English Language Education

Tae-Young Kim

Historical Progression of English Education in Korea

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Preface

In 2021, I had the privilege of authoring a book that examined the historical shifts in English-learning motivation in Korea. In that work, I argued that the prevalent competitive motivation observed among Korean students was shaped by the sociopolitical backdrop of Korea and its neighboring countries in East Asia (Kim, 2021). While the 2021 publication primarily focused on language learning motivation rather than the history of English education itself, it became evident that a thorough historical analysis of the spread of English on the Korean peninsula, and its role in Korea's modernization, had not yet been adequately explored.

This book aims to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive account of the development of English language teaching and learning in Korea, spanning from the late 19th century to the 2020s. As Korea's economic and cultural influence has expanded, particularly in the 21st century, the growing interest in English learning among Koreans has occasionally attracted attention in Western media, often generating both positive and negative portrayals. However, despite the increased interest in Korea's education system, there has been limited access to information on English learning and teaching in Korea, primarily due to the language barrier. Although there are volumes discussing the history of English education in Korea, most are written in Korean rather than English (e.g., Kim, 2006, 2011; Kwon & Kim, 2010). Only a small number of research articles in English (e.g., Choi, 2006) or books examining Korea's education system more broadly (e.g., Cho, 2017; McGinn et al., 1980; Seth, 2001) are available.

As a result, international scholars have struggled to study the history of English learning and teaching in Korea, limiting comparative research between Korea and its neighboring East Asian countries. Graduate students specializing in English language education, curriculum studies, or modern history have encountered significant challenges in accessing Korean-language sources, a situation that continues to affect researchers worldwide.

In response to this issue, this book endeavors to provide a comprehensive account of the history of English teaching and learning in Korea, both past and present. To this end, it analyzes archival materials from the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as newspaper articles discussing English education policies from the early 20th

century onwards—particularly after the establishment of Korea's two major daily newspapers, *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* (both founded in 1920). The introduction of English into Korea following international treaties in the late 19th century brought with it the recognition that English was a "language of power," being the language of the United States and the United Kingdom, which were arguably the two most advanced nations at that time.

The historical accounts of English education in Korea presented in this book illuminate the origins and development of Koreans' aspirations to attain prestigious social status through English language acquisition. It is hoped that readers will gain insight into how the history of English learning reflects Korea's unique sociopolitical context. By analyzing government documents that have shaped national educational administration, newspaper articles that capture the social consensus of their time, and representative English textbooks used over the years, this book aims to deepen our understanding of the dynamic interplay between English education policy and public perception.

The primary objective of this book is to offer systematic and comprehensive insights into English learning and teaching in Korea. To achieve this, the book follows a chronological timeline, beginning in 1883 with the establishment of *Dongmunhak*, Korea's first public interpreter training center, and extending to the most recent 2022 Revised National Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The first part of the book focuses on the early stages of English education, covering the period before the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. This section encompasses three major eras:

1. The 19th Century Joseon Dynasty and the Korean Empire (1882–1910)
2. The Japanese Colonial Period (1910–1945)
3. The United States Military Government Period (1945–1948)

Due to the political division of Korea after World War II, the second and third parts of the book focus on English education in South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea). Since the main objective of this book is to trace the historical development of English education in Korea, these chapters are structured around the National Curriculum of South Korea, first introduced in 1954 after a three-year hiatus caused by the Korean War (1950–1953).

The second part covers the latter half of the 20th century, divided into six sections, each corresponding to a period of the National Curriculum. This part also reflects the political context, particularly the military regimes of President Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) and the neo-military governments of Presidents Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1987) and Roh Tae-woo (1987–1992).

