cultural celebrations might provide deeper insights.

The forthcoming sections of this research will delve deeper into the histories, cultures, ceremonies, and traditions associated with *Seollal* and *Nowruz*, followed by a comparative analysis. The concluding segments will amalgamate the findings, emphasize the essence of cross-cultural understanding, and map potential paths for future investigations.

Overview of Korean New Year Rituals and Traditions

Seollal, which means “to be careful and sad”, is a major Lunar-based (Zamani-Farahani, Van Niekerk, & Elaine, 2019) traditional event in Korea (Lee, 2019). This three-day celebration is focused on time spent with loved ones (Yang, 2016). The Korean New Year's greeting, “새해 복 많이 받으세요”, translates to “May you be showered with abundant blessing and good fortune”. According to Korean custom, a *bokjori* (복조리—bamboo strainer used for washing rice before cooking) is purchased on the morning of *Seollal* and hung prominently in the home to bring good fortune and riches. Buying a *bokjori* early in life is thought to bring more prosperity. The next morning of their second day off, they hold rituals honoring their ancestors known as “*Jesa*” (제사). Wearing “*Hanbok*” (한복) is a common way for participants to express respect and keep cultural traditions alive during ceremonies honoring ancestors. The bold hues and sophisticated patterns make it instantly recognizable, and pay respects at a beautifully prepared supper table. Each row and category of food on the table follows strict guidelines. A quick glimpse at the tables set up in this fashion will impress guests, as each item has its designated

spot: meat, fish, fruit, or soup. The reason for this ritual is that the table is set for the ancestors' exact place; a note with the ancestor's names is placed prominently on the table to symbolize their spirit; and the food is served in front of and for the ancestors (Michael et al., 2020). This practice will surely awe anyone who sees the tables set this way.

Moreover, they respect the elderly surviving relatives (many people return to their hometowns to spend the holidays with their extended family); the "*Cheoyongmu*" (처용무) dance is used to display evil spirits and pray for peace to encourage wealth (Zamani-Farahani et al., 2019). Pan-fried dishes, skewered meat and vegetables, traditional desserts, and fresh fruits are common. At the same time, "rice cake soup" (떡국) and New Year's vine, which is called "soju" (소주), symbolize hoping for health and longevity in the coming year. Everyone then bows to their elders, who wish them well and, in the case of children, give them money as gifts to teach them the value of saving. This ceremony, called "*sebe*" (세배), is followed by the New Year's meal (Seo-Seok, Yoon-Jung, & Hyun-Ju, 2008). The Seollal is home to a wide variety of age-old pastimes. They engage in activities like "yutnori" (윷놀이) to celebrate the occasion. Throwing sticks and moving tokens following the score separates two teams in this ancient Korean board game (Yang, 2016). At the same time, "Yu" (윷) is a game played with two halves of a wooden board. Do, Gae Geol, Yut, and Mo (for pig, dog, sheep, cow, and horse, respectively) are thrown to the ground, and their value is determined by the number of points earned (Joinau & de Rouville, 2015). Children, teenagers, and even adults can all join in on the fun of the classic game of "Jegichagi" (제기차기), which can be played anywhere. This game aims to kick the "jegi" to stay in the air for as many counts as possible without touching the ground. Plastic jegi are widely available commercially and DIY-style; you only need a coin or binder ring, plastic bags, and twist ties (Kim et al., 2023). Wishing for a fruitful new year as the kite soars into the air and driving away bad vibes by deliberately snatching the kite's line are both possible symbolic meanings of kite flying (Amie, 2014). "Neolttwigi" (널뛰기) is a game that symbolizes the young women of ancient Korea and is played on Seollal. Its origins can be traced back to Koryo (918 C.E.). The see-saw was supposedly invented by two wives who wanted to catch a peek at their husbands behind bars. Another myth is that women first used see-saws to peek outside the confines of their home compounds (Kim, 2016). These activities' Buddhist, Confucian, and Korean ethics foundations are clear.

Nowruz: Customs, Rituals, and Traditions

Nowruz, which translates to "new day", is one of the earliest and longest-standing national and customary celebrations of Aryan (Indo-European) legendary culture, which has lived on in some form or another from antiquity to the present day. Jamshid, the fourth king of the fictitious Pishdadian dynasty, founded it. During the Kushan Empire, the Parthian Empire, and the Sassanid Empire, it was a common national ceremony organized publicly and magnificently by governors (Karimi, 2023). The ancient Zoroastrian religion, which dominated the Persian Empire from the sixth century B.C. until the Arab conquest in the ninth century A.D., inspired the holiday (Sharaby, 2022). The Iranian solar calendar, which tracks the Earth's yearly orbit around the sun, places this event on March 20 and 21. This day celebrates spring's arrival and nature's renewal after the long winter. However, Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Azerbaijan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan celebrate it (Zamani-Farahani et al., 2019).

