

Goals and Contents of English Language Teaching in North Korea: Insights From High School Textbooks*

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The current study attempts to shed light on the status of English education in North Korea – one of the most isolated countries in the world – by examining the most recent high school English textbooks currently accessible. Specifically, we examine the goals and contents of English textbooks used in North Korean high schools (Grades 10-12) by analyzing their prefaces and core reading passages. The reading passages from each grade level were categorized into six content categories, which were then cross-referenced with the pedagogical goal outlined in the preface of each textbook. The current results illustrate how the textbooks are manipulated to support and idolize Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and how the contents of the reading passages are used to inculcate the Communist ideology which pervades English classrooms in North Korea. In light of the increasing number of North Korean defectors studying in South Korea and elsewhere, the results are discussed with implications for teachers with these students in their classrooms.

[North Korean English textbooks/English education for North Korean defectors/북한영어교과서/새터민 영어교육]

I. INTRODUCTION

English education receives a significant amount of attention in the South Korean school

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system, where it is mandatorily taught from Grades 3-12. On the other hand, not much is known about English language teaching (ELT) practices in North Korea – one of the most isolated and closed states in the world. The limited access and dearth of research make it difficult to fathom the current status of English education in the Hermit Kingdom. There is, however, a growing need to learn more about ELT practices in North Korea as the number of North Korean defectors in South Korean secondary and tertiary institutions has steadily increased in the past two decades. Research on these students' adjustment to South Korean schools has consistently reported that they face a number of challenges, one of which pertains to their difficulty with English (e.g., Y. Paek & J. Yoo, 2011). Given the growing number of school-age defectors and their struggle with English, it is becoming increasingly important to have a clear understanding of the type of English instruction that they received prior to their resettlement in South Korea.

While not much is known about ELT practices in North Korea, historical records reveal that Kim Il Sung, the former leader of North Korea, explicitly emphasized the importance of foreign language education in a speech given to the Young Socialist Alliance on February 3, 1971:

We have to be ready to fight against the American and Japanese imperialists... We must know military words in English and Japanese such as “hands up” or “I will not shoot you if you put down the gun and surrender.” (Institute of North Korea Studies, 1983, p. 1337)

The above quote clearly illustrates that foreign language learning at that time was stressed primarily for military and political purposes. Similarly, existing literature reviewing ELT practices in North Korea suggests that since the Korean War, foreign language learning was emphasized as a means of idolizing Kim Il Sung and promoting his own brand of Communist ideology (J. Song, 2002). Whether for combating with the enemy or for promoting Kim Il Sung's Communist ideology, it appears that the goal of ELT in North Korea has more to do with political agenda as opposed to promoting learners' communicative competence in the foreign language – an objective that is explicitly stated in South Korean secondary school textbooks. The present study aims to revisit the goals and contents of ELT in North Korea in the 21st century by analyzing the prefaces and core reading passages presented in English textbooks used in North Korean high schools.¹ It is hoped that the current results will shed insights on ELT practices in North Korea which may help concerned practitioners and administrators gain a deeper

¹ As one of the reviewers pointed out, it is also meaningful to analyze textbooks from a state/country who share the same L1.

understanding about the type of English instruction that North Korean students typically receive before defecting to South Korea.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on textbook analysis has shown that textbooks are indicative of the objectives that a nation/state pursues through education. As Y. Park, J. Kim, K. Ko, K. Park, and K. Chung (2001) mention, textbooks serve as a means to connect the national educational ideology and policy to the students by echoing the national curriculum. In this sense, they are not just instructional media to teach school subjects, but also social media to convey ideologies and values that a nation advocates (J. Lee & W. Chang, 2012). Similarly, textbooks serve as an official construal of the National Curriculum and functions as a perceptual window through which students view the real world (Y. Jeong, 2003). Thus, textbooks provide insights into the educational ideology of the state as well as the contents deemed important to deliver the educational goals of each state. By analyzing English textbooks from a specific country, it is possible to “understand the direction and nature of a country’s English education program” (E. Kim & Y. Choi, 1999, p. 179).

