Changes in English education during the pre- and post-Kim Jong Un Eras in North Korea: A comparative textbook analysis

Shinyu Oh1 · Tae-Young Kim1

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Abstract
This study explores how English education developed in North Korea by analyzing the characteristics of secondary English textbooks published in the pre– and post–Kim Jong Un eras. We performed comparative analyses of textbooks for six secondary schools—three each for the junior middle and senior middle schools—published before and after Kim Jong Un’s rule. The comparative analyses adopted Cunningsworth’s textbook evaluation framework to examine the textbooks’ composition and content: (1) aims and approaches, (2) design and organization, and (3) topic variety. The results showed significant changes in listening materials and activities, among others, as well as concurrent developments in teaching methods. Additionally, each unit significantly reduced the number of topics associated with the idolization of the Kim family and the deliberate vilification of capitalist countries and instead increased the integration of other subjects such as mathematics, science, and technology. This study showed that despite various changes, the aim of English education in North Korea continues to be the maintenance and further development of the socialist system through the improvement of students’ English proficiency. This study also discusses the coexistence of different perspectives such as liberal ideas in English textbooks while emphasizing ideology education and its possible ramifications on the future of English education in North Korea.

Keywords English education in North Korea · English textbook in North Korea · Textbook analysis · North Korean 2013 curriculum revision · Socialist system · Ideology education

Introduction
This paper investigated changes in English education during the 2010s in North Korea, officially the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and examined its aims and roles. North Korea is the most closed-off country in the world and is considered one of the most secretive and intransigent nations (Asia Briefing Ltd., 2012). After the separation of North and South Korea in 1945, North Korea established itself by adopting the Juche ideology, which is an application of Marxist–Leninist principles to national situations as claimed by Kim Il Sung (Lee, 2003; Li, 1972; Myers, 2011). The three central tenets of Juche ideology are Chaju (“domestic and foreign independence”), Charip (“economic independence”), and Chawi (“military independence”) (Lee, 2003, pp. 105–107). North Korea’s autarkic state ideology has led to anti-American propaganda (Won & Huntington, 2021), strengthening its hostility against capitalism and Western culture and consequently losing contact with English-speaking countries.

Although often labeled a “hermit kingdom,” North Korea has experienced different changes since the Kim Jong Un administration, which included signs of expanding and developing foreign relations and reforming the overall education system, particularly English education. Indeed, the purpose and role of English education in North Korea have changed along with the political positions and goals of each regime during the three intergenerational succession periods of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un (Cho et al., 2015; Hong & Kim, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020). Analyzing specific changes in English education after Kim Jong Un took power will provide insights into North Korea’s political approach to establish itself as a member of the global community as well as its aims for the overall reform of the
educational system, including that of English-language education. Hence, this paper critically evaluates North Korea’s English education and the changes in its aims, overall design, organization, and topics by analyzing the English textbooks used in its secondary schools. Considering these purposes, we aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the different aims and approaches of English textbooks published during the pre- and post-Kim Jong Un eras?
2. What are the different designs and organizations of English textbooks published during the pre- and post-Kim Jong Un eras?
3. What are the differences in topic variety among English textbooks published during the pre- and post-Kim Jong Un eras?

**Theoretical background**

**North Korea’s education system**

During the Kim Il Sung regime (1948–1994), North Korea achieved “the most important goal and task of implementing a compulsory education system that guarantees the rights and freedom of learning to the entire people (Cha, 2019, p. 255).” Accordingly, in 1975, the government established an 11-year compulsory education system ranging from one year of kindergarten to six years of secondary education (or middle school). In the 1980s, the country initiated a socialist egalitarian system of education by providing students with free compulsory education, which included textbooks, school uniforms, and other school supplies for these 11 years. In the mid-1990s, however, public education collapsed because of the “Arduous March,” a period marked by a devastating economic downturn and famine in North Korea after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Most North Koreans experienced extreme adversity, such as the collapse of public education and health care and even considerable hunger, triggering an inevitable, illegal migration to other countries, if not death (Chae, 2020; Kim & Oh, 2004).

From this crisis emerged a new generation called Jangmadang¹ (“an illegal market”) in North Korea, who kept their food production for themselves instead of surrendering it to the national rationing system. This generation, which became familiar with the capitalistic market system, experienced the de facto collapse of free and guaranteed education, nurturing anticommunist sentiments and pursuing individualism and liberal values. They became more interested in private property and material items than politics or ideology (Cho et al., 2013; Lee, 2007; Lim, 2006). Therefore, as will be described later in the Discussion section, focus is placed on North Korea’s methods to exert control over this generation and preserve its social system or the Juche ideology, especially in English education—the language of individualism and capitalism.

Since the 2000s, North Korea has been working toward rebuilding its communist regime and restoring public education, and one key strategy that has emerged is the policy of “practical principles in education (Cho, 2007, 2014).” The education policy of the Kim Jong Un regime (2011–present) continues the professionalism and efficiency of education by emphasizing competence. Kim Jong Un has embarked on the biggest educational innovation since the 2000s by spearheading school system reform and aiming to restore the free compulsory education that began during the Kim Il Sung era (Han & Lee, 2014).

