

### **3 | Issues for English Tests and Assessments: A View from Korea**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, the language teaching profession in Korea has made significant progress in orienting English teaching and learning to focus on communicative competence. Globalization and its emphasis on communicative competence have brought about a drastic change in teaching and learning of English in Korea.

At a societal level, the ability to communicate in English is recognized as a vital tool to be competitive. English proficiency is now required to enter a competitive school, to get a prestigious job, and to be promoted at work. For these reasons, more money is being spent on attending English academy classes, studying English abroad, and taking English proficiency tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL. At a school level, the curriculum has been revised, textbooks have been rewritten, materials have been developed to include more communicative activities, and the teachers have been trained to be facilitators of students' meaningful interactions in English. The government is supporting communicative English education by developing English villages and cities, hiring native English speakers as teaching staff, and offering simultaneous video classes.

At an individual level, Korean students and office workers invest enormous amounts of time and money learning English. Students study English from elementary school to high school, taking a total of 204 class hours in elementary school, 340 class hours in middle school, and 408 class hours in high school<sup>1</sup>. If these class hours are converted into

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<sup>1</sup> The lengths of class hour are different among schools. The actual time spent for one class hour in elementary school is 40 minutes, middle school

60 minute classes, we can assume that the actual time spent on English classes at school is about 730 hours (Jeon & Paek, 2009). In addition to English classes at schools, many students are also exposed to private tutoring, on-line English classes, and self-help English study materials. Some students even go abroad for a certain period of time specifically to improve their English, even at a young age. Office workers also take off-line or on-line English classes, either voluntarily or involuntarily, because of the potential opportunities that communicative competence in English can bring them.

In spite of all these efforts and pressures to attain English communicative competence, very surprisingly, there seems to be no conspicuous improvement in Koreans' English communicative competence, especially when measured by well recognized English proficiency tests. For example, Koreans' speaking proficiency remains almost at the bottom of the iBT TOEFL (internet-based TOEFL). According to Kang (2009), Koreans ranked 136<sup>th</sup> out of 161 nations on the speaking test by obtaining an average of 18 points out of a possible 30, lower than the world average of 19.3 points. Koreans' listening score was also lower than the world average, scoring 19 compared to the world average of 19.5. Koreans' writing score of 20 was also lower than the world average of 20.5. Only on the reading section did Koreans score slightly above the world average, scoring 20 compared to the world average of 19.4.

What matters is not just the scores as measured in a form of proficiency tests, but how people perceive their proficiency. Korean people do not feel that they are gaining the desired level of English proficiency compared with all their effort and time invested studying English. While almost all Korean people think English is important, many of them still do not have realistic expectations towards achieving their English learning goals. Some do not even know what goals they are trying to attain.

The present study aims to share a bird's eye view of the current English education in a Korean context. In particular, the study aims (1) to detect the practical constraints of the current English education in Korea; (2) to identify the pressing issues related to English tests and

assessments; and, finally, (3) to discuss the future directions which will benefit learners to attain a higher level of English proficiency in Korea.

## **WHAT'S GOING ON IN KOREAN SOCIETY?**

Every society has its own matters to put their heads together. In order to understand English education in Korea, it seems mandatory to look at the realities Korean people face today in society. The most prominent educational issues for Korean people today would be perhaps private education and inequalities in educational opportunities.

### **Increased Private Education**

One of the most serious issues of the new government of Korea<sup>2</sup> is to reduce the cost Koreans spend on private education. It is a serious concern because most Koreans face this stressful cost, which is almost certainly an unpleasant experience that often leads to threats on their personal health and happiness. Regardless of the wealth of parents—rich or poor—and regardless of the intellectual advancement—advanced or behind in class—children are all going through the same pain of having additional classes after school for subjects including English, math, science, music, arts, and reading and writing essays.

