



THE ENGLISH TEACHER'S GUIDE TO KOREA

Living, Working, and Thriving in Korea Sparkling

By
Tony Hellmann, M.Ed.
Tom Rainey-Smith
Jason Thomas, M.App.Ling.
Matt Henderson

Chapter 2

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CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING THE KOREAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN KOREA

HISTORICAL EDUCATION

Korea's first national education system originated in 992 with the establishment of 360 government-run provincial schools (*hyanggyo*) across Korea.¹ They served primarily children of the upper class (*yangban*). Education focused on the national civil service examinations (*gwageo*). Although such education was in high demand, the *hyanggyo* were ultimately unable to compete with privately run academies (*seowon*). The last remaining *hyanggyo* were officially closed near the end of the Joseon Dynasty in 1894, but many were reopened as public elementary schools in 1900.

Seowon were educational institutions of Korea serving upper class pupils during the mid- to late Joseon Dynasty.² They were private institutions, and combined the functions of a Confucian shrine and a preparatory school. Like the *hyanggyo*, *seowon* were primarily focused on preparing students for the national civil service examinations.

Most *seowon* were closed by an edict of the regent Yi Ha-eung (commonly known as Daewongun). He banned the unauthorized construction of *seowon* in 1864, and finally, in 1871, he ordered all but a handful closed.³ The provincial *yangban* were outraged by these measures, and this is among the reasons that the regent was driven from power in 1873; however, the *seowon* remained closed.

1 Seoul National University Educational Research Institute, *한국교육사 Hanguk Gyojuksa / History of Korean Education*, Seoul: Gyoyukgwahaksa (교육과학사), 1997.

2 Park, Eui-soo (박의수), Kang Seung-kyu (강승규), Jeong Yeong-su (정영수), Kang Seon-bo (강선보), *교육의 역사와 철학 (Gyoju-ui yeoksawa cheolhak, History of education and philosophy)*, Seoul: Dongmunsa, 2002, p. 70.

3 Lee, Ki-baik (tr. by E.W. Wagner & E.J. Shultz), *A New History of Korea (Rev. Ed.)*, Seoul: Ilchokak, 1984, p. 262.

While *hyanggyo* and *seowon* served pupils from the *yangban* families, education was available for the masses as well. *Seodang* were private village schools providing elementary education during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. They were primarily occupied with providing initial training in the Chinese classics to boys of 7-16 years of age, but often served students into their twenties.⁴ Not regulated in any fashion, *seodang* could be freely opened by anyone. Widespread during the Goryeo period, these flourished during Joseon times and were the dynasty's most common educational institution. It has been estimated that 16,000 existed at the end of the Joseon period.

The teacher or headmaster of the *seodang* was called the *hunjang*. The teaching method emphasized rote learning by reading and memorizing an assigned passage each day; after reading the passage more than 100 times over, students would recite it to the *hunjang*.

In the 20th century, many *seodang* were modernized and known as "improved *seodang*" (개량 서당), and eventually accredited as primary schools under the Japanese occupation regime.⁵ This was part of a dramatic expansion of private education in this period; from 1883 to 1908, some 5,000 private schools were established in Korea.⁶ The first regulations instituted with respect to *seodang* were passed by the Japanese occupation regime in 1908. Beginning in 1918, regulations on education became much more stringent and repressive; the number of *seowon* dropped sharply. A small number of *seodang* operate today in South Korea as private academies providing extracurricular instruction.

20TH CENTURY EDUCATION

During the period of Japanese occupation (1910–1945), the Japanese occupiers strictly controlled the education system. While the numbers of public schools increased during this period, educational opportunities were restrictive and most Koreans were excluded from the benefits. Despite this, national independence leaders continued to educate for future independence. Independence from Japan was followed directly by an American military occupation in the south. The United States occupation established a US-style education system

4 Park, et. al., p. 72.

5 Lee, p. 368.

6 Park, et. al., p. 105.

consisting of six years of primary school, six years of secondary school, and four years of higher education. This system persists in its modernized form today.

Accompanying the staggering rate of economic and industrial growth in Korea in the last 30 years, the development of education is, in many ways, just as remarkable. Illiteracy, which was widespread following the Japanese colonial period, was steadily eliminated through the years of industrialization. Today Korea has nearly 100% literacy. In fact, since 1948 South Korea has achieved more in terms of measurable educational achievement than any other country of comparable GDP.⁷

A recent report released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development⁸ asks the question, “Will the expansion of tertiary education continue at this rapid pace, driven by an ever-rising demand for the highly skilled?” This question has no better respondent than Korea. According to this same report, 97% of people aged 25 to 34 now finish an upper secondary education, placing Korea in first place amongst OECD nations. 53% of people from this same cohort complete a tertiary level of education, which means that attainment levels have increased five fold in a 30-year period. Despite the huge emphasis on educational achievement, which has been accompanied by increasing rates of tertiary enrollment, it is interesting to note that educational attainment does not translate directly into increased benefits in future employment as employment rates are lower among higher educated people in Korea, but higher among the lower educated, when compared to other OECD countries.

ENGLISH EDUCATION FROM BEGINNING TO PRESENT

ORIGINS

Contact with the English language was minimal prior to the opening of the first English language school near the end of the Joseon Dynasty. Early Korean contact with western culture *per se* had come about in the most part as a consequence of missionary, commercial and diplomatic endeavors. More importantly, Korean contact with

7 Seth, Michael, “Letter to the Editor,” *Korea Times Online*, Oct 10 2008, retrieved 30 Oct. 2008
<http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/01/113_17113.html>

8 Education Directorate of the OECD, “Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators,” *OECD website*, retrieved 19 Feb 2009 <http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_41266761_1_1_1_1,00.html>

English speakers had been incidental and had not impacted education in any meaningful way. This changed in 1883 when the Joseon government opened the first English language school, heralding the introduction of English language education to Korea.