English is one of the most important subjects in the South Korean school system, where students receive a total of 10 years of instruction in primary and secondary schools, prior to entering college. The National Curriculum for secondary English education gets modified every two to five years, as deemed necessary. Presently, more than 20 English textbooks developed in accordance with the National Curriculum are being used in secondary schools nationwide. The primary objective articulated in these textbooks, which has remained consistent over time, is to communicate and share information with people from around the world (E. Kim & Y. Choi, 1999). Echoing these objectives, the most frequent topic presented in South Korean secondary school textbooks (under the 7th National Curriculum) pertained to ‘world cultures,’ covering about 11% of the textbook content (H. Lee, K. Cha, J. H. Lee, J. K. Lee, & E. Yoon, 2009).

Given the importance of English in South Korea, there exists an abundance of literature on ELT practices and policies with several domestic journals solely devoted to the teaching of English.² On the other hand, literature about English teaching practices in North Korea is rather scarce, most of which is limited to a handful of domestic journal articles, book chapters and unpublished master’s theses. These studies have largely resorted to analyzing

² Some of the domestic journal solely devoted to the teaching of English include *English Language and Literature Teaching*, *English Language Teaching*, *English Teaching*, and *Modern English Education*, to name a few.

North Korean English textbooks, which, as the only teaching materials approved by the government, are deemed to have “absolute power” (Y. Park et al., 2001, p. 172).

One of the earlier studies comparing the textbooks from the two Koreas was conducted by J. Baik (1995), which examined the power and ideology presented in the secondary school English textbooks (Grades 8-10) from the two Koreas. J. Baik found that much of the content from the two Koreas concerned social values (South Korea: 35%, North Korea: 41%) and noted that it is the nature of educational materials to propagate particular ideologies in order to maintain the power status quo of each country. Similarly, in his critical review of the history of English language education in North Korea, J. Song (2002) reported that North Korea’s English textbooks focused largely on propagating the *Juche* ideology – i.e., Kim Il Sung’s own version of idolatry-based Marxism-Leninism which is essential to consolidating Kim’s hold on power and establishing North Korea’s political autonomy from the Soviet Union. J. Song (2002) further contended that English education “serves as one of the many conduits” (p. 50) for the propagation of the *Juche* ideology and that English education in North Korea will remain ideology-based as long as the current regime stays in power.

A study by Y. Park et al. (2001), which also compared the contents of textbooks from the two Koreas, is of particular interest to the current study. Y. Park et al. categorized the contents of a series of North Korean secondary school English textbooks (Grades 7-12) into six groups by subject matter: (a) idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, (b) political propaganda, (c) distortion of other countries, (d) Communist values, (e) sciences, and (f) content-based texts. Their results showed that the majority of the readings in North Korean textbooks focused on promoting the Communist ideology, and that ‘idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il’ was one of the most consistent themes across all grade levels.

In addition to comparing the textbooks from the two Koreas, attempts have been made to infer the teaching methods of North Korean schools via textbook analysis. E. Kim and Y. Choi (1999), for instance, examined activities/exercises in English textbooks of two grade levels (Grades 8 and 12). Their results showed that audiolingual and grammar-based methods were predominant for both grades with a substantive amount of mechanical drill exercises.

As seen from the foregoing review, relevant research thus far is not only scarce, but also not as current as one would hope, with minimal publications available since Y. Park et al.’s (2000) study. S. Lee’s (2014) recent work which critically reviewed research on North Korean English textbooks from 1994-2013 reports that despite almost a twofold increase in the number of pertinent studies in the second half of the research period (i.e., 2004-2013), only one study (i.e., H. Yang, O. Kwon, & B. Lee, 2004) was published in an academic journal, while the remaining 12 studies comprised unpublished master’s theses.

Additionally, all of the previous published articles used English textbooks from the 1990s, including H. Yang et al. (2004). Although a few studies did target English textbooks from the 2000s, these were again limited to unpublished master's theses.