The core of the reorganization of North Korea’s free compulsory education was the implementation of a 12-year school system: one year of kindergarten, five years of elementary school, and six years of middle school—three each for junior middle school (JMS) and senior middle school (SMS) (Han & Lee, 2014; Kim et al., 2015). Along with changes to the school system, North Korea announced its 2013 revised curriculum, with the most noteworthy changes being the strengthening of science, technology, and English education (Cho et al., 2015; Kang, 2020). This highlights the importance of examining the role and function of English education in North Korea, considering its newly assigned status, as ordinary people’s contact and exchanges with foreigners continue to be extremely limited in the country.

**The role and purpose of teaching English in North Korea**

The purpose of English education changed in accordance with each era’s political stance. From the 1940s to 2022, North Korea’s foreign language policies can be divided into seven periods (Kim, 2017; Yoon, 2020). Table 1 outlines these periods and the changes that took place over time.

As shown in Table 1, when Kim Il Sung took power in North Korea in 1946, foreign language education was highlighted as part of war preparations—the focus being the establishment of a simple military language (Hong & Kim, 2019; Kim, 1995; Yoon, 2020). This emphasized the languages of countries hostile to North Korea, which were Japanese and English. Students were required to learn commands such as “Hands up. Do not move or you will be shot,” or “Surrender and you will be spared. Obey or you shall die

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¹ Members of the Jangmadang generation were born in the 1980s and early 1990s and were raised during the Arduous March (Chae, 2020; Lim, 2006; Park, 2021).
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In 1948, this foreign language learning system, except for Russian, was abolished. From 1948 to 1963, North Korea halted the teaching of English to consolidate its socialist system and maximize its hostility against the United States, the enemy nation during the Korean War (1950–1953) (Lee, 2011). However, in 1964, North Korea resumed its English education to achieve the ultimate victory over English-speaking nations, but its disdain for Western culture persisted (Kim, 1995; Lee, 2011).

Later, in the mid-1960s, North Korea’s reintroduction of English education became a precursor to the English-oriented foreign language education that began in the 1970s. Kim (1995) stated that this was based on the functional aspect of foreign language education for international relations, which became relevant in the 1970s. For example, Kim Il Sung stated, “our international status and prestige are increasing day by day, and cooperation with other countries is strengthening, but there are not many people who know foreign languages, which hinders our foreign activities (Kim, 1995, p. 179).” Kim Il Sung also emphasized the need to learn foreign languages to study modern science and technology from other countries’ published works (Hong & Kim, 2019; Lee, 2011).

In the 1980s, English gradually replaced Russian as North Korea’s language of emphasis and became a regular subject for fourth-grade students from 1986 to 1990 (Lee, 2011). Additionally, with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1991, the country abolished the teaching of Russian as its first foreign language in September of the same year and, in 1995, established English as its only foreign language (Cho et al., 2015; Lee, 2011). Despite North Koreans’ restricted interactions with foreigners in North Korea, English education continued for practical purposes, such as learning advanced science and technology.

In 1994, after Kim Il Sung died, the Kim Jong Il regime (1994–2011) obtained support from the British Council. Specifically, English education for North Korean elites began at major universities in Pyongyang with native teachers from the United Kingdom, and progressive improvements were made to the overall North Korean English education, including the curriculum, textbooks, and teacher training (Hong & Kim, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020). As discussed previously, however, in the mid-1990s, the “Arduous March” led to the collapse of public education, which was free and compulsory, in North Korea.

Thus, at his inauguration, Kim Jong Un insisted on the restoration of free compulsory education, proposing the 2013 Revised Curriculum (RC), which emphasized the strengthening of science and technology education and English education (Chae, 2020; Cho et al., 2015; Joo & Uhm, 2019). Regarding English education, significant changes were initiated, such as the introduction of a new curriculum and the inclusion of audio materials. For example, the new curriculum increased the time spent on English instruction from 298 h of “Foreign Language” in middle school to 408 h of “English” classes after the 2013 RC, which represents North Korea’s focus on improving English education since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011. Based on these changes, this study analyzed the purposes and characteristics of English education in North Korea after 2011.

### Analysis of previous studies on North Korean English textbooks

Textbooks are a major instrument in a language-teaching classroom. In North Korea’s case, it is only through textbooks that most students are exposed to English. The
country follows a state-authored textbook system in all subjects, including English, and publishes a single textbook for each subject to realize its political and educational ideology through publishing (Kim et al., 2017).

Thus, when studying English education in North Korea, textbook analysis (i.e., content analysis and topic-based analysis) has become the primary research instrument (Hwang & Kim, 2019). English textbooks have been considered objective artifacts to “identify the level of education required for North Korean students, know the intentions and directions of the North Korean authorities to educate them, and predict what direction the North will take in the future (Yoo & Kim, 2018, p. 413).” Research on English education in North Korea has focused mainly on analyzing the topic and content of textbooks by era (Hong & Kim, 2019; Hwang & Kim, 2019; Joo & Uhm, 2019; Kim et al., 2017; Lee, 2014; Oh & Kim, 2020; Park et al., 2000; Yoo & Kim, 2018, 2019).