The signing of the 1882 Korean-American Treaty and the 1883 Korean-Great Britain Treaty were the first formal diplomatic treaties with Western nations, the former allowing the United States to set up a legation in Seoul. At the time the Joseon government expanded its administrative structure to include departments to deal with matters of defense and international diplomacy and trade, and enlisted the help of foreign advisors to these departments. As diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States developed, so did the need for interpreters who could speak the English language.

Under Chinese influence, the Joseon Royal Court decided to open the *Dongmunhak*, or Common Script Learning, in December 1882 and it officially opened its doors in September 1883. Located in what is today Jae-dong, Jongno-gu in Seoul, its mission was to train interpreters within a one-year timeline in order to further economic and diplomatic relations with foreign nations. Historically translators had come from the *jungin* ("middle people") class, but the government declared that this school would consider admissions based only on academic ability, regardless of applicants' class background. The school commenced with a student population of around 40, producing 20 graduates within a few months of opening, but was almost as quickly closed two years later with the introduction of a formal school by the government in 1886.

Yugyeong Gongwon (Public Institute of Education), also known as the Royal English School, opened on the 23rd of September, 1886 and was located in Jeong-dong, Jung-gu, Seoul. Former students of *Dongmunhak* served as assistants to US instructors. This school was established with cooperation from the United States, a conscious decision made by the Korean government in order to reposition itself away from Chinese influence and instead garner relations with the US – esteemed as a progressive and modern country by Korean elites at the time. This was an institution for the elite; King Gojong ordered male relatives of high ranking public servants working for the Office of Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs officials to attend the new school in order to learn English to enable them to conduct diplomatic

business in the language. In a very real sense, with the introduction of English as the preferred language of the newly “modernised” Korean elite, English became an avenue for gaining political position. One note-worthy historical figure who attended this school, deeply resented by Koreans today, is Prime Minister Yi Wan-yong who helped draft the treaty that would cede control of Korea to Japan in 1910.

Despite *Yugyeong* instructors being cut from missionary cloth, regulation imposed directly prior to the school opening (on September 12, 1886) forbade the teaching of religion. Religion would have to wait its turn, but it would be a very resilient vessel for the passage of English in education in the years to come.

Classes at *Yugyeong Gongwon* initially focused on elementary English, using English language instruction and texts, and as students gained a better grasp of the language they were to be taught other subjects (including math, natural science, geography, and economics) through English. In May of 1889 the 3-year graduation period was extended to a more comprehensive 7 years. Unfortunately, the school suffered from a low attendance rate from those registered for classes and a high drop out rate. After numerous issues with both students and personnel, the school closed eight years after it opened. Factors contributing to the school's closure include cultural ignorance by both the foreign teachers and the Korean students; an inability of the students—used to a privileged lifestyle—to adjust to rigorous scholarly pursuits; and a misalignment of the students' and teachers' vision of the school's purpose. Students saw it as a way to secure a good government position; teachers saw it as a vehicle for providing a well-rounded liberal arts education. Coinciding with the Gabo Reform (see below), it closed in 1894 and was replaced by the new government-sponsored English Language School, this time with British instructors.

The same year the English Language School and the Japanese Language School were merged to become the Foreign Language School. The Chinese Language School was also set up in the same year followed by the French Language School in 1896, and the German Language School in 1898, all merging into the Foreign Language School in the proceeding years. While they had previously been run

from different locations, in 1907 the schools were brought together under one roof, before being closed down permanently in 1911.

For whatever reasons the graduation process was difficult to complete and the English language school also bequeathed a low completion rate. The first graduates of the English Language School were not produced until 1903, and with 911 students having entered the school from March 1896 to April 1910, less than 9% successfully completed the program.

In 1897 a new joint English language program opened between the Office of Education and Baejae Hakdang (today a prestigious middle and high school). It lasted until 1902 when it lost government backing and the language of instruction changed from English to Korean. Baejae would offer English as a regular subject from 1907.

In October 1900 the Government Middle School (today known as Gyeonggi Middle and High School), the most advanced modern educational provider in Korea of its time, opened its doors and included the teaching of English in its curriculum.

Around this time, with the influence of the Enlightenment Movement (as it was called), the opening of private schools including those specialising in foreign language education spread rapidly. Many proponents of the movement had received an English education (including Syngman Rhee who had attended Baejae Hakdang in the 1890s). The “Independence Club” had been launched in 1896 and produced a newspaper, the *Tongnip* (Independent), which alternated its pages with print in both Hangul and English.

ROLE OF MISSIONARIES

As the *Yugyeong Gongwon* was opening its doors in Seoul, Methodists and Presbyterians were establishing their own schools. There was an important difference between the mission schools and the *Yugyeong Gongwon*, though: instruction was offered to students regardless of their social class or other status which might alienate them from mainstream Korean society. The poor, orphans, and women could all be educated at mission schools. Methodists set up a school in 1885 (which would come to be known as Baejae Hakdang), followed by Ewha Hakdang (a prestigious women’s university today) in 1886, while Presbyterians established Gyeongsin School in 1886 and

Jeongsin School in 1890. Instruction was in English and focused on the teaching of the bible. Many of these institutions would go on to widely expand their curricula. As the trend of establishing private schools continued, up until the Japanese annexation of 1910, even under increasing government control, missionary schools flourished, numbering 796 in the year of annexation, and provided one of the few remaining channels for English education.

