Foreign-Language Education in Korea Today*

——With Special Reference to English——

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I will attempt a brief survey of foreign-language education in Korea today. I will have to confine my attention to South Korea alone since my access to information concerning North Korea is extremely limited. I will begin with a glance at the recent history of forein-language education in Korea. This will be followed by a discussion of the current scene in Korean foreign-language education, from the perspectives first of supply and demand, then of major changes currently under way, and finally of major issues and problems.

2. History

Up until the 1890s, only a few East Asian languages had been taught in Korea for the sole purpose of producing a limited number of interpreters and translators for the government. Western languages began to be taught a mere 100 years or so ago when Korea's doors were forced open to the United States and other Western powers.

Large-scale foreign-language education was first introduced into Korea during the Japanese colonial period. Japanese was imposed on the entire Korean school system as the sole medium of instruction and communication. During this colonial period, English was taught in all secondary and tertiary schools while German, French, and Chinese were taught on a much more limited scale.

Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 marks a major turning point in the history of her foreign-language education. As the liberator of Korea, the United States replaced Japan as the arbiter of all affairs affecting Korea. Under these circumstances, English immediately re-established itself as the premier foreign language in Korea, which status it had enjoyed prior to the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910.

English has since become an even more important language in all walks of Korean life. This is due primarily to the expansion of Korean-American relations during and after the Korean War. It is also due in no small measure to the expansion of Korea's relations

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with numerous other countries. For English is *the* international lingua franca in the world today.

The normalization of Korea-Japan relations in the mid-1960s is another major turning point in the history of Korean foreign-language education. Relations between the two countries have since expanded quite rapidly with the result that Japanese has now become the second most important foreign language taught in Korea, a very strong second to English. Next in importance come French, German, Chinese, and Spanish, probably in that order.

3. Supply and Demand

Foreign languages may be viewed as commodities so that foreign-language education may be discussed in terms of supply and demand. Taking this perspective here, we will begin with a look at the demand side.

With her contact with the outside world constantly increasing and diversifying, Korea's demand for foreign languages has been on the way up, especially since the late 1960s. The demand for a particular foreign language in Korea is often determined by the volume of her contact with the speakers of that language. This explains why English and Japanese are in such great demand in Korea today and why Arabic has recently become a very important language to Korea.

One measure of the great demand for foreign languages in Korea today is the fact that they figure quite prominently in all major examinations administered in the country. Thus without a good command of a major foreign language, expecially English, one cannot realistically aspire to any position of significance in Korean society today.

Perhaps mention should be made at this point of the recent increase in demand for Korean as a Foreign Language. With more and more foreigners coming to Korea for study or other pruposes, the need has steadily been increasing for programs in Korean as a Foreign Language.

Let us now turn to the supply side, i.e. to the question of who supplies the training and education to meet this increasing demand for foreign languages. The school system plays the central role here with more than six million secondary and tertiary school students taking a weekly average of four hours of foreign language instruction. As if this were not enough, elementary school children have begun to take varying amounts of voluntary English.

The school system is not the sole supplier of foreign-language education. There are hundreds of private, corporate, and government foreign-language institutes or porgrams scattered all over the country, catering mostly to adult learners.

The mass media establishment also takes an active part in foreign-language education in Korea. The country's major broadcast networks air between them a daily average of over six hours of foreign-language instruction. Perhaps the most influential supplier of

authentic English in Korea today is the American Forces/Korea Network, which broadcasts round-the-clock English-language programs on both TV and radio. Millions of Koreans tune in to these programs for enjoyment or for learning purposes.

Print journalism also figures here, although not quite as prominently as does broadcast journalism. There are four monthly magazines devoted exclusively to foreign-language instruction, three for English learners and one for Japanese learners. Besides serving the international community in Korea, the nation's two English-language dailies also cater to the English-learning Korean community by offering daily lessons in intermediate-to-advanced English. Many Korean-language dailies and magazines also feature English lessons of various types for their readership.

Foreign-language lessons on tape should also count among the major suppliers of foreign-language education in Korea today. So should foreign-language study guides and references. Virtually every Korean student has at least a few of these to assist them in their attempts to master their foreign languages.

