

Unveiling Revised North Korean English Textbooks: Language, Ideology, and Internationalisation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the visual and textual representations of three revised national junior middle English textbooks as part of Kim Jong Un's educational reform and aims to answer three questions: To what extent have the revised English textbooks i) fulfilled their proposed goal of improving North Koreans' practical English skills? ii) remained ideologically driven propaganda tools and iii) how the internationalisation of English is presented in these textbooks. The results indicate that these textbooks powerfully reinforce the notion of the superiority of North Korea and promote the cult system of the Kims. The textbooks are highly localised and absent of international content. This study highlights that North Korean English textbooks are not designed to teach international communication in English but to equip students with certainty about the superior status of North Korea. Although this study focuses on North Korea, it can prompt a critical re-examination of the biases contained in international English textbooks, which sensationalise a "bright" view of Western societies.

Keywords: North Korea; English education; English textbooks; internationalisation; ideology

INTRODUCTION

In North Korea, English education has risen to new importance under Kim Jong Un motivated by the regime's awareness of the critical role that English plays in the world¹. The increased status of English education is evident in the complete removal of Russian from foreign language education (Kang, 2019). Once considered "the language of the big brother", Russian was the most important and prestigious foreign language in North Korea. However, under Kim Jong Un's education reforms, from 2013, English has become the only foreign language to be studied at the primary and secondary levels. English education has now become compulsory from year four of primary school. The total amount of time devoted to English education in high schools is greater than the time spent on Korean language education.

Although English is strongly emphasised in education, for ordinary North Koreans, the chances of speaking and using English outside of the classroom are almost non-existent. English loan words or expressions are rarely used in the media (Jun, 1988) and most North Koreans do not have the opportunity to meet "outsiders" who speak English. Thus, it is not inaccurate to say that the only exposure to the English language for an overwhelming majority of North Koreans are English classes and English textbooks. These are the only references available and the only tools via which international information can be accessed.

Previous studies examining North Korean English textbooks under the two previous leaders found that they were heavily ideologically driven and explicitly contained distorted and hostile views of Western countries and South Korea (Lee, 2010). They were generally not useful as a tool to learn practical English skills (Baik, 1995; Song, 2002). However, a handful of studies of the newly revised books report that substantial changes have been made in content and in pedagogical approaches. For example, reading and writing focused activities have given way to a communicative teaching approach (Hong & Kim, 2019; Yoo & Kim, 2018).

English educators, as a whole, acknowledge the critical role that English plays as an international lingua franca. Improving students' intercultural communication skills has been the main focus of English language teaching in recent years (Awada, 2021; Matsuda, 2012; McKay, 2002; Miauw & Guo, 2021; Sharifian, 2009). However, the extent and ways that Kim Jong Un's emphasis on English proficiency will embrace these goals and how they are reflected in the newly revised textbooks is unknown. The present study aims to fill this gap by addressing three main questions.

- i) To what extent have the revised English textbooks fulfilled their proposed goal of improving North Koreans' practical English skills?
- ii) To what extent and in what ways do these English textbooks reflect the political ideologies of North Korea?
- iii) To what extent have these textbooks been internationalised in their content?

In order to address these questions, a text and visual analysis approach is employed. It is also believed that examining these revised English textbooks is one of few windows available for us to understand English language education in this very secretive country. It has to be acknowledged that absolute objectivity is difficult to achieve because the interpretation of these books by the authors may be unconsciously constrained by prolonged exposure to Western media and its characterisation of North Korea.

ENGLISH EDUCATION IN NORTH KOREA: REVOLUTION FOR OUR COUNTRY

The primary goal of education in North Korea is to provide a valuable resource for contributing to the creation of a strong socialist nation, enabling citizens to become revolutionary members of society ready to fight for their country. English language education is aimed explicitly at revolutionising the country. The purposes of education overall in North Korea are largely driven by *Juche* ideology and learning English helps citizens fulfil their duty to become *Juche* driven individuals. *Juche* is a portmanteau of the Sino-Korean character meaning "master or owner of your own body or whole". *Juche* ideology is largely promoted as a home-grown ideology, although Armstrong (2013) argues that this ruling ideology is a reflection of Stalinism and a mandated aspect of North Korean life. The central philosophical tenet is that everyone has control over their own destiny, and accordingly, people are responsible for and are prime movers in the country's social and economic program. However, only the Kim family has a right to interpret the ideology. The interpretation done by the Kim family elevates Kim Il Sung to a god-like leader, *Suryeong*, and then aims to indoctrinate everyone with the idea that without the *Suryeong's* wise and careful guidance, the country would not survive and would deviate from the path towards its socialist destiny.

Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea, adopted Russian as the first and only foreign language to be taught. As a result, English was only introduced in 1965. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, English became the most important foreign language of North Korea, while Russian was downgraded (Kang, 2019). Kim's regime acknowledged the growing importance of English and added it to the national curriculum beginning in year four of primary school. However, one of the main motivations for adopting English as part of early education was to equip North Koreans to fight against American imperialists, North Korea's chief enemy. North Korean youths should be able to say the following phrases: "Raise your hands" and "We won't shoot if you throw your gun away and surrender" in the enemy's language (Kim, 1995). Therefore, English language education in the Kim Il Sung era provided a vehicle for the expression of hostility toward Japan and the U.S. It was seen as a means of capturing enemy soldiers during battle and winning them over to the North Korean side. English was also considered as an efficient means of spreading the North Korean communist ideology to the rest of the world (Baik, 1995).