GABO REFORM

Following the Japanese invasion of the Korean peninsula (then known as the Kingdom of Joseon) in 1894, a pro-Japanese government was formed, which began the Gabo Reform. Carried out under external pressure from Russia, Japan and the United States who were contending for influence inside the country, these reforms formally separated Korea from Chinese control and abolished slavery. Appointment to the government became based on merit alone (i.e. children of *yangban* families no longer received appointments based on their family background). Major reforms were also undertaken in education. In 1894, the government announced the introduction of a modern educational system and agreed upon the establishment of primary schools, middle schools, professional schools, universities, technical schools, foreign language schools, and ordinary schools.

JAPANESE ANNEXATION

In November 1905, Japan declared Korea a protectorate following the Portsmouth Agreement of September 1905, whereby it gained recognition from Russia of its dominance over Korea. So began the government by the residency-general of Korea. The first Japanese Resident-General, Ito Hirobumi, was placed directly under the Korean sovereign; the residency-general began its operation in February 1906.

In 1906 many of the regulations that had come about as a result of the Gabo Reform were repealed or replaced and Japanese language was introduced in common schools as a compulsory subject while their curricula were stripped of all other foreign languages. While government-controlled schools lost their ability to run English language courses, private schools flourished. The majority of these offered English language instruction. In 1908 the ordinance for private

schools was promulgated, reducing the amount of control private schools had over their own curricula.

In 1909 a revised ordinance was implemented which restricted foreign language school admissions to common school graduates and defined the scope of English language education. 12 hours of English instruction were to be taught in a week, with only one hour dedicated to English speaking skills.

The Treaty of Annexation, signed in 1910 by the Japanese General Terauchi Masatake and Korean Prime Minister Yi Wan-yong, formally made Korea a colony of Japan. The Japanese then went about centralizing the Korean education system under the command of the governor-general and splitting it in two: one for Koreans and one for Japanese settlers. Control of education was viewed as an important means of controlling the Korean population and that English education was not encouraged as it played no part in serving this purpose.

One of the policies the Japanese government adopted to aid the colonization of Korea was the spread of the Japanese language, and this policy was realized in the curriculum of common schools. In accordance with the ordinance for common schools, Japanese was introduced as a required subject, and other foreign languages were eliminated from the curriculum.

While the government-controlled schools deprived their students of English language education, private schools maintained independent management and were unrestricted in their selection of subjects, thus, offering a larger number of cultural subjects, such as English language instruction. By the promulgation of the ordinance for private schools in 1908, however, Japan began to exert its control: the curricula of private schools were subject to Japanese regulation, and a number of private schools established by Korean civilians were forced to close under the pretext that they did not satisfy the requirements stipulated by the ordinance. Mission schools, which received less Japanese interference, maintained English language education.

Advances in English education under Japanese rule were closely tied to the prevailing education policies of the Japanese administration, which shifted several times. Initially, Japanese became

a required subject and foreign languages (including English) were eliminated from the curriculum. Mission schools (such as Yeonhi Professional School and Severance Joint Medical Professional School, which merged to become Yonsei University; and Ehwa Hakdang, now Ehwa Women's University) were regulated less strictly and thus made the most substantial contributions to the development of English language education during colonial rule.

1919 was marked by the March First Movement where Koreans took to the streets en masse to protest the Japanese colonial occupation and the brutal suppression of it by Japanese forces. This in turn marked a turning point in colonial policy where regulations were relaxed somewhat, as the Japanese government took a new conciliatory approach and adopted educational reform as its top priority. The government's shift in educational policy brought about a noteworthy improvement in English language education in the next two decades. The government began to allow Koreans to attend English teacher training programs in Japan, but this was a double-edged sword: while it produced more English teachers in Korea (as they became teachers at government or public schools upon their return to their homeland), their Japanese-influenced pedagogy exerted important, long lasting influence on English language education in Korea. The grammar-translation method of instruction, which requires students to memorize numerous grammatical rules and exceptions as well as enormous vocabulary lists, was given the most attention in class, and thus students were more likely to develop passive language skills (such as reading) rather than active skills such as speaking (Kim, 2008).

The last fourteen years of Japanese rule saw Japanese policy changed again, beginning in 1931 when Japan invaded Manchuria and a more militaristic faction came to power in the Japanese government. Kim (2008) notes:

In contrast to the lenient "cultural policy" during the previous decade, the new colonial government began an era of harsh rule. Minami Jiro, an expansionist militarist, was appointed as the new governor-general in August 1936 and sought the total assimilation of Koreans. Under the slogan of "Japan and Korea are One Entity," he launched a sweeping campaign to

eradicate the Korean national identity. During the final decade of colonial rule, Japan's primary goal was to fully assimilate Koreans for the purpose of war. In order to meet the increasing need for a labor force that understood the Japanese language, Japanese language education was given an unparalleled emphasis, and the language was forced upon Koreans as their daily means of communication.

In 1937, the governor-general ordered all instruction delivered in Japanese and that students not be allowed to speak Korean (either in or outside class). In addition, government-required worship at Shinto shrines emerged as a critical issue: many missionaries viewed Shintoism as idolatry. Mission schools that refused to observe the mandate faced being closed: many did, or were transferred to Japanese or Korean owners.⁹ In October 1940, the president of the United States ordered the State Department to completely withdraw all American expatriates in Korea. By 1942, all missionaries, along with other Americans in Korea, had been repatriated. The positions and school proprietorships that the American missionaries had maintained were eventually taken over by the Japanese.¹⁰

In 1940, Japan began to use Korean students to aid their war effort, dispatching Japanese soldiers to schools who began giving military drills to students. A student-soldier system was instituted in October 1943. Older Korean students were forced into military service while young students were exploited as a labor force. In May of 1943, the entire population of private-school students in Seoul was mobilized for the backbreaking purpose of dredging a reservoir.¹¹ Students in other regions were forced into munitions factories. Consequently, classes were neglected or abandoned.