4. Major Changes

Foreign-language education in Korea is currently going through a period of transition. I will briefly refer to some of the major changes that are taking place as part of this transition.

First of all, foreign-language education in Korea is just beginning to feel the impact of modern educational technology. Over the last ten years or so, all universities and many secondary schools have equipped themselves with language laboratories, which often feature video facilities. So have most private, corporate, and government foreign-language institutes. I would not be surprised at all if the fever of computer assisted language instruction hits Korea with a vengeance in the not too distant future. In fact, computers are already being utilized in test construction and scoring at a few universities.

Secondly, many educators are beginning to call into question the traditional attitude that all foreign-language education should be provided by the school system alone. They feel that there should be some sort of responsibility sharing between the school sector and the non-school sector in the foreign-language education establishment of Korea. In fact, there already appears to be a division of labor slowly emerging between the two sectors, whereby the school sector focuses on basics and written language while the non-school sector focuses on specifics and spoken lanugage such as conversationally-based ESP. The two sectors will hopefully so complement each other as to render Korean foreign-language education more productive.

Thirdly, the number of foreign languages taught in Korea has recently been increasing rather steadily. Fewer than ten foreign lanugages were taught well into the late 1960s. Today more than twenty are taught, including African and Southeast Asian languages. Chances are that more languages, especially African and East European languages will

be added in the years ahead. Needless to say, this trend stems from Korea's ever expanding international relations.

Fourthly, foreign-language education is fast developing into a major industry. Secondary school textbooks and self-study guides as well as TV and radio program textbooks sell millions of copies every year. Other hot items on the Korean foreign-language education market include TOEFL guides, college entrance examination guides, high school grammars, taped self-study companions to secondary school textbooks, and other commercially available materials on tape such as those by BBC. Besides, private foreign-language institutes are doing a land-office business, especially in the metropolitan centers of the country.

Fifthly, a search for a Korean identity in foreign-language education is currently under way in Korean educational/academic circles. Korean educators have often blindly copied their counterparts in advanced countries such as Japan and the United States. Superb as the foreign-language teaching practices of these countries may be on their own soil, they are not necessarily best suited to the Korean context. Many educators thus feel that the time has come to forge a type of foreign-language education that best meets Korea's needs.

Sixthly, foreign-language education has recently been changing from a passive into an active affair. Until well into the 1960s, foreign languages had been taught in Korea in passive response to the waves of the outside world breaking against her shores. Things have completely changed now and foreign languages are taught in Korea for the sake of her active participation in all sorts of international affairs. One indication of this change is that the Korean government is gradually expanding its recently initiated overseas training programs for teachers and students of foreign languages.

Last, but not least, Korean foreign-language education is undergoing some significant demographic changes. As indicated already, the population of learners is rapidly increasing, especially in the case of English. In about ten years' time, Korea may have as many as, or more than, ten million learners of English. This would represent approximately a quarter of the entire population. If this prediction comes true, then Korea would have to almost double its English-language teachers to well over 60,000.

Demographic changes of a non-numerical nature are also taking place in Korean foreign-language education today. More and more non-students are joining the ranks of foreign-language learners. These non-student learners include house-wives, retirees, corporate employees, government employees, and soldiers. Thus Korea has far more women and older learners of English now than it once used to.

Needless to say, these demographic changes bring other changes in their wakes. A case in point is the newly-emerging demand for diversification of programs and materials so as to betler meet the needs of divergent groups of learners. Many new programs and materials have indeed been emerging in recent years in response to this demand.

5. Issues and Problems

Foreign-language education in Korea is confronted with numerous problems, which need to be addressed and resolved sooner or later. Here we will deal with some of these problems.

The large class size is one of the major headaches for Korean foreign-language educators. An average Korean class comprises upwards of sixty students with some college classes exceeding 100. Thus Korean foreign-language educators are faced with the almost impossible task of working out a combination of curriculum, material, and method that can somehow beat this monstrously large class size.

Another problem is posed by the college entrance examination. The foreign-language component of this examination is too much of a power test overly heavy on grammatical analysis. This reduces secondary school foreign-language education to an exercise in tedious parsing and laborious decoding with little room for communicative activity. This has been blamed, with a fair degree of justice, for the inability of most Korean students to function adequately in their foreign languages.

