

A Comparative Study of Reading Passages in English Textbooks during the Kim Jong-un Era: Focus on the First Middle School

Yunha Joo

(Chonnam National University)

Joo, Yunha. (2025). A comparative study of reading passages in English textbooks during the Kim Jong-un era: Focus on the first middle school. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 33(1), 67-87. This study analyzes English language textbooks from elite and general schools in North Korea to understand how the tension between socialist ideology and the cultivation of exceptional talent manifests in educational materials. By examining textbook prefaces, reading passage themes, and readability levels, the research investigates curricular differences and their implications for gifted education. The analysis of the prefaces reveals that elite school textbooks emphasize the superiority of the North Korean socialist system and global knowledge, while general school textbooks prioritize engaging topics relevant to daily life. Thematic analysis of reading passages shows a greater diversity of topics, including world cultures and science, in elite school texts, reflecting a goal to broaden perspectives. General school texts focus more on education, learning strategies, and practical science. Readability analysis reveals a gradual increase in difficulty across grades in elite school textbooks, although levels remain lower than in South Korean schools. General school textbooks show consistently low readability, potentially limiting the academic challenge. These findings highlight the complex interplay between ideological pressures and practical necessities in North Korean education, suggesting that while elite education is prioritized, its implementation remains limited. Future research on linguistic features could further illuminate pedagogical approaches to students.

Key Words: North Korean English textbooks, elite school, the first middle school, senior middle school, reading passages, topic, readability

1. Introduction

The socialist ideology underpinning the North Korean state, emphasizing the inherent equality of all humans, ostensibly contradicts the principles of gifted education, which acknowledges and cultivates exceptional abilities. This ideological framework, rooted in the universal principle of socialist pedagogy, posits that individual differences in ability are socially constructed rather than innate. However, under the Kim Jong-il regime in the 1980s, the establishment of specialized schools for gifted students in the sciences marked a significant shift. This development suggests a tacit acknowledgment of the limitations of the purely ideological approach and a gradual convergence with Western educational theories that emphasize the importance of identifying and nurturing exceptional talent (Jeon, 2014).

Admission to the elite school is highly selective, prioritizing students from privileged backgrounds who demonstrate exceptional academic performance, particularly in mathematics and science. This specialized institution which is called the first middle school in North Korea, designed to cultivate future scientific and technological experts, utilizes a distinct curriculum that diverges from the general school syllabus. Notably, the first middle school students are exempted from compulsory labor mobilization activities, such as rural support programs, a significant departure from the experiences of their peers in general schools (MoU, 2024).

Socialism necessitates an educational framework predicated on the principle of inherent human equality. Conversely, gifted education operates under the recognition of differential student abilities, thereby presenting a fundamental incompatibility with socialist educational tenets. This inherent tension between socialist ideology and the pragmatic imperative to cultivate exceptional talent, exemplified by the establishment of specialized science schools such as the first middle school, raises critical questions regarding the conceptualization and implementation of gifted education within the North Korean context. This study aims to elucidate the specific manifestations of this tension within North Korean educational materials. Through a comparative analysis of reading passages utilized in the first middle school textbooks and those employed in general education curricula, this research seeks to understand how these materials reflect and reinforce the distinct educational trajectories of these two school systems. Furthermore, the research examines the readability levels of these textbooks to further delineate the distinctive characteristics of gifted education in North Korea in relation to general school

education. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions:

1. What differences exist in the English course objectives emphasized in the prefaces of textbooks used at different school systems?
2. How do thematic selections reflect ideological priorities and the intended socialization of students in elite vs. general tracks?
3. How does readability progress across grade levels within each school system?

2. Literature Review

North Korean secondary education exhibits a bifurcated approach to English instruction. General secondary schools provide standard English education, while specialized institutions cater to gifted students. While the first middle school prioritizes cultivating scientific expertise among its gifted cohort, it also recognizes the crucial role of a comprehensive education. Consequently, English instruction within this context emphasizes the development of reading and translation skills, enabling students to effectively comprehend Western scientific and technological literature (Song, 2011).

Furthermore, the first middle school serves as a model institution for general schools across the nation. The successful implementation of English education programs within this specialized environment is intended to inform and enhance English language instruction in mainstream secondary schools (Song, 2011). To this end, concerted efforts have been made to bolster English education within this institution. This includes the direct involvement of native English-speaking instructors from organizations such as UNESCO and Western non-governmental organizations in the classrooms of Pyongyang and Geumseong first middle schools (Bae, 2015).

