

English as an Official Language?

Letters to the Editor, Korea Herald

I am writing in response to the front-page article from yesterday's Korea Herald (Oct. 24), "Roh supports English as 2nd official language." This is an excellent idea, which in my opinion will be a strong spoke in the wheel for the idea of turning Korea into the business hub of the region. The sooner it starts, the better.

As stated in your article, we are living in an increasingly competitive and smaller world due to globalization, and whether you like it or not, English is the language of international commerce. The failed effort to introduce English as an official second language on Jeju Island in 2001 was due, in my opinion, to backward-thinking people and xenophobia.

In all areas of human development there are always those who will put their own selfish desires ahead of the interests of the people and the country as a whole, but these are the people who have to be dragged into the future by the visionaries who can smell the proverbial coffee.

Yes, the introduction of English as an official second language will cause some problems, but listening to those who prefer to keep their heads in a dark, warm place, afraid to move Korea forward, will cause more.

Considering the rivalry between Korea and Japan, this is one area where Korea could get a leg up by being first to make English the official second language. I hope Mr. Roh will follow through on his ambitious statement and not let the naysayers keep Korea from moving forward.

Thomas Higgins

Seoul

2003.10.25

In response to Thomas Higgins' letter to the editor of Oct. 25 and President Roh's proposal for the creation of English as an official language of Korea, I would like to speak to the short-sighted folly of this idea.

While it is absurd to deny that English is the global language of commerce and the de facto lingua franca of our time, it is equally absurd to elevate this foreign language to official status in Korea. The effort would serve only as a complete waste of energy and time, to speak nothing of money.

An official language is more than just a calling card for business. The doors of Korean business have been opening just fine and the increase in foreign investment testifies to this fact. Foreign investment has been brought about without the need of an official language stamp of approval.

The meaning of official language is a guide for the conduct of all governmental business. Is Korea prepared to have all governmental business conducted in English as well as Korean? I think not. Is the government prepared to conduct all courtroom procedures in English, with all parties present — from the bailiff through to the court reporter, the lawyers and judges — all prepared to perform in this foreign but official language? Will the government present road tests to drivers that wish to acquire a driver's license in the new official language of the state? This is to say nothing about the countless man-hours needed to translate all Korean statutes and laws into a new official language. This is what having an official language means.

Canada, with two official languages, has had to bear the expense of both since the Official Language Act of 1968. Having two primary founding linguistic groups (French and English) it is quite natural and appropriate for Canada to have two official languages. However, according to the Office of Commissioner of Official Languages: In 1998-1999, the cost of providing federal services in both official languages was \$255,200,000. I would suggest that this money would be better spent in Korea on other things, such as education, infrastructure, defense or other areas of the government.

Should the government promote the spread of English? Absolutely. Should the government encourage the use of English? Definitely. But raising this foreign language to an official status is quite simply a waste of time, energy and, most of all, of money.

Todd Vercoe

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