In March 1945, the government announced a suspension of all classes; students were compelled to do more work at munitions factories or for other military purposes. In May 1945, the government announced a wartime educational ordinance that committed education solely for the purpose of the execution of war. The schools

9 Kim, Eun-gyong, "English Education Under Japanese Rule (V)," *Korea Times Online*, 10 Aug 2008, retrieved 19 Feb 2009, <<http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/include/print.asp?newsIdx=32370>>

10 Kim, 2008.

11 Kim, 2008.

were converted into military structures, and all school training was diverted for the purpose of producing food and military supplies.

Japan's brutal rule ended with the Allies' victory; Korea was liberated on August 15, 1945. "Many of the drastic measures taken by the colonial government...dealt debilitating blows to the development of English language education, and the educational field therefore suffered a sharp decline during the last decade of Japanese colonial rule."¹²

THE SYLLABUS PERIOD UNDER THE U.S. MILITARY ADMINISTRATION (1946-1954)

This transitional period began directly following independence from Japanese imperial rule. Until the first national curriculum appeared, Korean education followed the educational system of the United States. "K-12" education began in this period, with students enrolling for kindergarten followed by up to twelve grades, at which time they graduated high school. As in America at that time, twelve years of schooling was not compulsory. The Basic Education Law was passed in 1949, and provided for the creation of a unified system arranged as 6 years of compulsory free education beginning at age seven, three years of non-compulsory tuition-based middle school, three years of non-compulsory tuition-based high school, and four years of tuition-based college. The transition from the multilevel secondary education system of the colonial period to a unified 6-3-3 ladder system was completed by 1951. The fact that Americans trained or influenced Korean educators had a strong impact on educational policy-making and administration.

The primary goal of this period was to replace the existing imperial education system so as to foster Western-style democracy. English education was greatly expanded during this period and in subsequent periods. The occupation was keen to impose order on the population and institute a government friendly to its interests in the region. This meant in large part repopulating the bureaucracy and police forces with Koreans.

When the American forces took effective control of the country, English became the official language of the occupation; after 40 years of Japanese control and increasingly repressive language

¹² Kim, 2008.

policies designed to exterminate the Korean national identity, another occupier (albeit considered a much more benevolent one by many Koreans of the era), introduced English as the language of rule. By the time U.S. administration had spread to the provinces, it found that People's Committees had set up a number of schools in the interregnum that followed the initial withdrawal of Japanese forces. English-speaking Koreans had an obvious advantage if they wanted to become a part of the US-controlled military government as it assumed power from People's Committees around the country. Command of the English language was an asset at the time that could help you further a career in the new political apparatus that was being built up around the former Japanese colonial one.

In December of 1945 the Military English Language School was set up to offer English language training to Korean military officers who would go on to work for the constabulary. Many of those who were chosen to make up the first class of the school would go on to fill the top ranks of the Republic of Korea Army after 1948.

THE FIRST NATIONAL CURRICULUM (1955-1962)

The Korean War (1950-1953) destroyed the national economy. In addition, ideological confusion between democracy and communism existed. The government decided that this called for a strong educational policy. The highest priority of this curriculum was to ideologically "stamp out" communism and train skilled workers.

THE SECOND NATIONAL CURRICULUM (1963-1972)

The second national curriculum (that is, the first national curriculum revision) appeared after a military coup deposed Rhee Syngman in 1960. Sensing a need to solidify its power, the new military administration designed a policy which emphasized the establishment of a national identity, the modernization of the state and the non-communist unification of the North and the South Korea. These were accepted as educational objectives. A number of important events in the history of modern Korean education happened during this period.

In August 1968 the Ministry of Education decided to institute a college entrance examination system to prevent unqualified high school graduates from entering colleges and to restrict the chaotic expansion of private universities and colleges. In 1969, middle school

entrance examinations were abolished, leading to the democratization of middle schools. Prior to 1969, entrance exams allowing only the best students to attend top-ranked middle schools. In The period from 1945–1970 witnessed a dramatic expansion of education and during this time illiteracy was virtually eliminated. As a result, today South Korea boasts one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

Among the many problems in Korean education identified at that time were rapid expansion, shortage of available resources, large class sizes, inadequate teacher education programs and relatively low student achievement. Despite the recognition of modern educational thoughts and methods, there were still problems with poor materials and equipment, fragmented rote learning and outdated methods of teaching. The Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) was established in August 1972 with the support of the MOE for the purpose of providing a nation-wide approach to a solution. KEDI was established as an independent non-profit organization whose primary function is to undertake comprehensive and systematic educational reforms through a series of research and development programs. It was funded for its first five years with a \$7.5 million USAID loan.

THE THIRD NATIONAL CURRICULUM (1973-1981)

The second revision was accompanied by the amendment of the national constitution, which was needed in order to maintain the contemporary military dictator's rule of Korea. It was developed and promulgated by the central government (not KEDI).

THE FOURTH NATIONAL CURRICULUM (1982-1988)

Unlike the former three periods of curricular development, this curriculum was produced by KEDI, and not by the central government. This reflected a public demand for Korea to stop following foreign curriculum models and to produce its own curriculum, which would be more appropriate. Thus, this curriculum contained some fresh ideas. For example, the idea of curriculum integration appeared for the first time in this curriculum document. Private companies could produce textbooks and localization of the curriculum was discussed. The purpose of this curriculum was to establish a well-organized educational program emphasizing national spirit, science and technology education, and education for the whole person.