1. The Korean War and the First National Curriculum Period (1950–1963), mostly overlapping with the Rhee Syngman regime
2. The Second National Curriculum Period (1963–1973) during the first half of Park Chung Hee's regime
3. The Third National Curriculum Period (1973–1981) during the second half of Park Chung Hee's regime and the transition to the Chun Doo-hwan regime

4. The Fourth National Curriculum Period (1981–1987) during the Chun Doo-hwan regime
5. The Fifth National Curriculum Period (1987–1992) during the Roh Tae-woo regime
6. The Sixth National Curriculum Period (1992–1997) during the Kim Young-sam regime

The third part of the book addresses the key issues in English education in the 21st century (1997 to the present). Following the comprehensive revision of the Seventh National Curriculum, the Ministry of Education in South Korea maintained the overall structure of the curriculum, making only partial revisions as necessary. As a result, the official curriculum includes the year of each partial revision in its nomenclature, such as the 2007 Revised National Curriculum (RNC), 2009 RNC, 2015 RNC, and 2022 RNC. Therefore, this part of the book covers:

1. The Seventh National Curriculum Period (1997–2007) during the civil governments of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun
2. The Revised National Curricula of 2007, 2009, 2015, and 2022, during the civil governments of Presidents Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, Moon Jae-in, Yoon Suk Yeol, and Lee Jae Myung

By summarizing significant findings and highlighting critical issues in English education, this book concludes that English learning and use in Korea have been closely intertwined with the socioeducational contexts of the time, reflecting the public's aspirations for both financial success and cultural affluence. The book also presents future challenges and prospects for English learning in South Korea as we move into the 2020s and beyond.

Note 1: To assist readers, the reference list includes both the first and last names of Korean authors, listed alphabetically. Similar to the case in China, many Koreans share the same family name, despite not being related. Including full names is intended to help readers accurately locate references of interest.

Note 2: In line with East Asian naming conventions, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese names in this book follow the order of family name first, followed by given name. For example, in the name Kim Tae-Young, the family name is "Kim," not "Tae-Young."

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My deepest appreciation goes to my beloved family. Without the unwavering support and patience of my wife, Jungyeon (Tanya), and my son, Young June, my journey through time—from the introduction of English education in Korea in 1883 to the present—would never have been possible. Their love and encouragement have been the foundation of this endeavor, and for that, I am truly grateful.

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Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the Historical Investigation of English Learning

To begin with a personal anecdote: in May 1996, I was a senior undergraduate student majoring in English language education. At the time, I was completing my teaching practicum at a girls' middle school in northern Seoul. As a pre-service teacher, I was about to embark on my first teaching experience at the age of 22. To my surprise, however, the students seemed largely indifferent to my presence, despite my youthful appearance. Some girls chatted among themselves, apparently unconcerned by my arrival, while others struggled to keep their eyes open, barely staying awake. Was this simply the result of a heavy lunch with their classmates? Perhaps not. This lackluster atmosphere persisted throughout my class, yet as the session came to a close, the room suddenly came to life, filled with the cheerful energy of the students. It became clear—they were not disinterested in socializing but in my English class. About a week later, during a student counseling session, I asked them directly: "Why are you not interested in English?" Their answers caught me off guard. None of them admitted to disliking the subject. In fact, in unison, they insisted they were very much interested in learning English. Despite their lack of active participation in class, they professed a genuine enthusiasm for the language. This paradox has continued to intrigue and perplex me over the years—that learners in Korea often express strong interest in English but do not exhibit the expected learning behaviors.

The purpose of this book is to systematically explore a logical explanation for this phenomenon, which is observed not only in Korea but also in other countries. Language learning behaviors and attitudes do not emerge overnight; rather, they develop within a broader historical context, evolving over generations. These behaviors and attitudes are deeply embedded in the socio-historical fabric of a speech community, and in this case, the nation serves as the largest unit of that community. Therefore, a historical examination of a nation's foreign language learning processes is essential to understanding contemporary attitudes and behaviors toward English.

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Looking back, English was first introduced and formally taught in Korea in 1883, following the ratification of a commercial treaty between Korea and the United States. Since then, English has played a significant role in the lives of Koreans. Apart from a brief hiatus during the 1940s, English has been consistently taught in both public and private sectors. At different times, English proficiency has been closely linked to employment opportunities, admission to prestigious universities, or career advancement. This widespread belief in the benefits of English education has persisted for over a century, surviving even major historical upheavals such as Japanese colonization and the Korean War.

