

## Try Hard! Content Analysis of Senior Middle School North Korean English Textbooks Through EIL Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

*Textbooks provide rare insight into North Korea's education system, where information access is scarce. Since its current leader, Kim Jong-Un, took power, North Korea has been placing increasing importance on English education, evidenced by major educational reforms that allocated more curriculum time to English, reduced the age of first contact with English education, and introduced more communicative approaches in English teaching. While it appears that North Korean education is becoming more internationalised, analysis of its English textbooks reveals otherwise. Using content analysis with the English as an International Language theoretical framework, this study investigates how English is refashioned as propaganda in North Korean education and whether North Korea's English education prepares learners for global communication, by examining senior middle school English textbooks published during Kim Jong-Un's regime. Visuals in the textbook cover and text in the reading passages and textbook prefaces were analysed. The analysis revealed that these textbooks function concurrently as educational and propagandistic tools. They characterise English as an instrument for national development, enabling North Koreans to promote domestic culture abroad and access the wider scientific literature in English, achieving the state's political goals of glorifying North Korean culture and boosting its international standing through technological advancements. These textbooks strategically advocate domestic topics and state-approved ideologies with little mention of global perspectives, reinforcing this information in a top-down fashion that, while equipping North Korean learners to communicate their own culture, precludes critical engagement with domestic and foreign cultures, limiting learners' ability to use English in global, transcultural contexts.*

*Keywords:* North Korea; English education; English as an international language; Content analysis; Juche ideology

### INTRODUCTION

North Korea, a hermit kingdom largely operating in isolation, is guided by an omnipotent state ideology called *Juche* that emphasises self-reliance and seclusion from external influences. *Juche* dominates all areas of North Korean life (Lee, 2003), including that of education.

Despite active isolation, North Korea has, in recent decades, relied significantly on international trade for survival (Hastings, 2020), suggesting an increasing need to communicate in the global economy with international languages like English. This was not always the case: Russian was once North Korea's favoured foreign language due to ideological and political ties with Russia. Russian was supplanted by English, which subsequently became North Korea's main foreign language (Song, 2002). This resulted from geopolitical shifts like the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of English as a global tongue. English education has since gained greater prominence in North Korea, especially during the reign of its current leader, Kim Jong-Un, who instituted sweeping changes to English education (Kang, 2020).

The increasing prominence of English education is paradoxical, as Ahn and Lee (2022) argue that most North Koreans lack opportunities to use English outside class. Considering North Korea's minute English-speaking population, it is unlikely that average North Koreans have access to English speakers (T.-Y. Kim, 2021). Furthermore, North Koreans are generally forbidden from speaking to foreigners and accessing outside information (Burgess, 2023; Cowan, 2018). For many North Koreans, textbooks are likely their only source of interaction with English (Ahn & Lee, 2022).

These textbooks are state-produced and supposedly reflect strategic aims such as empowering students to articulate national achievements through English and access English-based scientific knowledge. However, there is little research evaluating how effectively North Korean English textbooks serve these purposes. Furthermore, research on English language teaching (ELT) in Korean contexts has revolved around South Korea, and the few studies involving North Korean-produced ELT textbooks have examined ideologies, structural linguistic features (e.g., lexicon), and communicative tasks within. However, few studies investigate how these textbooks prepare North Koreans for transcultural communication in English, that is, whether these textbooks orient to English as an International Language (EIL). In this age where English has become globalised and most English speakers reside outside of traditional English-speaking countries (Rose & Galloway, 2019), it is crucial for ELT to move away from Anglophonic norms and towards representing the diverse cultural and linguistic realities of English learners/speakers. This study bridges this research gap by employing content analysis to investigate the following issues in North Korean senior middle school English textbooks, using EIL as a theoretical framework:

- i) How is English conceptualised in senior middle school English textbooks in North Korea?
- ii) To what extent are these textbooks employed as propaganda for promoting North Korean state ideologies?
- iii) To what extent do these textbooks equip North Korean learners to communicate in English globally and interculturally?

The motivation for using textbooks is three-fold: i) North Korea's isolation renders it difficult for researchers to access information about it apart from state media (Shin, 2014); ii) it is unlikely that state media constitutes a comprehensive data source because it seldom discusses English education (Shim, 2021); iii) textbooks are ideological and cultural conduits (Apple, 1992; Ndura, 2004). Therefore, these textbooks are valuable insider resources for investigating North Korea's perception of English and how it affects North Koreans' English education, as few such resources are available outside of North Korea.

### NORTH KOREA'S RULING IDEOLOGY, *JUCHE*, AND ITS IMPACT ON ENGLISH EDUCATION

Following the division of Korea into a democratic South and a communist North, North Korea was officially founded by Kim Il-Sung in 1948. The country has been ruled by Kim's family, namely, his son, Kim Jong-Il, and currently, his grandson, Kim Jong-Un. A major event that forever changed North Korea was Kim Il-Sung's introduction of *Juche*, North Korea's ruling ideology. Founded on Marxism-Leninism, *Juche* is a form of socialism emphasising North Korea's self-

reliance through ideological, political, economic, and militaristic independence (Kwon, 2003). This self-reliance characterises North Koreans as “master[s] of [their] own fate” who resolve domestic issues without external help (Shin, 2021, p. 83). Under *Juche*, reliance on a central figure is justified by asserting that self-reliance is achievable only through loyalty to a leader or *suryong*, generating extensive glorification of the Kim family. Moreover, *Juche* indoctrinates North Koreans with the belief that they cannot function independently without the *suryong*'s guidance.

Like many aspects of North Korean life, education is intertwined with *Juche*. English education in North Korea shares similar goals with North Korean education in general, which are i) glorifying the Kim family through *Juche* and ii) scientific and technological development. The former aims to promote *Juche* globally through English, given English's role as an international language (Song, 2002). The latter is shaped by economic pragmatism, as North Korea realised that scientific and technological expertise would be best accessed through English (Song, 2002). This second goal propagates the belief that scientific and technological advancement helps North Korea achieve economic independence, one of *Juche*'s tenets (Song, 2019). Additionally, North Korean students are taught that “self-realisation” is achievable only through “promoting the achievements of [North Korean] society” (Yang & Chee, 1963, p. 129), suggesting that North Korean English education trains students to showcase the nation's positive aspects.