THE FIFTH NATIONAL CURRICULUM (1989-1994)

The curriculum during this era was not significantly different than the fourth. The new president was a former four-star general. He ordered a ceremonial reform of national curriculum, but wanted to maintain the framework of the fourth-national curriculum, which had been made by his predecessor. The goals of this curriculum were to help educate people, attain subjectivity, autonomy, creativity, and morality.

THE SIXTH NATIONAL CURRICULUM (1995-1999)

In 1993, a new democratic government came to power. This government aimed at the total reformation of the Korean school system. In this period, the metaphor of the corporation appeared in educational discourses for the first time. According to governmental policy, which was characterized by introducing the idea of globalization and free-market system, the epitome of school reforms was focused on strengthening competitive power. Parents and students were treated as consumers. The official objective of this curriculum was to cultivate morality and creativity. The sixth national curriculum was the first to see English instruction required in primary schools (beginning in 1997). Since 1995, native speakers have been hired to teach English in middle schools in an effort to enhance English acquisition and prepare students for the "Age of Globalization."

THE SEVENTH NATIONAL CURRICULUM (2000-PRESENT)

This curriculum was implemented gradually, beginning in 2000. In its development, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform advised that, in preparation for the 21st Century, the development of creativity in elementary school, junior high school and high school children should be given high priority. Responding to the Commission's advice, the number of compulsory subjects was decreased, and the importance of the optional subjects was stressed. Also, the curriculum was diversified according to different achievement levels. Consequently, this curriculum consists of two parts: a national compulsory curriculum for grade 1 to 10 students, and optional courses for students in grade 11 and 12. The national compulsory curriculum is also being organized according to the different levels of difficulty rather than by grade and year.

The well-educated Korean citizen promoted by this curriculum is defined as a person who seeks to develop her/his own individuality on the basis of well-rounded and wholesome development; a person who demonstrates creative ability on the basis of a solid grounding in basic knowledge and skills; a person who explores career paths on the basis of broad intellectual knowledge and skills in diverse academic disciplines; a person who creates new values on the basis of understanding the national culture; and a person who contributes to the development of the community where she/he lives, on the basis of democratic citizenship.

Today families collectively spend around 3 trillion won on private English education per year – half the total annual amount spent on private education. Koreans students spend over 15,000 hours learning English in the ten year period between middle school and university. With 1.9% of GDP spent on private English instruction and proficiency tests in 2006, English is considered not only an invaluable skill to have in order to get ahead in life, but it is also seen as a necessary one.

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THE KOREAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

OVERVIEW

In South Korea, primary education is compulsory and free. In some rural areas this also applies for the three years of middle school. South Korean students attend school for 220 days a year, the minimum required academic year length for primary, middle and high schools. In 2006 the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development introduced no school every other Saturday and as of 2007 schools follow a five day school week due to the growing acceptance of the forty hour week. In 2008, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development was merged with the Ministry of Science and Technology to become the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. As the name of the ministry has changed several times in the last ten years, for the sake of clarity, this ministry will be referred to simply as the Ministry of Education (MOE) in this article, although other versions of the name apply at different points in history.

Korea has a single-track 6-3-3-4 system (elementary school, 6 years; middle school, 3 years; high school, 3 years; university, 4 years). In South Korea, a student's grade level designation is reset as the student progresses through elementary, middle and high school. Thus, a student in the first year of middle school (equivalent to 7th

grade in the United States) is referred to as "First grade in middle school (중학교 1 학년)".

The academic year consists of two terms. Instructional hours vary from 24 to 34 periods per week depending on the school level. In 2007, there were 19,865 schools in South Korea and of those 5,982 were private. The MOE reported 11,883,628 students and 506,682 teachers.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Elementary school consists of grades one to six, with students entering at age six (western age) and finishing at age twelve. Students learn subjects including, but not limited to, Korean, mathematics, science, social studies, language arts, fine arts, and music. Usually, the class teacher covers most of the subjects; however, there are some specialized teachers in professions such as physical education and foreign languages, including English. About 20 years ago, English used to be taught first in middle school, but now students begin learning English in the third year of elementary school. Many parents choose to send their children to private educational institutions called *hagwon* (학원) after school (see *Supplementary Test Prep Schools* on page Error: Reference source not found). More schools in the country are recruiting native English speakers to facilitate learning English.

Alongside public elementary schools there are a number of private elementary schools in Korea, usually distinguishable by the uniforms their students wear (public elementary school students do not wear uniforms apart from physical education clothing). These schools follow a similar curriculum as public elementary schools, but often offer superior facilities, a higher teacher-to-student ratio, and extra programs. They also usually offer a higher standard of learning. Though highly desirable, they are prohibitively expensive for many Korean parents.

South Korea has the lowest social expenditure on services for young children in the OECD, as a percentage of GDP. Korea spends 6.1% of GDP on care for young children, while the OECD average is 11.2%. Expenditure on pre-primary educational institutions (kindergartens only) as a percentage of GDP is 0.16%. The OECD average is 0.6% of GDP.¹³

13 Education Directorate of the OECD, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD, 2006, pp.

Elementary schools are called *chodeung-hakgyo* (초등학교). The South Korean government changed the name in 1996 to the current form from *gukmin hakgyo* (국민학교) meaning citizens' school. This was done as a gesture of restoring national pride. The word, abbreviated from *hwanguksinminui-hakgyo* (황국신민의 학교), means "school for the subjects of the imperial state" carried over from Japanese colonial rule.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Middle schools are called *jung hakgyo* (중학교) in Korean, which literally means middle school. They consist of three grades. Most students enter at age twelve and finish at fifteen. These three grades correspond roughly to grades 7-9 in the North American system and 2nd to 4th form in the British system.