Scholarly analysis of North Korean English textbooks, both quantitative and qualitative, has either focused only on textbooks within a specific period in the country or compared them with South Korean English textbooks (Hong & Kim, 2019; Hwang & Kim, 2019; Joo & Uhm, 2019; Kim et al., 2017; Lee, 2014; Oh & Kim, 2020; Park et al., 2000; Yoo & Kim, 2018, 2019).

Table 2: Referenced English textbooks

| School                  | Junior middle school (JMS) | Senior middle school (SMS) |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| **Period**              | Pre-Kim Jong Un            | Post-Kim Jong Un           | Pre-Kim Jong Un era | Post-Kim Jong Un era |
| **Grade**               | 1                          | 2                          | 3                        | 1                        | 2                        | 3                        |
| **Year of publication** | 2002                       | 2001                       | 2002                     | 2013                     | 2014                     | 2015                     |
| **Number of units**     | 19                         | 16                         | 17                       | 16                       | 12                       | 12                       |
| **Pages**               | 204                        | 207                        | 163                      | 159                      | 151                      | 159                      |
| **Grade**               | 1                          | 2                          | 3                        | 1                        | 2                        | 3                        |
| **Year of publication** | 2008                       | 2008                       | 2008                     | 2013                     | 2014                     | 2015                     |
| **Number of units**     | 15                         | 16                         | 9                        | 9                        | 8                        | 7                        |
| **Pages**               | 119                        | 154                        | 99                       | 127                      | 119                      | 111                      |

2 The textbooks used in this study were obtained from the Information Center on North Korea at the National Library of Korea in Seocho-gu, Seoul, South Korea.
Six textbooks were published by Gyoyukdoseo Chulpansa (Education Book Publisher) before the revision and the rest by Oegugmundoseo Chulpansa (Foreign Literature Publisher) after the revision. Although these publishers were different, they were comparable. As stated in Section “Analysis of previous studies on North Korean English textbooks”, the North Korean education system is closely regulated by the state; therefore, publishers are de facto government agencies with no real compositional differences between them.

Studies have used various frameworks to analyze North Korean English textbooks (e.g., Cunningsworth, 1995; Littlejohn, 1998; Skierso, 1991; Tucker, 1978), with criteria seemingly overlapping and details showing slight differences depending on how specific and comprehensive the criteria are. Cunningsworth (1995) presented a set of textbook evaluation standards including aims, design, language content, topics, methodology, and teachers’ books. However, North Korean textbooks do not contain detailed information on the actual materials and methods used in classrooms or on the books that teachers should consult. Therefore, we decided to use only three criteria, which we could identify in the textbooks: (1) aims and approaches, (2) design and organization, and (3) topics (Table 3).

From the textbooks’ covers, prefaces, and introductions, we extracted the aims of English education in North Korea. We also made systematic inferences regarding English education approaches through the number of lesson hours devoted to English in each grade and ascertained teachers’ roles in the classroom through their instructional methods and assigned tasks. By comparing content organization, content sequence, the inclusion of reviews for each unit, and references for supplementary studies, we described the overall design and organizational aspects of pre- and post-RC textbooks. Using the titles or keywords of the reading passages, we categorized their topics to compare their content diversity and links to other subjects in each period. To enhance the reliability of data interpretation, we mainly followed the analytic methods that studies on North Korean textbooks have used, employing two experts with doctoral degrees in English education to cross-check the findings.

### Results

#### Aims and approaches of English education in North Korea

The primary aims of North Korea’s English education can be identified from textbook covers and prefaces. From the prefaces of pre-Kim Jong Un textbooks, the aim was to improve English skills, especially reading and comprehension along with writing and speaking: “The best way to learn English quickly and accurately is to read, write, and talk a lot. (...) It is important to improve students’ speaking skills and to develop reading ability (translated by Author, SMS 3, 2008, p. 2),” and “To be good at a foreign language, you have to read it aloud and write it often (JMS 1, 2001, p. 2).”

| Evaluation criteria | Contents of evaluation |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| Aims and approaches | What are their main reasons for learning English? What are the aims of the English program? How much time is available? What is the accepted role of teachers in the education system? What methodological approach do they tend to prefer? |
| Design and organization | How is the content organized? How is the content sequenced? Is there adequate recycling and revision? Are there reference sections for grammar, etc.? Is some of the material suitable for individual study? |
| Topic (reading contents) | Is there enough variety and range of topics? Is there sufficient material of genuine interest to learners? At the school level, do they link with other subjects? Are the topics sophisticated enough in content for the learners but at the right level linguistically? |

### Notes

3 LittleJohn (1998) suggested three categories for evaluating textbooks: (1) What is there (description, physical aspects)? (2) What is required of the users (tasks)? (3) What is implied (aims, teacher and learner roles, learner’s process competence)?