While scholarly research on English language instruction within the context of general education in North Korea has a relatively established history, investigations into English education specifically designed for gifted students remain a relatively recent area of inquiry. Consequently, given the inherently limited scope of elite education in North Korea, focused scholarly attention from numerous researchers is necessitated. Prior contributions to this area include the works of Kim and Hwang (2018a; 2018b) and Hwang and Kim (2017), which analyzed pre-revision textbook iterations. More recently, Lee and Kim (2023) examined textbooks implemented during the Kim Jong-un administration. Despite the temporal distance since the publication of these educational

materials, restricted access has historically resulted in a delayed analysis of elite school textbooks. However, a salient limitation of the extant body of research lies in its prevailing emphasis on lexical analysis, with a comparatively limited exploration of other critical dimensions of English language pedagogy within this specialized educational milieu.

Hwang and Kim (2017) conducted a comprehensive corpus analysis of the first middle school textbooks to investigate their linguistic characteristics and identify high-frequency content words. Contrary to expectations, the study did not reveal a consistent increase in the total number of words across grade levels. However, vocabulary diversity demonstrated a sequential increase as students progressed through the grades. The distribution of high-frequency content words across grade levels exhibited significant variability depending on the specific themes and topics incorporated into each grade's textbook. This suggests that the curriculum may prioritize the acquisition of vocabulary relevant to particular thematic units rather than adhering to a uniform progression of vocabulary difficulty across grades.

Kim and Hwang (2018a) conducted a comparative analysis of English textbooks utilized in North Korea's first middle school, North Korea's general middle schools, and South Korean middle and high schools. Employing a positive keyword analysis, the study revealed distinct characteristics of English education within the first middle school, evident in variations in textbook composition, emphasis on specific language skills, utilization of educational materials, and classroom activities. A notable finding was the relatively high frequency of academic content words related to scientific disciplines such as biology, geography, and earth science within the first middle school textbooks. Furthermore, the analysis revealed a higher frequency of ideological terms in the first middle school textbooks compared to their South Korean counterparts.

In a subsequent study, Kim and Hwang (2018b) investigated the vocabulary diversity within these textbooks. While the analysis did not reveal statistically significant differences between the vocabulary diversity of the first middle school textbooks and those used in South Korea, a notable disparity emerged when comparing the first middle school textbooks to those employed in North Korea's general schools. The vocabulary diversity within the first middle school textbooks was found to be approximately twice as high, providing quantitative evidence for the differentiated nature of gifted education within the North Korean context.

In a recent study analyzing the 2013 revised textbooks, Lee and Kim (2023) conducted

a comparative analysis of English textbooks utilized in North Korean elite schools with those employed in South Korean general high schools. Corroborating findings from previous research (Hwang & Kim, 2017; Kim & Hwang, 2018a; 2018b), the study reaffirmed the strong emphasis on scientific texts within the North Korean elite school curriculum, even following the 2013 revisions. However, the analysis revealed several notable limitations of the North Korean elite school textbooks. Specifically, the vocabulary range exhibited a restricted scope, resulting in reduced vocabulary diversity and lower vocabulary complexity. Furthermore, the average sentence length within the North Korean textbooks was significantly shorter than that observed in their South Korean counterparts, suggesting a lower level of syntactic complexity.

3. Method

3.1. Research Subject

This study examines reading passages sourced from both the first middle school and senior middle school which is referred as general school in this study within the North Korean education system. It is important to note that both these school levels correspond to the high school level in the conventional educational framework. In contrast to general school textbooks, which typically include supplementary reading sections at the end, the textbooks utilized in the first middle school exclusively consist of such supplementary reading materials. Given that these supplementary materials may possess distinct educational objectives compared to the primary curricular units, this study focuses solely on the analysis of the main reading passages. A summary of the subjects included in this study is presented in Table 1.

The names of the authors are originally presented in Korean within the textbooks. For the purpose of this study, the researcher has adopted an English transliteration of these names. An examination of the author affiliations reveals that the development and implementation of English language education materials within the North Korean context appear to be primarily undertaken by designated research personnel. Notably, the publishers of both general school and the first middle school textbooks are Foreign Language Publishing House.

