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English Education in North Korea: A Peak into the Unknown

Robert J. Fouser  
rjfouser@msg.biglobe.ne.jp

### Introduction

#### Caveats

- Knowledge about North Korea is scarce and biased
- Internal Differences: P'yongyang versus the provinces

#### Research Questions

- Why do North Koreans learn English?
- How does the lack of authentic material, contact with English speakers, and native-speaker teachers affect English education?
- What does English education say about the rest of North Korean society?

### Historical and Social Context

#### State Ideology and Language Policy

- North Korea: rigid, clear, focused
- South Korea: weak, confused, changeable

#### History of English Education in North Korea

- Anti-English period (1945-1964): no English education; Russian dominant foreign language.
- Reconciliation period (1964-1985): English taught as a second foreign language, gradually begins to displace Russian; Chinese characters introduced as a subject in 1968; political balance between Soviet Union and China and participation in non-aligned movement.
- Growth period (1986-2000): English replaces Russian as first foreign language with fall of the Soviet Union; experiment in elementary school English education; Chinese and Japanese becomes important second foreign language.
- Boom period? (2000-?): English proficiency linked to economic development; growing popularity of English among elite in P'yongyang.

### The School System

#### Elementary and Secondary (see Figure 1)

- North Korea: 4-6; 11 years of school (kindergarten +10) compulsory since 1975; foreign language secondary schools (6 years) in major cities; all education state run and provided for free.
- South Korea: 6-3-3, 9 years of school compulsory in stages from 1985 to 2002; foreign language high schools (English, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish, French, Arabic) in major cities; mixture of state and private education.

## Higher Education

- North Korea: one prestigious comprehensive four-year university (Kim Il Sung University, 16,000 students, 3,000 professors and researchers), prestigious and other "higher learning institutions" (单科大学) and "higher specialized schools" (高等专门学校); one foreign language college (P'yongyang Foreign Language College: 5 years, 19 languages).
- South Korea: several prestigious and many less-prestigious four-year comprehensive universities, and two-year colleges; two foreign-language universities (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies; Pusan University of Foreign Studies).

**English in the Curriculum** (see Figures 2-4)

- More hours for English and Chinese classics in North Korea than in South Korea.
- Number of hours devoted to English has increased steadily since the 1980s.
- Elementary School English education was required in Grade 4 (last grade) of elementary school from 1986-1992; dropped because of difficulty finding qualified teachers as economic crisis worsened (Park, et al. 2000).
- English and Chinese classics (Kanbun) are the only foreign languages offered in regular secondary schools; Chinese classics focuses on teaching Chinese characters and textual analysis.

## Textbooks

### General

- British English, American English taught as part of "knowing the enemy"
- Low quality paper and printing
- No mention of audio-visual or auxiliary materials in texts

### Elementary School Book (Grade 4) (see Appendix 1)

- Alphabet taught before anything else
- Reading and language manipulation dominate

### Secondary School Books (see Appendix 2)

- Reading passages are considerably longer in South Korean textbooks; SK high school Grade 1 books have an average of 1,679 versus 1,125 for NK secondary Grade 6 books.
- Influences: grammar-translation, audio-lingual, oral method
- Activities: repetition, translation, manipulation, writing, copying
- Contents: North Korea centered, political, related to daily life

### University

- Some British materials and magazines; most dictionaries copies of South Korean dictionaries; largest North Korean English-Korean dictionary has 30,000 words, English majors have controlled access to English-language films.

## Teacher Development

### Teachers' Colleges

- Two teachers' colleges for each province (11 provinces +2 = 24); distance and night school to train teachers when teachers are in short supply.
- Kim Hyong-jik College of Education founded in 1947 (8,000 students); P'yongyang Foreign Language College of Education specializes in foreign language education only.

## University Entrance Examination

- Only about 10-15% of students go to university; entrance to university is officially merit-based, but is often given as a reward for political loyalty.
- Subjects: "Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il Revolutionary History," Math, Physics, Chemistry, Korean, English, (Physical Education, interview); first subject has most weight.
- Format of English exam: 60 minutes, three questions (grammar, writing words, writing sentences, translation).
- Time Line: "Pre-Exam" in November/December; "Main Exam" in February; new semester begins in April.
- Regional and local committees nominated candidates to take "Main Exam" based on results of "Pre-Exam."

## Proficiency Levels and Use of English

- English careers: diplomacy, translation/interpretation, technology (?), business (?).
- English TV Program "TV English" (10 minutes every Sunday since August 2000); English instruction on TV began in 1980s; first reported in South Korea in 1993.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

### Learning from North Korea?

- The good: focused, specialized, economical
- The bad: political, closed, elitist
- North Korea as a conservative Korean society; South Korea as an experiment

### Future Directions

- October 2000: Kim Jong Il asks Madeleine Albright to send English teachers from the United States.
- Foreign Exchange: training in English and "global markets" at Portland State University from fall, 2001 (see Appendix 3)
- Native-speaker teachers: three British teachers went to North Korea in fall of 2000; American teachers from Portland State University to teach at Kim Il Sung University from fall 2001.
- Manchuria, Kim Il Sung, Park Chong-hee, and Kim Jong Il: toward a state-centered export economy? Bakumatsu or Late East Germany?

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Websites (mostly in Korean):

Chosun Ilbo: <http://nk.chosun.com/> (also English)

JoongAng Ilbo: <http://nk.joins.com/>

Korea Institute for National Reunification: <http://www.kinu.or.kr/>

Ministry for National Reunification Resources: <http://www.unikorea.net/>

North Korean Educational Policy: <http://home.hanmir.com/~uri1004/2dan-13.htm>

Yonhap News Agency: <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/services/2200000000.html>