4 Skierso (1991) suggested checking “bibliographical data,” “aims and goals,” “subject matter,” “vocabulary and structures,” “layout and physical makeup,” and “teacher’s manual.”

5 Tucker (1978) proposed relatively detailed criteria such as “pronunciation criteria,” “grammar criteria,” “content criteria,” and “general criteria.” The activity types are categorized according to their target language skill. In pre-RC textbooks, dialogs and activities that target students’ English communication, such as “listening, asking, and answering” and “looking [i.e., observing], asking, and answering” were counted as CLT activities. Meanwhile, post-RC textbooks contained CLT activities in each section, such as “listening and speaking” in JMS textbooks, in contrast to “speaking,” “listening,” or sometimes “pronunciation” in SMS textbooks.
After the 2013 RC, textbooks continued to adhere to the previous educational guidelines, such as emphasizing reading and speaking skills, but expanded their aims to include the need for the authentic and wide use of English for “developing international exchanges” and “embracing advanced science and technology (JMS 3, 2013, p. 2).” Figure 1 shows two textbook covers that reflect how students studied English during each period. In the pre-RC textbook, a student merely read the text aloud, but in the post-RC textbook, a student used earphones to listen to the text and wrote down the word, “map”, as shown in the figure. Notably, on the cover of the revised textbook is an illustration of a North Korean rocket launch, called Eunha (“galaxy”). We considered it reasonable to infer that the aim of English education in North Korea is to link English with science.

Since the revision, textbooks have not only emphasized the practical use of English through listening materials but have also facilitated communication-focused classes through various activities. With regard to listening, pre-RC textbooks focused on reading, pronunciation, and dialogs but contained no activities for listening directly to spoken English. Figure 2 presents two pages from a pre-RC textbook.

The textbook in the figure outlines the common process of “Text, new words, and practice” and does not encourage learners to actively use, practice, infer, or learn English expressions through communicative activities. Rather, students learn by listening to teachers’ explanations of grammar and sentence structure and then translating the given sentences or writing answers in English.

Meanwhile, the 2000s saw the emergence of practical principles in education, and post-RC textbooks focused on the authentic use of English by suggesting various communication-oriented activities such as listening and speaking. Figure 3 is an example of how post-RC textbooks clearly distinguished among listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and using the language and provided instructions for class activities.

Each unit consists of a variety of activities from listening to dialogs to conversations with peers, which help students not only understand but also use the target content in class. This is consistent with the first detailed goal of teaching English in JMS in North Korea, that is, “to find self-directed ways of learning through active attitude and cooperative learning (Cho et al., 2015, p. 105).” Accordingly, students are strongly encouraged to participate in class and work with one another to learn. This may have created an environment where students are granted “a higher degree of autonomy in the classroom (Mascolo, 2009, p. 8).” Simply put, the post-RC teaching approach seems to approximate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)—letting students develop their own ideas and think aloud—rather than Grammar Translation Method (GTM) or the Audio-lingual Method (ALM).
where students simply repeat after their teachers (Hong & Kim, 2019; Kang, 2020).

However, despite the recent CLT-oriented changes in English education in North Korea, the fundamental purpose of English learning is the same: textbook prefaces in both periods emphasize the need to cultivate patriotism and create citizens who will build a stronger, self-reliant nation. For instance, the pre-RC prefaces declare that “students must learn foreign languages to support the Korean Revolution” (SMS 1, 2008, p. 2) and that “students must learn hard to lay the foundation of English and this is for the Korean Revolution (JMS 2, 2002, p. 2).” In addition, the post-RC textbooks state that “students should be well prepared to play the lead in the future and to be the reliable pillars of socialist Korea by faithfully accepting the order of military-first revolution of the respected General Kim Jong Un (JMS 3, 2015, p. 2).” JMS 3 (2015) also states that “foreign language education at the stage of secondary general education must also be bolstered to embrace advanced science and technology around the world (p. 2),” while JMS 2 (2014) demands that students “respect the words of our dear General Kim Jong Un, learn hard, and prepare to be a great person responsible for the splendid future of the strong Korea (p. 3).” Given these, the purpose of English education in North Korea is to teach advanced science and technology and English proficiency across grades and periods, serving “the communist state, rather than individual prosperity (Won & Huntington, 2021, p. 270).”

Design and organization of English textbooks in North Korea

Textbooks after the 2013 RC preserved the overall content organization of the previous versions, with a preface, lessons, revision, and appendix. However, there were also significant changes from the books’ covers (Fig. 1) and the details in each unit to their appendixes (Appendix 1).

