

Chapter 13

Beyond the English Divide in South Korea

Maria Teresa Martinez-Garcia

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3187-0853>

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea

ABSTRACT

The knowledge of English in South Korea is considered to be an important asset, such that it is an indispensable skill when applying for admission into the top universities in the country or finding good jobs. The investment of families in making sure their offspring learn the language has been consistently increasing in recent years. However, not all families have access to the same private resources, thus creating a division (also known as ‘English Divide’) between the richer families, who can provide their children with good private education, and poorer families, who cannot do it. This chapter provides a detailed account of the current economic situation of South Korea, emphasizing the importance given to English education. Moreover, the authors outline the work done by nonprofit organizations (such as Beyond the English Divide) to stop this English Divide.

INTRODUCTION

While South Korea traditionally has been considered a country with relatively strong monolingualism, since the 80s, the situation is rapidly changing. Nowadays, English is seen as an important key for success, and the lack of English skills is considered an important handicap in the competitive Korean society (Park, 2009). The importance given to English education has been fostered by the Korean government, which pushed its citizens to be more proficient in English to gain international recognition, more openness, competitiveness, and economic stability in the global economy (e.g., Kim, 2000; Park, 2009). For example, through the 6th National Curricula, English education was implemented obligatorily in 1995 for middle schools and in 1996 for high schools, and all the curricula was changed moving from a pedagogical approach focused on grammatical knowledge and accuracy towards focusing on communicative

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language use and fluency (e.g., Kwon, 2000; Shin, 2007). In addition, since 1997 (in the 7th National Curricula), mandatory English language education has been implemented beginning in the third grade in elementary school (Jung & Norton 2002; Lee, 2004; Song, 2013).

The emphasis on English education for Korea's development has not only affected primary/secondary education, but it is also reflected in its growing importance in higher education and the job market. Since the late 90s, most universities require students to take an English test as part of their Korean SAT (entrance exam). Moreover, as a graduation requirement, students need to achieve a certain score on standardized English tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), produced and administered by the Educational Testing Service of the U.S., for graduation – and those minimum scores have risen over the years (Park, 2009). Furthermore, English skills have become an important criterion for decisions regarding employment in the white-collar job market, such that even jobs that normally would not require English knowledge still test candidates on their skills during the interview process (Choi, 2002; McTague, 1990; Song, 2011) and even during their career (Choi, 2002). In fact, over 90% of workers in large, private manufacturing and exporting industries are continuously required to take English tests throughout their working career (Choi, 2002).

Thus, having high English proficiency offers significant advantages in entering top universities, landing high-paying jobs, and in future promotions, thereby widening the economic disparity prospects between the rich who can boost their English training and the poor in the country who cannot. Since the introduction of English as an elementary school subject, the private English education market has continued growing, with parents trying to give their children the best chances of having a good future. In recent years, English private after-school academies suppose an estimated \$3.3 billion market (Park & Abelman, 2004), and the competition for entering English-only kindergartens (*yeongeo yuchiwon*) with native-speaker staff (often twice or three times more expensive than regular kindergartens) is also thriving (Park, 2009).

This is an example of how economic conditions closely intersect with the issue of English in Korea (Park & Abelman, 2004; Shin, 2016). Those members of the Korean society who have more resources can send their children to costly English-only kindergartens or abroad, which in turn provide the offspring with better chances at securing better jobs (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This socioeconomic division between the rich and the poor in the society and its relation to the knowledge of English is known as the “English divide”¹. Nonprofit corporations such as Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR <http://teachnorthkoreanrefugees.org/>), Helping Others Prosper through English (HOPE http://alwayshope.or.kr/aboutus_eng.php), and Beyond the English Divide Inc (<https://beyondtheenglishdivide.com/>, which forms part of Beyond Inc.) have emerged in an attempt to provide opportunities to foster English acquisition for children from households with limited resources. These nonprofits aim for a level playing field, attempting to ensure equal opportunities by helping children from underprivileged, low-income families (including children from orphanages) find ways to learn and speak English at no extra cost to the parents.

In this book chapter, the importance of knowing English in the Korean society and the role of nonprofit corporations to fight this socioeconomic division will be discussed (with special emphasis on the work done by Beyond the English Divide Inc). First, the chapter provides an overview of the economic situation in South Korea, drawing data from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/>) and Statistics Korea (<http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/index.action>). By discussing some economic parameters, such as the real gross domestic product (GDP) or the country's average expenditure in education, this section provides direct evidence of the English divide

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