Middle school in South Korea marks a considerable shift from elementary school, with students expected to take studies and school much more seriously. At most middle schools regulation uniforms and haircuts are enforced fairly strictly, and some aspects of students' lives are highly controlled. Like in elementary school, students spend most of the day in the same homeroom classroom with the same classmates; however, students have different teachers for each subject. Teachers move around from classroom to classroom, and few teachers apart from those who teach special subjects have their own rooms to which students come. Homeroom teachers (*dam im seonsaengnim*: 담임 선생님) play a very important role in students' lives, and have considerably more authority over and responsibility for their students' than their western counterparts.

Most middle school students take six lessons a day, and in addition to this usually have an early morning block that precedes regular lessons and a seventh lesson specializing in an extra subject to finish the day. Unlike with high school, middle school curricula do not vary much from school to school. Maths, English, Korean, and science form the core subjects, with students also receiving instruction in art, PE, history, hanja (Chinese characters), ethics, home economics, and computers. What subjects students study and in what amount may vary from year to year. All regular lessons are 45 minutes long. Before school, students have an extra block, 30-or-more minutes long, that

may be used for self-study, watching Educational Broadcast System (EBS) broadcasts, or for personal or class administration. As of 2008, students attend school from Monday to Friday, and have a half-day every 1st, 3rd, and 5th (calendar permitting) Saturday of the month. Saturday lessons usually include Club Activity (CA) lessons, where students may participate in extracurricular activities.

In the late 1960s the government abolished entrance examinations for middle school students, replacing it with a system whereby elementary school students within the same district are selected for middle schools by a lottery system. This has the effect of equalizing the quality of students from school to school, though schools in areas where students come from more privileged backgrounds still tend to outperform schools in poorer areas. Until recently most middle schools have been same-sex, though in the past decade most new middle schools have been mixed, and some previously same-sex schools have converted to mixed as well.

As with elementary schools, students are promoted from one grade to the next regardless of knowledge or academic achievement, the result being that classes often have students of vastly differing abilities learning the same subject material together. In the final year of middle school, examination scores become very important for the top students hoping to gain entrance into the top high schools, and for those in the middle hoping to get into an academic rather a technical or vocational high school. Otherwise, examinations and marks only matter insofar as pleasing parents and teachers (or avoiding their wrath). There are some standardized examinations for certain subjects, and teachers of academic subjects are expected to follow approved textbooks, but generally middle school teachers have more flexibility over curricula and methods than do teachers at high school.

HIGH SCHOOLS

High schools are called *godeung hakgyo* (고등학교) in Korean, literally meaning "high-level school." They consist of three grades, with students beginning at age sixteen and commonly graduating at age 19. High schools in Korea can be divided into specialty tracks in accord with a student's interests and career path. For example, there are science, foreign language and art specialty high schools which

students can attend after passing entrance examinations; these schools are generally highly competitive. Other type of high schools include public high schools and private high schools, both with or without entrance examinations. These high schools do not specialize in a field, but are more focused on sending their students to college. For students who do not want a college education, vocational schools specializing in fields such as technology, agriculture or finance are available. Students are employable right after graduation.

Regarding the schedule of many high school students, it is not abnormal for them to arrive home from school at midnight, after intensive "self-study" sessions supported by the school. The curriculum is often rigorous, with as many as eleven or more subjects. Some students choose to attend private academies to boost their academic performance. Core subjects include Korean, English and math, with emphasis on social and physical science subjects. It is critical to note that the type and level of subjects may differ from school to school, depending on the degree of selectivity and specialization of the school.

High school is not strictly mandatory, unlike middle school education in Korea. However, according to a 2005 study of OECD member countries, 97% of South Korea's young adults do complete high school. This was the highest recorded percentage of any country.

SUPPLEMENTARY TEST-PREP EDUCATION

Most South Korean children spend their entire high school life preparing for the all-important college entrance examination. The College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), called *suneung* (수능) in Korean, is the higher education exam accepted by all South Korean universities. A large number of privately owned institutions, called *hagwon* (학원) exist in order to provide after school instruction in various subjects. As the university entrance exam is such an important factor in education, many parents spend a significant portion of their income to send their children to these institutes in order to prepare them for the exam, many beginning hagwon instruction in elementary school.

HIGHER EDUCATION

There are four categories of institutions for higher learning: (1) colleges and universities with four-year undergraduate programs (six-year in medical colleges), (2) junior colleges, (3) universities of education and colleges of education, and (4) miscellaneous schools like theological colleges and seminaries. Law schools are currently being established at select universities and plan to begin admitting students in 2010.

About 80 percent of all Korean institutes of higher education are private. In accordance with the Education Act and the relevant presidential and ministerial decrees, all institutes of higher education, whether public or private, come under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry has control over such matters as student quotas, qualifications of teaching staff, curricula, degree requirements, and so on.

Higher education aims at teaching and studying fundamental academic theories and their various application as necessary for the progress and enlightenment of society and the global community, with the aim of nurturing the nation's future leaders.

The unit for measuring the completion of each course is a credit. Each university oversees the requirements for the completion of each credit, the minimum credits necessary for graduation, the standard credits and maximum credits required to be taken each semester, the method to obtain special credit, and credits required for the completion of preparatory courses on the basis of school regulations.