Taken together, studies on North Korean ELT practices, albeit scarce, have consistently shown that the teaching method used in North Korea adopts the structuralist approach, and that the content of North Korean textbooks is dominated by ideological matters, such as national pride or Communist social values (E. Kim & Y. Choi, 1999; Y. Park et al., 2000, 2001). Most of these studies have focused on identifying the common characteristics of textbooks across all grade levels (e.g., Y. Park et al., 2000, 2001; H. Yang et al., 2004; M. Yu, 2008). The current study extends on the existing research by examining how the presentation of certain contents changes from one school year to the next. Additionally, we examine the most recent English textbooks available from North Korea (printed in 2008).³ The following three research questions guided the current study:

- 1) What are the educational goals stipulated in the prefaces of each grade level?
- 2) What is the distribution of the contents of reading passages for each grade level?
- 3) In what way(s) do the goals and contents change from one grade level to the next?

In order to address the questions stipulated above, we examine the contents of reading passages presented in North Korean high school English textbooks. We also identify the pedagogical goals articulated in the preface of each textbook in an attempt to document any changes (or lack thereof) in the goals and contents from one school year to the next.

III. METHOD

1. Materials

English classes in North Korean high schools use just one type of textbook, *English for Senior Middle School* (2008), published by the North Korean government. As noted, English textbooks from 2008, the most recent ones currently available in South Korea were chosen for the current analysis.⁴ We decided to focus on Grades 10-12,⁵ as the lower level

³ According to Education Newspaper (as cited in J. W. Kim, J. S. Kim, & S. Han, 2015), North Korea revised its school curriculum in 2012 and published a new set of textbooks in 2013; however, the new English textbooks are currently not available in South Korea.

⁴ In South Korea, there are two national libraries that carry several North Korean textbooks in their collection. Most of the North Korean textbooks, including English textbooks, are classified as 'special collection' and cannot be checked out of the library.

textbooks were found to contain fewer reading passages, compared to the higher level textbooks where each unit is organized around a core reading text. There were 15 reading passages ($M = 191$ words) in the Grade 10 textbook; 16 passages ($M = 346$ words) in the Grade 11 textbook, and 9 passages ($M = 361$ words) in the Grade 12 textbook. There were also supplementary reading materials at the back of the textbooks. However, only the core reading passages from each chapter are analyzed in this study.

2. Data Analysis

In order to identify the educational goal for each grade, we examined the prefaces presented on the first page of the textbook for each school year. Each preface was quite brief, occupying about half a page to one page. The prefaces of all three textbooks began with a direct quotation from Kim Jong Il, followed by his advice on foreign language learning (e.g., “The great leader Marshal Kim Jong Il said ‘Abundant reading, memorizing, and writing is the best way to master foreign language fast and accurately’” [Grade 12, p. 2, emphasis in original]). As shown in the quoted sample, Kim Jong Il’s (as well as Kim Il Sung’s) name was enhanced in bold with increased font size whenever it made an appearance in the textbook.⁶ For the sake of illustration, we have reproduced it in bold in the above quote, but we leave it intact elsewhere in this article. It should also be noted that each preface was written in Korean, which we translated into English. Kim Jong Il’s quote was followed by a short description of the chapters and exercises presented in the textbook. It then concluded with a single sentence in the form of a directive to the students, which stated the goal of English language study for each school year. For the purpose of the current analysis, we focus on the directive in the concluding sentence of each preface as the educational goal of the corresponding textbook.

In order to analyze the contents of the reading passages, the subject categories identified by Y. Park et al. (2000, 2001) were adopted with some modifications. Y. Park et al. (2000) originally categorized the contents of the textbook into six groups: (a) idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, (b) political propaganda, (c) distortion of other countries, (d)

⁵ Strictly speaking, the textbooks analyzed in this study were from Grades 8-10, the final three years of the North Korean secondary school system (i.e., Senior Middle School, grades 4-6), which is equivalent to Grades 10-12 in the U.S. school system. In line with previous studies that have used the U.S. system to refer to the North Korean school year system, the current study also adopts the U.S. school year system.

⁶ Since the preface was written in the Korean script (i.e., *Hangul*), Kim Jong Il’s name appeared in *Hangul* in all the prefaces. The reading passages were in English, with his name appearing in English. Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung’s names appeared in bold with enlarged font size in both scripts.