The adoption of English as a foreign language was influenced by shifting geopolitical concerns between North Korea and its neighbours. During Kim Il-Sung's reign, Russian was the sole most important foreign language due to close Russian-North Korean interactions. Furthermore, English teaching ceased during the Korean War and early in the Cold War as English was deemed the language of North Korea's nemesis, the U.S. (Kang, 2020; Song, 2019). This changed in the 1960s when English was reintroduced and subsequently replaced Russian as the main foreign language during Kim Jong-Il's reign after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 (Song, 2002). This eventually led to North Korea establishing English as its foremost foreign language (T.-Y. Kim, 2021). Since taking power in 2011, Kim Jong-Un has placed increasing importance on English education, an example being his regime's investment in educational technologies for young English learners (Lynn, 2021; Shim, 2021). This suggests that the regime is keen on helping its citizens get a head start on acquiring English.

In 2013, Kim Jong-un introduced significant reforms to North Korea's curriculum. This change suggested that North Korea's education system is slowly aligning with international trends, especially considering an increased emphasis on English learning (Yoon, 2016). Analysts speculate that these reforms mirror Kim Jong-Un's recognition of the economic significance of English proficiency (Park, 2021). Notably, the updated curriculum substantially modified North Korea's English syllabus by diversifying communication-centric activities, emphasising participatory group work, allocating more curriculum time to English, and commencing English education as early as the fifth grade (Ministry of Unification, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2022; Winters, 2022; Yoon, 2016).

Despite these revisions, the core purpose of North Korea's English education remains firmly ideological. These reforms function to boost economic development through improved scientific and technological education and strengthen ideological indoctrination (Kang, 2020). English education functions more to sustain the veneration of the Kim regime and adherence to *Juche* than to advance North Koreans' English abilities (Kang, 2020). Yet, these shifts inadvertently stoked an “English fever”—a fervent desire to master English. This trend may have been spurred by a “lifelong education fever”, an ethos encouraging North Koreans to dedicate part of their daily lives to studying (Reed & Kim, 2007, p. 258). Supporting this uptrend in English

learning is a noteworthy increase in the proportion of North Koreans undergoing English tuition—from 12.5% to 27.7% between 2006 and 2020 (Ji, 2023).

Despite growing interest in North Korean English education, knowledge of it remains limited. Professor Hwang In-pyo from Chuncheon National University of Education in South Korea observed that currently available North Korean education-related materials are “inadequate” and “inconsistently maintained”, necessitating further investigation (Eum, 2015).

### ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (EIL)

The multifaceted, multilocational evolution of English has produced various analytical frameworks like EIL, World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and Global Englishes (Ahn, 2017; Galloway & Rose, 2018; Kachru, 1992; Matsuda, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2018; Sharifian, 2009). These frameworks collectively dispute the concept of a singular “authority, prestige, and normativity” for English (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008, p. 3). This section focuses on EIL.

EIL challenges the notion that English is the preserve of “native” English speakers. Central to the EIL perspective is the imperative to equip both multilingual and monolingual English learners with essential communication skills. EIL-influenced pedagogies move beyond just teaching so-called “standard English varieties”, typically American or British English. Instead, they underscore the significance of recognising and understanding diverse linguistic and cultural norms within different English varieties.

EIL advocates that the main purpose of English education is to equip students with an international communication tool, voicing significant concerns about ELT’s over-reliance on cultural materials predominantly from traditional English-speaking countries like the U.S. Such materials often present idealised portrayals of these nations, associating them with positive descriptors like “wealthy”, “right”, and of “higher status” (Ahn, 2017; Matsuda, 2012; Sharifian, 2009, and others). Numerous locally and internationally produced ELT textbooks have promoted Anglophone norms and cultures while side-lining non-Anglophone ones (Keles & Yazan, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2011, among others). Exposure to these biased materials might lead students to develop a unidimensional understanding of these countries and their English varieties as the only legitimate ones. The negative impact becomes evident when learners experience difficulties in expressing aspects of their native and other non-Anglophone cultures in English. EIL scholars emphasise the inclusion of content that goes beyond Anglophone cultures in ELT materials. In fact, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) proposed that ELT textbooks can include source cultures (learners’ native culture), target cultures (Anglophone cultures), and international cultures (all other cultures). This ensures that students acquire cultural knowledge and linguistic resources to discuss a diversity of cultures rather than being limited to those of English-speaking nations. English in the current age of globalisation is spoken more widely outside Anglophone countries, and the English-speaking population outside of these countries is predicted to exceed those within by eight times by 2050 (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Transborder communication and intercultural competence will, therefore, become increasingly pertinent. This highlights the need for more balanced and inclusive approaches to English pedagogy that address the shifting sociolinguistic realities of English, which are no longer encompassed solely by an Anglophonic, native speaker-based approach.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS IN NORTH KOREA

Research on North Korean English education remains underexplored. Most literature concerning English education in the Korean context focuses on South Korea, while North Korea garners considerably less attention. Publications examining English textbooks produced in North Korea and the nation's English education mostly cater to Korean-speaking audiences. These works encompass macro analyses, investigating diachronic shifts in North Korea's educational policies and comparing English curricula between both Koreas, as well as micro analyses, which analyse features of North Korean English textbooks—including vocabulary, structure, and ideological functions (Baik, 1995; Jung, 2018; Kang, 2020; Kim, 2019; Yoo & Kim, 2018). This section reviews studies on English textbooks in North Korea.

The first investigations of North Korean English textbooks emerged in the mid-1990s. Baik (1995) compared how North and South Korean English textbooks perpetuate ideologies and power imbalances in both Koreas. Choi (1996), on the other hand, studied how a high school-level North Korean English textbook might provide insights into English education during the eventual unification of both Koreas. Like Baik, Choi found that these textbooks are ideologically laden and not particularly useful for teaching English communication, as *Juche*-related teachings feature prominently and facts about other countries are “distorted”, reducing “efficiency of communication through English” (Choi, 1996, p. 58).

Corpus-based research on North Korean English textbooks has examined vocabulary and sentence structures, often in comparison with their South Korean counterparts. Several studies indicate that these textbooks showcase limited syntactic, lexical, and semantic complexity, especially when juxtaposed with South Korean equivalents (Joo & Uhm, 2019; Kim, 2019; Y. C. Lee & Kim, 2023). Specifically, Lee and Kim (2023) found less complex syntax and vocabulary in North Korean textbooks, suggesting potential challenges for North Korean students in handling intricate English texts. Echoing this, Joo and Uhm (2019) observed that reading passages in these textbooks offer limited linguistic cues, potentially hampering comprehension.

