

English Language Reform

An open letter

To those of the newly forming presidential cabinet and others responsible for English language education in South Korean society,

As a long term foreign resident of East and Northeast Asia I am concerned about recent developments regarding the use and instruction of the English language in South Korea. As you formulate your policies with regard to education and South Korea's further growth and integration into the global community I would like very much that you and your staff consider the following points:

One, all South Koreans share a common system of writing and spoken language made possible through a national system of education supported by one of the best national information and telecommunication infrastructures in the world. While in school South Korean children learn a way of writing and speaking reinforced through national media and the shared aspirations of all South Korean parents to see their children succeed in Korean society. In short, compared with many other countries of the world with large ethnic populations each cultivating a language and culture different from that of its host country, South Korea's minority groups are tiny, and the chance of the average South Korean having to speak with members of these groups in a language different from Korean is minute.

Two, although the English language is an important language in the areas of foreign commerce, scientific research, and international diplomacy, the vast majority of economic, social, and political activity in South Korea is conducted in the Korean language. Moreover, with the exception of North Korea which is separated from the South by a heavily fortified and intimidating border, travel between South Korea and its nearest neighbors is expensive. Visiting a foreign capital or spending the entire weekend with friends or family living in a neighboring country costs much more than a mere fill-up at a local gasoline station or the purchase of a local train ticket. In brief, Northeast Asia is not continental Europe. Furthermore, South Korea has lived close to its nearest neighbors for many hundreds of years. Much of Korea's trade with China and Japan is conducted between ethnic Koreans living in those countries -- trade for which the English language hardly plays a role that cannot be handled by a small number of bilingual legal specialists. Though South Korean businesses engage in a large amount of foreign trade that requires high-level competence in the English language, much of that trade is conducted in high value-added items. As a result, there are far fewer South Koreans required to realize those transactions than would be required to consummate a similar volume of domestic trade. In short, South Korea's large overseas trade receipts exaggerate its need for the English language.

Three, not all South Korean industry depends directly on foreign trade, and by making the English language a requirement to enter into South Korean

universities, many potential South Korean business and government leaders, who are less prone toward the acquisition of a second language, are disadvantaged. Thus, not only is it unfair, but it is also an inefficient use of South Korean managerial and creative talent.

Four, the number of South Koreans who enter colleges and universities is small as a percentage of the total population, and of that number there are many fewer, who remain in academia after they have graduated. Moreover, there is no dearth of South Koreans able to translate English language texts into the Korean language, and with proper incentives there are likely many South Korean academicians who would willingly write college and university textbooks in the Korean language that are better adapted to the specific needs of South Korean society.

Five, by forcing all South Koreans to learn the English language, the South Korean government raises an important barrier to those foreigners living in South Korea, who would like to learn the Korean language and thus become better integrated members of South Korean society. With every child and parent striving to learn English and with so few native English speakers to go around, every foreigner who visits South Korea becomes an automatic target for English language firing practice. Thus, foreign residents who make a modest effort to learn the Korean language are largely discouraged, because they have such little opportunity to engage in Korean language dialogue.

Six, the vast majority of English language instructors in South Korea are native South Koreans with little overseas exposure. As such, the language that they teach is the same as that which they learned from teachers just like them -- teachers with little overseas exposure. As a result, South Korea is developing a dialect of the English language that is unique to South Korea and of only marginal use as a medium of communication between native Koreans and foreign visitors to South Korea. Moreover, most of the language needs of these visitors can be easily satisfied through electronic means, or through the building of neo-colonial enclaves as the current government has already envisioned.

Seven, the United States maintains close to 100,000 troops in Northeast Asia, a third of which are stationed on the Korean peninsula. This is to say nothing of the many tens of thousands more stationed on the European continent and elsewhere. The United States and the European Union make up more than 60% of South Korean overseas trade, and the United States is South Korea's most important strategic ally. Thus, it makes little sense to compel all South Korean children to study English, but then promote a latinization of the South Korean language that does not reflect the phonetic patterns of the English language. Furthermore, as not a few South Koreans are trained in the United States and all eyes in Northeast Asia are turned in part towards North America, the English spoken in Northeast Asia is strongly influenced by North America.

Eight, though language is the property of those who spend the time and energy to acquire it, language as a means of international communication, can only succeed insofar as it is communicated internationally. What percentage of the Korean public actually engages the international community living or passing through South Korea with anything more than polite phrases of acknowledgment, an occasional direction, or nominal displays of international awareness. The number cannot be large. Moreover, what one learns in school is quickly forgotten unless it is utilized after graduation,

and few people choose a second language over their mother tongue to communicate with another who shares the same mother tongue. Thus, with the exception of requisite examinations and much exaggerated hype about the importance of English as a global language, the real need for English is much smaller than the supply generated by universal language training.

Nine, true communication comes about when one can sit down at length and discuss matters of vital importance to oneself and one's society. In order to achieve this level of communication, many more hours of training than that which can be obtained throughout a child's grade school career are necessary. Requiring that all children study English up until the time they graduate from secondary school, and making the English language a requisite for entry into higher levels of education, creates an overabundance of students relative to teachers, raises the price of qualified teachers to those students who are best able to learn the language, and thus cheapens the overall quality of the language for everyone.

Having made these points I would like to recommend important reform in the way in which the English language is taught in South Korean society.

K Determine early in a child's formal education whether he is pre-disposed to learning English and provide him with schools to attend in which the English language is the medium of instruction.

O Remove English as a global requirement from university entrance examinations, so that it not become the primary motivation for learning English, but still provide English channels within those institutions that encourage use of the language.

R Make the English language, together with other languages of the world, a curricular option to all children in advanced grades.

E Let the market dictate true demand, and remove the burdensome and distortive artificial demand created by the universal language requirement.

A Finally, take a portion of the savings that will necessarily result from these reforms and dedicate it to the instruction of Korean to foreign residents already living in Korea and those who might someday make the Korean peninsula their new home.

Faithfully,

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