Table 1. List of the Textbooks

School	Grade	Published Year	Authors	No. of Units	Cover Page
First Middle	1	2014	Moo-il Lee, Chan-moon Lee, Myung-ok Kim, Hye-young Kim, Geum-hee Jeon, Young-mi Lee	17	
	2	2015	Moo-il Lee, Myung-ok Kim, Il-kwang Kim, Ryong-jin Jeon, Geum-hee Jeon, Young-mi Lee	12	
	3	2015	Chan-moon Lee, Chung-hyeok Jang, Moo-il Lee, Myung-ok Kim, Seon-hee Jeong, Nam Yoon	11	
General	1	2013	Juk-song Choi, Cheol-ho Park, Seon-hae Oh, Cheol-jin Hwang	9	
	2	2014	Myung-ok Kim, Hye-young Kim, Won-je Jeon, Moo-il Lee, Cheol-ho Park	8	
	3	2015	Cheol-ho Park, Seon-hae Oh, Cheol-jin Hwang, Moo-il Lee	7	

A visual analysis of the textbook covers reveals distinct visual cues that suggest differing educational philosophies. The first middle school textbook prominently features a map of Korea positioned at the center of the world, overlaid with a rising galaxy, conveying a strong emphasis on science and technology within the context of English language learning. In contrast, the general school textbook cover primarily emphasizes the act of learning itself. Moreover, the exclusive depiction of the Korean map on the cover suggests a strong nationalistic undercurrent, implying that the primary objective of English language acquisition is to serve the interests and development of the Korean nation. These contrasting visual elements on the textbook covers provide valuable insights into the divergent educational goals and philosophies underpinning English language instruction in these two distinct educational contexts.

3.2. Research Method

3.2.1. Analyzing Prefaces

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the content within North Korea's elite school textbooks and those utilized in general schools, with the objective of identifying distinct educational approaches. Given the limited public availability of the complete North Korean curriculum, this study utilized the textbook prefaces as a primary source of information. These prefaces often provide valuable insights into the composition and intended learning objectives of the included reading passages, thereby facilitating a comprehensive analysis.

3.2.2. Standard of Topic Classification

This study employs a five-category classification system for analyzing reading passages, drawing upon the work of previous scholars (Hong & Kim, 2019; Joo & Uhm, 2019; Lee, 2020). The specific criteria utilized for analyzing these reading passages are outlined as Table 2.

Table 2. Standard of Topic Classification

Category	Description
Education & Learning	School life, learning methods, learning environment, education system, etc.
Society & Culture	International relations, foreign cultures, cultural differences, social differences, history and cultural heritage, etc.
Science & Nature	Natural science, technology, history of science, environmental issues, future society, etc.
Individual Life	Health care, relationships, etc.
etc.	Idolization related to Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un, Literature, Fairy Tales, Travel and Tragedy

3.2.3. Measuring Readability Level

Readability formulas serve as valuable tools for assessing the difficulty level of written text (Sung, 2014). Widely utilized in both English language research and diverse educational contexts, these formulas provide quantitative measures of text complexity. Among various readability formulas, Coh-Metrix offers the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL) indices. These indices, derived from word length and

sentence length analyses (Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004; McNamara, Graesser, McCarthy, & Cai, 2014), provide valuable insights into the overall readability and estimated grade level of a given text. The FRE score is expressed as a numerical value ranging from 0 to 100. Higher scores on the FRE scale indicate greater readability, suggesting that the text is easier to comprehend (Graesser et al., 2004). Conversely, the FKGL score, which translates the Reading Ease Score into an equivalent American school grade level, ranges from 0 to 12. In this context, higher FKGL scores correspond to a higher level of reading difficulty, indicating that the text may be challenging for readers at lower grade levels (Graesser et al., 2004).

To assess the continuity of readability across grade levels, an ANOVA analysis will be performed using SPSS 23. Prior to conducting the ANOVA, normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) were performed. In all cases, the significance probability exceeded 0.05, leading to the rejection of the alternative hypothesis and the acceptance of the null hypothesis. This indicates that the data meet the assumption of normality, a prerequisite for the valid application of the ANOVA test. Following a significant ANOVA result, Tukey's HSD post-hoc test was employed to identify specific pairwise differences among groups.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Comparison of Prefaces

The preface to the first grade textbook of the North Korean elite school outlines its content, emphasizing the inclusion of materials that demonstrate the superiority of the North Korean socialist system, alongside narratives depicting school life, family life, global knowledge, and interesting science stories. The second grade textbook preface similarly emphasizes key themes, including the enchanting image of North Korea, the superiority of the North Korean socialist system, school life, family life, global knowledge, and interesting science stories. The third grade textbook preface focuses on a more refined selection of reading materials, prioritizing interesting science stories and common sense materials related to students daily lives and contemporary issues in science and technology.