Communist values, (e) sciences, (f) content-based (texts).⁷ This categorization was based on the observation that such topics comprised recurring themes throughout the textbook, albeit in slightly different manner. Note, however, that Y. Park et al. (2000, 2001) included the entire series of secondary school textbooks (i.e., six years of middle and high school), and their analyses focused on analyzing the entire textbook, not just the reading passages. Hence, although we started with the same categories as Y. Park et al. for our own analysis, some modifications were needed. For example, it turned out that some portions that Y. Park et al. classified as *content-based* concerned subject matter often found in *content* classrooms such as math, chemistry, and biology, which inevitably overlapped with their *sciences* category. Furthermore, there were also some readings, best described as *stories*, whose contents did not fit into any of the established categories. Taking this into consideration, we opted to replace the *content-based* category (which mostly pertained to science-related contents, or which were embedded in dialogues and exercises, as opposed to reading passages) with *stories* in the current analysis. In addition, we renamed their original category of *distortion and slandering of South Korea and Western countries* to *skewed picture of other countries* since the latter was deemed to more accurately reflect the contents corresponding to that category. The revised subject categories with descriptions are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Contents of Reading Passages

Content category	Description
Idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il	Passages that explicitly extol Kim Il Sung and/or Kim Jong Il by describing their heroic achievements, birthdays, portraits, birthplaces, songs dedicated in their honor, among others (e.g., “Kim Jong Il’s Heroic Childhood”)
Political propaganda	Passages with political subject matter that supports the current socialist regime such as the <i>Juche</i> ideology and the Communist revolution
Skewed picture of other countries	Passages that present a skewed or distorted portrayal of other countries, on topics such as racial discrimination, unemployment, or poverty (e.g., “A Poor American Boy,” “A Poor Girl in Seoul”)
Communist values	Passages about values needed to maintain the regime such as cooperation, teamwork, order, sacrifice, physical strength, and the value of labor
Sciences	Passages specifically on scientific subject matter (e.g., “The Sun,” “Scientific Laws”)
Stories	Stories taken from literary works from around the world (e.g., “Jane Eyre,” “The Gift of the Magi”)

⁷ In Y. Park et al. (2001), there were originally seven categories, which included an additional category of *physical strength and hygiene*.

IV. RESULTS

The contents of the reading passages for each grade are presented and discussed in terms of the educational goal stipulated in the preface of the textbook for each school year.

1. Grade 10

The distribution of the content of reading passages for the Grade 10 textbook is summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Contents

Content category	No. of passages (%) <i>N</i> = 15
Communist values	6 (40.0%)
Idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il	4 (26.7%)
Skewed picture of other countries	2 (13.3%)
Stories	2 (13.3%)
Sciences	1 (6.7%)
Political propaganda	0 (0%)
Total	15 (100%)

There were 15 reading passages in the Grade 10 textbook out of which six readings fell in the category of *Communist values* wherein values such as group work, collaborative efforts and team sports were emphasized. For example, there was a reading passage entitled *They Like Sports* which depicts a girl who loves team sports: “Ok Sun is fond of sports, but she does not like to play sports games herself... She likes team sports more than individual sports. ‘Team sports are fun,’ she says” (Grade 10, p. 23). Another reading entitled *Doing Things Together* introduces several group activities and concludes with the following sentence: “Like this they do various kinds of activities every Thursday and prepare themselves in order to become true students faithful to the great leader Marshal Kim Jong Il” (p. 36).

The category of *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il* also assumed a substantive portion of the Grade 10 readings, as illustrated by the reading passage in the first chapter which expresses respect and loyalty to the two Kims. Written in the form of a diary, the writer expresses that he wants to be “a true son loyal to the great leader Marshal Kim Jong Il upholding the last teaching of the respected leader Generalissimo Kim Il Sung” (p. 11). Similarly, a reading entitled *Our National Holidays* describes the birthdays of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung as “the greatest national holidays” (p. 61).