In the 2020s, despite numerous political regime changes, Koreans continue to hold a steadfast belief in the power of English. It has, in fact, evolved into something of a public myth: the belief that high proficiency in English is a key to success in life. According to Statistics Korea (2022), over $18 billion was spent on private education in South Korea in 2021, with a significant portion dedicated to English education. Given South Korea's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of $1630 billion in 2020 (TradingEconomics, 2022), this figure suggests that approximately 1.1 percent of the nation's economy is tied to the private education industry, with English as a primary focus.

This book investigates how English education has evolved in Korea over the past 140 years. It examines the role English has played in Korean society and traces the impact of major political regime changes on the nation's approach to English education. The book is organized into three main parts. The first part focuses on the early stages of English education, covering the period from 1883 to 1948. The second part examines the development stage, which includes the establishment of its government, the Korean War, and the formulation of national English education curricula, spanning from 1950 to 1997. The third part explores the expansion stage, highlighting the rapid growth of English education in the twenty-first century as South Korea's economic and cultural influence increased on the global stage.

1.2 The Uniqueness of English Education in Korea: Comparative Analysis with China and Japan

South Korea alone boasts a population of over 50 million people, and when combined with North Korea, the total population reaches approximately 77 million as of 2022 (Worldometer, 2022a). Economically, South Korea ranks 12th in terms of GDP among 190 nations worldwide, positioning itself close to Russia (Worldometer, 2022b). These statistics from recent years illustrate Korea's growing influence in international affairs. However, when viewed from a broader historical and geopolitical perspective, Korea is often studied in conjunction with its neighboring countries, China and Japan—both of which are considered international powerhouses.

Throughout history, Korea has shared numerous cultural heritages with these two nations. For instance, all three countries used Chinese characters for international

communication prior to modernization in the nineteenth century. To varying degrees, they also share traditional (neo-)Confucian values and collectivistic ideals, including reverence for the elderly, the emphasis on filial duty and loyalty to the monarchy, and an appreciation for unity over individual differences. Given these shared cultural elements, one might assume that China, Japan, and Korea followed relatively similar paths in the development of English learning and teaching. However, such an assumption may be an oversimplification and reflects a form of Western prejudice toward the East, known as orientalism (cf. Said, 1979).

Thus, before delving into a detailed examination of the development of English education in Korea, it is important to first survey the historical trajectories of English education in China and Japan. By doing so, we can better highlight the unique characteristics of English education in Korea and how it diverges from these neighboring countries.

1.2.1 The Case of English Education in China

A meticulous examination of English learning and teaching in China reveals a historical oscillation between traditional Sino-centrism and pragmatic nationalism. The etymology of "China," which literally translates to "the central nation" (中國), reflects a perception that other nations were either barbaric or subordinate. The earliest accounts of English learning in China, dating back to the sixteenth century, are intertwined with this worldview. Chinese merchants reluctantly acquired rudimentary English, known as "broken English" or "pidgin English," to facilitate international trade, particularly in tea (Bolton, 2002). However, the study of Western languages, including English, remained minimal. The British Empire's victories in the Opium Wars of 1839 and 1856 exposed China's technological deficiencies, leading to the establishment of the Public Interpreter's College in Beijing in 1862. *Tongwen Guan* (同文館), or the Interpreter's College, contributed to the training of translators in China. Despite this development, the Chinese public remained resistant due to deep-rooted Sino-centrism, which viewed the learning of Western languages as a capitulation to "barbarians." Western missionaries also established schools in major Chinese cities during the mid-nineteenth century, offering modern Western-style education to Chinese students (Adamson, 2004). However, these efforts faced similar resistance for the same reasons.

This traditional Sino-centric ideology gradually shifted following a period of national humiliation for China. For example, the civil war between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s underscored the importance of English as a means of international communication, particularly in garnering support from the United States and Western nations. Consequently, the early twentieth century saw a surge in English education in China, leading to a gradual shift in public attitudes as English came to symbolize prosperity (Kim, 2021). However, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the pendulum swung sharply back toward regressive Sino-centrism. The Cold War rivalry between Western

capitalism, led by the United States, and communism, led by the Soviet Union and the PRC, severely hindered the learning and teaching of English during the 1950s and 1960s. Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in 1966 further intensified the suppression of English education, as the government sought to return to communist ideals and vehemently opposed any foreign or Western influence. English teachers became primary targets, as they were perceived as "symbols of capitalist vice smothering the human mind" (Kim, 2021).