The prefaces of the general school textbooks consistently emphasize the importance of

interesting topics to enhance student motivation and learning. The preface to the first grade textbook specifically highlights the inclusion of topics such as school life, computers, and music, aiming to establish a friendly and engaging learning experience for students. The second grade textbook preface emphasizes the incorporation of topics relevant to students' everyday lives, including school life, home life, space and the environment, and the animal kingdom. Finally, the preface to the third grade textbook outlines the inclusion of topics related to physical education, computers, and health within the English language curriculum.

The curriculum of the elite school consistently emphasizes the superiority of the North Korean socialist system across all three academic years. It also incorporates common themes such as global knowledge. This suggests a focus on political ideology and shaping students' beliefs in line with the regime's worldview. In contrast, the curriculum of general schools emphasizes the importance of interesting topics to enhance student motivation. This approach is evident in the inclusion of topics directly relevant to students' daily lives, such as school life, home life, and health issues. This indicates a focus on practical learning and developing a deeper understanding of the world around them. Furthermore, the emphasis on science differs between school types. Elite school focuses on comprehensive scientific content, such as interesting science stories, while general school emphasizes specific topics like computers, space, and the environment.

4.2. Comparison of Reading Topics

Due to the limited availability of comprehensive data on the North Korean curriculum, this study relies heavily on textbook analysis to infer curricular emphases and identify key learning objectives. Examination of textbook content provides valuable insights into curricular priorities. A comparative analysis of reading passages across different school types facilitates the identification of key curricular differences. Table 3 presents a detailed classification of the reading passages based on their thematic content.

Based on the analysis of reading passages classified according to the categories outlined in the methodology section, distinct thematic emphases emerged. In the first middle school, 'Society and Culture' constituted the most frequent category, while 'Science and Nature' emerged as the dominant theme in general school textbooks. A further analysis by grade level revealed intriguing patterns. In the first middle school, 'Society and Culture' dominated first grade textbook, while 'Education and Learning' and 'Society

Table 3. Number of the Reading Passages by Topic Classification

School	Grade	Education & Learning	Society & Culture	Science & Nature	Individual Life	etc.
First Middle	1	4 (0.24%)	6 (0.35%)	2 (0.12%)	3 (0.18%)	2 (0.12%)
	2	4 (0.33%)	4 (0.33%)	2 (0.17%)	1 (0.08%)	1 (0.08%)
	3	0 (0%)	2 (0.18%)	7 (0.63%)	1 (0.09%)	1 (0.09%)
	Total	8 (0.20%)	12 (0.30%)	11 (0.28%)	5 (0.13%)	4 (0.10%)
General	1	4 (0.44%)	1 (0.11%)	3 (0.33%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.11%)
	2	1 (0.13%)	2 (0.25%)	3 (0.38%)	1 (0.13%)	1 (0.13%)
	3	0 (0%)	1 (0.14%)	4 (0.57%)	2 (0.29%)	0 (0%)
	Total	5 (0.21%)	4 (0.17%)	10 (0.42%)	3 (0.13%)	2 (0.08%)

and Culture’ were equally prominent in second grade textbook. In contrast, ‘Science and Nature’ emerged as the most frequent theme in third grade textbooks. General school textbooks demonstrated a different pattern. ‘Education and Learning’ was the most frequent theme in first grade textbook, while ‘Science and Nature’ emerged as the dominant theme in both second and third grade textbooks. These findings highlight significant variations in thematic emphasis across different school types within the North Korean education system.

‘Education and Learning’ themes were notably absent from the third-grade textbooks of both educational tracks. Conversely, ‘Science and Nature’ consistently emerged as the most prevalent theme in the upper grade levels. A limited presence of content related to ‘Individual Life’ was also observed across both textbook sets. However, a significant disparity between the two school types was evident in the relative emphasis given to ‘Society and Culture.’ While the greater number of units in elite school textbooks naturally contributes to some thematic distributional variations, the difference in the proportion of content dedicated to ‘Society and Culture’ was particularly marked. This divergence appears to be correlated with the inclusion or exclusion of global knowledge data in the textbook preface, a relationship that will be analyzed in detail in the following section.

To gain a deeper understanding of the specific content areas emphasized within the elite school textbooks, a detailed analysis of reading passages classified according to the categories outlined in Table 4 was conducted.