Skewed picture of other countries, the third most frequently covered topic, was found in

two readings entitled *A Poor American Boy* and *The Climate in England*. In the former, a doctor in the U.S. refuses to treat a blind boy as he had no money. The latter describes the weather in England as “awful” and concludes by exclaiming: “Our country has a good climate. How happy we are!” (p. 73).

In order to compare the reading contents against the educational goal stipulated in the textbook, the educational goal provided in the Grade 10 preface is presented below:

Students should clearly keep in mind that the goal of foreign language learning is for Communist revolution; they should make constant efforts to use the foreign language in real life. (p. 2)

As seen in the above quote, Communist revolution is explicitly mentioned as the goal of English language learning. The reading passages in the Grade 10 textbook, with 66.7 % of the contents covering Communist values and the idolization of the two Kims, seem to duly reflect the proposed goal of achieving the *Communist revolution*.

2. Grade 11

The distribution of reading contents for Grade 11 is summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Distribution of Contents

Content category	No. of passages (%) N = 16
Communist values	4 (25.0%)
Idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il	3 (18.7%)
Skewed picture of other countries	3 (18.7%)
Stories	3 (18.7%)
Political propaganda	2 (12.5%)
Sciences	1 (6.3%)
Total	16 (99.9%)

Compared to Grade 10, where more than half of the readings concerned *Communist values* and *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il*, the contents of reading passages for Grade 11 were more evenly distributed across the six categories. *Communist values* was still the most prevalent topic (25%), closely tailed by the following three categories: *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il* (18.7%), *skewed picture of other countries* (18.7%), and *stories* (18.7%).

While the emphasized Communist value in the Grade 10 textbook was *teamwork*, the Communist value of *labor* was highlighted in Grade 11, often accompanied by a warning,

which illustrates the dire consequences of not working hard enough. For instance, a reading entitled *An Idle Pig* describes a pig, which does not work as hard as the other animals and eventually gets killed by the master for his birthday supper. This story concludes with an explicit lesson for the students: “This story is not mere fable. We should love labor and work hard keeping in mind this fable the respected Generalissimo told us” (p. 74). Likewise, in a reading entitled *No Food for a Lazy Boy*, a boy named John Brown is described as a lazy child who would not clean his shoes as they would get dirty in no time. In return, his father refuses to give him dinner, saying, “You don’t have to eat now, because you will be hungry again in a short time” (p. 65), cautioning the negative consequence of his laziness.

In line with the Grade 10 textbook, the first chapter of the Grade 11 textbook starts with an instance of *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il*: “In spring there is the birthday of the great leader Generalissimo Kim Il Sung... The birth of the respected Marshal was the greatest happiness and joy for our people” (p. 6). Another reading falling under this category was presented in the form of a letter written by a middle school student, praising the two Kims:

We bow in front of the bronze statue of the respected Generalissimo Kim Il Sung and make up our minds to be loyal to the respected General Kim Jong Il... We are the happiest children thanks to the warm care of the respected General Kim Jong Il. (pp. 42-43)

One notable observation in the Grade 11 textbook concerns the fact that the contents presented under the category of *skewed picture of other countries* became more explicit. For example, the following is taken from a reading about a young American named John Smith who is unemployed: “It is easy to lose a job in America, but it is very difficult to find a job... There is nothing given to him: no job, no house and no food. This is America. He hates this America” (p. 36). The use of the verb “hate” to describe John’s feelings toward his own country is noteworthy as such extreme sentiment was not portrayed in the 10th grade textbook. Likewise, a reading entitled *Because He Was a Negro Boy* describes a 12-year-old boy Jack who was “refused medical treatment, because he was a Negro boy” (p. 84). In another reading entitled *A Poor Girl in Seoul*, “the US beasts” are blamed for the unfortunate circumstances and poverty experienced by Nam Suk whose father was killed by “the US imperialists” (p. 111). Considering that the readings falling into this category in the 10th grade textbook were about an American blind boy with no medical care, and the “awful” weather in England, the contents and the expressions in the same category presented in the 11th grade is noticeably more hostile.