Despite attempted shifts towards communicative approaches, ideological elements persist. Ahn and Lee (2022) argue that post-reform junior middle school textbooks (2013 and later) remain insufficient for international communication due to limited international content and prevailing portrayals of North Korean dominance. Similarly, Kim (2023) and Park and Shin (2016) suggested that the updated textbooks' content and objectives largely reflect *Juche* and the North Korean leadership's intentions. Additionally, J.-R. Kim (2021) noticed that communicative approaches in these textbooks deviated from traditional communicative language teaching methods: Activities with communicative objectives were limited, primarily revolving around past and present tense questions.

Comparative analyses between textbooks from Kim Jong-Un's era and those of prior leaders underscore nuanced shifts across leadership periods. Hong and Kim (2019) and Oh and Kim's (2022) comparative studies pinpointed a decline in ideological content in recent textbooks. Additionally, they noted more extensive topics and an increased emphasis on communicative tasks. This suggests an ongoing balancing act between ideological instruction and communicative language teaching.



Therefore, much research on North Korean textbooks predominantly addresses their ideological content, structural linguistic attributes (e.g., syntactic and lexical features), or language skills imparted. A glaring gap exists in examining these textbooks using EIL, specifically how they prepare North Korean learners to communicate cross-culturally. This study seeks to bridge this gap.

## METHODOLOGY

The study utilises content analysis with the EIL theoretical framework to examine the conceptualisation of English in three senior middle school English textbooks, the extent to which these textbooks function as propaganda, and whether they prepare learners to communicate in global contexts. Content analysis is a systematic context-based approach to analysing texts through inferences (Krippendorff, 2004; Weber, 1990). It is commonly used in textbook analyses and noted for its utility in “examin[ing] texts as carriers of cultural information” (Canh, 2018, p. 118). EIL enables our examination of how North Korean ELT textbooks promote intercultural communication, focusing on lexical choices, topics, and representation of local (North Korean) and international cultures within.

Table 1 provides comprehensive information about our selected textbooks, including references, publication years, and author details. We selected these textbooks as they are locally produced by a state-owned publisher and contain many universal topics like energy and healthcare. Given that locally produced ELT textbooks are more inclined to align with EIL perspectives (Sihombing & Nguyen, 2022), our analysis explores if this is the case. Furthermore, given the prevalence of universal topics, our analysis examines whether the textbooks explore issues from different cultural perspectives. Although these books are solely authored by North Koreans, they primarily refer to British sources.

TABLE 1. Publication details of three senior middle school English textbooks in North Korea

Book	Publishing year	Authors	References
Book 1	Juche 102 (2013)	Choi Juk-song, Park Cheol-ho, Oh Seon-hae, Hwang Cheol-jin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Interchange 1</i> Cambridge University Press, 2009</li> <li>• <i>English Vocabulary in Use</i> Cambridge University Press, 2004</li> <li>• <i>English Grammar in Use</i> Cambridge University Press, 2004</li> </ul>
Book 2	Juche 103 (2014)	Kim Myeong-mok, Kim Hye-young, Associate Professor Jeon Won-je, Associate Professor Ri Moo-il, Park Cheol-ho	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Interchange 2</i> Cambridge University Press, 2009</li> <li>• <i>Interchange 3</i> Cambridge University Press, 2009</li> <li>• <i>Strategic Reading 1</i> Cambridge University Press, 2009</li> <li>• <i>Oxford Practice Grammar Basic</i> Oxford University Press, 2006</li> <li>• <i>English Vocabulary in Use: Pre-intermediate &amp; Intermediate</i> Cambridge University Press, 2006</li> <li>• <i>Active Skills for Reading 2</i> Heinel Cengage Learning, 2008</li> <li>• <i>Passages 2</i> Cambridge University Press, 2009</li> </ul>
Book 3	Juche 104 (2015)	Not available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Interchange 3</i> Cambridge University Press, 2009</li> </ul>

- *English Vocabulary in Use*  
Cambridge University Press, 2004
- *English Grammar in Use*  
Cambridge University Press, 2004
- *Grammar Sense 2*  
Oxford University Press, 2009
- *Pairwork 1*  
Pearson Education Limited, 2009

This study utilises three primary datasets from these textbooks:

- Visual imagery in the textbook covers. The books employ identical visual elements with different background colours: Books 1, 2, and 3 adopt a green (see Figure 1), purple, and orange background, respectively.
- Directives issued by the late leader, Kim Jong-Il, consistently featured in the textbooks' preface (see Figure 2).
- 24 reading passages and their corresponding 24 unit titles.

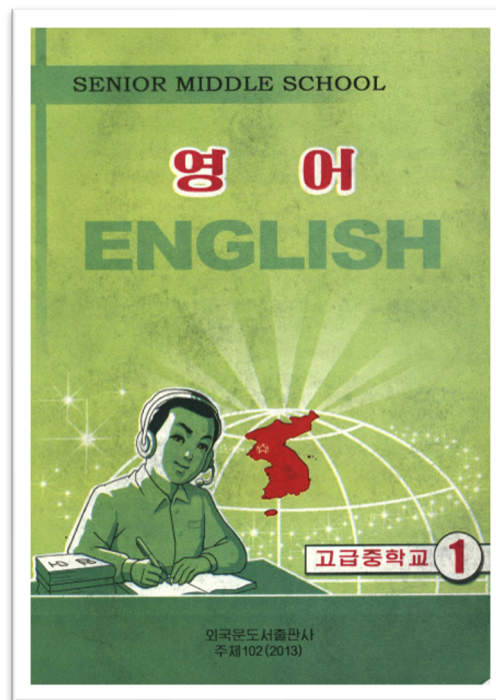


FIGURE 1. Senior middle school English textbook cover (Book 1)

Books 1, 2, and 3 contain nine, eight, and seven units respectively. Each unit is structured around a reading passage that sets the unit's thematic tone. The initial reading section is succeeded by skill-specific sections, including vocabulary and listening. Although these sections are designed to hone distinct English skills, their content is intrinsically tied to the reading passage's main theme. For instance, Book 3, Unit 1's reading passage elucidates the topic of the Olympics. Following this, the vocabulary section introduces Olympic sports-related terms. Moreover, example sentences in the grammar, speaking, and listening sections align with the overarching theme of sports or the Olympics.

## FINDINGS

### ENGLISH AS A PROMOTIONAL TOOL FOR NATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

To understand state perspectives on English in North Korea's English textbooks, this section analyses visual imagery in the textbook covers and directives from the late leader Kim Jong-Il in the textbook prefaces.