Table 4. Topic Description of the Reading Passages in the First Middle School

Theme	Topics	Description
Education & Learning	Education system & School Life	Various education systems, including North Korean gifted schools, British schools, happiness education, lifelong learning
	How to learn	How to improve learning effectiveness, including long-term memory, creative thinking, and brain power
	Learning abroad	Studying in England
Society & Culture	Multicultural	British culture, cultures of different countries, How to spend the holidays
	Social differences	Gender differences, Discourse differences with text messages
	History & Cultural Heritage	Understanding of history and cultural heritage, including Machu Picchu and the Olympics
	Food	Chocolate, British school health diet, food culture
Science & Nature	Future Society	A look into the future, including predictions of future society and the impact of technological advancements.
	Natural Science	Exploration of natural phenomena such as black hole
	Science related to human	How a cancer-stricken doctor survived in Antarctica, a scientific approach to memory, and a volcanologist
	Technology	Technological advancements and their impact, including computers and digital technology
	Environment	Considerations on environmental issues such as environmental conservation and climate change
Individual Life	Health	How to stay healthy, Overcoming anxiety
	Human Relationships	Forming relationships with others, such as parent-child relationships, friendships, and social life
etc.	Idolization	Kim Jong-un
	Literature	Jane Eyre, Johnny Appleseed
	Travel and Tragedy	Exploring the unknown world of Antarctica, The life of a motherless child

Textbooks utilized in elite school exhibit a greater diversity of content and topics compared to those employed in general school, attributable to the inclusion of a larger number of instructional units. This suggests that the gifted school curriculum intentionally integrates elements of world cultural perspectives and scientific concepts into English language instruction, aligning with the educational goal of fostering global awareness and scientific literacy through the inclusion of world common sense data and interesting

science stories.

Within the 'Education & Learning' theme, England is prominently featured in school descriptions, suggesting its use as a model for effective educational practices. However, this portrayal presents a selective view of English education, focusing on specific aspects such as a student's study abroad diary (Unit 7, Grade 1), experiences of student life abroad (Unit 8, Grade 1), and the implementation of well-being programs like "happiness education" (Unit 2, Grade 2). Consequently, England appears to be presented as an aspirational ideal for school systems. Furthermore, the inclusion of content on lifelong learning (Unit 2, Grade 1), enhancing long-term memory for improved study (Unit 1, Grade 2), fostering creative thinking (Unit 9, Grade 2), and developing brainpower (Unit 12, Grade 2) reveals the pedagogical direction of elite school education, emphasizing cognitive enhancement and continuous intellectual growth.

In this theme, particular attention should be paid to Unit 1 of the first-grade textbook. The passage provides valuable insights into the daily routine of students attending elite schools in North Korea. The text describes a standardized school uniform, with boys wearing dark blue trousers and a white shirt, while girls wear a white shirt and a dark blue skirt. The passage further details the school's daily schedule. Students are required to assemble in the schoolyard at 7:40 every Monday morning for a brief assembly, during which the head teacher provides updates on school events. The academic curriculum encompasses a wide range of subjects, including English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and information technology. This emphasis on scientific disciplines reflects the core mission of the school as an institution dedicated to nurturing scientific and technological excellence.

The typical school day in the first middle school consists of five lessons interspersed with a 10-minute break in the morning. Classes typically conclude at 1:15 PM, followed by a one-hour lunch break. While the passage does not explicitly detail the afternoon schedule, it suggests that the school day may not extend significantly beyond the lunch break, unlike the extended learning hours often associated with elite educational institutions. However, students are required to remain on campus until 5:00 PM on Mondays and Wednesdays to participate in one or two extracurricular activities. These activities, while not exclusively academic in nature, encompass a diverse range of pursuits, including sports such as football, fine arts, and participation in the school band, encouraging students to engage in a well-rounded educational experience.

The 'Society and Culture' theme demonstrates an effort to integrate world knowledge

materials into the English curriculum. Passages on world cultures, food, and sports, selected by North Korea, serve this purpose. Illustrative examples include narratives about civilizations like Machu Picchu (Unit 10, Grade 2), the Moai, Stonehenge, and Nzaka (Unit 9, Grade 2), as well as accounts of British school dietary practices (Unit 17, Grade 1) and the history of chocolate (Unit 8, Grade 3). Given North Korea's limited access to external information, these selections suggest an attempt to broaden students' perspectives and foster cross-cultural understanding by indirectly exposing them to Western culture. Furthermore, the inclusion of three sports-related texts—Sports (Unit 10, Grade 1), Soccer (Unit 15, Grade 1), and History and Explanation of the Olympics (Unit 4, Grade 2)—suggests a strategic use of sports content. International sporting achievements are often leveraged to enhance national prestige, bolster civic pride, and ultimately strengthen internal unity and loyalty to the regime.