Another salient observation in the Grade 11 textbook is the emergence of readings

pertaining to the category of *political propaganda*, wherein the North Korean political ideas are brought to spotlight. One reading describes an incident that happened in a former socialist country where a man named Mr. Ivanov waits for a young woman who asks him to hold her baby until she returns. The woman never returns, and the passage goes on to say that such tragic scenes can be frequently seen in “countries where socialism was turned over” (p. 98). The story concludes with the following lesson: “As you see, if we defend socialism, we are to win; but if we forsake it, we are to die. Socialism is our soul and life” (p. 98).

As with Grade 10, we have reproduced the pedagogical goal for Grade 11 from the preface:

Students should engrave the words of our supreme leader Kim Jong Il in their hearts and study hard to learn the foundations of foreign language in secondary school (p. 2).

As shown in the quoted directive, Kim Jong Il’s name is explicitly mentioned, and students are urged to faithfully heed his words.

3. Grade 12

The distribution of reading contents for Grade 12 is summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Distribution of Contents

Content category	No. of passages (%) <i>N</i> = 9
Idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il	3 (33.3%)
Political propaganda	3 (33.3%)
Stories	2 (22.2%)
Communist values	1 (11.1%)
Skewed picture of other countries	0 (0%)
Sciences	0 (0%)
Total	9 (99.9%)

As seen in Table 4, the reading contents were concentrated on *political propaganda* and *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il* in the Grade 12 textbook, with more than two-thirds of the readings corresponding to the two afore-mentioned categories.

Similar to Grade 10 and Grade 11 textbooks, the Grade 12 textbook starts with a passage idolizing the two Kims. The first chapter describes a classroom decorated with “the portraits of the respected leader Generalissimo Kim Il Sung and the great leader Marshal

Kim Jong Il” and mentions that the students “take good care of them every day” (p. 3). In another passage about Kim Jong Il’s childhood, Kim is portrayed as a brilliant student who skipped school years and who was the only student that could solve difficult math problems. The passage concludes by mentioning that other students “couldn’t help admiring him” (p. 27).

Alongside *idolization of the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il*, *political propaganda* emerged as an important theme for the Grade 12 readings, which exhibited more exaggerated political content compared to that of Grade 11. In a reading entitled *Pyongyang*, the North Korean capital city is augmented as “the centre of the world revolution” where many foreigners visit “to learn the *Juche* idea” (p. 32). Another reading in the *political propaganda* category introduces an 18-year-old teenager Ri Su Bok who was killed during the “Fatherland Liberation War” (i.e., the Korean War). The passage portrays him as a hero who “joined the Korean People’s Army to smash down the US invaders” (p. 48), and who “dedicated his only life to his one and only fatherland” (p. 49). The final chapter of the Grade 12 textbook also included a reading falling into this category. In fact, this chapter was entitled *On the Juche Idea: An Immortal Classic Treatise of the Great Leader Marshal Kim Jong Il*, with the entire chapter focusing on the *Juche* ideology. The reading included in this chapter was described as an extract from an article with the same title which was authored by Kim Jong Il himself.

Unlike the Grade 10 and 11 textbooks where *Communist values* received the most amount of coverage, there was just one reading falling into this category. In addition, categories falling into *sciences* and *skewed picture of other countries* were noticeably absent from Grade 12.

The pedagogical goal presented in the preface of the Grade 12 textbook read as follows:

Students should engrave the words of our supreme leader Kim Jong Il in their hearts, and study hard over and over again in order to become great pillars of the society. (p. 2)

The first clause is an exact copy of the Grade 11 preface in which Kim Jong Il’s name is explicitly mentioned and the students are asked to engrave his words in their hearts. Of particular interest is the second clause which articulates that the objective of studying is for the students “to become great pillars of the society,” manifesting a political and social agenda. It is perhaps not coincidental that *political propaganda* and *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il* were the most frequent themes in the Grade 12 textbook.

