

ENGLISH PROMOTES NATIONAL INTERESTS*

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Nowadays, one seldom sees people in the subways of Seoul reading books or newspapers. Those reading English or other foreign language materials are practically non-existent.

This is what I was told several weeks ago by a European ambassador, resident in Seoul, who frequently rides the subway to get out of town during the weekends. He asked me why this was the case. He was well aware that, as is the case in many other countries, English is a crucial element to individual competitiveness in Korea, especially for young people faced with college entrance examinations or pursuing employment.

This is not an easy question to answer. Doing any kind of reading in public places such as subways has yet to become part of Korean culture. Reading English material in subway cars may require a certain degree of courage for young people these days, perhaps because they are uncomfortable with what their peers might think.

Competitiveness in the world economy will no doubt become more and more knowledge-based. Therefore, the intellectual level of the people of a country will be an important ingredient in their global, economic competitiveness.

For example, the ``Lisbon Strategy,’’ adopted by the European Union summit in Lisbon in 2000,

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aims at achieving a knowledge-based European economy, equipped with the highest competitiveness in the world by 2010.

Enhancing the intellectual level of the Korean people through increased reading, among other things, is highly desirable. English is particularly important for the Korean people, who are among the largest beneficiaries of globalization.

Korea has emerged as the 11th largest economy in the world, with its GDP reaching \$803 billion, its GDP per capita \$16,400, and its trade \$546 billion by the end of 2005.

Remarkable an achievement as this is, there is no room for self-complacency.

It is encouraging to note that the London-based consulting company Euro-Asia Business Consultancy recently predicted that South Korea would emerge as the seventh or eighth largest world economy in 2025 with a population of 80 million after a possible reunification.

However, we should bear in mind that the rate of the Korean economy's dependency on external trade remains as high as 68 percent, making it keenly vulnerable to changes in the overseas economic climate. Korea's key industries such as shipbuilding, electronics, and the iron and steel industries will continue to be confronted with relentless waves of competition from other countries.

No one denies that English serves as an important medium for promoting Korea's national interests in the international arena and for advancing the commercial interests of its private sector in the world market. Negotiations are conducted in English and agreements are signed in English in almost all cases. English has already become the lingua franca of the Internet world. Through the medium of English, one can easily swim this unlimited "cyberpool" of knowledge.

For Koreans, fluency in English is inextricably linked to remaining internationally competitive. Many more skilled or professional jobs overseas would be made accessible to Korean aspirants if they were armed with functional English.

English, Russian, Chinese, French, Spanish, and Arabic are the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic is an official language only in relation to the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council).

Korea is one of the few countries whose mother tongue or official language is not included in any of the six languages. Production of one page of a United Nations document in the six official languages costs \$800, according to a report submitted by the UN Secretariat several years ago.

Korea has become the 11th largest financial contributor to the United Nations, budgeting over \$120 million toward its regular and peace-keeping operations each year. There is no possibility for the Korean language to become one of the official languages of the United Nations in the foreseeable future.

Therefore, Korean officials and civilians participating in UN activities will have to continue to wrestle with English if they want to play a role duly commensurate with their international status.

According to statistics released by the Korean Educational Development Institute last week, during the one-year period ending in February 2005, 16,400 Korean students in elementary and secondary schools left their country to study abroad.

This represents an increasing trend of exodus of young Korean students to foreign countries, even creating the so-called "goose families." They migrate to the United States, Australia,

Canada, Singapore, India, and even Fiji and Tonga in order to receive an education in English.

The government is responsible for addressing institutionally the enhancement of Korea's long-term international competitiveness with vision and foresight into the future.

In January this year, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development announced that English would be a part of the first grade curriculum in 2008 and that a pilot program would begin in selected schools in August 2006. While this is a significant step forward, Korea is still lagging behind.

China began to give English lessons to third graders in elementary schools in big cities in 2001 and in rural areas in 2002. True, Korea's elementary schools started to teach third graders English in 1997, but the lessons were a mere hour a week.

Increased teaching hours and more native English teachers should be provided to elementary school students at an earlier age. The government should make this important investment for the future a high priority.

In order for Korea to remain competitive in an increasingly globalized world, government policies and relevant NGOs' activities should be directed towards heightening the individual citizen's awareness of the need to pursue knowledge through reading. Hopefully, the day when one will see a great many people reading books in the subway is not far away.

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