According to Kim Jong-Il's directives, English (or foreign languages generally) is positioned as pivotal for students endeavouring to build a "strong and advanced" North Korea or *Joseon*, a domestic abbreviation of North Korea's official name, *Joseonminjujuuinmingonghwaguk*. The directives illuminate the multifaceted role of English education in North Korea. Our translation of pivotal sections of these directives accompanies Figure 2.

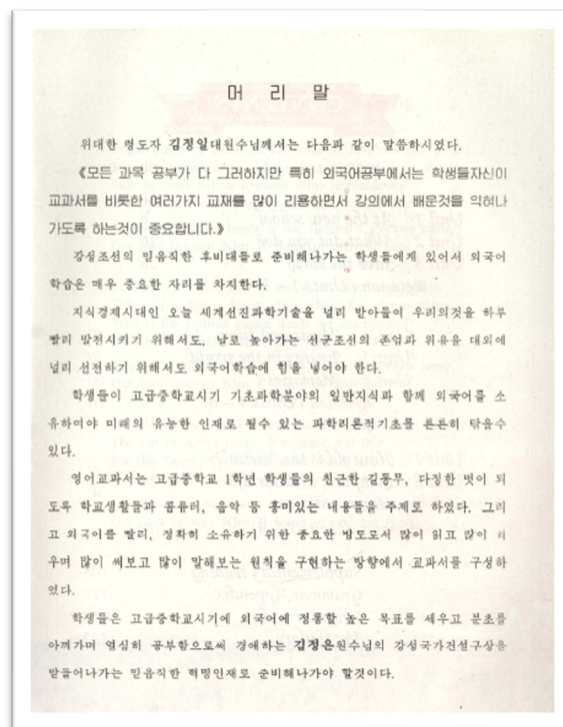


FIGURE 2. Textbook preface

#### PREFACE

The great leader Kim Jong-Il said as follows:

<...>

Foreign language acquisition occupies an important position in the lives of students preparing to become trustworthy supporters of a strong and advanced Joseon.

In today's era of the knowledge economy, we must intensify our efforts in foreign language learning to widely embrace the world's advanced science and technology, expedite our own development, and widely showcase the rising dignity and prestige of Joseon to the world.

During the senior middle school period, students must own a foreign language along with a general knowledge of foundational scientific fields so that they can hone a firm foundation in scientific theory for becoming competent talents in the future.

<...>



Students in senior middle school should aim high in mastering a foreign language by utilising every moment to study diligently to prepare themselves to become trustworthy revolutionary talents who build our beloved Marshal **Kim Jong-Un**'s strong and advanced nation.  
(Authors' own translation)

Firstly, the directive emphasises English's strategic value in accessing global innovations in science and technology, suggesting that a strong English proficiency keeps North Koreans updated with international scientific trends. English is positioned not just as a language but also as a tool for development, for displaying North Korea's developmental achievements, and for enhancing its global standing. The emphasis on learning English to "embrace" science suggests that English is seen as a bridge to global scientific knowledge, which is mostly communicated in English. This dovetails with Kim Jong-Un's goals, which foreground scientific education and technological advancement (Spezza, 2021).

The text's forward-looking stance characterises students as "competent talents in the future", indicating that English proficiency is perceived as a foundational tool for future global opportunities. English education aligns with Kim Jong-Un's vision of bolstering North Korea's position internationally (Panda, 2020), reflecting connections between individual English mastery and the nation's broader aspirations. Mastering English becomes not just a personal achievement but a national imperative reflecting the leadership's broader goals.

The textbook cover (see Figure 1) echoes Kim Jong-Il's directives. It connotes a united, forward-thinking North Korea with the boy engrossed in studying English, representing diligent youth striving towards national objectives. This underscores the importance North Korea attributes to English, characterising the language as equipping students for future roles as global professionals. The headphones suggest the nation's commitment to modern learning tools (Lynn, 2021), indicating North Korea's embrace of global developments. Combined with Kim Jong-Il's directives, the textbook cover implies that English is not merely a foreign language—it is crucial for North Korea's national, scientific, and global ambitions, acting as a bridge to the world and a representation of the country's global presence.

#### INTERNATIONAL CONTENTS AND THEIR DUAL PURPOSES

Content introduced in the reading passages is predominantly localised, lacking international representation. Out of 24 passages, only a few briefly mention non-North Korean topics. While some international segments discuss other countries' norms, several are leveraged to either laud North Korean accomplishments or champion *Juche* and collective domestic efforts towards global success.

For example, in Book 2, Unit 2, the passage (p. 17) first illustrates heating mechanisms in Europe and the Middle East and their essential functions in human life. The spotlight then shifts to the superiority of the Korean *ondol* (underfloor heating) system, highlighting its global popularity and how it is "unlike other heaters". This manoeuvre does more than just inform. For North Korean learners, English becomes the medium for projecting national pride to global audiences through communicating the *ondol*'s superiority. Learning about *ondol* in English readies students to advocate its merits, transforming them into cultural ambassadors. This dovetails with the propaganda narrative, where showcasing North Korea's national achievements and uniqueness becomes paramount.

Similarly, in Book 2, Unit 6, the passage introduces climate change, positioning small island nations as victims of actions by "large developed countries" (p. 61). This creates a narrative where vulnerable nations suffer due to other countries, echoing North Korea's ostracisation by big,

powerful countries like the U.S. (CFR.org Editors, 2022). Furthermore, the passage in Book 3, Unit 1 explores the history of the Olympic Games (pp. 6-7). A significant portion is dedicated to North Korea's medal wins at the 2012 London Olympics and its development into a "sports power", underscoring national pride and achievement. Beyond this blend of propaganda with international content, inclusion of global subjects also fulfils intercultural and informational objectives.

Most international content within North Korean educational materials is imbued with propaganda (Paik, 2020). Nevertheless, there are segments emphasising intercultural and informational enrichment. For instance, the passage in Book 1, Unit 7 (p. 75) explores the historical progression of length units, underscoring Egyptian measurement standards. Additionally, this unit elucidates linguistic nuances by underscoring the American English spelling *meter*—a noteworthy inclusion as North Korean English pedagogy is predominantly sculpted by British influences (Ahn & Lee, 2022). Such nuances signal a deliberate effort to acquaint students with the multifaceted nature of English.

The passage in Book 2, Unit 7 (p. 75) delves deeper into cross-cultural distinctions in gestures. It does so through an anecdote involving an English professor in Bulgaria by underscoring gestural discrepancies between Europe and North America. Thus, despite nationalistic undertones, the intent to foster an understanding of broader global cultures is clear.