V. DISCUSSION

The current analysis sought to gain some insight into the goals and contents of ELT in North Korea by examining the objectives and reading passages presented in their high school English textbooks. As shown, their political agenda is explicitly stipulated as the goal of studying English (e.g., "...the goal of foreign language learning is the Communist revolution" [Grade 10]; "[Students should] study to be great pillars of society" [Grade 12]). These objectives were duly reflected in the contents of the reading passages, with some features varying by each school year. For example, for Grade 10, *Communist values* was by far the most popular theme, followed by *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il*. The same trend continued for Grade 11, but with the percentages being more spread out across other categories. Additionally, the category of *political propaganda*, which was absent from Grade 10, made its first appearance in Grade 11. In fact, this very category went on to receive the most amount of coverage (alongside *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il*) in the Grade 12 textbook. Table 5 displays the distribution of contents across the three grade levels.

TABLE 5
Distribution of Contents for Each School Year

Content categories	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Idolization of two Kims	26.7%	18.7%	33.3%
Communist values	40.0%	25.0%	11.0%
Political propaganda	0%	18.7%	33.3%
Stories	13.3%	18.7%	22.2%
Skewed picture of other countries	13.3%	18.7%	0%
Sciences	6.7%	6.3%	0%

As shown in Table 5, *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il* remained the most consistent and persistent theme throughout the three grade levels, occupying a sizable coverage for each school year. While *Communist values* continued to receive the most coverage in both Grade 10 and Grade 11, it gradually decreased from 40% (Grade 10) to 25% (Grade 11) to 11.1 % (Grade 12). On the other hand, readings on *political propaganda* steadily increased from 0% (Grade 10) to 18.7% (Grade 11) to 33.3% (Grade 12).

In addition to the quantitative changes in the categories, qualitative differences in the contents falling in the same category were also observed across different grade levels. As mentioned, it may be recalled that the contents under *skewed picture of other countries* became more spiteful with each increasing school year, with words such as "hate," "US imperialists" "US beasts" being used in Grade 11 and 12, but not in Grade 10. Additionally, the readings pertaining to *Communist values* in Grade 10 focused on the value of *teamwork*,

whereas the readings in the same category in the Grade 11 textbook focused on the value of *labor*, accompanied by a description of subsequent punishment for not working (e.g., not receiving any food, or getting killed).

In comparing the current results with Y. Park et al.'s (2000, 2001) results, which analyzed North Korean textbooks from the 1990s, it is evident that the textbooks from the 1990s contained more science-related subjects such as gravity and the solar system, especially for Grade 12. However, this was not the case for the more recent Grade 12 textbook analyzed in this study. Readings on scientific topics appeared only until Grade 11, but was conspicuously absent from the Grade 12 textbook, being replaced by topics such as *political propaganda* which, along with *idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il* received the most coverage (occupying more than two-thirds of the reading passages) in the Grade 12 textbook. Hence, in the current analysis, the contents became more concentrated on political propaganda with each increasing school year. This difference aside, a general comparison of the current textbooks with those printed in the 1990s shows that the contents of the reading passages have remained more or less the same, with only small changes to few reading passages.

As noted previously, Kim Il Sung is reported to have emphasized foreign language learning in 1971, mandating that young people must learn foreign languages to fight against the American and Japanese imperialists (Institute of North Korea Studies, 1983). It has been almost 45 years, but hostile attitudes towards other capitalist countries, especially toward the United States and Japan, are still prevalent in North Korean textbooks as evidenced by the readings categorized under *skewed picture of other countries*. Of course, such stereotyping in which one country or a certain group of people are depicted as exhibiting one set of characteristics is also prevalent in other textbooks from around the world. Ndura (2004), for example, raises concerns about Africans being stereotyped as being poor and primitive in ESL textbooks used in the Western United States. However, such portrayals are usually covert and benign, the ramifications of which are often not intentionally fabricated on the part of the textbook writer(s). In the case of North Korean textbooks, however, the skewed portrayals are unequivocally overt, reinforced by the use of explicit phrases such as “[d]amn the US beasts” or “sworn enemy of our people” (Grade 11, p. 111).

It is perhaps inevitable that textbooks necessarily “reflect ideological and political discourses” (Ke, 2012, p. 186) as most English language textbooks inadvertently impose Anglo-American cultural values on the world with their covert cultural bias. Schneer (2007) also cautions that such “hidden agenda” can direct students to regard other cultures as “problems to be solved” (p. 606). In the case of North Korea, however, the political and social agenda are not hidden, but explicit and premeditated where the students are overtly directed to view certain groups of people as enemies.