Kim Jong Il took power in 1994 and emphasised that secondary education should focus on English language learning to cultivate competent scientists and technologists with excellent international communication skills. He accepted financial and educational support from UNESCO and the U.K. In 2000, the North Korean government agreed to collaborate with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the U.K. on an English language teacher training program which aimed to improve the English competence and teaching ability of the nation's English teachers (Fitzek, 2017).

With Kim Jong Un's rise to power in 2011, the country's education system was reformed, making education mandatory from year 11 to year 12 to improve the quality of education. The revised education plan saw the time spent teaching the four subjects of English, IT, science and technology increased (Cho et al., 2015; Kang, 2019). For example, in 2003, the total hours spent on English instruction per student was approximately 469 hours from primary to senior middle school but in the new education system, this was significantly increased to approximately 787 hours (Kang, 2019, p. 5). In addition, English education became compulsory nationwide in secondary schools with the complete removal of Russian from the school curriculum. English is now the only foreign language taught in primary and secondary schools (Cho et al., 2015).

The strong emphasis on learning the English language came after the disbandment of most of the former communist countries, with the U.S. remaining as one of the strongest superpowers in the world. Despite the emphasis on English education in North Korea, it is widely believed that English education is mainly for the privileged and the quality of public education is so poor that only people with power and money can advance their English skills by resorting to private tutoring (Jung & Lim, 2009).

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF NORTH KOREAN ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS

One of the earliest studies of North Korean English textbooks is Baik's (1995) doctoral thesis. The study compared South Korean English textbooks with North Korean English textbooks and argued that both South and North Korean English textbooks were ideologically laden to sustain the asymmetrical power relations in both societies. Since Baik's study, few Korean scholars have shown interest in studying North Korean English textbooks used in the era of the previous ruler, Kim Jong Il. Park et al. (2001) examined North Korean English textbooks for senior middle schools published in the late 1990s by considering several aspects such as their layout, physical

makeup, aims, content, vocabulary, and structure. They concluded that English was mainly learned as an auxiliary tool to train students to become committed members of North Korea and be ready to help revolutionise the country, but not as a means for international communication. Lee (2007) and Nam (2009) examined North Korea's English textbooks for secondary schools published between 1996 and 2002 under Kim Jong Il's regime. Both studies have made similar discoveries. The books contained distorted views of South Korean society and depicted South Korea as an underdeveloped country full of homeless people on the streets.

More recently, Ahn (2012) examined three junior middle school English textbooks for grades four, five and six, with grades four and five published in 2008 and grade six in 2002. Although Ahn (2012) examined more recently published English textbooks, she made similar claims to the previous studies with the finding that these books were mostly propaganda-filled in nature – focusing on idolising the Kim family and criticising capitalism and Western societies. In addition to this, Jeong (2010) and Lee (2011) examined the vocabulary used in these textbooks published in similar periods and collectively argued that they contained many words related to the core ideology of socialism. What can be noticed from previous studies is that the textbooks were heavily ideologically driven to promote and sustain the current socialist values and system and functioned as a tool to over-idealise the Kim family.

Since the introduction of the revised education system in 2013 under Kim Jong Un's direction, English textbooks have been substantially revised. For example, several structural and physical changes have been found (Yoo & Kim, 2018). While previous textbooks 20nternatio reading and writing skills, the newly revised textbooks integrate the five skills of reading, listening, speaking, writing, and grammar. Hong and Kim (2019) compared six English textbooks published under the regimes of the three different Kims. They argued that the newly revised textbooks include a less explicit 20nternationala of the Kim family with more content related to the daily lives of North Koreans. However, their study mainly focused on the overall comparison of the characteristics of English textbooks published in the different eras. Little has been known as to what extent and in what ways the revised English textbooks still remain ideologically driven propaganda tools that promote the government's hostile view of "Western" countries and South Korea. To what extent have these revised textbooks been 20nternationalized in their content so they can be considered as a door to the rest of the world? This study attempts to fill this critical gap.

METHODOLOGY

The present study examines three textbooks used in three junior middle schools, Books 1, 2 and 3 published by *Oegugmunseo doseochulpansa* (Foreign document book publisher) in *Pyongyang* as can be seen in Table 1. For the first time, textbooks have been referenced from English language teaching books published outside of North Korea including : *English Vocabulary in Use* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *Interchange Student's Book 1* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and so on. These books are for students aged between 11 and 13 years. They were published between 2013 and 2015. These dates are also indicated as the *Juche* years of 102, 103 and 104 respectively (See Figure 1). Figure 1 is the cover page of Book 1 but all three books have the same cover page. The *Juche* calendar is a system of year-numbering used in North Korea. The year 1912 is *Juche* 1, the birth year of Kim Il Sung.