A ritual cleaning of the home, known as "Khaneh Tekani", begins the preparations a few weeks before the holiday. It is necessary to go shopping for new clothes and flowers to brighten up the place. One's chances of succeeding in life are increased by eating symbolic dishes like "*Reshteh polo*" (rice cooked with noodles and

served with meat), symbolizing good fortune, and “*Sabzi polo Mahi*” (herbed rice with fish), meaning fertility and abundance. It is also traditional to pay respects to departed loved ones by visiting their graves and reciting from the Quran. The night before Nowruz, people gather to celebrate the prefestival of Chahar Shanbeh Suri, also known as the Wednesday Feast. There are typically three bonfires at each location, each reflecting the three highest ideals of Zoroastrian tradition: good thoughts, words, and deeds.

In contrast, unity with Ahura (God) is represented by a single flame. Humans perform a purifying rite by jumping over fires, hoping to be blessed and delivered from their ill fates. It is thought that wishes made on this night will come true, and the evening is marked by the consumption of many sweets and nuts as a gesture of appreciation for the success and happiness of the previous year. Covering oneself in a sheet and running around the streets while smashing spoons to imitate a ghost is another typical practice among young people. The famous troubadour Mir-e-Nowruz (Amoo Norouz or Hadji Firuz) spreads cheer and news of the approaching New Year. In black makeup and a crimson suit, he performs a variety of musical acts, including singing, dancing, and tambourine playing. As part of the Nowruz holiday, the “Tokhm-e Morgh Jangi” (or “Egg-Cracking”) game is played. This game aims to crack your hard-boiled egg against your opponent without breaking yours (Sahraee Juybari & Bozorgian, 2020).

Haft-sin Sofreh, popularly known as the “Seven-Sin Tableau”, is a New Year’s tableau that celebrates seven deadly sins. As Nowruz approaches, this ritual is carried out to ensure that the coming year will bring forth all the good things people desire and ward off any misfortune. The ancient Persian beliefs of the Seven Creations, protected by Seven Holy Immortals, are linked to the significance of seven as a sacred number in Persian culture. The “Haft-sin Sofreh” holiday is essential in bringing loved ones together again and healing rifts within families (Sahraee Juybari & Bozorgian, 2020). Table 1 illustrates the seven items and their symbols.

Table 1

Haft Seen Items and Their Symbols

Item	Symbol	Item	Symbol
Somaq (sumac)	The color of the rising sun, which ultimately triumphs over darkness.	Search (vinegar)	Age & patience
Senjed (Jujube fruit)	Love, affection	Samanoo (sweet pudding)	Sweetness, prosperity, and fruitfulness
Sabzeh (sprouts)	Rebirth, purity, revival, success, elegance	Sib (apple)	Wellness, aromatherapy, and organic appeal
Sir (garlic)	Medicine, good health		
Optional items			
Sekkeh (coin)	Wealth & prosperity	Sonbol (hyacinth)	Beauty and life
Mahi Ghermez (goldfish)	Pisces, the zodiac sign that ends the year, represents the final moments of life.	Tokhmeh Morgh Rangi (painted egg)	Fertility
Sham (candle)	Joy, enthusiasm, and illumination	Shirini (sweets)	Spreading the sweetness
Ayeneh (Mirror)	Creator-honoring, spotless, truthful, enlightening reflection	Esfand (sacred herb)	Protection from harm and a boost to your health
Bowl of water with orange and rose leaf	Earth floating in space	Hafez’s poems collection	

Source: Authors and Zamani-Farahani (2013).

Gifts called “Eydi”, usually money, are passed down from elder relatives to younger ones at a family gathering on the holiday’s eve (Sharaby, 2022). Nowruz lasts 13 days, even though Iranian law only mandates four days off for government workers. In fact, after taking their required four days off for the Nowruz holidays, most employees

take advantage of their legal right to 30 days of earned or privileged leave (Jahromi et al., 2019). “Sizdah Bedar”, which translates to “getting rid of the thirteen”, is celebrated on the 13th day of Nowruz. Many people avoid going indoors on Friday the 13th because they think doing so will bring bad luck (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006). Sizdah is traditionally thrown into moving water to rid oneself of negative energy and keep good fortune (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006; Zamani-Farahani, 2013). The customary greeting on this day is “Sizdah-e toon bedar”, which translates to “May you get rid of the thirteen, your enemies be displaced, and your happiness increase a hundredfold”.

Nowruz represents the Iranian people, their rich cultural heritage, and their shared values and commitment to one another. There is an emphasis on “family values”, “togetherness”, and “rebirth”. To better their language learning experience and have a deeper understanding of both cultures, Iranian students can benefit from familiarity with the traditions and customs of Nowruz and identify similarities to the cultural practices related to the Korean New Year.