Private education in Korea is not only for students who want to catch up or who want to explore more, but for all students to be better than other students. Korea is notorious for its competitive “pressure cooker” education. Since most high school graduates try to be admitted to universities at the same time without exploring different paths for majors or careers, the competition to be admitted to elite schools is quite high. In order to be better prepared for entering these prestigious schools, students, beginning in middle school, tend to have long days of studying because of private classes in addition to their regular school classes. They begin their school classes at 8 or 9 a.m. and finish around 4 p.m. They then attend private institutes for 2 or 3 additional hours per day in the late afternoon or evening for extra classes, typically for

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<sup>2</sup> MB government, led by President Myong Bak Lee since 2008.

English and math, which ends their weekdays around 10 p.m.<sup>3</sup>. Reflecting this harsh reality, kids often hear since childhood “During your high school days, if you sleep for four hours, you will pass. But if you sleep for five hours, you will fail.” As a result of this pressure to enter prestigious schools, Korean society witnesses suicides and mental breakdowns among teenagers before and after the college entrance exam. For this reason, the Korean government tries to find ways to improve the educational system, such as reducing the cost for private education, particularly English education, since English, along with math, is one of the main subjects that Korean people would pay extra for private education.

According to the joint annual survey by MEST (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology) and KNSO (National Statistical Office), Koreans spent 20.9 trillion won (\$22.9 billion)<sup>4</sup> on private English language education in the year 2008 (See Figure 1). In detail, parents of up 5 percents spent about 233,000 won (\$211.8) per month per child for private education; parents of up 11.8 percent spent 76,000 won (\$83.6) per month per child for private English education. It is certainly surprising to see this growth in spending on private education considering the fact that people are reducing their expenditures due to shrinking household income because of the current economic recession. The psychological costs added to the financial costs of education in Korea are often pointed as reasons why Korea has one of the lowest birthrates in the world<sup>5</sup>. Improving the education system by reducing the cost for private education and strengthening public education seems to be pressing issues that Korean governments face.

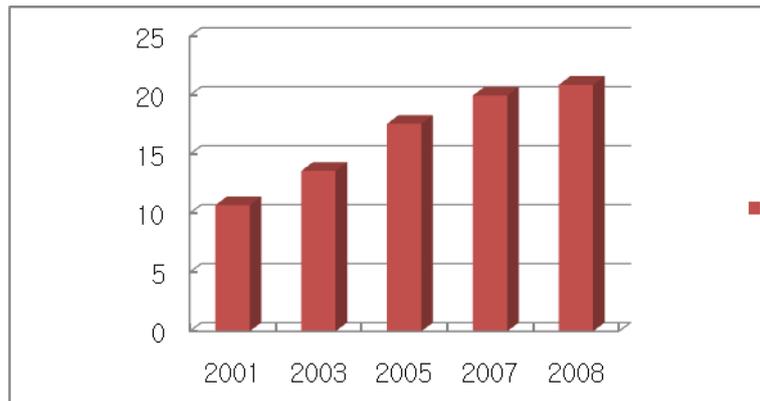
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<sup>3</sup> In June 2009, the Korean government banned instruction at private academies after 10 p.m. Before this prohibition, some academies for junior and senior high school students had classes even after midnight.

<sup>4</sup> Exchange estimate \$1=1100 won

<sup>5</sup> The birthrate was 1.26 in the year 2007.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Private Education (Source: Korea Times, Feb. 27, 2009)**



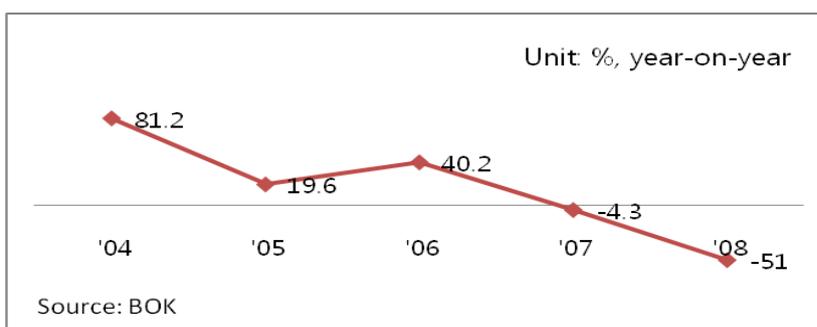
\*vertical axis: money spent(trillion won) \*\*horizontal axis: year