This oppressive environment surrounding English education dissipated in the 1970s when diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC resumed. Under the political leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the announcement of the Open Door Policy and Deng's visit to the United States in 1979 marked a turning point in détente between the two nations (Adamson, 2004). Following these events, English, alongside other foreign languages, gained prominence in the PRC. English was officially recognized as the "dominant foreign language" for the first time in China's history, and the first international conference on English teaching took place in Guangzhou in 1985 (Lam, 2002).

Until recently, enthusiasm for English education persisted in China. Despite warnings by Bolton and Graddol (2012) that the practical use of English might be limited to certain domains, over 400 million Chinese people were learning or had learned English around 2000 (Wei & Su, 2012). Once again, the pendulum of English learning shifted toward pragmatism, distancing itself from Sino-centric conservatism.

In the 2020s, English education remains significant in China. The large-scale administration of the College English Test aims to assess the English proficiency of undergraduate students and ensure they meet required standards (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). However, recent economic and technological advancements in China have brought notable changes. Overseas-trained individuals are no longer viewed with the same enthusiasm as before, and they no longer necessarily hold a significant advantage over domestically trained candidates. While previous generations admired the expertise and English proficiency of those educated in English-speaking countries, this perception is shifting (The Economist, 2024). Foreign-trained employees are now expected to possess additional skills beyond their educational background (Bermingham & Wang, 2019).

Another noteworthy development is the growing economic conflict between the United States and the PRC. China's rapid economic growth has been perceived as a potential threat by the United States, prompting efforts by Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden to protect national interests by countering China. This international conflict has spilled over into various arenas, including issues related to Taiwan, space exploration, semiconductor alliances, and a renewed ideological clash that gained prominence around 2020 amid the global urgency surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak. The strained relationship between the United States and China has also influenced the patriotic sentiments of Chinese millennials, often referred to as Gen-Z or MZ generation, born after 1996 (Wong, 2022). This generation, the primary beneficiary of mainland China's economic progress, is being educated to pursue the "Chinese Dream" (中國夢). In some cases, this notion has manifested in radically patriotic and ethnocentric movements that sometimes disregard the national

interests of neighboring countries. Chinese Gen-Z individuals are generally more individualistic than previous generations but also exhibit stronger patriotism (if not hyper-nationalism) and less inclination toward democracy compared to their Western counterparts (*Kookmin Ilbo*, 2022; The Economist, 2024; Wong, 2022).

In this context, the future of English education in China may present markedly different prospects compared to the decades following Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy in 1978. While it is too early to make definitive predictions, the history of English education in China suggests that the pendulum may once again swing toward nationalism, with increased governmental support for Chinese over English, the latter of which is often seen as the language of the United States.

1.2.2 The Case of English Education in Japan

English education in Japan, compared to China, has historically followed a more utilitarian path. The transformation of traditional feudal Japan began in 1853 when Commodore Matthew C. Perry forced the opening of ports near Tokyo, leading to the signing of a commercial treaty with the United States in 1854. In response, the Tokugawa shogunate, the de facto ruling party, quickly established a public institute in 1860 to study Western knowledge, with English as a primary subject (Sasaki, 2008). The Meiji Restoration accelerated Japan's modernization, establishing national universities, middle schools, and elementary schools, with mandatory general education for all Japanese children. These developments laid the foundation for English education in nineteenth-century Japan.

The Japanese government prioritized modernization, including foreign language learning, recognizing English as a crucial tool for importing advanced Western technology. Given the limited opportunities for Japanese to travel abroad in the nineteenth century, accurate translation of English-language Western books became essential. Consequently, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) was introduced, focusing on translating from English to Japanese, with emphasis on reading skills, vocabulary, and grammar (Sasaki, 2008).