The preface of the North Korean textbook underscores the inclusion of engaging scientific narratives. Given that the first middle school caters to scientifically gifted students, the English curriculum appears designed to integrate language instruction with accessible scientific topics, rather than focusing solely on rigorous scientific content. Illustrative examples include themes related to the natural environment, such as global environmental challenges (Unit 14, Grade 1) and the preservation of animals and the planet (Unit 6, Grade 3), as well as texts concerning computers and digitalization (Unit 7, 8, Grade 2), black holes (Unit 10, Grade 3), and volcanologist (Unit 11, Grade 3).

The 'Individual Life' theme encompasses content relevant to personal well-being, including health maintenance (Unit 6, Grade 1), anxiety management (Unit 9, Grade 1), seeking counseling (Unit 16, Grade 1), and expressing apologies (Unit 6, Grade 2). Given the commonality of topics like health, emotions, and family relationships in daily life, such materials are likely chosen for their relatable and engaging nature, fostering student interest and motivation in English language acquisition. Furthermore, as elite school students are often positioned as future leaders, this content may also serve to cultivate essential individual capacities, such as problem-solving, self-management, and interpersonal skills, necessary for navigating a competitive social landscape.

While idolization phrases, such as "the respected Marshal Kim Jong-un," were still present in the textbooks, their use was relegated to supplementary roles rather than constituting core content. These phrases appeared to serve a propagandistic function, promoting national patriotism and loyalty to the regime within texts addressing topics such as school life at North Korean elite schools (Unit 1, Grade 1), Olympic history (Unit

4, Grade 2), and the rationale behind unique architectural designs in countries other than North Korea (Unit 11, Grade 2).

Notably, neither Kim Il Sung nor Kim Jong-il was mentioned in these elite school textbooks. This omission may reflect Kim Jong-un's strategic approach of minimizing references to previous leaders while emphasizing his own name and accomplishments to solidify his leadership. Furthermore, within the context of elite education, this absence could signal a deliberate effort to underscore the advent of the Kim Jong-un era and delineate it from the past. Highlighting Kim Jong-un's achievements, rather than those of his predecessors, may be perceived as a more effective means of presenting a new vision for the future to the younger generation and securing their allegiance.

Consistent with previous research on general school textbooks (Joo & Uhm, 2019), content related to American imperialism, South Korea, and racial discrimination is notably absent. However, a distinctive feature of these elite school textbooks, and indeed, a characteristic commonly observed in educational materials within socialist states, is the presence of critical commentary on capitalism. This emphasis on the superiority of the North Korean socialist system aligns with the ideological framework outlined in the prefaces of the textbooks.

The subsequent analysis, presented in Table 5, classifies the topics of reading passages found in general school textbooks. This categorization facilitates a comparative examination with elite school texts.

The 'Education and Learning' theme in the general school textbook, like its elite school counterpart, begins with an introduction to the school. However, while the elite school textbook provides more comprehensive details about school life, the general school version focuses on science classes and laboratory facilities. Furthermore, the reading passage features a speaker aspiring to a career in science, implicitly conveying the notion that English language acquisition serves as a tool for scientific pursuits. A similarity with the elite school curriculum is the inclusion of after-school club activities, suggesting student autonomy in selecting extracurricular involvement. Overall, the content emphasizes learning strategies. Texts covering English study methods (Unit 2, Grade 1), memory enhancement techniques (Unit 6, Grade 1), and English learning strategies (Unit 1, Grade 2) directly instruct students on effective learning practices. The presentation of practical learning content and specific strategies underscores the emphasis on student-directed instruction.