Textbooks pose still another serious problem. All secondary school textbooks, subject to government screening and approval, are given but a year for designing, writing, and publishing. On account of the rush and also of a slipshod screening procedure, most textbooks in Korea today are woefully inadequate, often riddled with outright errors.

At this point, we may mention the problem of contextual contamination. As already pointed out, textbooks contain quite a few errors, and so do self-study guides and other references. Teachers themselves constantly commit errors in large quantities. Many loan words in Korean are so far removed from their original meanings that they are often error-inducive in Korean learners' use of their foreign languages. The context of Korean foreign-language education is so polluted with errors that Korean learners often acquire these errors as part of their foreign-language repertoire.

Let us now turn to this problem of which language skill or skills are to be highlighted in foreign-language education. The Ministry of Education says that all four skills must be given equal weight in all phases of foreign-language education. Many educators are calling this directive into question, however, claiming that the receptive skills, especially reading, should take precedence over the productive skills. Their main rationale is that the receptive skills have a far greater surrender value than do the productive skills. They also argue that the receptive skills, but not the productive skills, can be taught with any reasonable expectation of success in the large classes of the Korean school system.

Still another problem, one of far more serious concern, is attracting high-caliber teachers to the profession. Corporate careers have recently become so attractive vis-a-vis teaching careers that most competent college graduates in foreign languages shy away from teaching jobs in favor of corporate jobs. Thus with the possible exception of the universities, the country's school system often gets only mediocre-to-inferior college graduates as foreign-

language teachers.

Another equally serious problem relates to the teacher-training process. Most teacher-training programs in Korea today are long on theory and short on practice. Thus most Korean teachers do not have an adequate command of either their target languages or classroom procedures and techniques while they may often have a fair knowledge of literature, linguistics, and learning theory. They may be excellent armchair teachers, but by no means good classroom teachers.

Our next problem has to do with lack of coordination among the major shapers of Korean foreign-language education. Operating without adequate professional input from specialists and teachers, policy makers and administrators often fail to foster effective foreign-language programs. Without active support and encouragement from policy makers and administrators, on the other hand, specialists and teachers often find themselves powerless to try and implement innovative ideas. This kind of climate leaves little room for research and development in Korean foreign-language education.

The perennial methods debate has been a source of serious confusion to the average foreign-language teacher in Korea. Hypersensitive to fashion changes in advanced countries, Korean authorities on foreign-language education have kept swinging back and forth between one method and another, often leaving the average classroom teacher completely at a loss.

Yet another problem centers around wildly exaggerated claims about certain materials, methods, or devices. Some educators in Korea, for example, have made the absurd claim that Korean students will all acquire a near-native command of English if and only if they begin to learn the language in elementary school. Many English-language materials dealers have made the patently false claim that anyone who uses their materials will master spoken English in a matter of months. The gullible public often thus gets conned into buying such materials or devices only to discover much to their disappointment that they are anything but what they are claimed to be.

The most serious of the problems facing Korean foreign-language education today is probably the low priority the government gives to education in general and foreign-language education in particular. Government investment in the development of foreign-language education has been nominal at best. The government does not seem to have had any long-range plans for the development of foreign-language education, either. It must not lose sight of the fact that foreign-language education is a very delicate plant which must be frequently watered and adequately fertilized.

Another very serious problem, which often goes unnoticed, is the failure to benefit fully from international cooperation among foreign-language specialists, educators, administrators, and policy makers. It is well known that Korea, China, and Japan have many similar problems in foreign-language education. Thus it would make eminent sense for these three neighboring countries to pool their resources in solving their many common problems. Yet

there has not been any substantive step taken by either Korea or the other two countries for educational cooperation in this important area.

Last, but not least, Korean foreign-language education faces this problem of an extremely high rate of desertion in the ranks of its highly trained specialists. The overwhelming majority of East-West Center, Fulbright, and British Council returnees in English-language teaching have left their profession in favor of linguistics and literature. This is a woeful waste of resources for both Korea and the program-host countries.