#### LOCAL NAMES AND PLACES

The textbooks' reading passages often feature local names or settings. This reflects a deliberate strategy with dual objectives. The utilisation of recognisable settings and characters magnifies resonance with North Korean learners, ensuring effective transmission and assimilation of intended political ideologies. Featuring local content in English acquaints students with their own culture and empowers them with linguistic skills to articulate these domestic nuances to a global (English-speaking) audience. By weaving local narratives with English instruction, the passages merge cultural education, linguistic empowerment, and strategic propaganda.

For instance, the passage from Book 1, Unit 1 (p. 7) illustrates the daily life of a student at Kwangmyong Senior Middle School (see Figure 3). The beginning sets a tone of happiness and optimism: "Today I'm very happy". This sentiment subtly underscores the implication that studying at North Korean schools provides this happiness. Descriptions that follow paint an idyllic picture of the school. Phrases like "Everything looks bright and clean" and "All the students are wearing smart school uniforms" showcase a pristine, disciplined environment. This serves as propaganda highlighting the supposed benefits of North Korean education—where everything is orderly, clean, and joyous. The addition of "They're full of hope" amplifies this optimistic narrative.

Furthermore, the mention of science subjects (like physics and biology) and specialised laboratories signifies the importance of scientific studies in North Korean schools. This focus on science is evident in the protagonist and her partner's aspiration to become "famous scientists", which resonates with North Korea's emphasis on science and technology for national progress (Williams, 2019). This ambition, combined with the determination to "work harder than before", mirrors North Korea's broader messaging about dedication, hard work, and striving towards a brighter future (Hassig & Oh, 2015).

By anchoring this story in a local context, the passage adeptly fulfils dual purposes. It harmonises with national propaganda by illustrating the positives of North Korean education and

students' ambitions as symbolic of North Korean dreams, which reflect state-centric goals of promoting North Korea's advancements (here, in educational infrastructure) and scientific-technological progress. Furthermore, it offers students linguistic tools to discuss personal and national narratives in a global language.

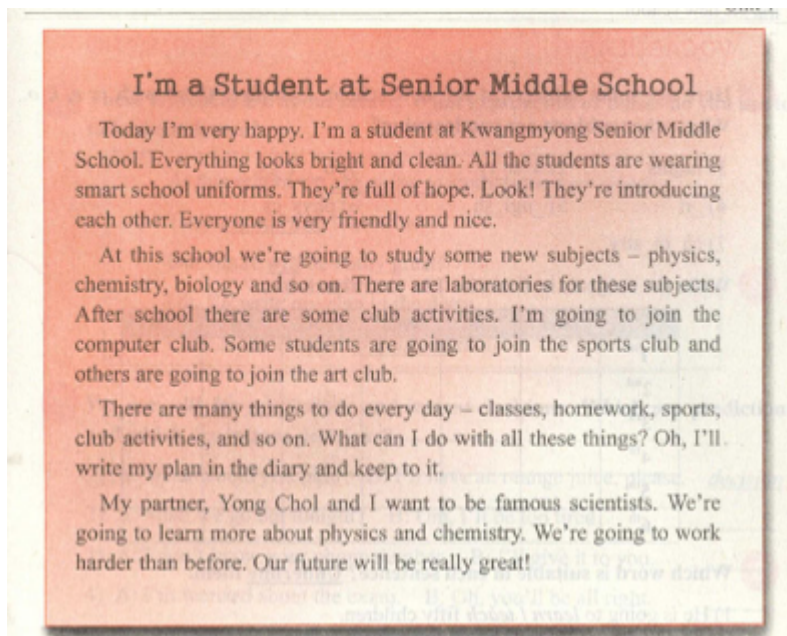


FIGURE 3. I'm a student at senior middle school (p. 7 of Book 1, Unit 1)

#### DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ENGLISH

The preface, featuring Kim Jong-Il's directives, underscores the paramount importance of scientific and technological knowledge within English education. This emphasis consistently appears across various units. Table 2 provides a unit-by-unit breakdown of scientific, technological, and medical domains and topics. Of the 24 units spanning the three books, 14 specifically emphasise science-, technology-, and medicine-related themes.

TABLE 2. Units with scientific, technological, and/or medical information

Book	Unit titles	Domain(s)	Science-, technology-, and/or medical-related information
Book 1	Unit 1 At the new school	Life & Science	Students' aspirations of becoming renowned scientists
	Unit 3 Save the Earth	Science	Exploration of scientific insights into Earth and climate change
	Unit 5 Energy in the world	Science & Technology	A comprehensive look at renewable energy sources
	Unit 6 Memories	Science	The interplay between human memory and brain functions
	Unit 7 How old is the "metre"?	Science & Math	Understanding scientific and mathematical principles of length
	Unit 8 Computer and our life	Technology	Evolution of computing and the significance of computer literacy and skills

<b>Book 2</b>	Unit 2	Science & Technology	Heating technologies and principles
	Love ours!		
	Unit 3	Science	Nutritional science
	Healthy food		
	Unit 4	Science & Technology	Satellite functions and their relationship with Earth
	Satellites in space		
<b>Book 3</b>	Unit 6	Science	Climate change and environmental issues
	The world we live in		
	Unit 2	Technology	Computer viruses
	Small but dangerous		
	Unit 4	Medicine	Impact of cold weather on human physiology
	Health care		
	Unit 5	Science & Technology	Environmental issues (tree health)
	Green land		
	Unit 6	Science	Evaporation process
	Water		

The integration of scientific content with English instruction is crafted to ensure clarity and simplicity while conveying essential scientific principles. For example, the passage in Book 3, Unit 6 (p. 61) elucidates the fundamental components of the water cycle straightforwardly. Such topics, pivotal to understanding broader concepts in earth science and climate change, are made accessible through scientific vocabulary like *evaporation* and *vapour*. This dual instruction offers learners a grounding in science and English terminology, potentially aiding future engagement with global scientific discourse.

Similarly, the passage in Book 1, Unit 3 (p. 27) focuses on environmental degradation. In Figure 4, the passage adeptly blends environmental science with English pedagogy. Learners are introduced to crucial environmental topics, from geological time scales to contemporary issues like pollution. The passage conveys significant human impacts on our environment, emphasising key scientific terms like *carbon dioxide* and *climate*. Through such integration, the textbooks equip students with linguistic tools to discuss pressing global issues.