### Overseas English Studies

Koreans' desire to make their children better prepared for the future extends to their investment in English education. They not only pay for additional English classes at private academies in Korea, but also spend money profusely by sending their children to English speaking countries strictly to provide better English education or to provide better education in general, sometimes at the cost of family happiness.

According to an article (Onishi, 2008), there are more than 40,000 Korean children living outside Korea with their mothers, leaving their fathers in Korea to earn money to support this effort to learn English abroad. The article reports that Koreans make up the largest group of foreign students in the United States and the second largest in New Zealand. These Korean students are unlike other foreign students in that they are often younger than students from other countries. This is because Korean parents send even elementary school children to English speaking countries in the belief that English is absorbed more easily at a younger age. In Korea, this particular form of separated family is referred to as a "wild geese" family, who live apart so that they can educate their children in English-speaking countries.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Overseas Education Spending Growth (Source: Bank of Korea, 2008)**



Since this form of family separation—hoping for the future and tolerating the present unhappy family separation for the sake of education—is such a peculiar and yet prevalent phenomenon, the Korean government has been concerned with the increase in overseas education. English educators have also been looking at the issue seriously and trying to find ways to improve English education within Korea. Although spending on overseas education has begun to decline (the number of students going overseas dropped to 1.29 million in 2008, as can be seen in Figure 2), this decline was most likely caused by the weak exchange rate of the Korean won rather than due to the improvement of the Korean education system.

### **Emergence of English Divide, a New Form of Social Inequality**

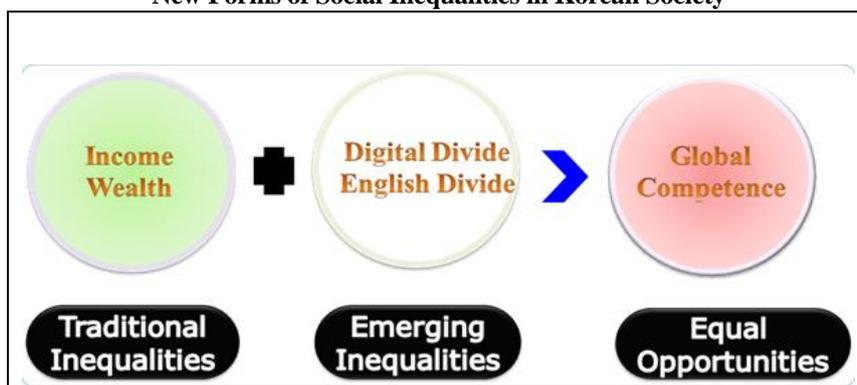
There is a large gap in the amount of money spent on private English education and overseas English studies between affluent and poor households. By region, people in Seoul, the capital city, had the highest education expenditure, spending on average 296,000 won per student month, which is 2.4 times more than was spent in rural areas. Comparing expenditure by household income, families earning more than seven million won a month spent 8.8 times more for private education than that of families earning less than one million won (Kang, 2009). This means the rich have the opportunity to receive more English education and the poor have less opportunity. This particular

phenomenon is now called *English Divide* and recognized as a new form of social inequality in Korea along with *Digital Divide*. As Figure 3 summarizes, these new forms of social inequalities are added to the traditional inequalities of income and wealth, and believed to be affecting Korean people's ability to survive in a global society.

The Korean government takes this *English Divide* seriously since Koreans consider English vital to their success in a globalized society with intense economic competition. Unequal opportunities for English education will eventually lead to inequalities in their lives. For this reason, the Korean government began to look at ways to provide equal educational opportunities for English communication.