Meanwhile, with regard to textbook design and organization, the units of the revised textbooks were completely overhauled. As will be described later, pre-RC textbooks already adopted English education based on the four language skills, providing activities for reading, writing, and sometimes simple dialogs. However, besides dialogs, no other additional listening materials were identified, and speaking activities for authentic communication were prioritized less than in post-RC textbooks (Table 4). This may be attributed to the adverse economic situation during the Arduous March at the turn of the century. Further, the resulting lack of competent, qualified teachers and teaching infrastructure (Oum, 2017) may have prevented a balanced inclusion of the four subskills of English education.
However, to improve practical English skills, the 2013 RC textbooks contain improved communication-oriented activities that focus on listening and speaking, such as pair and group discussions (Table 4). The revised JMS textbooks consisted of three sections, that is, listening and speaking, reading and writing, and language in use (or grammar), whereas the SMS textbooks presented seven sections including all four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) along with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Accordingly, activities in the post-RC textbooks for both JMS and SMS were diversified, indicating changes from the reading-, writing-, and grammar-oriented English education of the pre-RC textbooks to the communication-oriented English education of the post-RC textbooks.

Table 4 presents the percentages of the different activity types included for each grade, school level, and period. Despite differences in the portion of each activity type between grades on average, a significant increase has been observed in activities for improving communicative functions in textbooks after the revision (e.g., 9.6% to 36.6% in communicative activities) and in the content of the activities as will be described later. Most tasks in the pre-RC textbooks were for the individual, such as simply reading new words from the text, answering questions based on the text, and translating Korean to English or vice versa (e.g., “Read

The activity types are categorized according to their target language skill. In pre-RC textbooks, dialogs and activities that target students’ English communication, such as “listening, asking, and answering” and “looking [i.e., observing], asking, and answering” were counted as CLT activities. Meanwhile, post-RC textbooks contained CLT activities in each section, such as “listening and speaking” in JMS textbooks, in contrast to “speaking,” “listening,” or sometimes “pronunciation” in SMS textbooks.
and answer,” “Fill in the blanks,” and “Say in English [translation],” as shown in Fig. 4). Even dialogs or communicative activities did not offer students any opportunity to express their opinions but only to alternately speak with the person beside them using fixed expressions.

In the post-RC textbooks, however, each unit included diverse activities for communicative function with detailed instructions. Students practice pronunciation by repeating listening materials and completing communication tasks such as asking questions or talking about the given pictures (Fig. 5). The listening and speaking sections provide different activities that encourage students to communicate with peers or in groups and express and share their own ideas rather than merely answer using given expressions (e.g., “Ask your partner for some advice in the following situations” in JMS 2, p. 43, and “Where did you go last week? Ask and answer in pairs” in JMS 2, p. 23). These changes establish that unlike its previous textbooks that focused on reading, interpreting, and writing, North Korea has decided to endorse communication-focused English education (Hong & Kim, 2019).

As a result, one can assume that changes also took place in teaching methods and class formats. Pre-RC textbook activities adopted the typical GTM approach or ALM, in which students repeat simple dialogs or sentence patterns. Meanwhile, the post-RC textbooks included enhanced listening and speaking activities, promoting authentic communication between students, with MP3 files and CDs (Cho et al., 2015). The restrictions on information discourse make it nearly impossible to calculate the exact number of audiovisual materials for all school grades in North Korea, but it seems evident that communication-oriented listening and speaking classes are prioritized more now than before. Given the textbooks’ detailed instructions and various activities (e.g., problem-solving in pairs/groups, finding answers from classmates by interviewing, etc.), post-RC textbooks show notable improvements. North Korean students are now encouraged to use English for communicative purposes rather than simply completing controlled activities.

**Topics in English textbooks in North Korea**

The topic for each reading text is important for the students to learn the authentic target language, and the revised textbooks reflected different changes in their topics, such as (1) daily life at home or school, (2) idolization of the leader or promoting patriotism, (3) nature, (4) other subject-related topics, and (5) science or technology. Table 5 summarizes the JMS contents before and after the revision including the proportions of the overall units that each topic represented.

Table 5 shows that the two most common topics in both the pre- and post-RC JMS textbooks were daily life and the idolization of the leader/patriotism. The pervasiveness of everyday life as a topic (up to 94.7% of one book) seems

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7 In the table, other subjects refer to reading content integrated with mathematics, such as word problems: “There are five boys. Each boy has two balls. How many balls do the boys have in all?” and “Let me see. Five times two make ten. Therefore, there are ten balls in all (JMS 3, 2002, p. 102).”
relevant to students’ lower English proficiency before 2013. For example, the pre-RC JMS 1 textbook featured a preliminary section that taught students the English alphabets and the most basic English greetings (e.g., “Hello” and “Good morning”). Additionally, in lesson 1, students merely learn basic-level English words such as *cap*, *bag*, and *map* with no dialogs or reading passages; subsequent chapters introduced concepts such as using pronouns or *be* verbs through basic sentences and dialogs. Given the students’ low English proficiency in the first grade of middle school, pre-RC textbooks could not incorporate specific topics in full sentences but used daily life content.