These textbooks were analysed in light of the three research questions, namely: i) to what extent have the revised English textbooks fulfilled their proposed goal of improving North Koreans' practical English skills; ii) to what extent and in what ways do these textbooks reflect the political ideologies of North Korea; and iii) To what extent have these English textbooks been internationalised in their content? To shed light on the aforementioned issues, a rigorous content analysis of visual and textual materials embedded in the textbooks was conducted at three levels: each targeted one of the research questions posed by this study. The first level of content analysis was carried out to identify the ultimate goals of North Korea's English education through inspecting rhetoric and ideological statements manifested in textbook prefaces and units. The second level of analysis was undertaken to detect the extent to which the political agenda of North Korea is depicted in pictorial symbols and linguistic texts of the textbooks. Such analysis could potentially reveal whether these textbooks remain ideologically driven propaganda tools, which promote the government's hostile view of "Western" countries and South Korea, and reinforce the personality cult of the Kim family. Lastly, the degree of internationalisation of the textbooks was scrutinised based on the names and images of characters along with locations mentioned in these textbooks. The results of content analysis are organized around the research questions germane to this study. By juxtaposing previous literature with the findings, the current study strives to provide a nuanced and substantiated insight into the role of North Korean English textbooks as ideologically imbued propaganda tools in foreign language classrooms.

TABLE 1. North Korean English textbooks

JM	Year	Authors	References
Book 1	2013 (<i>Juche</i> 102)	Lee, Myeong Hui,	- <i>English Vocabulary in Use (Elementary)</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2010
		Kim, Ye Hui,	- <i>English (Student's Book)</i> , Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2010
		Choi, Gwang Nam, Park, Cheol Lyong, Lee, Mu Il	- <i>Everyday Mathematics Class 1 (Pupil's Book)</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2009.
Book 2	2014 (<i>Juche</i> 103)	Park, Cheol Lyong,	- <i>English (Student's Book 2)</i> , Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005
		Lee, Myeong Geun,	- <i>English (Student's Book 3)</i> , Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2006.
		Oh, Seon Hae,	- <i>Interchange (Student's Book 1)</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2009.
		Lee, Mu Il	- <i>English Vocabulary in Use (Elementary)</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2010.
Book 3	2015 (<i>Juche</i> 104)	Lee, Yong Cheol,	- <i>Five-minute Activities for Young Learners</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2010.
		Kim, Won Seon,	- <i>Interchange (Student's Book 1)</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2009.
		Hwang, Cheol Jin,	- <i>English Vocabulary in Use (Elementary)</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2010.
		Lee, Mu Il,	- <i>English Grammar in Use</i> , Cambridge University Press, 2004.
		Park, Cheol Lyong	

Albeit the fact that several EFL textbook-related studies were guided by preexisting theoretical or conceptual frameworks, this study made a concerted effort to avoid starting with predetermined expectations of the research findings, underpinned by specific hypotheses or frameworks; rather, it aimed to allow the textbook data per se to come up with dynamic and new discoveries. Thus, the content analysis was undertaken via a line-by-line interpretative examination of political and linguistic ideologies surfaced in visual and textual contents of the North Korean English textbooks. By doing so, this study strived to unlock novel and developing

insights rooted in the ideological representations embedded in the English textbooks in North Korea, where the state exerts a substantial degree of control over all forms of education.

FINDINGS

ENGLISH EDUCATION'S ULTIMATE GOALS FROM THE STATEMENTS FROM TWO KIMS

PREFACES: THE CULT OF PERSONALITY SURROUNDING THE KIM DYNASTY

The prefaces of each of the three books are directives from the leaders. They state that the ultimate purpose of North Korea's English education, which is to improve students' practical English skills as way of proving them to become reliable, revolutionary members of the state, who unquestioningly follow the leadership of Kim Jong Un, build a strong and prosperous nation and publicise the greatness of North Korea to the rest of the world. All prefaces begin with a statement from Kim Jong Il about how, why, and what to learn in English to improve students' practical English skills. They also explicitly include an exhortation to work hard and be loyal to Kim Jong Un and to help build a powerful and advanced nation. Each preface includes expressions like: "a revolutionary and faithful member of the nation", "*mideumjighan yeoggun*" (reliable military forces), "*mideumjighan gidung*" (reliable pillars) and "*apnalui juingong*" (protagonists of the future). In addition, all include the word *junbi* ("get ready") and North Korea is described as *gangseong Joseon* (strong and prosperous Joseon) whereby *Joseon* was the old name for the Korean Peninsula.

As the state leader's opinion is seen as the only legitimate organising principle for people's daily lives, Kim Jong Un's preface to these textbooks is a declaration of the ultimate aim of English education in North Korea. Kim (2010) explains this in the following way:

In an explicit analogy to the human body in *Juche*, the Great Leader is the brain that makes decisions and commands action, the Worker's Party is the nervous system that mediates and maintains equilibrium between the brain and the body, and the people are the bone and muscle that implement the decisions and channel feedback to the Leader.