English education in Japan also exerted significant influence on Korea due to historical circumstances. Japan first encroached upon Korea's diplomatic sovereignty in 1905 and ultimately annexed Korea in 1910, leading to the implantation of the Japanese educational system in Korea. The GTM, emphasized in Japan, also became influential in Korea during the 1910s. For example, as early as the Meiji Restoration period, English translation tests were included as part of the entrance exams for advanced schools in Japan. This academic credentialism began around 1900 in Japan (Yamamoto, 2004), as graduation certificates from recognized universities, particularly the Imperial Universities, carried prestige and social status. This phenomenon was replicated in colonized Korea, where English translation tests for university entrance exams were introduced in 1924 when Kyungsung (or Keijo) Imperial University (京城帝國大學) was founded in Seoul (See Chap. 3 for a detailed explanation).

In contrast to China's oscillation between nationalistic and pragmatic attitudes, English education in Japan did not witness vehement conflicts between these two opposing sentiments. English was considered a crucial tool for understanding and disseminating advanced Western technology within the nation. The Japanese government adopted a utilitarian stance, actively embracing Western knowledge if it contributed to the nation's enlightenment. This perspective is encapsulated in the slogan of *Wakon-Yosai* (和魂洋才), meaning "Japanese spirit and Western scholarship." Ota (2011) suggests that, in the context of English education, this slogan could be aptly substituted with *Wakon-Beisai* (和魂米才), meaning "Japanese spirit and American scholarship." English education, therefore, centered around written English, with less emphasis on speaking and listening skills until the mid-twentieth century. The primary concern of the government was to develop Japan's infrastructure and systems to match those of advanced Western nations.

The only period during which English education was officially prohibited in Japan was during World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii in 1941. English education was banned in Japan and its colonies for four years until Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allied Forces. However, the subsequent occupation of Japan by the United States from 1945 to 1952 reshaped the social and educational systems, adopting a model similar to that of the United States. After the U.S. occupation, English consolidated its status as a foreign language in secondary schools in Japan (Sasaki, 2008). Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the educational status of English in secondary schools remained relatively unchanged. English education played a significant role in Japan's rapid economic development and increased national wealth, positioning Japan as the second-largest Gross National Product (GNP) economy in the 1980s. However, the emphasis was still on written English, with a focus on reading, vocabulary, and grammar.

In the twenty-first century, Japan has endeavored to introduce educational reforms in English education. As early as the 1960s, the Japanese government recognized the need to strengthen English speaking and listening skills, particularly highlighted by the successful hosting of the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games in 1964. The government established the Council for Improvement of English Teaching in 1960 and formulated plans to enhance English skills. However, due to the negative washback effect from high school and university entrance exams, these reforms faced challenges. Recent reforms in English education in Japan include the introduction of elementary school English education. Starting from the spring semester of 2020, elementary school students receive foreign language activities totaling 35 hours for third and fourth-year students and 70 hours for fifth and sixth-year students (Nemoto, 2018).

Despite these recent reforms, it is important to address a notable psychological phenomenon. Despite the government's efforts to boost the domestic economy initiated by former prime minister Abe Shinzo (tenure: December 26, 2012, to September 16, 2020), it seems that the Japanese economy is no longer comparable to its prime days in the 1980s. The aging population and subsequent loss of workforce pose potential risks to the Japanese economy (Japan Times, 2020). Younger generations in Japan have realized that even with a prestigious university diploma, job prospects

do not significantly improve, and the cost of living, particularly housing, is unaffordable in major cities. In this resigned atmosphere, students in secondary schools perceive that learning English and other subjects may not lead to success in life through attending university. This prevailing sentiment has resulted in widespread demotivation in English learning, as observed and reported by scholars in Japan (Falout etal., 2009; Taguchi, 2015; Yashima, 2013). English, to many students, has lost its excitement as a subject at school. Kim (2021) explains the demotivational forces in English learning in Japan as follows:

> This new research trend of EFL learning demotivation may involve a variety of reasons. First, […] learning English has traditionally been equated with the importation of the advanced Western technology represented by the U.S. and the U.K. (Koike & Tanaka, 1995; Sasaki, 2008). However, going through the rapid post-war reconstruction and economic boom for more than three decades from the 1960s to 1980s, Japan's role model to follow or exceed has largely disappeared and Japan itself became the role model for the fast following nations such as Singapore, South Korea, or Taiwan. Their economic growth also prompted many foreigners learn Japanese. This meant that most Japanese people did not need to learn English for foreign travel, particularly pre-arranged tours accompanied by tour guides. The domestic market size in Japan also needs to be considered. The economic development in the latter half of the 20th century resulted in the expansion of domestic market. This meant that the industrial goods produced in Japan could be consumed in Japan without necessarily exporting them. (pp. 185-186)

In summary, the utilitarian purpose of English education has been central in Japan for over 150 years, with less tension between nationalistic and pragmatic views than in China, except during World War II. Traditionally, written English was prioritized, with the GTM playing a key role in Japan's industrialization. However, recent reforms have aimed to emphasize speaking and listening skills. Despite the introduction of English education in elementary schools, the growing disconnect between national policies and the younger generation's perception of English's relevance poses a potential challenge to the future of English education in Japan.

1.2.3 The Uniqueness of English Education in Korea

For over two thousand years, Korea has maintained complex and multifaceted relationships with China and Japan, shaped by geopolitical factors. Historically, influence flowed from China to Korea and then to Japan, but by the late nineteenth century, Japan, having undergone industrialization, began exerting significant influence over Korea.

Korea's educational system, particularly during the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392 AD), was heavily influenced by China, exemplified by the introduction of the *Gwageo*—a national civil service examination—during the tenth century. This examination system, which lasted for nearly a millennium until its official abolition in 1894 during the Korean Empire, primarily assessed candidates on their knowledge of classical Chinese literature. The *Gwageo* was a crucial mechanism for selecting elites to govern the country, with successful candidates regarded as intellectuals capable

of contributing to national governance (Lee, 2024). Alongside the main *Gwageo* exam for administrative officers, there were specialized versions for military officers, interpreters, and technicians.

In Korean society, where the literati class held significant social and political influence, passing the *Gwageo* exam was highly coveted by those aspiring to become civil servants. Successful candidates enjoyed lifelong prestige and often amassed considerable wealth. However, the literati class was not without its risks—despite their political power and material success, these elites could quickly fall from grace if they were seen as disloyal to the monarchy, leading to the possibility of their entire family being exiled or executed (Lee, 2024). Meanwhile, the middle class, rather than focusing on the main *Gwageo*, often aimed to pass the interpreter-focused *Gwageo* exam.

To understand traditional East Asian international relations, one must consider the tributary system, or *Chaogong* (朝貢), which China established with its neighboring countries. As China expanded its territory through its large population and military might, it developed a system of tribute that recognized the sovereignty of smaller nations while asserting China's predominant role in East Asia. This tributary system, which endured for over a thousand years, provided mutual benefits. Korea, for example, regularly sent tributary envoys to China, paying respects to the Chinese emperor in exchange for gifts. The system allowed Korea to maintain sovereignty while gaining access to cultural and technological innovations from other civilizations through this exchange of tribute and reciprocal gifts. Thus, the East Asian tributary system served as a valuable conduit for cultural and technological exchange, enhancing premodern Korea's access to new ideas and innovations.

Against this historical backdrop, both the Goryeo Dynasty and the subsequent Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910 AD) placed great importance on the selection and training of interpreters. During the Goryeo period, the *Tongmungwan* (通文館), established in 1276, focused on interpreter training, and in 1393, soon after the founding of the Joseon Dynasty, the *Sayeokwon* (司譯院) was established to continue this tradition. As Lee (2008) explains, middle-class citizens favored these interpreter schools, as interpreters accompanied envoys from the ruling class on scheduled tributary visits to China. These interpreters often purchased valuable items in China and imported them back to Korea, allowing them to accumulate significant wealth through official international trade. Over time, interpreters in the Joseon Dynasty played an essential role in society, becoming some of the wealthiest individuals through their engagement in international trade, especially between China, Korea, and Japan. Their positive contributions to society through trade and facilitating the nation's exchange of goods were highly emphasized throughout the Joseon period.