In contrast, post-RC textbooks are more advanced because they include the English alphabets, *be* verbs, and *wh*-questions in lesson 1; pre-RC books do not discuss these until lesson 5. Post-RC textbooks also present much less basic content associated with daily life at home and school, from an average of 90.3% of pre-RC JMS textbooks to an average of 64.9% of post-RC JMS textbooks. Additionally, the pre-Kim Jong Un textbooks only cover...

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**Table 5** Topics of the JMS textbook reading texts before and after Kim Jong Un

| Grade | Pre-RC textbooks | Post-RC textbooks |
|-------|------------------|-------------------|
|       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Daily/school life | 18 (94.7%) | 15 (93.8%) | 14 (82.3%) | 8 (61.5%) | 9 (75%) | 7 (58.3%) |
| Idolization of the leader/patriotism | 1 (5.3%) | 1 (6.2%) | – | 1 (7.7%) | 1 (8.3%) | 2 (16.7%) |
| Nature | – | – | 1 (5.9%) | 2 (15.4%) | 2 (16.7%) | 2 (16.7%) |
| Other subjects | – | – | 2 (11.8%) | 1 (7.7%) | – | – |
| Science/technology | – | – | – | 1 (7.7%) | – | 1 (8.3%) |
| Total number of units | 19 | 16 | 17 | 13 | 12 | 12 |
| Total percentage (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
basic words and a few sentences whereas the post-RC books include dialogs and texts on more diverse contents.

One could understand this change through the systematic inclusion of elementary English education in North Korea. The post-RC system added two hours of English classes per week into the curriculum for elementary schools from the fourth grade onward, teaching basic English expressions such as “Greetings,” as well as “Numbers” and the “English alphabet” and their sounds (Kim, 2020; Lee, 2019). These changes in elementary English education in the post-RC system are reflected in the more innovative content in post-RC JMS textbooks (Kim, 2020).

Another major topic found in the textbooks at the JMS level is the idolatry of the Kim family and overall patriotism (Table 6). As stated previously, English education is a useful tool for inspiring patriotism and maintaining the political regime and social system (Kang, 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Oh & Kim, 2020; Park & Kim, 2020). To that end, textbooks from both periods explicitly emphasize idolization and loyalty to the Kim family, which is a content feature unique to North Korean textbooks and not found in any other English textbooks globally.

As noted above, the textbooks now include science and technology as well as other subjects including nature. Science and technology stand out because these have been among the most important subjects pursued in North Korea since the 2013 RC. Even before the Kim Jong Un era, the introduction and development of advanced science and technology have been a focus (Lee et al., 2005). Notably, reading passages dealing with science and technology, especially computer content, was first included in post-RC textbooks (Hong & Kim, 2019) (Table 5). Accordingly, the post-RC English textbooks continue to highlight science and scientific development, especially respect for scientists, as shown in the following passage:

My father studies space science. He believes science plays an important role in our life. I want to be a scientist like him (JMS 3, 2015, p. 66).

Planes will be faster and flying will not be expensive. Cars will use new, clean fuels and they will go faster and more safely. (...) Medical technology will cure many diseases. Soon it will help blind and deaf people to see and hear again. Machines will do hard jobs in factories, offices and on farms. People will not do heavy work. They will have lots of free time. Computers will be very small and light. People will carry them everywhere. (p. 130)

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Table 6 Sample JMS text passages on the idolization of the Kim family and patriotism

| Period  | Grade | Contents                                                                 |
|---------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pre-revision | 1     | “We live in Korea. We are Korean boys and girls. We are happy.” (p. 160) |
|         | 2     | “General Kim Jong Il is our father. We are sons and daughters of General Kim Jong Il. We are very happy.” (p. 3) |
| Post-revision | 1     | “Let’s learn for Korea!” (p. 10)                                          |
|         | 2     | “We are all happy under the warm care of the respected Supreme Leader Marshal Kim Jong Un.” (p. 86) |
|         | 3     | “This morning we went up Mansu Hill and made a bow before the statues of the great Generalissimos Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.” (p. 22) |
|         |       | “We have to defend our country. I think it is the most important. (...) They all want to be true to the Songun-based revolutionary leadership of the respected Marshal Kim Jong Un.” (p. 66) |

Table 7 Topics in English Language SMS Textbooks in North Korea

| Grade | Pre-RC textbooks | Post-RC textbooks |
|-------|------------------|-------------------|
|       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Idolization of the leader/patriotism | 5 (33.3%) | 5 (31.3%) | 6 (66.7%) | 1 (11.1%) | 2 (25%) | 3 (42.9%) |
| Daily/school life | 3 (20%) | 3 (18.7%) | 1 (11.1%) | 2 (22.2%) | 3 (37.5%) | 2 (28.6%) |
| Science/technology | – | – | – | 2 (22.2%) | 2 (25%) | 2 (28.6%) |
| Literature | 2 (13.3%) | 5 (31.3%) | 2 (22.2%) | – | – | – |
| Nature | 3 (20%) | – | – | 1 (11.1%) | 1 (12.5%) | – |
| Etc | 1 (6.7%) | – | – | 2 (22.2%) | – | – |
| Distorted descriptions of other countries | 1 (6.7%) | 3 (18.7%) | – | – | – | – |
| Other subjects | – | – | – | 1 (11.1%) | – | – |
| Total number of units | 15 | 16 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 7 |
| Total percentage (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
Table 7 presents the topics we compiled from the SMS textbooks before and after Kim Jong Un and the 2013 RC as well as their proportions in the books.