Iranian students might gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of Seollal by making connections between that holiday and their New Year’s celebration (Nowruz).

Seollal vs. Nowruz and Implications for Iranian Students Learning Korean

Table 2

Key Features of New Year in Korea and Iran

	Korea	Iran
Date/Duration	It begins on the 15th of the eighth lunar month (late January or early February, depending on the year) and continues for three days.	It starts on March 21 and continues for 13 days.
Name of New Year	Seollal	Nowruz
Meaning	Be careful and sadness	New day
Calendar	Lunar	Solar
Religion base	Buddhist, Confucian	Zoroastrian, Muslim, and local folk tradition
Unique activities/values	This celebration ranks high among Korea’s annual events. On New Year’s Eve, Koreans traditionally wear traditional clothes (hanbok), honor their ancestors and older living relatives (many returns to their hometowns to spend the holidays with their extended families), perform ancestral rites, and the traditional bow called sebae. People enjoy folk games, eating traditional meals, exchanging gifts, and listening to folk tales as they pay their respects. Folk villages (Namsangol Hanok), amusement parks, and palaces (including Gyeongbokgung and Changdeokgung) also host traditional Korean festivities.	At least 5,000 years have passed since the first celebrations, making this the longest New Year’s celebration in history. Many traditional rituals are carried out in the lead-up to and after Nowruz, including those involving Amoo Norouz or Hadji Firuz (the Persian Troubadour & Santa Claus) and the setting up of the Haft Sin Table. Cultural variety and camaraderie between people of different groups are bolstered by Nowruz’s emphasis on ideals like peace and solidarity between generations and within families and reconciliation and neighborliness. Cleaning the house, paying respect to one’s elders and family members, getting new clothes, giving money to one’s children, and eating a festive feast are all part of the festivities. Chahar Shanbeh Suri is a pre-event held on the eve of the Wednesday before Nowruz on the last Tuesday evening of the year. People take part in a cleansing rite by jumping over fires, which is believed to bring good luck and rid them of ill effects. Sizdah Bedar is a post-event where people go out for enjoyment, typically by going on a picnic to avoid the bad luck associated with the thirteenth day of the holiday. Iranians’ welcome visitors (often close family and friends) to their homes the evening before Nowruz.

Source: Author based on the literature.

Seollal and Nowruz are huge cultural festivals to usher in the new year. Despite the obvious differences in geography and culture, some fascinating parallels and contrasts exist. Table 2 represents the key features of the

New Year in Korea and Iran.

The following are some similarities between these festivals: (a) Family gathering: Seollal and Nowruz are times for families to remember and appreciate their ancestry; (b) Ancestral rituals: Seollal and Nowruz include rituals and practices to honor ancestors, highlighting the importance of family and heritage; (c) Traditional clothes: Iranians and Koreans celebrate the New Year by donning their national dress, a gesture of pride in and identification with the rich traditions and customs associated with the holiday; (e) The symbolism of renewal: New beginnings, rejuvenation, and the expectation of a fruitful year are all represented in the symbolic meanings of Seollal and Nowruz. They are united in pursuing happiness, success, and change for the better; and (f) Cultural traditions and foods: Seollal and Nowruz are celebrated with distinct customs and delicacies. However, there are also some key differences:

1. The Lunar calendar vs. the Solar one: Seollal is based on the lunar calendar and coincides with the agricultural and lunar cycles to mark the change from one year to the next. The tides of time are represented symbolically by the moon's connection to Seollal. It often occurs in late January or early February. However, according to the solar calendar, the day of the spring equinox, the rejuvenation of nature, and the triumph of light over darkness as the Earth moves closer to the sun, it occurs on average on March 21.

2. Religious significance: Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion, is where the concept of good and evil and the worship of Ahura Mazda, the ultimate deity, originated, as does Nowruz. Zoroastrian influences on Nowruz include the celebration of fire, representing divine light and purity in Zoroastrianism.

Celebrants start bonfires at Nowruz's Festival of Fire (Chaharshanbe Suri) to avoid bad luck by jumping over them. The eternal struggle between good and evil and the importance of truth and justice are important spiritual themes in Zoroastrianism. These religious underpinnings give the Haft Seen table and Nowruz their symbolic connotations. Although modern Seollal is more concerned with cultural and familial traditions than religious observances, the festival's historical ties to Buddhism have influenced certain event features: (a) Ancestral rites: Seollal includes ancestral, which entails paying respects to deceased ancestors and having close ties to Buddhism; (b) Buddhist Temple Visi: Some Koreans may travel to Buddhist temples during Seollal to participate in religious rites and receive blessings; and (c) Filial piety: Seollal festivities revolve around filial piety and reverence for elders, values rooted in Buddhist and Confucian teachings. These principles align with Buddhist teachings about respecting and caring for one's family tree.