(Kim, 2010, p. 155)

THE RESPECTED GENERAL KIM JONG UN

Boundless praise for Kim Jong Un randomly occurs throughout the textbooks. For example, Unit 2, Book 1, "Nice to meet you" teaches English phrases that can be used when meeting people for the first time, such as "Where are you from? I am from ...". However, it randomly includes a statement about the great care the students receive from their leader, like "many students are coming to Myohyang mountain camp full of love from our dear leader **Kim Jong Un**". This inclusion is not warranted by the content of the unit, which has no relationship to the *Myohyang* mountain camp or Kim Jong Un.

Furthermore, Unit 1, Book 2 teaches about holidays but most of the holidays mentioned in the unit are related to Kim's family or the communist party. It first teaches the two previous leaders' birthdays (April 15 and February 16), which are known as the "Day of the Sun" and the "Day of the Shining Star". It also asks students to write down the crucial days for "our party" and "our republic".

Unit 8 of this book also includes the random but explicit description of great admiration for Kim Jong Un in a passage in which a boy, Yong Chol, introduces his family and their jobs. Yong Chol ends the passage with the statement, “We are all happy under the warm care of the respected General **Kim Jong Un**” (p. 86). In addition to this, in Unit 6, Book 3, the students are introduced to the usage of “going to be”. The unit contains a reading passage describing the ambitions of three different students. One wants to be a soldier to defend his country, another wants to become a space scientist to advance his country and the final student wants to become a football player to promote his country to the world. The passage also concludes with the statement, “They all want to be true to the *Seongun*-based (military-first) revolutionary leadership of the respected Marshal **Kim Jong Un**”.

PICTORIAL SYMBOLS: PROPAGANDA-LADEN VISUALS

In this section, an examination of the visual text of the cover page and the first page of all three books is presented. All the images used on the first pages of these three books explicitly represent politically laden propagandist visual conventions and reinforce the ideologically driven linguistic text. At first, as can be seen from Figure 1, the cover page of the book depicts a boy from the Korean Children's Union (*Joseon Sonyeondan*) wearing the Union's symbolic red scarf and pin. He is listening to recordings to study English with a picture of an *Eunha Ho* (Galaxy) rocket being launched from the Korean Peninsula on a sparkling globe in the background. The *Eunha Ho* rocket is a North Korean expendable carrier rocket. The *Eunha 3Ho* was launched on December 12, 2012 and it is considered as one of North Korea's earliest successful long-range ballistic missiles (Jang, 2016). The Korean Children's Union is a political organisation linked to the Workers' Party of North Korea. It admits children and pre-teens aged six to fifteen nationwide and teaches them the *Juche* ideology and other fundamental ideologies supporting the North Korean system. The juxtaposed images of a boy studying English by peacefully listening to recordings and the powerful and military *Eunha Ho* rocket being launched from the Korean Peninsula showcase the ideal of a loyal member of the country studying English to establish North Korea as an advanced, superior and powerful nation.

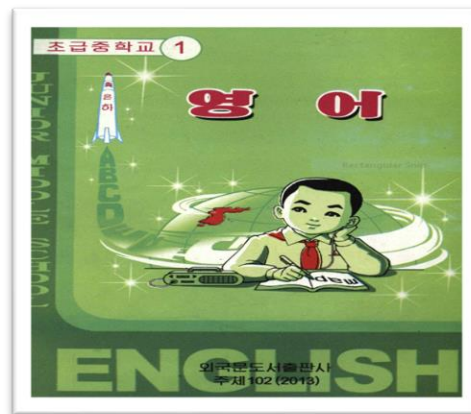


FIGURE 1. JM Book 1, cover page

Next, an examination of the picture on the first page of the three books shows that all the images include the sun radiating glaring rays of light. The “Sun” in North Korea expresses a very significant political agenda and is frequently represented as analogous to the Kim family. The sun

is the centre of the solar system and is an analogy of how a leader is the centre of the country. Most living things depend on the sun for life. It is indispensable to them. Finally, the sun radiates light to the world. It is the supreme symbol that governs and regulates all life in nature. As part of the leadership cult in North Korea, the leaders are often referred to as the “Sun” (Lim, 2015, p. 89) and Kim Il Sung is called the “Sun of the Nation” (Byman & Lind, 2010, p. 52). Kim Il Sung's birthday is dubbed the “Day of the Sun” (*Taeyangjeol*) and the celebration centring on this day is called the “Sun Festival”. Kim Il Sung's revolutionary activities of the mid-1930s were presented in a film entitled, “*The Sun of the Nation*”. In addition to this, the sun is frequently adopted as Kim's image appearing in hagiographies such as “*Our Sun*” (1946)ⁱⁱ and “*The Eternal Sun*” (2002)ⁱⁱⁱ. The place where Kim Il Sung's body is laid to rest is called “*Geumsusan Palace of the Sun*” (*Geumsusan taeyang gungjeon*). As a political leader, he was known as Il Sung, which means “forming the Sun” (Lim, 2015, p. 88). This name was one he chose for himself. His original given name was Seong Ju.