The current Korean presidency is particularly emphasizing global competition and education. In this light, the current English education policies are twofold: (1) improve English communicative competence and (2) narrow the gap between the *English Rich* and *English Poor*. In order to narrow the gap between the *English Rich* and *English Poor*, the MEST have continually offered plans to help reduce the increasing costs of private education and to strengthen English education at public schools. In this effort, the government is hiring native English speakers to assist with English classes, offering English camps, and providing various forms of simultaneous web classes for rural areas where there are less opportunities to be exposed to English (Jeon, 2009a). Furthermore, the MEST recently designated 300 "schools free from private education" and promised to support each school with financial aid.

**FIGURE 3**  
New Forms of Social Inequalities in Korean Society



### SPOTTING THE CULPRITS

In order to strengthen English education in Korea, it seems essential to understand what causes the increase of private education and overseas English studies, and what weakens public English education. From an overview of the goals, practices, and assessments at a glance, the three most pressing issues are identified. They are (1) the discrepancy between goals and practices at school; (2) the discrepancy between goals and tests; (3) the discrepancy among tests and assessments required for school, for admission to prestigious schools, and for employment

#### **Culprit #1: Discrepancy Between Goals and Practices**

The most pressing issue in English education in Korea is the discrepancy between the goals and practices. While the national curriculum suggests English classes should be communicative, in reality, English education at school does not provide students sufficient opportunities to learn how to communicate in English. Because of this, people seek alternatives to improve their ability to communicate in English.

English (as a Foreign Language) education in Korea has been

undergoing historic changes in the past decade in order to teach students to develop English communication skills. The curriculum has been revised, the textbooks have been rewritten, and the communicative approach has been enforced in practice. In reality, however, it does not always work as planned because of a lack of understanding, lack of experience, and constraints in realities. As Choi (2007) asserts, there is a gap between ideals and realities as the national curriculum has never been fully actualized.

Jeon (2008) explored the key issues that need to be addressed to actualize the communicative approach successfully in the context of Korean public schools. The practical issues were first identified through the Delphi method, then the importance of the issues were rated by Korean elementary and secondary school teachers in two surveys, one conducted in 1996 (N=172) and the other conducted in 2008 (N=305). The results were surprising since the top 5 ranked issues remained identical in both administrations (See Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**Practical Issues in Implementing Communicative Approach**  
**in English Classrooms**

Issues at school	2008 (n=305)		1996 (N=172)		Rank Diff.
	R	M	R	M	
Number of students in the classroom	1	9.36	1	9.14	0
In-service teacher training	2	8.86	2	9.06	0
Practical and interesting materials	3	8.76	5	8.75	+2
Pre-service teacher training	4	8.64	3	9.00	-1
Supplemental materials	5	8.63	4	8.77	-1
Education centered on university entrance	6	8.43	13	8.38	+7
Teachers' English communicative competence	7	8.40	7	8.50	0
Teaching techniques for the communicative approach	8	8.38	6	8.36	0
Learner motivation and participation	9	8.30	16	8.21	+7
Assessment techniques to match with communicative objectives	10	8.18	8	8.30	-2
Flexible use of textbook	11	8.16	12	8.30	+1
Teacher motivation	12	8.12	9	8.17	-3

Tools and technology	13	8.07	10	8.32	-3
Learner-centered approach	14	7.88	11	8.17	-3
Stakeholders' understanding	15	7.80	14	7.92	-1
Students' anxiety	16	7.74	17	7.42	+1
Seating arrangement in the classroom	17	7.72	15	7.98	-2
Instructions on using technology and resources	18	6.86	18	7.30	0

Among the top 5 issues that Korean teachers felt the most important to be dealt with, reducing the number of students in the language classroom ranked number 1. The typical number of students per class was 45 to 50 in 1996. Even though the number of students per class has been reduced to between 30 and 37 in 2008, teachers still felt they had too many students to make their classes communicative.