Table 5. Topic Description of the Reading Passages in General School

Theme	Topics	Description
Education & Learning	School life	Introduction to school activities and future aspirations
	How to learn	Learning-related content such as how to study English, learning strategies, etc.
	Learning Contents	How to count
Society & Culture	International competition	Olympics, International Music Competition
	Cultural differences	Language-related content such as foreign languages and gestures
	Foreign culture	A wide range of cultural and artistic fields, including Mozart, Beethoven, and international music competitions.
Science & Nature	History of Science	The story of scientists including Vynalon and Seung-gi Lee
	Natural Science	Covers natural phenomena and scientific principles, including fossil fuels, alternative energy, evaporation of liquids, space and satellites, etc.
	Technology	Heating system, Technology-related content such as computers, computer viruses, etc.
	Environmental Issues	Social issues such as global environmental pollution, global warming, etc.
Individual Life	Health Care	Health-related topics such as breakfast, cold weather health care
	Human Relationships	How to request, types and how to apply in real life
etc.	Idolization	Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un
	Fairy Tale	Goldfish

The ‘Society and Culture’ theme explores the cultural relativity of gestures, exemplified through the lives of Mozart and Beethoven (Unit 4, Grade 1) and a discussion of foreign languages and associated gestures (Unit 7, Grade 2). While elite school textbooks incorporate a substantial amount of world knowledge material to expose learners to diverse cultural contexts and engaging content, this breadth is significantly reduced in general school textbooks. Furthermore, content related to international competitions, such as the International Music Competition (Unit 5, Grade 2) and the Olympics (Unit 1, Grade 3), includes pronouncements attributing awards to “the respected Marshal Kim Jong-un,” along with other idolizing phrases. This reinforces the observation, also noted in elite school textbooks, that success in international competitions is utilized

for propagandistic purposes.

Mirroring the approach taken in elite school textbooks, the general school textbooks, as stated in their preface, also incorporate engaging scientific narratives. Consequently, similar science-related texts appear, addressing topics such as global environmental pollution and warming (Unit 3, Grade 2 & Unit 6, Grade 2), fossil fuels and alternative energy sources (Unit 5, Grade 1), and the role of computers (Unit 8, Grade 1 & Unit 2, Grade 3).

The 'Individual Life' theme in general school textbooks features content relevant to daily life, selected for its potential to resonate with students' interests. While a passage on the importance of breakfast (Unit 3, Grade 2) parallels the elite school textbook's focus on food as a theme of 'Society and Culture', this text, focusing on individual meals, is categorized under 'Individual Life.' Additional content addresses health management in cold weather (Unit 4, Grade 3) and effective methods for making requests (Unit 3, Grade 3), both pertinent to interpersonal relationships in everyday life. The reading passages appear designed to extract key aspects of ordinary North Korean students' daily experiences and present them in an engaging manner.

4.3. Comparison of Readability Level

This study investigated the progression of reading difficulty across grade levels in elite and general school textbooks, using readability analysis. The results are presented in Table 6.

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in the FRE index across grades in elite school textbooks ($F=8.210$, $p<0.01$). The analysis indicated a gradual increase in reading difficulty across grade levels. First grade textbook exhibited an average FRE score of 80.246, classified as 'easy.' Second grade textbook, with an average score of 73.824, were also categorized as 'relatively easy.' However, third grade textbook demonstrated a higher level of difficulty, with an average score of 64.576, falling within the 'intermediate' range. These findings suggest that while the overall reading difficulty of elite school textbooks may not be excessively high, there is a discernible progression in reading complexity across grade levels.

Table 6. Readability

(N = 64)

School	Readability	Grade	N	Average	SD	F	p	Post-hoc
First Middle	FRE	1	17	80.246	7.615	8.210	0.001**	3<1
		2	12	73.824	10.032			
		3	11	64.576	12.891			
	FKGL	1	17	4.668	1.334	13.150	0.000***	1,2<3
		2	12	6.225	1.814			
		3	11	8.032	2.058			
General	FRE	1	9	79.104	6.830	0.384	0.686	
		2	8	75.986	6.938			
		3	7	76.628	9.602			
	FKGL	1	9	4.627	1.014	1.575	0.231	
		2	8	5.527	1.343			
		3	7	5.806	1.868			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A one-way ANOVA also revealed significant differences in the FKGL index across grade levels in elite school textbooks ($F=13.150$, $p<0.001$). When mapped onto the American grade level system, the FKGL scores suggest a consistent progression in reading difficulty. First grade textbook was found to be at a US fourth grade reading level, while second grade textbook increased to a US sixth grade level. Notably, third grade textbook exhibited a reading level comparable to US eighth grade level. These findings indicate a systematic increase in reading complexity by approximately second grade levels per year in elite school textbooks, suggesting a rigorous and challenging academic trajectory for students.