Figure 2 below shows the first page of Book 1. It says, “Let's become true sons and daughters of the respected General **Kim Jong Un!**”. In addition to this phrase promoting loyalty, the visual image reinforces the same message. It shows birds soaring upwards with smiling and joyful children wearing the uniform of Korean Children's Union. These children include a boy holding an aeroplane and a boy brandishing a victory trophy. The boy with the aeroplane symbolises the progressiveness of North Korean children, while the boy with the trophy represents the superior and advanced quality of a nation which can nurture and develop the superior talent of its children who will lead the country to triumph. In addition, a girl playing the accordion may suggest the public's easy access to high-quality education. The accordion is considered a “people's instrument” and is one of the most popular musical instruments in North Korea. All teachers are required to learn how to play the accordion and to teach a song titled “*We have nothing to envy in the world*”^{iv} (*Sesang buleom eobseola*)” (Demick, 2015).



FIGURE 2. JM Book 1 p. 1.

The images of the children are set against a background depicting the grandeur of *Mangyongdae Children's Palace* with an illuminating sun. *Mangyongdae Children's Palace* is the largest palace in North Korea dedicated to after school activities for children and supports the

motto “Children are the king of the country” (Fincher, 2010). It is an institution that intensively nurtures talent in the arts and sports and is often presented as the place to showcase the superiority of the North Korean system. By using these images of such a prominent site against the backdrop of the rising sun with its illuminating sunlight for the book covers creates a metaphor embodying the glorified and supported status of young talent in North Korea. *Mangyongdae* is where Kim Il Sung spent his childhood and also represents the origins of the Kim family. The family lived in *Mangyongdae* from the time of Kim Il Sung’s great grandfather. In addition, the name of the leader, Kim Jong Un, is presented in bold print in the picture. It is common formatting practice for all North Korean publications to give special graphic treatment to the Kims, with their names either appearing in bold font, highlighted in a different colour or printed in a bigger sized font.

In sum, the picture used on the first page of Book 1 cultivates the image that under the sun’s rays and the warm guidance of the supreme leader, children in North Korea are happy and triumphant in the world, taking full advantage of the superior system that the country offers. Therefore, North Korean children should do their best to become loyal members of a country led by a supreme leader like Kim Jong Un, who has a prophetic vision for the nation’s future.

Next, Figure 3 shows the first page of Book 2. It contains the phrase, “We are the happiest in the world”, with an image showing children in a carriage drawn by two *cheonlimas* (flying horses) in a field full of sunflowers blossoming under the sun’s rays. A *cheonlima*, literally a one thousand-*ri* (unit of length in Korean) horse, is a mythical winged horse from the Chinese classics. It means “a horse that travels 1000 *ri* (approximately 400km) a day”. It symbolises the country’s great strength and rapid economic development. In addition, the Korean phrase, “May you walk on flower-filled roads” is used when wishing people a prosperous and peaceful life. Thus, the image of the children looking upward from a carriage drawn by two *cheonlimas* in a field full of flowers delivers a message that children in North Korea enjoy a safe and prosperous life guided by superior creatures. In addition to this, the sunflowers themselves are significant. Harvesting sunflowers in North Korea is greatly supported and encouraged by the government due to their multiple functions (Ahn, 2019). Not only do sunflower seeds provide food and oil, they can also be used as food for livestock. Politically, a “sunflower” in North Korea symbolizes the loyalty and adoration of the sun. This visual image reflects the meaning of the linguistic text, “We are the happiest in the world”.



FIGURE 3. JM Book 2 p. 1.

Figure 4 is the first page of Book 3. It contains the statement, “Let’s learn for Korea!”, indicating the ultimate purpose of education. The picture depicts three members of the Korean Children’s Union (*Joseon Sonyeondan*), wearing the union’s symbolic red scarf and pins and performing their “infamous” pioneer salute. The motto of the Korean children’s Union is “Always ready!” (*Hangsang junbi!*). This visual image is accompanied by the statement, “Let’s learn for Korea”, with the aim of encouraging children to study hard to become loyal socialists and patriotic citizens of North Korea. Once again, an emblematic big sunflower and the sun rays are used in the background.



FIGURE 4. JM Book 3 p. 1.

In addition, the government’s unification agenda is implicitly, yet powerfully embedded in several units. Each time a map of the Korean Peninsula is presented, Korea is depicted as a unified country. For instance, Unit 7, Book 2 contains information about several North Korean mountains such as, Mt. *Kumgang*, Mt. *Myohyang* and Mt. *Paektu* and their related geographical information. However, it also includes one South Korean mountain and its highest peak – Mt. *Jiri* and the *Chonwang* peak which are introduced as part of one unified nation. Another example can be found in Unit 9, Book 3. This unit includes several pictures of a kite which also contains a North Korean flag with the Korean reunification phrase on it in Korean (*jogug tongil*). Although this unit does not deal with the country’s reunification at all, the inclusion of such a phrase in these units suggests that the North Korean government does not miss one opportunity to expose students to the government’s agenda about the longing of North Koreans to make “reunification” a reality (McEachern, 2009). It is self-evident that the political agenda of North Korea permeates both the visual and linguistic texts used on the cover page. The images explicitly display the embedded, politically-laden propagandist visual conventions of the regime, which are also reinforced by the linguistic texts.