The issue that ranked second in importance was the quality of in-service teacher training. Teachers felt that the in-service teacher training program currently offered did not provide the necessary training for the necessary people at the necessary time. The issue ranked fourth was pre-service training. Teachers believed that the current pre-service training was still focused on English literature, linguistics, and non-practical methods so that it was difficult for them to be equipped with English communication skills and the appropriate methods to teach English for communication. Although the Korean government has put an emphasis on teacher training through diverse programs for pre-service and in-service teachers, as Lee (2009) asserts, teacher education in Korea seems to have been neither effective nor practical.

The issues ranked third and fifth were related to the development of practical and interesting materials (3<sup>rd</sup>) and the development of supplemental materials (5<sup>th</sup>). With all the efforts to make textbooks more practical and interesting, teachers still felt the textbooks were neither practical nor interesting for effective communicative language learning. In addition, teachers felt they did not have appropriate supplemental materials to use with the textbook. Although teachers wanted to use and to develop their own supplemental materials that could intensify their students' learning, practically they did not have the time or skills to make the necessary materials. Part of the difficulty is due to the discrepancy between a student's proficiency level and interest level. Because authentic materials that teachers find suitable for

students' proficiency level is often developed for L1 users, if they are presented to L2 students, the content may be too easy and thus not interesting to L2 learners even though the language level might be suitable. Therefore, providing supplemental materials suitable to students' levels of proficiency and levels of interest at the same time is not an easy task to do.

Two issues among the 18 issues identified by the teachers were related to tests and assessments. The issue ranked as the sixth in the 2008 administration and ranked thirteenth in 1996 administration was related to education being centered on university entrance. Teachers believed that English education in a public school context will never change unless the tests and assessments for university entrance changes. Since the current university entrance exam measures students' listening and reading comprehension only, classes focusing on productive skills cannot be performed well.

### **Culprit #2: Discrepancy between Goals and Tests at School**

In the previous section, the gap between the goal and practice was explained. Since there is a disparity between what the national curriculum suggests and what actually happens in English classes, it follows that there is also a serious gap between the goals of instruction in English classes and what is being tested for achievement at school.

For language learners, the tests can serve as a compass by providing useful feedback on their achievement. However, the English achievement tests at school do not seem to function in that way. While the national curriculum emphasizes the use of integrative tests and classroom-based assessment, most school English tests are still discrete-point tests. The main issue here is, while there is much emphasis given on communicative classes, English testing has not changed to allow for this. This is well manifested in literature. While there has been a lot of research on curricula changes, there has been insufficient report on what changes are made in classroom tests accordingly.

In an effort to enforce using more direct, performance-based assessments, the Korean Ministry of Education (MOE) has suggested integrative tests and performance-based assessments (MOE, 1996, 2007).

Teachers have been attracted to the newer concepts of English tests at

school. In the late 1990's, with the hope of successfully implementing the communicative approach, researchers focused more reporting on performance assessment (Aschbacher, 1991), alternative assessment (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992), and authentic assessment (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). There have been positive beliefs that students should be evaluated by performance assessment if they are taught using the communicative approach. Scholars and practitioners were all in agreements that performance assessments would yield positive feedback (Bailey, 1996). Therefore, teachers have tried to make part of their tests performance-based. There was an increase in the use of more open-ended items in English tests at school. From the late 1990s to the beginning 2000s, performance-based assessments accounted for up to 30% of the achievement assessments at schools. During this period, research on performance assessment in school settings was frequently reported.

Lee (2000) studied teachers' perceptions on the use of performance assessment. The result showed the use of performance assessment could be different by teacher and by school. More than 58% of secondary teachers responded that about 30-50% of their tests are performance assessment. In addition, 30% of the teachers thought the use of performance assessment was helpful for enforcing communicative goals, and 25% thought the performance assessment was helpful for student achievement. Furthermore, 40% of the teachers thought students' scores on multiple choice tests are highly related to their scores on performance assessment items.