Korea's public funding for higher (tertiary) education (as a percentage of GDP) is the lowest in the OECD.¹⁴

NATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

South Korea's education system has undertaken significant reform in order to align the curriculum with the "knowledge based society" of the 21st century. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) established in 2008 by restructuring the scope of the former Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, is the

¹⁴ Education Directorate of the OECD, "Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators," *OECD website*, retrieved 19 Feb 2009 <http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_41266761_1_1_1_1,00.html>, Table B4.1.

central government body responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies related to academic activities. Like other ministers, the Minister of Education Science and Technology is appointed by the president. They are mainly chosen from candidates who have an academic background and often resign after a fairly short term (around one year).

The Public Education Enforcement Plan, a component of the seventh curriculum revision, was introduced in 2004 with the goal of South Korea becoming a strong nation firmly grounded on knowledge and information. "In 2005, South Korea changed to an 'on demand' curriculum revision system, which whenever there is a need for curriculum or text book revision the appraisal is carried out immediately and the necessary changes applied accordingly. This flexibility helps to deliver knowledge that is up to date and alive..."¹⁵

South Korea has a highly centralized education system and standardized educational content. The existence of a curriculum evaluation system helps promote quality assurance.¹⁶ The evaluation system is responsible for:

- Development and implementation of national level achievement tests
- Participation in international comparative studies of student achievement
- Development and implementation of diagnostic tests of basic skills of elementary students
- Conducting studies on research and development in educational evaluation and long term development planning
- Conducting training on educational evaluations.¹⁷

EDUCATIONAL AND CURRICULUM ORGANIZATION

The first ten years of school education from primary first grade to high school grade are set as a national common basic education period. During this period, students learn from a national curriculum.

15 Choi, E., *Korean Educational Policies and Current Issues*, Cheongju, Korea: Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006, p. 6.

16 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, "The School Curriculum of the Republic of Korea," *Ministry of Education, Science and Technology website*, 3 Dec 2007, Retrieved 2 Feb 2009 <<http://english.mest.go.kr/data/upFile/english/200712030350262417.doc>>

17 Korea Institute for Curriculum Evaluation, *Korea Institute for Curriculum Evaluation website*, Retrieved 19 Feb 2009, <<http://www.kice.re.kr/en/functions/curriculum.jsp>>

In revising the national curriculum, the MEST judged that a flexible level differentiated curriculum would address each student's different ability, interest aptitude and career direction; and also promote gifted and talented education while satisfying the requirements of a common basic education.¹⁸

The types of level differentiated curriculum include:

1) Step by Step Curriculum

Applied to the core subjects of mathematics and secondary level English. Mathematics is taught step by step with a curriculum divided into twenty levels for students in grades 1 – 10. The English curriculum has eight levels, taught from 7th through to 10th grade.

2) In-depth and Supplementary Curriculum

This is for advancing or lagging students in the subjects of Korean language (1st – 10th grade, social studies (3rd – 10th grade) and primary English (3rd – 6th grade).

3) Elective Curriculum

High school students in grades 11 and 12 can choose from a number of electives that reflect their differing abilities, aptitude, needs and interests. Selection is made by students according to their ability and career development.

Teachers at the start of the year are given a structured syllabus of what should be taught. School text books and teacher training support such syllabuses and there is regular testing to ensure that all students are at or above the required standard. There is also a very clear expectation that all students by the end of each year level will have reached the required level of ability.

High schools are separated into two types: general (academic) and vocational. In high school a flexible level-differentiated curriculum is provided for second and third year students, choosing from seventy nine electives. Electives are set by each metropolitan/provincial education office and school with a minimum of twenty eight units each, for up to fifty percent of students. Schools are granted more autonomy in designing curriculum. Roles are divided between the MOE, schools and metropolitan/provincial

¹⁸ Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2007.

education offices in designing and operating the curriculum, so as to ensure efficiency and educational quality.

Recent developments in educational and curriculum organization include:

- Development of diversified text books
- A level-differentiated evaluation system
- Enhancement of teacher expertise through training programs and lessened workloads in order to develop expert teaching skills
- Improving the school environment to enhance level-differentiated curriculum delivery through the provision of teaching and learning materials for each level
- Improvements in the administrative and financial system
- English education development: As of 2006, English is taught from primary first grade; one native English teacher will be placed in every middle school by 2010; incentive points will be given to English teachers of Korean nationality who possess English certificates and qualifications and pilot based English immersion education.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology administers the national school curriculum and this is periodically revised. Individual schools are given a degree of control over their own curricula in accordance with regional guidelines and curriculum standards. Seven curriculum revisions have taken place since the first curriculum was introduced in 1954, with the Seventh Curriculum coming into effect with implementation staggered from 1997 to 2004, covering the first year of primary school through to the first year of high school (ten years in total), and the Eighth Curriculum phase-in beginning in 2009. It is made up of the Basic Common Curriculum and the Selected Curriculum at the level of high school. After the 10th grade, students are able to decide which courses they will take.

The latest national curriculum is student-oriented and is designed to promote individual talent, aptitude, and creativity. It defines the desired image of an educated person as a person who:

- seeks individuality as the basis for the growth of the whole personality;

- exhibits a capacity for fundamental creativity;
- pioneers a career path within the wide spectrum of culture;
- creates new value on the basis of understanding the national culture;
- contributes to the development of the community on the basis of democratic civil consciousness.

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

The school council system was first introduced in 1995 in 355 schools, to enhance autonomy in creative school management and develop education tailored to local characteristics and demands. In 1998, all national primary and secondary schools were mandated to establish school councils, and in 2000 all private schools were mandated to establish school councils.