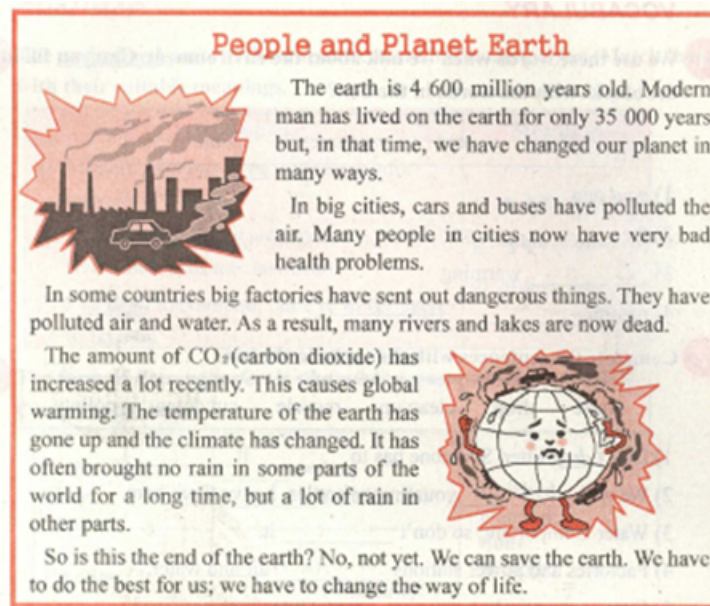


FIGURE 4. People and planet Earth (p. 27 of Book 1, Unit 3)



### PROPAGANDA AND INSTRUCTIONAL DIRECTIVES

The enigma of North Korean English pedagogy is unveiled not just in its overt state-centric narratives but also in subtle undertones permeating its educational content. A thorough examination unveils the deliberate interweaving of instructional and propagandistic elements. Table 3 shows that seven passages are both instructional and propagandistic, while eight are purely propaganda-driven. Each entry categorises the units' thematic content as either primarily instructional, directive, and/or propaganda-driven. That is, whether its content serves an educational purpose by emphasising specific skills or knowledge or whether it has a propagandistic objective of promoting state-approved ideologies. Exemplary sentences are presented to provide insights into the passages' tone and content. Furthermore, brief descriptions elaborate on various undertones and themes, like leadership values or collective unity. This table offers a snapshot of the intertwining of instructional content and state-sanctioned ideologies, highlighting the textbooks' dual purpose as educational tools and state-endorsed propaganda.

This dual purpose is shown in how some passages reflect universal values while others champion the merits of North Korean leadership and state ideologies. The degree of propaganda varies from subtle to overt. The passage on Mozart and Beethoven from Book 1, Unit 4 (p. 41, see Figure 5) exemplifies a subtler form. Ostensibly, it serves an educative purpose, narrating the lives of these famed musicians. However, underlying themes of resilience, early mastery, and unwavering dedication, evident in Beethoven "continu[ing] to compose" despite going deaf, resonate with North Korean societal values as espoused in *Juche*—determination in achieving self-reliance, mastering one's destiny, and dedication to the *suryong*. By emphasising the adversities these musicians faced and juxtaposing them with their prodigious talents since they were young, the passage characterises their genius as a motivational tool, implicitly suggesting that North Korean education too can nurture global talents. Thus, the passage appears educational but concurrently embeds domestic values of dedication, resilience, and national pride.

Conversely, the passage about Sun Hui from Book 2, Unit 5 (p. 51, see Figure 6) more overtly signals state propaganda. Sun Hui's narrative, an inspirational tale of a musical prodigy from an ordinary North Korean family achieving international acclaim, underscores egalitarianism, suggesting that in North Korea, anyone, irrespective of background, can achieve greatness. The regime's instrumental role in fostering talent and ensuring their citizens' success is overtly emphasised in Sun Hui's gratitude towards Kim Jong-Un. Ultimately, the story instils national pride while reinforcing the regime's centrality in individual success narratives.

The passage titled "How happy they are!" from Book 1, Unit 9 (p. 95, see Figure 7) represents the most overt use of propaganda. The narrative positions Kim Jong-Un as the epicentre of North Koreans' bright future. Every facet of the story, from Kim Jong-Un's benevolence towards children to ordinary families achieving prominence through association with him, is carefully crafted to promote universal loyalty and allegiance by tying individual and collective prosperity to loyalty towards Kim Jong-Un. Chung II and Hyo Sim's narratives encapsulate this unwavering commitment to him. Similarly, many passages overtly use propagandistic language, linking individual success to the North Korean leadership.



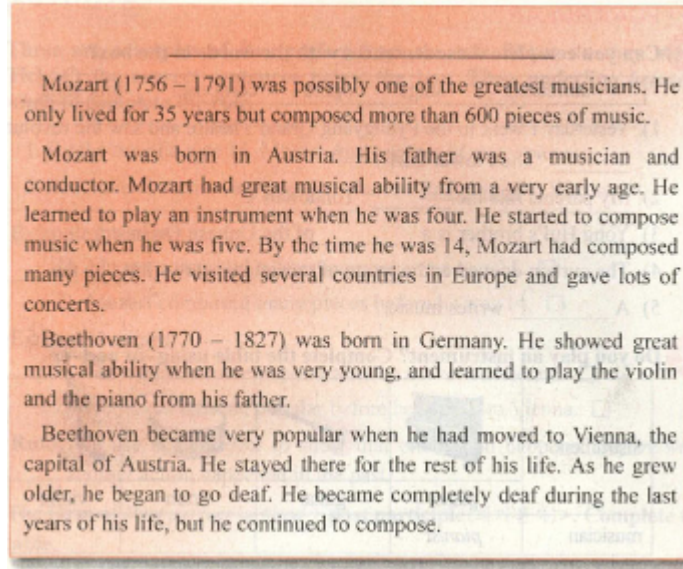


FIGURE 5. Mozart and Beethoven (p. 41 of Book 1, Unit 4)

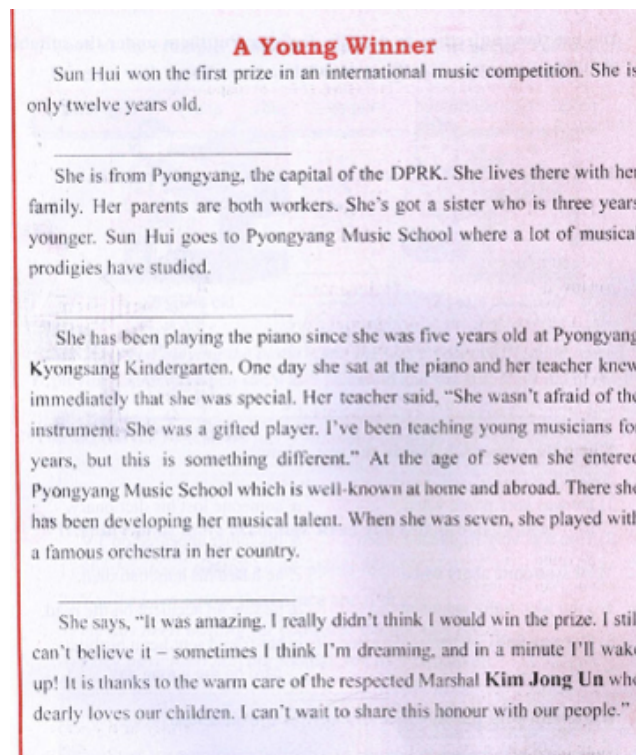


FIGURE 6. A young winner (p. 51 of Book 2, Unit 5)

