

## **The Attitude Toward and Recognition of English in Korea with reference to English in Japan**

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### **1. Introduction**

In Korea, as in other Asian countries, the government is attaching extreme importance to English education. It seems that Korea is laying more emphasis on the progress of linguistic ability than cultural understanding in English learning.

Generally speaking, when learning a foreign language, contact with the cultural faces of the language speaking area is unavoidable. Historically speaking, a nationalistic-oriented nation has the tendency to adopt the policy that its own culture should be protected from other ethnic cultural invasion. Korea is not an exception of such Asian countries. It is, therefore, very sensitive to cross-cultural contacts.

Through the analyses of the English textbooks now used in junior high schools in Korea and TV commercials currently broadcasted on Korean TV stations, the attitude toward and recognition of English in Korea will be discussed and compared with that of Japan.

### **2. Historical Background**

First, a brief history of the English education in Korea comparing it with that of Japan is necessary. Both countries started English education at the end of the 19th century. In Korea, however, the colonization by Japan (1911-45) and Korean War (1950-53) caused serious difficulties in the development of English education. It can be said that Korea started English education, both in name and reality, in the 1960s. On the other hand, Japan has always put English education in an important position since the Meiji Restoration (1868), except during World War II, when teaching and using English was prohibited.

These historical differences between the two countries provide an interesting contrast. The average score of Japanese TOEFL examinees was 20 points higher than that of Korean examinees in the 1970s. The Korean government undertook the improvement of English education with the reform of its curriculum in the 1970s and 1980s. School hours of English in Korean high schools have been increased more than in the Japanese counterparts, as shown in Figure 1. English classes were opened in elementary schools optionally in 1982 and made mandatory in 1997. On the contrary, the Japanese government has been absorbed in for the last twenty years



reducing English class time and the number of vocabulary items taught to give spare time to students. As a result, the average score of Korean TOEFL examinees was 24 points higher than that of the Japanese in 1997. Their positions were completely reversed.

Figure 1: English Class Time in Junior High Schools

Academic year			80~	92~	94~
Korea (mandatory)	1st year	Hours per week		4	4
	2nd year			35	4
	3rd year			35	4
Japan (elective)	1st year	Hours per week	5		3~4
	2nd year		5		3~4
	3rd year		5		3~4

## Analysis of English Textbooks in Korea and Japan

### 3.1. Quantities comparison

The English textbooks used in junior high schools in Korea are quantitatively and lexically bigger than those in Japan (Figure 1). For example, one of the most popular English textbooks Middle School English 1, 2, 3 consist of 776 pages and 1417 words. In contrast, one text used in Japanese junior high schools, New Horizon 1, 2, 3 consists of 332 pages and 1163 words. Another common Japanese textbook New Crown 1, 2, 3 consist of 326 pages and 1198 words.

Figure 2: Quantities text analysis

Middle School English			
Korea	1st year	18 lessons	256 pages
	2nd year	17 lessons	262 pages
	3rd year	<u>16 lessons</u>	<u>258 pages</u>
		51 lessons	776 pages
Japan	New Horizon	11 lessons	111 pages
	1st year	9 lessons	111 pages
	2nd year	<u>7 lessons</u>	<u>110 pages</u>
	3rd year	27 lessons	332 pages
	New Crown		
	1st year	11 lessons	100 pages
	2nd year	11 lessons	113 pages
	3rd year	<u>9 lessons</u>	<u>113 pages</u>
		31 lessons	326 pages

### 3.2. Comparison of contents

First, a remarkable contrast is seen in the contents of textbooks. Korean textbooks have a tendency to include moralistic and ethical descriptions such as diligence, frugality, good deeds, rule obedience, etc. This tendency is due to the



value judgment of Korean people whose mentality has been influenced greatly by Confucianism. Some example sentences are as follows.

(diligence)

A: Working hard and saving money will be the only way for us to survive in this world.

B: Koreans always work hard. I'm sure you'll prosper in the future. (Lesson 15, 3rd year)

(frugality)

She only buys the things that she really needs now. She never spends money on things that she may want later. (Lesson 8, 2nd year)

(good deeds)

Offer your seat to an old person in a crowded bus or subway. (Lesson 10, 2nd year)

In contrast to this, it is difficult to find similar descriptions in Japanese textbooks (Figure 3).

Second, the introductions of Korean culture, natural features, and prominent figures are found, and the praising and glorifying of them can be seen in the following examples.

I love my country, Korea. It is a beautiful country.... In our long history, we have many great men.... We Koreans worked hard for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. They were a great success. (Lesson 18, 1st year) There are many Koreans who are famous at home and abroad. They have done a great job for our country. We are proud of them. (Lesson 17, 2<sup>nd</sup> year)

Like Korea, topics dealing with Japanese history and society are also seen in the Japanese textbooks, especially Hiroshima and the Ainu (a Japanese ethnic minority) are given as examples in New Horizon and New Crown, the most popular English textbooks in Japanese junior high schools, though it is difficult finding glorification of the things in Japan.

Third, commonly comments on foreign countries can be seen in the Korean textbooks but they are almost totally restricted to the matters of England and the U.S. and it can be said that the contents are superficial like a tour guide's explanation. The following examples are the only two comments about Japan found in the text.