The school council has five to fifteen members according to the school size with students and parents forming 40%–50%, teachers 30%-40% and local representatives 10%-30%. School principals are automatically included in the committees as teacher members and the president and vice president of the committee are elected from non-teacher members.

Public school committees hold appraisal rights for the establishment and revision of school charter regulations; budgetary planning, which has strengthened the financial power of schools; accounts settlement; curricular operations including selection of textbook and educational material; after school and vacation classes; other extra curricular programs; and the formation and management of school committees, fees, school lunches, et cetera.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Although the delegation of power to schools has made schools more autonomous, it does not give school management a free hand to do anything it wants. As a school community has been empowered, it is necessary to ensure the accountability of school education. An external evaluation committee has been established with provincial and metropolitan offices of education administering school evaluations, usually on an annual basis but there are cases where the evaluation occurs once every two years. Each office is responsible for

the preparation of evaluation areas, criteria, methods, and establishing an evaluation committee. Schools are given a grade based on evaluation fields and a final rankings list of all schools. The results of school evaluations are used for supervision consultations and as a basis for providing financial awards to well-performing schools.

EVALUATION

Previously most schools used a norm-referenced evaluation, meaning students were ranked according to the average total score they received by combining grades from all subject areas. Class instruction was designed for students to achieve good grades on their test scores at the expense of achieving the genuine goals and objectives of education. As a consequence, it is reported that school education has failed to develop student abilities to understand and think in comprehensive and creative ways. In order to address this concern the MOE introduced Diverse Student Evaluation Methods which is aligned to the curriculum for a knowledge based society. A prominent feature of this policy in relation to evaluation is the diversification of the criteria for evaluating students.

Since 1998, in primary and secondary education performance based evaluation methods are used to develop student's abilities to understand and think in comprehensive and creative ways. These include written exams, oral tests, discussions, demonstrations, lab experiments, interviews, clinical observations, written reports, research papers and portfolios.

TEACHER EVALUATION

The OECD found that in Korea, evaluation on teacher performance failed to provide systemic influence on their career development and that the country lacked a tool to differentiate between teachers according to their performance ability. The recommendation was to set up an objective evaluation standard; and make use of the standard as a tool for school development and improvement. The majority of primary school teachers are graduates of four years of college education. "Previously the principal evaluated teachers and reflected evaluation results in teacher promotion."¹⁹ Also, the MOE recognized the growing need for the improvement of teacher quality and

¹⁹ Choi, p.11.

professionalism, in particular people's trust for the teaching profession through teacher evaluation that is both appropriate and impartial. A survey conducted in 2005, revealed 77.4% of South Koreans agreed that a teacher evaluation system was necessary.

"Previously, principals were appointed based on seniority. Under the new policy in a trial commencing in September 2006, principals will be selected partially through job offerings or open competition so as to recruit those who possess good management skills, in addition to expert knowledge in education."²⁰ "The whole process of teacher selection and training is also under review."²¹ The Korean proverb "One should not even step on the shadow of one's teacher," highlights the degree of respect traditionally given to teachers.

EDUCATION SYSTEM STRENGTHS

- South Korean people have a very high zeal for education and believe that "human capital developed through education is their most valuable resource."²²
- There is a strong after school learning program for students' including arts, sports and foreign languages. This provides learning opportunities for low income students. The student participation rate in these programs is 60%.
- South Korean people have high respect for members of the teaching profession and the salary of teachers at all levels in South Korea is relatively high compared to other countries.
- Special education in South Korea has made great strides both in number and quality of programs since the enactment of the Special Education Promotion Act in 1977.
- Introduction of the 'alternate school' policy for students with special needs.
- Promotion of educational development in remote areas and educational programs for gifted students.
- A well developed and supported e-Learning focus.

²⁰ Choi, p.12.

²¹ Choi, p.10.

²² Weidman, J., and Park, N., "Recent Trends and Developments in Education in the Republic of Korea," *World Education News and Reviews*, 2002, p. 1.

- In 2005 South Korea was ranked in first place in the OECD rankings in terms of the number of younger people who have completed an upper secondary education, leading a small group of countries including Norway and Japan, where more than 90% of students reach this level.
- The South Korean government spends about half the amount on school students as the USA but its performance in maths is much higher.
- South Korea has experienced a spectacular expansion of higher education during the last five decades.

EDUCATION SYSTEM AREAS FOR CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT

- In recent times there has been a strong emphasis on teacher evaluation; however school evaluation/accountability is still in the process of development.
- Private education costs are high. For example, the main focus in South Korea is in preparing students for college admissions exams and subsequent enrollment into preferred universities. This cost is one of the highest among OECD countries.
- There have been so many reform measures and laws introduced within the last fifty years, educational policies in South Korea are generally referred to as forever changing policies.²³
- Drift of children from wealthy families to educational facilities outside South Korea. MOE recently promulgated an independent private high school policy aimed at keeping more students at home.
- The South Korean education system, despite its success in achieving high test scores has been criticized for encouraging students to conceive of themselves as being in fierce competition with their friends and peers.
- “South Korea is probably the most education-orientated country in the world. Seven out of ten students receive private tutoring for an average of 6.8 hours a week, and private

23 Weidman and Park, p. 1.

expenditure for education accounts for an average 12.7% of household expenses.”²⁴

- Corporal punishment is still widespread in primary and secondary institutions.²⁵
- South Korea has a heavy reliance on summative assessment (to the exclusion of other modes of assessment), and specifically on discrete item testing.²⁶

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