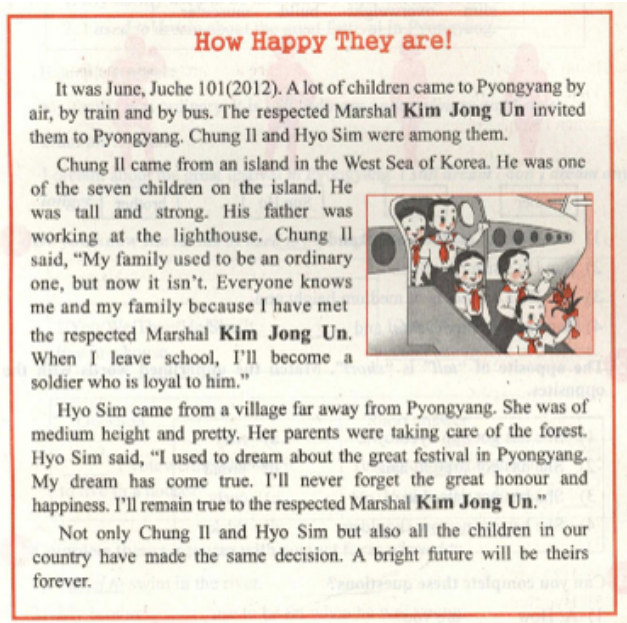


FIGURE 7. How happy they are! (p. 95 of Book 1, Unit 9)

Another salient characteristic of these passages, irrespective of their overt subject matter, is the emphasis on directive instruction. Ten passages contain directive/prescriptive elements. Although numerous passages disseminate knowledge on universal themes like general life and science, there is ubiquitous inclusion of explicit directives. This characteristic is present not only in propagandistic content but also in texts designed to impart linguistic skills, social etiquette, and other essential life competencies that the state values. For instance, the passage in Book 1, Unit 3 concerning critical environmental concerns extends beyond mere fact dissemination. It engenders a pronounced sense of urgency regarding environmental responsibility, subtly guiding learners towards the ethical necessity of sustainable practices. The reading passage ends with a directive to “save the earth”, “do the best for us”, and “change the way of life” (p. 27 of Book 1, Unit 3).

This prescriptive pattern is found in other units in Book 2. A passage on English learning strategies culminates with a clear directive: “Set goals, look for opportunities to practise and guess. Try these things, and you will learn more English!” (p. 7 of Book 2, Unit 1). This statement transcends mere suggestion, positioning itself as a framework for actionable outcomes. Even passages with casual content bear this instructional hallmark. Consider the passage in Book 2, Unit 3, which presents an epistolary exchange between Dr. John and Jane regarding dietary habits (p. 26). While ostensibly a simple correspondence, the underlying motif concerns guidance and advice solicitation. This is not mere casual discourse; it symbolises a structured pedagogical approach underscoring the importance of seeking and adhering to authority.

In conclusion, reading passages within North Korean English textbooks demonstrate a nuanced pedagogical design that is intrinsically propaganda-driven, with state ideologies being deeply embedded throughout the material. More than just an educational tool, the content often presents directives, signalling paths students should follow. Even seemingly informational passages are intricately layered with themes that subtly or overtly emphasise the regime’s pivotal role in individual and collective narratives. This dual purpose—teaching English while instilling state-endorsed ideologies—reflects a strategic marriage of linguistic development with state-centric narratives.

TABLE 3. Reading passages with instructional, directive or/and propagandistic nature

Book	Unit titles	Nature of text	Exemplary sentences
Book 1	Unit 1 At the new school	Propaganda-driven	<b>Utopian portrayal of North Korean schools</b> “All the students are wearing smart school uniforms.” “Everyone is very friendly and nice” (p. 7)
	Unit 2 What did you do?	Instructional & Directive	<b>Advice on embracing English learning</b> “When I was at school, I enjoyed learning English. Here is some of my advice” (p. 17)
	Unit 3 Save the Earth	Instructional & Directive	<b>Stresses the urgency of environmental conservation</b> “We can save the earth. We have to do the best for us; we have to change the way of life” (p. 27)
	Unit 4 Music and films	Instructional & Propaganda-driven	<b>Uses themes of resilience, early mastery, and dedication as a motivational tool while connoting the potential of North Korean education in producing geniuses</b> “Mozart had great musical ability from a young age” “He became completely deaf...but he continued to compose” “By the time he was 14, Mozart had composed many pieces”
	Unit 5 Energy in the world	Instructional & Directive	<b>Stresses the urgency of finding renewable energy sources</b> “Energy is very important...if we don’t find new kinds of energy, we will use them up soon” (p. 50)
	Unit 6 Memories	Instructional & Directive	<b>Guidance on enhancing memory skills</b> “You must always do something to improve your memory. Everyone’s memory gets better if they use it often” (p. 61)
	Unit 7 How old is the “metre”?	Instructional	<b>Promotes intercultural competence and understanding of variations in English</b> “When people such as ancient Egyptians started to ask these questions...” “The French introduced the ‘metre’” “In American English, they spell it ‘metre’” (p. 75)
	Unit 8 Computer and our life	Propaganda-driven	<b>Highlights ordinary North Koreans enjoying technological advancements</b> “There is a computer in my room.” “I can use it in the IT room at school” (p. 85)
	Unit 9 Happy children	Propaganda-driven	<b>Reverence for Kim Jong Un and loyalty to him and the state</b> “My family used to be an ordinary one, but now it isn’t. Everyone knows me and my family because I have met the respected Marshal <b>Kim Jong Un</b> . When I leave school, I’ll become a soldier who is loyal to him” (p. 95)
Book 2	Unit 1 Try hard!	Instructional, Propaganda-driven, & Directive	<b>Advice on embracing English learning and the national ethos of industriousness</b> “Strategy 1: Set goals” “Try these things, and you will learn more English” (p. 7)
	Unit 2 Love ours!	Propaganda-driven	<b>Promotes the superiority of the Korean <i>ondol</i> heating system and positions students to become advocates for Korean technological excellence</b> “The entire floor becomes a heater, and it is called <i>ondol</i> system. It is very popular abroad, particularly through Asia” (p. 17)
	Unit 3 Healthy food	Instructional, Propaganda-driven, & Directive	<b>Importance of adhering to expert advice and, by analogy, authority</b> “I’m writing to you to get your advice...” “Who do you think is right?” (p. 26)
	Unit 4 Satellites in space	Instructional & Propaganda-driven	<b>Emphasises the significance of science and collective identity through <i>we</i> and <i>our</i></b> “Many of our TV programmes come to us through satellites.” “We use satellites to send ...” “Scientists are now trying to solve this problem” (p. 41)
	Unit 5 A young talent	Propaganda-driven	<b>Instils national pride and emphasises the leadership’s benevolence</b> “It is thanks to the warm care of the respected Marshal <b>Kim Jong Un</b> who dearly loves our children. I can’t wait to share this honour with our people” (p. 51)
	Unit 6 The world we live in	Propaganda-driven	<b>Victim and culprit narrative</b>