Thus, even before Koreans first encountered the English language in the nineteenth century, they had already recognized the practical value of foreign language skills for achieving success. Following the ratification of a commercial treaty between Korea and the United States in 1882, English, in particular, was seen as a powerful tool for attaining wealth and social advancement. In 1883, the first public English school was established to train interpreters for customs offices. In 1886, this public English school was expanded and became known as *Yookyeong'gongwon* (育英公院), or the

Royal English School (further details can be found in Chap. 2). Western missionaries, primarily from the United States, also played a significant role in establishing mission schools, which trained English-Korean interpreters. As Korea rapidly modernized, English came to be recognized as the language of the United States, and the demand for English interpreters surged across the country, fostering a positive attitude toward English among Koreans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Unlike China, where English education vacillated between nationalism and pragmatism, Korea did not exhibit a regressive stance toward learning English. Instead, English education was actively promoted in the early twentieth century and became associated with empowerment through learning. A notable example of this is depicted in Yi Kwang-su's novel *Mujeong* (無情) (1917), which portrays America as a land of hope and advanced civilization. The protagonist, Mr. Lee Hyungsik, is an English teacher who plans to study abroad in the United States after a romantic relationship with Ms. Kim Sunhyeong. During this period, proficiency in English was seen as a pathway to upward social mobility in Korean society, particularly after the abolition of the traditional *Gwageo* exam in 1894. This abolition, part of the *Gabo* Reform initiated by the royal court, eliminated the civil service exam based on Chinese classics. After the *Gabo* Reform, in place of the *Gwageo* exams, the Joseon Dynasty improved its civil service appointment system by allowing each government department to recommend candidates based on their specific needs. The recommended candidates were then selected through examinations that assessed knowledge in modern disciplines such as economics, law, political science, and diplomacy. For the selection of English interpreters, candidates were chosen through exams from among graduates of English schools, including those from *Yookyeong'gongwon.*

Japanese colonization (1910–1945) had a significant impact on English education in Korea as well. During this period, English was integrated into the regular curriculum. However, Japan's colonial policy restricted Koreans' access to higher education, limiting opportunities even at the elementary school level. Written tests became mandatory for admission to middle school, high school, and college, but only a select few students were admitted. Japan's educational policy at the time was one of obscurantism, intended to maintain control by limiting the knowledge of colonized people. Despite these constraints, Korean students continued to strive for higher education, with English being one of the core subjects on admission tests.

As stated earlier, English education in Japan emphasized written English, particularly reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. This approach, which had proven effective during Japan's own modernization in the nineteenth century, was also applied in colonized Korea in the early twentieth century. As a result, Korea's prior focus on oral proficiency in English shifted toward an emphasis on reading and vocabulary, driven largely by the competitive nature of admission tests.

The use of English as a tool for internal competition among Korean students during the Japanese colonial period shares common origins with the post-liberation view of English as valuable for employment and career advancement. Both stemmed from a desire to gain a competitive edge over fellow Koreans. Following Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, the establishment of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1948, and the Korean War (1950–1953), competition remained a central

theme in South Korea's economic development during the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Korean War left the country in ruins, lacking the infrastructure necessary for sustainable development. In response, South Korea expedited post-war reconstruction under the leadership of President Park Chung Hee, who came to power after a military coup on May 16, 1961. Park's economic development plan propelled South Korea toward rapid growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s, despite significant suppression of human rights.

The hosting of major international events, such as the Asian Games in 1986 and the Summer Olympic Games in 1988, further accelerated the country's economic growth into the 1990s. This rapid transformation saw South Korea evolve from a predominantly agrarian society into a manufacturing and heavy industry powerhouse within a single generation. As a result, quantifiable tests became the most efficient way to identify top students and employees. English test scores were a key determinant in admission to higher education, and many job applicants were required to submit scores from tests like the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States.