In contrast, a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences in average readability scores between textbooks across different grades in general schools. Moreover, the observed differences in mean scores were minimal. The FRE index of general school textbooks ranged from 76 to 79, indicating a relatively low reading difficulty level. Similarly, the FKGL scores fell between 4 and 5, suggesting a reading level comparable to elementary school texts in the United States. These findings suggest that the overall reading difficulty of textbooks in general schools is relatively low and consistent across grades. This consistency may inadvertently lead to a perceived lack of progression in

reading difficulty for learners, potentially diminishing the challenge and engagement associated with advancing through the educational system.

According to Ryu and Jeon (2020), South Korean third grade middle school textbooks exhibit an average FRE of 79.80 and FKGL of 4.92, suggesting a readability level comparable to North Korean elite school first grade textbook. Yang and Bae (2022) reported that South Korean first grade high school textbooks have an average FRE of 72.05 (FKGL 6.42), while second grade textbooks average 64.57 (FKGL 7.61). These findings indicate that North Korean elite school second grade textbook has readability levels similar to South Korean first grade high school textbooks, and third grade elite school textbook is comparable to South Korean second grade high school textbooks. North Korean general school textbooks, characterized by minimal inter-grade continuity, demonstrated readability levels slightly higher than South Korean third grade middle school textbooks and slightly lower than first grade high school textbooks.

These findings reveal distinct patterns in the readability of North Korean textbooks. General school textbooks exhibit low and consistent reading difficulty across grades, potentially limiting academic challenge for students. In contrast, elite school textbooks demonstrate a gradual increase in reading difficulty, although the overall level may be lower compared to South Korean general high school textbooks. Notably, elite school textbooks show a more pronounced progression in reading complexity, aligning more closely with the expectations of higher education. These findings highlight significant disparities in the academic rigor and intellectual stimulation provided to students in different educational contexts within North Korea.

5. Conclusion

This study has illuminated key distinctions in the English language curricula of elite and general schools in North Korea, revealing how the tension between socialist ideology and the practical need for specialized talent manifests within educational materials. The analysis of textbook prefaces revealed divergent curricular priorities. Elite school textbooks emphasize the superiority of the North Korean socialist system, incorporating global knowledge and science stories, reflecting a focus on ideological indoctrination and the cultivation of future scientific leaders. General school textbooks, conversely, prioritize engaging topics relevant to students' daily lives, highlighting a focus on practical learning

and motivation.

The thematic analysis of reading passages further underscored these differences. Elite school textbooks featured a greater diversity of topics, including world cultures and scientific concepts, reflecting an aim to broaden students' perspectives and foster global awareness. While 'Society and Culture' was a prominent theme, particularly in the lower grade, 'Science and Nature' became increasingly dominant in the upper grade, aligning with the schools' focus on scientific excellence. General school textbooks, while also incorporating science-related content, focused more consistently on themes related to 'Education and Learning' and 'Science and Nature,' with less emphasis on global perspectives. The analysis also revealed the presence of ideological messaging in both types of textbooks, although its form and frequency varied. While overt idolization of the regime was less prevalent in elite school texts, the underlying message of socialist superiority remained a consistent theme.

Finally, the readability analysis revealed significant differences in the cognitive demands placed on students in the two school systems. General school textbooks exhibited consistently low readability levels across all grades, potentially limiting the academic challenge for students. Elite school textbooks, while demonstrating a gradual increase in reading difficulty, still presented texts that were generally less complex than those used in South Korean high schools. This suggests that while elite schools in North Korea aim to provide a more rigorous education than general schools, the level of academic challenge may still fall short of international standards.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the differentiated nature of English language education in North Korea, highlighting the complex interplay between ideological imperatives, practical needs, and pedagogical approaches in educational materials. The regime's commitment to socialist principles is evident in the emphasis on ideological content, but the establishment of specialized schools and the inclusion of global knowledge and advanced scientific topics in elite school curricula demonstrate a pragmatic recognition of the importance of cultivating exceptional talent. Building on this foundation, future research could investigate and compare the specific linguistic features influencing reading passage readability in the first middle school textbooks. Such an analysis could further illuminate the pedagogical strategies employed in these distinct educational settings, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how linguistic complexity is tailored to different school textbooks and the potential impact on student learning outcomes.

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Yunha Joo

Research Professor

Center for East Asian Studies, Chonnam National University

(59626) 50, Daehak-ro, Yeosu-si, Jeollanam-do

Phone: +82-61-659-7584

Email: jinajoo486@jnu.ac.kr

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