			“If the developed countries didn’t keep producing pollutants...the people of the small islands would not be afraid of the danger in the near future” (p. 61)
	Unit 7 Gestures in different cultures	Instructional & Directive	<b>Fosters and prescribes acquisition of intercultural competence</b> “... when you travel to a different country, be careful about your gestures so that you won’t upset anyone” (p. 75)
	Unit 8 Animals in our lives	Instructional & Propaganda-driven	<b>Moral teaching: Community and cooperation</b> <b>Propagandistic undertone: Rebirth, resilience, and promotion of communal values</b> “A poor boy caught a golden fish. He released it, and in return, he got happiness.” “During the years of war, everything was destroyed, but life underwater had flourished” “...Mrs Cindy and her sons started feeding the fish, and then handed them out to the village people” (p. 85)
<b>Book 3</b>	Unit 1 Sporting activities	Propaganda-driven	<b>National achievements and the pivotal role of leadership</b> “Now our country is developing into a sports power under the wise leadership of the respected Marshal <b>Kim Jong Un</b> ” (p. 7).
	Unit 2 Small but dangerous	Instructional, Propaganda-driven, & Directive	<b>Highlights the superiority of local expertise and cautionary advice</b> “Su and I went to see Dr Kim, a computer expert, and had a small talk about a computer virus.” “...don’t open strange files or folders...” “...asked him whether he could give us some advice...” (p. 17)
	Unit 3 A good request	Instructional & Directive	<b>Guidance on making requests effectively according to different contexts and relationships</b> “First, you must consider how the people are feeling about your request.” “Second, you should decide how well you know the people” (p. 27)
	Unit 4 Health care	Instructional & Directive	<b>Guidance on staying safe and warm in winter</b> “Try to wear light warm clothes...” “Change wet socks right away” (p. 41)
	Unit 5 Green land	Instructional & Propaganda-driven	<b>Instructional: Guidelines for ensuring healthy trees</b> <b>Propagandistic elements: Ties the health and care of trees to patriotism associated with Kim Jong-Il</b> “Putting a small well around the trunk of a young tree may help.” “In our country, a lot of trees have been planted on the mountains, and they are being kept healthy by the people with <b>Kim Jong Il</b> ’s patriotism in their mind” (p. 51)
	Unit 6 Water	Instructional	<b>Teaches about the water cycle</b> “Liquid water... has become water vapour” “... unseen water vapour... has turned back to water.”
	Unit 7 Dreams and Wishes	Propaganda-driven	<b>Promoting <i>Juche</i>, nationalistic sentiments, and reverence for leadership</b> “Now it has developed into a big <i>Juche</i> -type modern industry thanks to the wise leadership of our Party. If he hadn’t come into the bosom of his true fatherland, Ri Sung Gi wouldn’t have realised his dream” (p. 71)

## CONCLUSION

This study analysed three North Korean senior middle school English textbooks to discern their pedagogical and ideological undertones with respect to EIL orientations. It aimed to elucidate perceptions of English in North Korea perpetuated in these textbooks, their role as propaganda tools, and the extent to which they prepare North Korean learners to communicate in English in international contexts. A salient finding was the positioning of English as crucial for North Korea’s national progress. English is conceptualised as a bridge for North Koreans to access global scientific knowledge and a platform for them to project North Korea’s excellence in domestic achievements globally. However, there is a glaring paucity of detailed coverage of international



contexts beyond North Korea. This underscores a strategic focus: while English is learned and adapted, the content remains largely insular. From an EIL perspective, while these textbooks have succeeded in providing numerous localised cultural schemas (McKay, 2018), such as North Korean names which learners can relate to, there is a stark imbalance in the representation of non-North Korean cultures. This suggests that North Korean ELT textbooks may not be effective in helping North Korean learners communicate beyond local contexts, given that limited exposure to other cultures means limited critical awareness of and engagement with interculturality, which is central to cultivating transcultural competency in EIL.

Another finding was the dualistic role of these textbooks as educational and propagandistic tools. While some passages include intercultural and instructional/informational content, the majority contain an overwhelming number of propaganda-driven narratives. On the one hand, there are overt references to the state, peppered with formal titles and expressions of unwavering loyalty. On the other hand, subtler strategies weave state-driven ideologies and instructions into seemingly informational content. This inculcates and prescribes state-approved worldviews. Many passages are directive/prescriptive, such that despite including global themes (e.g., pollution) and non-Anglophone cultures (e.g., Mozart), learners are deprived of opportunities to engage critically with the material and reflect on their own and other cultures beyond surface-level exposure, transgressing EIL pedagogy.

In sum, North Korea's senior middle English textbooks meticulously blend education and propaganda, serving as powerful conduits through which state ideologies are transmitted uncritically to the population. Although English is championed as a tool for national development, the content remains markedly North Korean, emphasising domestic achievements, values, and ideologies while maintaining a strategic distance from international perspectives. While this serves to promote state-centric goals and cultivates North Koreans who can discuss local contexts through English, it diverges sharply from EIL, suggesting that North Korean English textbooks are ineffective in producing learners capable of communicating across and about other cultures. Further studies of these textbooks can examine the extent to which EIL perspectives are reflected (or not) in other components (e.g., discussion questions), quantitative analyses of cultures represented within, and diachronic analyses of EIL (dis)orientation in textbooks across different eras of the North Korean leadership.

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