LOCALISED CONTENT

LOCAL PEOPLE AND PLACES

In this section, the level of internationalisation portrayed in the textbooks is examined by looking at the names and images of characters as well as places mentioned in these books. Although a total of 21 out of 46 units use non-Korean names, their presence in each unit is minor. For example, Unit 6, Book 2, “What does she look like?” has the highest number of non-Korean names and characters of all the units, with such names appearing in over four pages of a ten-page long unit. When it comes to names of foreign countries, only England and Australia, together with four English-speaking cities, London, Cambridge, Sydney and Darwin, are briefly mentioned. In addition, only six units briefly use non-North Korean related information in their text, such as including brief textual information about historical sites such as the pyramids in Egypt and Stonehenge in the U.K. The images of the pyramids and Stonehenge are the only two visual images of non-North Korean landmarks to be found in the three books.

While most of the non-North Korean related items are briefly mentioned as part of exercises, there was one exception in which almost half a page was spent on a description of Stonehenge. This relatively rich information on the U.K. may be associated with the British Council’s generous contribution to establishing North Korea’s English education system. The British Council sent teachers to North Korea for over 17 years from 2000 to 2017 and helped to update classroom material and develop the curriculum (Fitzek, 2017). The spelling rules in these textbooks follow “British” English spelling and vocabulary as can be found in words like “metre”, “mum”, “honour”, “football” and “flat”.

THE “ORDINARY” LIFE

This section examines textbook content depicting aspects of the North Korean lifestyle. A glimpse of daily school life is seen in Figure 5, extracted from Unit 1, Book 1. A teacher in traditional Korean dress, *Hanbok*, is standing in front of a class of 40 students wearing red scarves. The classroom is equipped with a TV and a computer. It is questionable how realistically this picture reflects the reality of the classroom setting in North Korea. However, at least it offers what is considered an ordinary classroom setting. Students are dressed identically, sitting upright and focused on their teacher standing in front of the classroom.

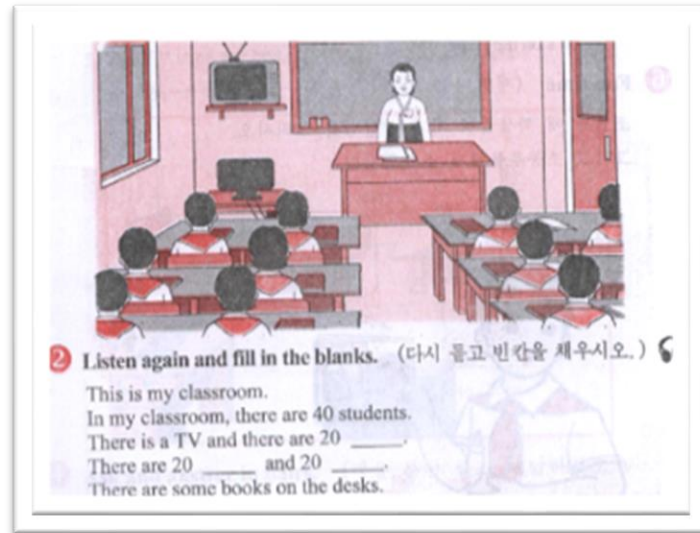


FIGURE 5. North Korean classroom (source: JM Book 1, Unit 1, p. 42)

Figure 6 is extracted from Unit 1, Book 3 and introduces the students' after-school activities. In this unit, the school offers a maths club, Taekwondo club, music club (learning to play the accordion), football club, fine arts club and a computer club. The picture has the caption, "Let's learn for Korea".



FIGURE 6. North Korean students' after school activities
(source: JM Book 3, Unit 1, p. 8)

Other information about the daily activities of students shows students listening to a recording, watering flowers at home or planting trees in the park. Students are also shown learning how to use a computer and play the piano and violin. They also play sports such as football, basketball and ping pong. Unit 5 of this book also depicts students in daily mass activities such as "cleaning the classroom", "watering the garden" and so on as shown in Figure 7. An examination of these books suggests that the most popular or familiar sport amongst young North Koreans could be football, as football-related pictures are most frequent. For example, "football" and its

related pictures and phrases are mentioned across 12 units in Book 1, and seven units in Book 2 and 14 units in Book 3.



FIGURE 7. North Korean students' daily engagement
(source: JM Book 3, Unit 5, p. 58).

However, it is questionable to what extent these activities are truthful representations of the reality of the majority of children in North Korea. The UN investigator, Tomas Ojea Quintana reported that 11 million people (43.4 per cent of the population) in North Korea are undernourished, and 140,000 children are estimated to be affected by malnutrition and of these, 30,000 children in North Korea face an increased risk of death (Ojea Quintana, 2019, p. 5). North Korea is also notorious for the exploitation of children through forced labour and discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2017). North Korea's egregious human rights violations have been condemned by the UN and this has been dealt with as a formal agenda item in the UN General Assembly for 14 consecutive years. Despite the fact that North Korea ratified the human rights convention on children, the UN insisted in its 2014 report that the North Korean government take action to stop its human rights abuses and its crimes against humanity nationwide (Roth, 2019).

