

The Presentation of Culture in Korean English Textbooks

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Abstract

L2 speakers of English now outnumber L1 speakers by at least three to one, making English a bridge between people of different races, religions, and ethnic/cultural groups. Yet many L2 English curricula and materials used in Korea mislead learners about the role of the language by focusing on L1 speakers' cultures and propagating the false notion that L1 speakers own the English language. In Korean English education, learners are not made familiar with the concepts of "world English," "global English," and "international English." Instead, pedagogical materials treat English as a possession of British and North American cultures. This paper argues that exposure to a multicultural curriculum allows Korean EFL learners to see that they share many common experiences with other people throughout the world and, ultimately, that English is important not just for scholastic and professional goals, but for understanding and interacting with people of other cultures all over the world. The paper also presents a study comparing three textbook series used in Korea (national English textbooks authorized by the government, imported Oxford Press textbooks, and textbooks produced by Korean English educators). The study refers to the 7th national curriculum's specifications for cultural content to analyze the role of culture in the textbooks.

Keywords

Culture, multicultural, globalization, international, American, British, English language

Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has become the prime means of world communication, playing a crucial role in sharing knowledge, information, skills, and attitudes across nations. Hence, English ability has become essential to academic achievement and professional success in many countries. The tremendous power English exerts today is very much related to the

economic and political position of the USA. English can be a bridge between people of different races, religions, ethnicities, and cultural groups. But in most Korean teaching materials, mainstream British or North American culture dominates, with little or no attention given to other cultures. This leads to negative consequences for Korean learners, because it reinforces a false sense of British-American L1 speakers' ownership of the English language and a misunderstanding of the contemporary role of English in the world. English learners today should be exposed to the perspectives and frames of reference of other cultures.

1 Previous studies

Ra (1999) analyzed cultural elements in 12 English textbook series authorized by the Korean government for 3rd to 5th grades under the 6th national curriculum. She categorized cultural content as Korean, British-American, and universal. She then examined how cultural content in each unit reflected the curriculum. However, Ra did not analyze the materials by grade, which could lead to inaccuracy due to different word frequencies in each grade.

Kim (2005) analyzed 5th and 6th grade English textbooks for cultural content, social and cultural topics, and cultural background, based on the national curriculum. Kim also categorized cultural content as Korean, British-American, and universal. Specifically, according to the cultural content suggested by the curriculum, she examined cultural topics in each unit to understand how intentionally the textbooks addressed culture. She also discussed differences in both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior between British-American and Korean society.

This study analyzes the cultural elements of the textbooks page by page, not by unit, and categorizes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Words are considered linguistic and images/picture are considered non-linguistic. The study categorizes cultural elements as Korean (KC), British-American (BAC), other

(OC), and multicultural (MC).

2 Methodology

This study examines cultural content in three textbook series used in Korea: (i) a national series authorized by the government, (ii) an imported Oxford Press series, and (iii) a series written, designed, and produced by Korean English educators.

2.1 The nationally authorized series

Although four different textbook series are authorized by the government, this study analyzes *Chunjae Education*, by Haam, which is the most widely used.

2.2 The imported series

Oxford Press's *Let's Go* series, a long-term bestseller, is widely used in private English academies for elementary school students.

2.3 The Korean-educator-designed series

Hye Jee's Family Trip is written and designed by Korean educators. It is specifically intended to fulfill the needs of Korean EFL learners.

3 Results

3.1 The nationally authorized series

The Korean national English textbooks are designed to be visual, and they contain little text. The largest cultural category of pictures was multicultural (14.8%), followed by Korean (13.1%).

Table 1: Cultures in *Chunjae Education*

	BAC	KC	OC	MC
Text	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.4%
Picture	5.0%	13.1%	3.6%	14.8%

3.2 The imported series

Let's Go never refers to Korean culture. The text refers to the other categories in the order: British-American (7.7%); other (7.0%); multicultural (6.5%). For the pictures, the order is: British-American (28.2%); multicultural (8.1%); other (7.2%).

Table 2: Cultures in *Let's Go*

	BAC	KC	OC	MC
Text	7.7%	0.0%	7.0%	6.5%
Picture	28.2%	0.0%	7.2%	8.1%

3.3 The Korean-educator-designed series

Hye Jee's Family Trip employs both text and pictures. For text, the largest categories were other (20.5%) and multicultural (11.5%). For pictures, the largest category was other (21.8%), followed by Korean (9.6%), and British-American (4.5%).

Table 3: Cultures in *Hye Jee's Family Trip*

	BAC	KC	OC	MC
Text	2.6%	4.5%	20.5%	11.5%
Picture	4.5%	9.6%	21.8%	0.6%

4 Conclusion

Language is an expressive tool that reflects culture. Therefore, Korean English learners who are only exposed to the language in terms of British-American culture do not learn that English now reflects a vast diversity of cultures. Textbooks that lack cultural content referring to other cultures, such as those that are currently authorized by the Korean government and the *Let's Go* series, indirectly teach learners to accept British-American ownership of English. In contrast, *Hye Jee's Family Trip* is specifically designed for English learners in Korea by Korean educators and deliberately includes a well-distributed proportion of cultures. It is crucial for English education in Korea to employ more materials, like *Hye Jee's Family Trip*, that recognize the importance of multiple cultures in order for Korean learners to fully realize the role of English as a bridge among cultures and peoples worldwide.

References

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