Son Ki-jong won a gold medal in Berlin in 1936 when Korea was under Japanese rule. At that time he was known to the world as a Japanese runner. But his victory gave Koreans great courage. (Lesson 17, 2<sup>nd</sup> year)



Japanese houses don't have ondol, but the Japanese also take of their shoes in the house. (Lesson 15, 3rd year)

Moreover, the regular foreign characters acting in the settings are only Americans and Britains who came to Korea as English teachers.

In Japanese textbooks, foreigners from various countries appear, including Americans, Britains, Canadians, Brazilians, Koreans, Chinese, Singaporeans, Kenyans, and so on. Foreign areas mentioned there are also diverse; places such as Scotland, Wales, Australia, Mongolia, and Sudan as well as the countries of the people mentioned above. In one of the lessons, Korean history, culture, and things Korean are explained (1).

Another interesting characteristic in Korean textbooks is the mentioning of unreasonable use of English words in daily life as follows.

Sometimes we use English when we don't need to. For example, we don't need to use fan or notebook. There are good Korean words like...(Lesson 3, 2nd year)

In Japanese textbooks the title for women is always Ms or Ms., but in Korean ones that is definitely Miss or Mrs. as their marital status.

Figure 3: Analysis of contents

		Cultural Introduction		Moralistic and Ethical Description
		Domestic	Foreign	
Korea		10	6	19
Japan	MH	8	12	2
	NC	6	25	5
	Total	14	32	7

This shows that Korea is very sensitive to cross-cultural contacts and they prefer to protect their own culture from other ethnic cultural invasion by less exposure of the young people to different cultures. On the other hand, the Japanese government is emphasizing the progress of linguistic ability, especially speaking and listening. However, at the same time they are decreasing the English education hours and the number of vocabulary items taught. This can be seen as a contradictory policy.

#### 4. Analysis of TV Commercials in Korea and Japan

##### 4.1. Korean TV commercials(2)

150 TV commercials which were broadcasted on 3 Korean television stations (MBS, KBS, SBS) during the last week of October in 1998 were analyzed. The



commercials were divided into 3 groups. The first group has characters who give the impression that they may be from the English speaking world appearing on the screens but they do not speak any word in English. The second group consists of similar figures speaking English words or sentences. The third group contains only Korean characters and language. As for the results, 17 commercials were included into the first group, only one commercial was in the second, and the rest were in the third (Figure 4). In general, the number of TV commercials containing something related to the English-speaking world in Korea was quite lower than had been expected. The main reason for this is the protection of Korean culture from foreign influence.

English loan words in the dialogue of Korean advertisements and the writing of Korean companies and goods' names using Roman letters also occur *passim*, but cases in which the Roman letters fade out and then Korean equivalents quickly fade in are often seen. This phenomenon comes from the strong idea of cultural protection.

#### 4.2. Japanese TV commercials

In 150 Japanese TV commercials shown in the same period, 18 were included in the first group, 16 were in the second, and the rest were in the third. Compared with that of Korea, the number of commercials in the second group was much higher (Figure 4). Some English phrases were superimposed with the Japanese equivalent, but others were not. In the latter case, many Japanese people cannot understand what the foreign actors or actresses are mentioning about the goods advertised. It can be said that the advertisers ignore the viewers' ability to understand phonetic information, but emphasize the significance of providing a good feeling caused by English or English-like presentation. Most of the viewers accept this without any complaint.

It is comparatively difficult to give a generalization about TV commercials because of the differences of broadcast codes and regulations of both countries. However, it can be claimed that the TV commercials' statistical distinctions indicate a different perception of the relation of a country's own culture and traditions to those of foreign countries.

Figure 4: Television Commercial Categorization

	Korea	Japan
1st group	17	18
2nd group	1	16
3rd group	132	116
Total	150	150



## 5. Conclusion

According to the analyses of junior high school English textbooks and TV commercials of Korea and Japan, it can be concluded that the attitude toward and recognition of English is fairly distinct in each country. Korea is seen as cautious of so-called a foreign cultural invasion. Contrary to this, Japan is comparatively permissive. As mentioned above, Korea is particularly putting a large emphasis on the improvement of linguistic ability rather than cultural understanding in English learning, whereas the Japanese government is reinforcing the rise in cross-cultural understanding as well as linguistic fluency. It is assumed that this divergence may lead to a different response to varieties of English. According to Kwon (1990), the Korean Ministry of Education is strongly emphasizing that Standard American English is the only target for English learners in Korea. The Japanese counterpart is also claiming that Japanese people have to learn Standard British or American English in Japan. However, it is inferred that Japan will be more tolerant of various Englishes like Asian Englishes in the near future, judging from the contents of English textbooks and TV commercials. It is also predicted that Korea will follow Japan, taking the recent open-door policy to cultural contacts by the new President Kim Dae Joong into consideration, but it will take much more time in comparison to Japan.

## Notes

- (1) Korea is precisely explained in Lesson 6 entitled "Our Neighbors" in the 2nd year textbook of New Horizon, and Lesson 3 "Korea" in the 3rd year textbook of New Crown.
- (2) Mr. Jin Dae Cheol (Ph.D candidate of Chukyo University) greatly contributed to the data collection on Korean TV commercials.

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