Unit 4, Book 1 introduces several household items in what is presented as an ordinary house in North Korea. As can be seen from Figures 8 and 9, the house is equipped with non-traditional Korean furniture (i.e. a sofa in the living room and a bed in the bedroom). Additional images show an ordinary-looking bedroom which is always equipped with a desk, a bed, a computer and a TV. North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world with \$1700 GDP per capita (2015) (CIA, 2019), 70% of the population rely on food aid and 40 percent of the country is malnourished (Aleem, 2017). Thus, it can be safely assumed that this can hardly be a realistic depiction of life in North Korea.

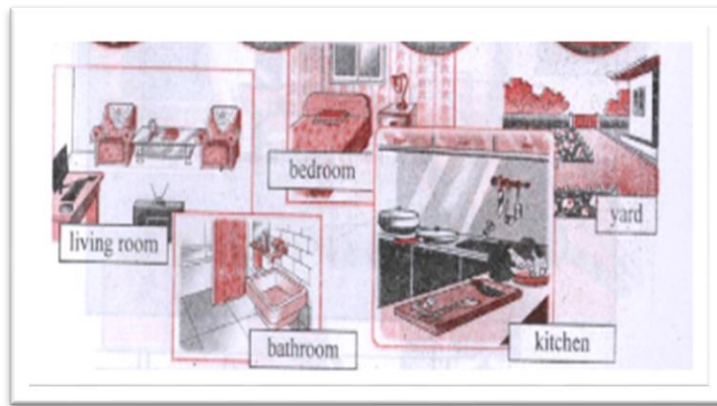


FIGURE 8. Household items in North Korea (source: JM Book 1, Unit 4, p. 37)

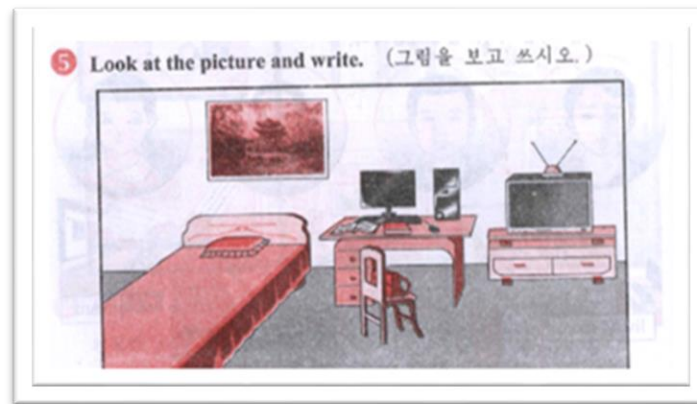


FIGURE 9. North Korean children's bedroom (source: JM Book 1, Unit 4, p. 38)

The topic of Unit 2, Book 3 is “We had a great time”. As the title suggests, it is full of the glorious aspects of a North Korean child’s lifestyle. People visit a ski resort, a water park, a zoo and an amusement park. The unit introduces *Pyongyang*’s famous landmarks such as *Mansu Hill* and *Okryu Restaurant* as shown in the reading passage below. It also includes a passage where students make a bow to the statues of two previous leaders, which is also an essential part of North Korean activities:

Hello, In Su!

How are you? We arrived in Pyongyang yesterday evening. This morning we went up Mansu Hill and made a bow before the statues of the great Generalissimos **Kim Il Sung** and **Kim Jong Il**. Then we went to the Rungna Dolphinarium... We had lunch at the Okryu Restaurant. The noodles were really nice. After lunch we saw a new film at the Taedongmun Cinema... Tomorrow, we are going to Mansu Water Park. I feel really happy! See you soon.

(Extracted from Book 3, Unit 2, p. 22)

In addition to the information about North Korean society presented in the textbooks, these books contain rich information suggesting what life is like in North Korea.

While the previous section deals with what is supposed to be considered as the “ordinary” lifestyle of North Korean students, this section focuses on content that promotes the superiority of North Korea. For example, the title of Unit 7, Book 2 is “The highest mountain”. One would expect to read a text about Mt. Everest or the Himalayas in this unit. However, it mostly introduces information about North Korean mountains and rivers such as Mt. *Paektu*, Mt. *Kumgang*, Mt. *Myohyang*, the *Amnok* River, the *Taedong* and *Tuman* Rivers and so on. For example, Unit 7 includes a reading passage about Mt. *Paektu*:

Mt. Paektu is in Samjiyon County in Ryanggang Province. It is the highest mountain in our country. Lake Chon is on the top of Mt. Paektu. It is the ____ mountain lake in the world. There are many peaks but Janggun Peak is the highest of them. The ____ temperature is about -48 C and the highest is 18°C. You can see the Paektu hot spring under Janggun Peak. It is one of the ____ hot springs. (Source: Book 2, Unit 7, p. 76)

Mt. *Paektu* has significant symbolic and spiritual value in North Korea. Mt. *Paektu* symbolises the origins of the nation together with its revolution and prosperity (Lim, 2015). The Kim Il Sung family has been referred to as a *Paektu* family or a Mt. *Paektu* bloodline. Almost all information is directly related to North Korean geography.