According to Table 7, among other differences between the JMS and SMS textbooks, the latter still contain topics associated with daily life at home and school and the idolization of the leader/patriotism. However, contrary to the focus of JMS books on daily/school life, in SMS textbooks, the idolization of the leader and patriotism comprised a majority of grade 3 books both before and after the 2013 RC.

Besides the shift in emphasis in SMS textbooks, the pre- and post-RC textbooks also present different figures to be idolized. Pre-RC textbooks focus on Kim Jong II and Kim Il Sung (e.g., “The great leader Marshal Kim Jong II,” SMS 3, Unit 9). The first unit of each book also discusses the Juche ideology or presents works for idolization. Schools emphasize respect for Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong II by celebrating their birthdays and hanging their pictures on the front walls of classrooms. Conversely, post-RC textbooks contain references to Kim Jong Un, as he is naturally an important topic. However, he highlights the superiority of science in his time and the legitimacy of his political regime. Kim Jong Un appears to seek the same awe and respect as Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong II not just for himself but also for the achievement of the nation under his rule (Cho et al., 2015).

Pre-RC textbook content on idolizing the Kim family also emphasized the superiority of socialism by presenting negative views of South Korea and the United States (Oh & Kim, 2020). The stories highlight the poverty and racism in America: “Here is a story about some poor people in America. The Brown family lived in the south of America. Mr. Brown was a farm worker, and he did not have much money” (SMS 1, 2008, pp. 41–42), and “This is a story about a poor American Negro (sic) boy. (...) Though he was carried to a hospital by the passer-by, he was refused medical treatment, because he was a Negro boy (SMS 2, 2008, pp. 83–84).” Another example tells the story of a poor girl in South Korea who was hit and seriously injured by a U.S. armored vehicle, and one textbook tells students that these tragedies are frequent in South Korea because of “U.S. beasts” (Fig. 6).

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instead, they focus more on science and technology and integrated education like the revised JMS textbooks.

**Discussion**

After Kim Jong Un assumed power as North Korea's supreme leader, he reformed the overall education system based on two goals: (1) “economic development by advancing science and technology” and (2) “strengthening socialist values by suppressing growing capitalistic individualism among his people (Kang, 2020, p. 32).” While the vilification of imperialism and capitalism represented by the United States and South Korea, idolization of the Kim family, and patriotism were heavily emphasized before the revision (Oh & Kim, 2020), these contents faded after the revision. The post-RC English textbooks minimized the content on idolization, featured more liberal and humanistic values, focused on practical values, and emphasized listening and speaking activities, such as encouraging students to communicate with each other and share their ideas in small groups.

Whether such changes in English education and its textbooks are consistent with the current political situation in North Korea is a noteworthy question. Regardless of the humanistic ideas or features expressed in post-RC English textbooks, North Korea still adheres to the Juche ideology at the forefront. Even in the twenty-first century, North Korean schools still function “as a key institution through which national citizens and elites were to be created” (Ramirez et al., 2016, p. 59) in the context of the homogenization of the masses in their own communist ideology.

Besides the Juche ideology discussed in textbooks, the Jangmadang generation, which represents a prominent social issue in North Korea, provides new implications for changes in the country’s English education afterward. Studies (Chae, 2019; Cho et al., 2013; Lee, 2018) have found that Jangmadang has been associated with the introduction of individualism and the capitalistic marketplace in North Korea since the Arduous March in the 1990s. This compelled the North Korean government to submit to, nurture, and control the generation according to its policy needs (Ministry of Unification, n.d.). North Korea still attempts to exert control and maintain its social system or its Juche ideology by controlling the thoughts of the Jangmadang generation (Lee, 2018; Park, 2021). In this regard, North Korean educators may soon witness a drastic disparity between the liberal, humanistic values in post-RC English textbooks, which match the Jangmadang generation’s characteristics, and their dire need to uphold a more rigid Juche ideology to tighten thought control.

This prospect is also supported by the escalating political tension between North Korea and the United States. President Joseph Biden has expressed a much more rigid stance toward North Korea than his predecessor Donald Trump. In April 2021, the Biden administration completed their review of the North Korea policy and promulgated the policy of “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” (Klein, 2021). However, North Korea continued to develop its nuclear capabilities, which is regarded as “one of the most serious threats to political stability in Northeast Asia and, more broadly, in the Asia–Pacific region (Lankov, 2018, para 2).”

Based on the abovementioned internal political insecurity suffered by the Jangmadang generation and their adverse diplomatic situation particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea may continue to strengthen its antagonistic stance toward Western society and South Korea, which could conflict with the practical and liberal ideas expressed in post-RC English textbooks. For instance, as a step toward suppressing the new generation’s laissez-faire attitude, the current education policies based on English textbooks may be replaced by retrogressive revisions that conform to their ideological inculcation.