The current results corroborate the previous findings that the idolization of both the late Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, as well as the propaganda of the *Juche* ideology predominate the reading passages of English textbooks across all grade levels. As J. Song (2002) predicted, this ideology-laden instruction is likely to continue as long as the current leaders stay in power. Moreover, it appears that such type of indoctrination is evident not only in English textbooks, but also in other school subjects. A case in point is Karp and J. Lee's (2010) study which examined North Korean mathematics teaching practices, drawing largely on interviews with North Koreans who used to teach mathematics back in the North, before defecting to the South or finding refuge in a third country. Based on their results, Karp and J. Lee conclude that the authorities in North are "not content with promoting party propaganda everywhere outside the walls of the mathematics classroom, but have deemed it necessary to introduce it into the mathematics lesson as well even to the detriment of the subject" (p. 10). They further note that "ideological propaganda is required during each lesson," and that "[m]athematics becomes a pretext for propaganda" (p. 9). Thus, it appears that all content education in North Korea, be it English other subject (such as Math), first and foremost, must serve the interest of the Communist revolution (J. Baik & J. Shim, 1995; Karp & J. Lee, 2010; J. Song, 2002).

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current findings indicate that the contents of reading passages used in English textbooks in North Korean high schools focus on promoting Communist values and idolizing Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il so as to inculcate their own brand of Communist ideology. We suspect that the current results may possibly alarm and discomfort many ELT practitioners who may not be familiar with the educational practices in North Korea. However, an accurate portrayal of the goals and content of teaching materials in North Korea is important, not only in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of their ELT practices, but also for practical reasons – to better understand the educational backgrounds and experiences of the expanding group of North Korean defectors whose young minds may have been inculcated with such contents from Grade 1.

With the rapidly increasing number of North Koreans defecting to South Korea, we are beginning to witness many of these defectors enrolling at tertiary institutions in South Korea in an attempt to adjust to and increase their chance of securing a better life. Accumulating research examining their adjustment to the South Korean university system has shown that these students face tremendous difficulties partly because of their lack of background knowledge and familiarity with the new school system, but also because of their lack of basic knowledge of English, which is an integral part of the South Korean

high school curriculum (H. Kim, 2012; H. Lee, 2015; E.S. Park & O. Kim, 2014). Given that the general university curriculum is designed for an average South Korean student who come with a minimum of 10 years of English instruction, the same curriculum does little to support the unique educational background that an average North Korean student typically comes with. Many students who have defected from the North have experienced a hiatus in their education or encountered rather unusual circumstances where the teachers did not show up for classes (H. Kim, 2012).⁸ Given the recent influx of such students in our school system, it is high time that we become aware of the type of education and teaching materials that these students have experienced in their home country, in an effort to better cater to their unique learning needs. This may not be an easy feat, but an accurate portrayal and understanding of their educational backgrounds and experiences will serve as a starting point to better addressing their needs.

Last but not least, there are some limitations that need to be pointed out. As noted in the Introduction, North Korean resources are not easily accessible to outsiders. The textbooks targeted in the current study were printed in 2008. While these were the most recent textbooks currently accessible, it is still not the most recent version; it has been reported that North Korea completed a new set of textbooks in 2013 and started using them from April, 2014 (J. W. Kim, et al., 2015). Unfortunately, however, the 2013 English textbooks are currently not accessible. Further research should focus on the most recently published textbooks especially in light of the speculation that the ideological contents seem to have been reduced in the new set of textbooks (J. W. Kim et al., 2015). In addition, given the increasing number of school-age North Korean defectors who have attended (or partially attended) secondary school in North Korea, it would be worthwhile to recruit participants who have actually used these textbooks in North Korea, and hear about own their experiences with the textbooks. A comparison of their English-learning experience in the North and in the South could yield valuable insights for teachers and administrators interested in helping these students transition to the South Korean school system.

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Examples in English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Levels: Secondary, Tertiary

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