3. Timing and season: Seollal, which ushers in the lunar new year, occurs in late January or mid-February. However, the entrance of spring and the renewal of nature are celebrated at Nowruz, which is observed on the vernal equinox.

4. Cultural influences: The Confucian principles and Korean indigenous traditions that inform Seollal contrast with the Zoroastrian and Persian heritage that inform Nowruz. Their unique cultural contexts shape each holiday's traditions, rituals, and symbolic significance.

5. Duration: Seollal lasts for three days on average, while Nowruz lasts for 13. Festivals have different atmospheres and customs since they last for a long time.

The implications of this comparative study go far beyond the realm of language learning, touching on issues of cultural awareness, identity formation, and effective cross-cultural communication. Iranian students can improve their language abilities and classroom involvement by studying the similarities and contrasts between these events. Students can practice and improve their Korean language skills by having conversation themes

(traditional rituals and holidays) available. Intercultural communication skills can be developed through classroom instruction incorporating real-world exercises like role plays and talks (Schmidt, 2000). By comparing and contrasting the two cultures, students develop cultural sensitivity and understanding that will serve them well in future interactions with Korean speakers. Iranian students will have a leg up on the competition regarding discussions, presentations, and group projects centered on the Lunar New Year in Korea. They bring valuable life experiences and cultural insights to the classroom that benefit everyone. Iranian students can apply what they have learned about Iranian New Year rituals and vocabulary to the context of the Korean celebration due to the many shared similarities between the two celebrations. They can use their prior knowledge and experience with the target language to make connections, draw parallels, and advance their learning. A common awareness of different viewpoints and beliefs facilitates effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration. Cultural savvy is a must in today's globalized world, and this helps students acquire it. It prepares them to speak effectively with people from different backgrounds and develop true connections with them in various social settings.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Through a comparison of their histories, cultural significance, rituals and customs, traditional meals, social interactions, and symbolic meanings, this study has investigated the Nowruz and the Seollal. The benefits of learning Korean for Iranian students in terms of language learning, cultural awareness, and celebratory behavior have been illuminated by comparing and contrasting these two festivities. This research shows how teaching students about other cultures might help them communicate with one another and develop a sense of global citizenship. The results highlight the importance of incorporating cross-cultural studies into academic curricula and creating policies that promote cultural interaction and understanding.

Implications for schools and policymakers who want to improve students' linguistic abilities, cultural understanding, and intergroup communication are as follows:

Intercultural education: Institutions of higher learning should prioritize intercultural education by integrating studies of other cultures, such as Nowruz and Seollal, into existing courses of study. When different cultures are brought together, kids can learn to understand and communicate with people from all walks of life.

Language learning programs: Agendas for teaching languages should emphasize the cultural components of learning a new language. Students can learn more about the cultural traditions and customs of the Iranian New Year of Nowruz and the Korean Lunar New Year of Seollal through resources, materials, and language activities linked to these holidays.

Cultural exchanges and events: Iranian students learning Korean can benefit greatly from the chances provided by cultural exchanges and events that bring together the Iranian and Korean populations. Stronger cultural bonds are fostered as participants in these exchanges gain linguistic and interpersonal benefits from their interactions from various cultural backgrounds.

Training and assistance for educators: Instructors facilitating language and cultural education must obtain training and assistance to include comparative cultural studies in their classes properly. They can better involve their students in conversations and activities relating to Nowruz, Seollal, and other cultural festivities if they can access credible materials, lesson plans, and professional development opportunities.

Celebrating cultural diversity: Multicultural events can be held at schools to honor various ethnic celebrations, such as Nowruz, Seollal, and others. Through these activities, we aim to instill in our pupils a sense

of community and an appreciation for the richness that cultural variety brings to our school.

By implementing these policy implications, educational institutions and policymakers can foster students' cultural awareness, language development, and intercultural communication. This method helps create a more accepting culture of cultural differences while better preparing pupils to succeed worldwide.

While the findings of this study have important implications for curriculum development and educational policy, they also have some limitations that should be considered when considering the impact of cultural comparison on language learning, cultural knowledge, and celebratory behavior among Iranian students studying Korean. According to the study, contrasting New Year celebrations significantly affected Iranian students studying Korean. The views of other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and community members, were not thoroughly investigated. Future studies could include more people in their samples to fully understand the ramifications. Further research into the role of cultural integration and its effects on language learning, self-perception, and acculturation processes among Iranian students learning Korean could provide interesting insights. Future research could also focus on comparing different New Year's celebrations to determine which, if any, are most helpful in the classroom.

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