English proficiency, particularly test scores, became essential for Korean youth as English was established as a critical subject alongside Korean and mathematics. It held substantial weight in college entrance exams and was often a prerequisite for employment and career advancement. Starting in the 1990s, the belief in the importance of English proficiency was reinforced by the government under the slogan of strengthening national competitiveness. This policy contributed to heightened internal competition among students. During the 1990s and early 2000s, students with high English test scores were given preference in high school and college admissions. As a result, parents increasingly invested in their children's English education, with wealthier families sending their children to English-speaking countries, often accompanied by their mothers. For families unable to afford this, private English academies, or *hagwon*s, became a popular alternative, leading to a boom in the private education sector at the turn of the twenty-first century.

According to Park (2021), Koreans embraced a form of "upward egalitarianism" during the country's economic development, viewing competition as an unavoidable cost of nation-building. From this perspective, the prioritization of English, particularly after the Korean War in the 1950s, had a positive impact. English served a utilitarian purpose, becoming a major subject in school curricula and a key component of college entrance exams. This focus on English contributed to the development of a highly educated workforce, which played a significant role in advancing Korea's national economy. As a result, the average level of English proficiency in Korea increased, although oral proficiency remains an area of weakness for many.

Recent trends in Korea reveal a close connection between social class and English proficiency. The educational gap, particularly in access to English education, has drawn increased attention, especially when viewed in conjunction with household income. Families without the financial means to provide their children with high-quality private English education are concerned about the potential for an intergenerational lack of English fluency. This phenomenon is often referred to as the "English

divide" in Korea. The Ministry of Education has been actively addressing this issue, attempting to curb the upper class's overspending on private English education in the twenty-first century.

It is important to note that English is now closely tied to upward social mobility, as it serves as a global lingua franca, offering career and promotion opportunities around the world. While the "English divide" is not unique to Korea, English plays an especially prominent role in reinforcing meritocracy in Korean society. This is due to the country's strong emphasis on education and the intense competition for better employment opportunities.

1.3 The Organization of the Book

The introductory chapter provides an overview of the historical progression of English language teaching and learning in Korea since the establishment of the first English institution in 1883 with specific references to English education in China and Japan. It examines the sociopolitical influences that have shaped Korean perspectives on English education over the past 140 years and their consistent impact on education policies. Additionally, the chapter outlines the structure of the book and introduces the main ideas covered in each chapter.

The first phase of the book explores English education in Korea before the establishment of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1948, covered in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Chap. 2 focuses on the late nineteenth century through the Korean Empire, highlighting how English was viewed as a tool for social mobility, with prominent figures like Dr. Rhee Syngman serving as examples. Chap. 3 examines the role of English education during the Japanese Colonial Period (1910–1945), particularly in competitive exams and academic credentialism. Chap. 4 discusses the U.S. Military Government Period (1945–1948), emphasizing how American influence reshaped English education, signaling the beginning of modern approaches in South Korea.

The second phase, spanning from the Korean War to the late twentieth century, encompasses Chapters 5 through 10. Chap. 5 addresses the post-war period and the implementation of the First National Curriculum in South Korea, highlighting the growing importance of English for sociopolitical and economic reasons. Chapters 6 to 10 review subsequent curriculum periods (Second to Sixth National Curricula, 1963–1997), showing how English education evolved amid rapid economic development. These chapters trace the shift from traditional grammar-translation methods to more communicative approaches, with key moments like the introduction of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and the increasing role of private education.

The third phase covers the twenty-first century and includes Chapters 11 and 12. Chap. 11 focuses on the Seventh National Curriculum period (1997–2007), when South Korea began emphasizing communicative competence in English as it entered the information age. Chap. 12 examines developments from 2007 onwards, including the integration of digital tools and AI, as well as efforts to reduce the "English divide"

and promote competency-based education. These chapters reflect South Korea's ongoing modernization and the growing role of English in a globalized world.

Finally, Chap. 13 provides a comprehensive conclusion, summarizing the historical progression of English education in Korea, the challenges it has faced, and its evolving role in the twenty-first century, shaped by digital and technological advancements.

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