Therefore, considering all these situations, scholarly attention must be paid to future changes in North Korea’s English education since it may take one of two paths: serve as a tool for international communication or perpetuate the Juche ideology to consolidate internal unity.

**Conclusions**

This study examined changes in North Korea’s English education before and after the 2013 RC through a comparative textbook analysis. Through English-language education, the 2013 RC fosters science and technology-related skills (Chae, 2020; Joo & Uhm, 2019). Note that the English textbooks obtained from the two eras are more similar than different in terms of their purpose and ideological stance. Both pre- and post-RC English education hold a high regard for the advancement of science and technology in the country. Nevertheless, this study found notable differences in the revised textbooks in terms of their composition and content.

The most prominent features of post-RC English textbooks are changes in teaching approaches and topics. Compared to the pre-revision GTM approach of simply reviewing grammar through individual tasks, post-RC textbooks focus on CLT in paired and group activities. Additionally, most passages in pre-RC textbooks for reading, which instill anti-American propaganda and the Juche ideology to justify the Kim family’s dictatorial legitimacy, were replaced in post-RC English textbooks by practical reading texts that focus on computers, science and technology, or real life.

As stated above, the Jangmadang generation, which grew up during and after the Arduous March, followed the similar societal trends in education identified in the post-RC English textbooks in North Korea. However, with the inherent conflict between the liberal, communicative orientation in recent English
textbooks and the traditional emphasis on ideological education highlighting the Kim family as supreme leaders, the end of such a reform in North Korea’s English education remains unclear.

Regarding the further analysis of such textbooks, scholars may replicate this study using the same methods. However, since this research only performed a comparative analysis of English textbooks used in North Korea, a follow-up study with in-depth interviews and observations involving some of the country’s English-language teachers and students would be beneficial. Through such field research, we could precisely identify how the 2013 RC English education affected students’ lifestyles and their English learning. As the contents of post-RC English textbooks include students’ autonomy and active expression of their thoughts, these textbooks may contribute to North Korean human rights and individual empowerment (Suarez & Ramirez, 2007). Overall, the future of English education in North Korea and the North Korean political regime remains undetermined.

### Appendix 1

See Table 8.

#### Table 8  Textbook organization of JMS and SMS for each period

|                | Pre-2013 revised curriculum                                      | Post-2013 revised curriculum                                      |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| JMS 1st grade  | • Table of contents                                               | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   |
|                | • Preface                                                         | • Preface                                                         |
|                | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   | • Table of contents                                               |
|                | • Lessons                                                         | • Preview of each lesson                                          |
|                | • Review lessons                                                  | • Lessons                                                         |
|                | • Appendix                                                        | • Revision                                                        |
|                | – Vocabulary                                                      | • Appendix                                                        |
|                |                                                                  | – Board game                                                      |
| JMS 2nd grade  | • Table of contents                                               | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   |
|                | • Preface                                                         | • Preface                                                         |
|                | • Lessons                                                         | • Table of contents                                               |
|                | • Review lesson                                                   | • Preview of each lesson                                          |
|                | • Appendix                                                        | • Lessons                                                         |
|                | – Supplementary reading                                          | • Revision                                                        |
|                | – Vocabulary                                                      | • Appendix                                                        |
|                |                                                                  | – Vocabulary                                                      |
|                |                                                                  | – Parts of speech                                                 |
| JMS 3rd grade  | • Table of contents                                               | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   |
|                | • Preface                                                         | • Preface                                                         |
|                | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   | • Table of contents                                               |
|                | • Lessons                                                         | • Preview of each lesson                                          |
|                | • Appendix                                                        | • Lessons                                                         |
|                | – Supplementary reading                                          | • Revision                                                        |
|                | – Vocabulary                                                      | • Appendix                                                        |
|                |                                                                  | – Irregular verbs                                                 |
|                |                                                                  | – Classroom English                                               |
|                |                                                                  | – Vocabulary                                                      |
| SMS 1st grade  | • Table of contents                                               | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   |
|                | • Preface                                                         | • Preface                                                         |
|                | • Lessons                                                         | • Table of contents                                               |
|                | • Appendix                                                        | • Idolization of the Kim family                                   |
|                | – Supplementary reading                                          | • The plan of the book                                            |
|                | – Vocabulary                                                      | • Lessons                                                         |
|                |                                                                  | • Revision                                                        |
|                |                                                                  | • Appendix                                                        |
|                |                                                                  | – Supplementary reading                                          |
|                |                                                                  | – Grammar appendix                                                |
|                |                                                                  | – Irregular verbs                                                 |
|                |                                                                  | – Vocabulary                                                      |
|                |                                                                  | – References                                                      |
Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval Because this study was an analysis of secondary data (textbook) with no identifying information, it was exempted from Institutional Review Board Approval.

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