Unit 8, Book 3, “Computers are wonderful, aren’t they?” deals with information about great inventions in North Korea or by North Koreans such as the *Masikryong* Ski Resort, described as “one of the world’s most wonderful ski resorts”. The *Masikryong* Resort, constructed by Kim Jong Un in the hope of hosting some events for the 2018 Winter Olympics, is often referred to as Kim Jong Un’s propaganda showcase (Lam, 2018). The entrance fee of \$40 is not affordable for most locals.

Praise for North Korea’s great inventions continues with the introduction of the “Turtle ship” and “Vinalon”. The *Turtle ship* became famous when it was used in the fight against invading Japanese naval ships between 1592 to 1598 and is often recognised as the first armed ship in the world. *Vinalon* is a synthetic fibre and it is used in the majority of textiles produced in North Korea. It is also referred to as “*Juche* fibre” (Demick, 2015, p. 59). However, there is no mention of the great Admiral Yi Sun Shin or his heroic actions in rescuing Korea from near ruin during the Hideyoshi invasions from Japan which made the Turtle ship known to the world, nor of the inventor of *vinalon*, North Korean chemist Ri Sung Gi. This may be to do with the government’s paranoia about suggesting other heroes to North Korean students other than members of the Kim family.

CONCLUSION

This article explored North Korean English textbooks to examine i) to what extent and in what ways the revised English textbooks have fulfilled their proposed goal that equips North Korean students with practical English skills, ii) to what extent they still remain ideologically driven propaganda tools which promote the government's hostile view of “Western” countries and South Korea, and reinforce the personality cult of the Kim family. In addition, it also examined the extent to which English as an international language, and a door to introduce international content to North Korean students has been achieved.

The findings highlight that the practical English skills emphasised by North Korean leaders in the prefaces are designed to teach students how to speak about the glorified aspects of North

Korea and its society to foreigners in English. The textbooks do not develop an international understanding of the world but reinforce and project an idealised picture of North Koreans living a peaceful, happy and advanced lifestyle. All three books start with instructions from the “revered leaders”, and fulfilling these instructions is regarded as the ultimate aim of English education. Although the proposed objective of these textbooks claims the importance of practical English skills, it seems almost no attempt has been made to provide their citizens with a tool to connect with the rest of the world. North Korean English textbooks remain as just another practical tool to indoctrinate citizens and to stabilise the regime. As Song (2019) rightly predicts, practical English education can not be carried out in North Korea as it can ultimately threaten or jeopardise North Korea’s ideological foundation once its own citizens access the tool to gain the capitalistic values.

However, unlike previous findings of textbooks promoting distorted views of the U.S. and South Koreans (Cho et al., 2015), the rare utterances from citizens of English-speaking countries in these books are not negative and there are no explicit expressions of hatred to be found either visually or linguistically. The content of these books does not encourage students to develop hostile attitudes towards their chief enemy, the U.S., nor to teach them how to speak to invading foreign soldiers in English as in previous editions. Also, military-related items hardly appear. This demonstrates the changed aim of English education in North Korea from a means to prepare its citizens for war to one that promotes North Korea’s superiority to the rest of the world.

This study simultaneously focuses on highlighting the heavily localised textbook content. It has been argued that many of the “international” English textbooks used in EFL and ESL countries are criticised for the inclusion of a non-critical, glorified view of the “Western” world and the messages that imply the English language belongs to the Western world. The English language has always been portrayed as a source of “success” and “power” (Matsuda, 2012, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2020; Sharifian, 2009). As a result, the students who study English using these “international” textbooks tend to develop glorified views of English speakers and the English-speaking world as they are all wealthy and advanced. However, the examined North Korean English textbooks do not include any of these contents. Instead, these books are full of glorified views of North Korea with almost an absence of internationalised materials.

As Lim (2015, p. 9) points out, North Korean state education is “another theatre of propaganda” where state objectives are promulgated under the guise of “the factual pedagogy of truth”. The results of this present study suggest that the ultimate aims of English education are determined by the directives from the leader Kim Jong Un, which are to improve students’ practical English skills so that they can become royal and model members of North Korean society who can promote the superiority of North Korea to the rest of the world in English. In other words, the revised English textbooks actively and explicitly promote the country’s self-proclaimed superiority and the personality cult of the Kim family.

A critical look at English textbooks used in North Korea gives one a deeper understanding of the country and provides valuable insights into the daily lives of ordinary citizens. However, the information presented in the book would highly likely reflect an image that the government wants to project that could be far from the realities of North Korean society. There are indeed few avenues for verifying how true that image is. While this paper has analysed the visual and linguistic texts of three books to gain insight into North Korean English education, further studies and analyses of materials, pedagogical approaches and types of vocabulary being learnt will increase the understanding of English education in this very secretive country.

END NOTE

All translations not otherwise credited are the work of the authors. All Korean terms are transliterated according to the official Romanisation of Korean system. Exceptions are made for proper names (e.g. *Pyongyang*, Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Un etc.) and surnames well known in the English-speaking world by alternative Romanisation.

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