While there are studies on positive perceptions about the use of performance assessment, there are also reports on the practical difficulties teachers face in using performance assessment items in their classes. Choi and Yoon (1999) developed performance assessment for middle school English and investigated its practicality as well as its effects on the students' achievement and attitude. According to their analysis, implementing performance assessment did not have positive effects on the learning attitude of the students nor on their performance in the school achievement tests. In addition, participating teachers felt implementing performance assessment in middle school was not easy because it required more time and money, yet was not received well by the parents because of the subjective elements of the performance test.

The difficulty of using performance assessment items also had to do with learners' preference for familiar test items. Kim & Lee (2005) developed task-based English writing test items and rating criteria based on the 7<sup>th</sup> national curriculum and administered those test items to high school students. After analyzing students' reactions towards the developed tests, the researchers found that the students' confidence and interest in the writing test was lower than those in the multiple choice items and short answer items. This was because the writing items developed for the study were more difficult than the short answer items on the regular tests. The students seemed to have more difficulty when the item required more writings.

Song (2007) looked at performance assessment items used in high schools in Korea and concluded that there are a number of problems associated with them. The problems were: 1) not having sufficient speaking assessment; 2) including writing assessment only as part of the midterm and final tests; 3) providing unclear scoring rubrics; 4) using items far from real situations; 5) having inappropriate content; 6) using mostly EBS listening tests; 7) putting too much emphasis on grading; 8) testing mostly grammar or vocabulary; and finally 9) providing less feedback.

Due to these practical constraints, the proportion of performance-based items seems to have been reduced. The desire to improve English tests has faced the harsh reality of grading students on curves for admission to upper-level schools. Typical English exams administered at school are given twice per semester with the exception of some teachers providing additional quizzes and performance assessments during classes. The most prevalent form of English exams at school include the following sections: (1) a multiple choice test of listening comprehension items given either during the class or during the exam hour (contributes approximately 10% towards the total grade), and (2) a paper-pencil test consisting of 19-24 multiple choice items (see example 1 and 2) and 5-7 short answer items (see example 3) during the exam hour (contributes approximately 90% towards the total grade).

The teacher constructed exam items on both midterm exams and final exams, as can be seen in the example 1, 2, are mostly discrete point items, providing less language input and requesting minimum responses, forcing students to select the options and to write short responses to a

few items. As can be seen in the Example 1, the instruction is frequently given in Korean. In order to select the only one correct answer, learners often need to know exactly what is being required as an answer. In example 1, learners need to know that only the singular form is acceptable in the blank.

### EXAMPLE 1

#### Sample Item ('09-1 Midterm Exam, DC Middle School) (Lee, 2009)

다음 \_\_\_\_\_ 에 올 수 없는 것은?<sup>6</sup>

\* There is an \_\_\_\_\_ in this picture.

- |                |                   |
|----------------|-------------------|
| ① American boy | ② English teacher |
| ③ engineer     | ④ old men         |
| ⑤ apple        |                   |

Example 2 is similar. Although, in meaning, option ① could be the answer, learners should select option ③ to demonstrate the understanding of present tense.

### EXAMPLE 2

#### Sample Item ('09-1 Midterm Exam, DC Middle School) (Lee, 2009)

주어진 문장의 뜻과 같은 것은?<sup>7</sup>

4. I'm from America.

- ① I came from America.
- ② I come in America.
- ③ I come from America.
- ④ I'm come from America.
- ⑤ I come to America.

Even with short answer items, as in Example 3, they seem to be testing whether learners know particular forms instead of eliciting learners' English language.

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<sup>6</sup> Which of the following cannot be in the blank?

<sup>7</sup> Choose the sentence which means the same as the given sentence.

**EXAMPLE 3****Sample Item ('07-1 Midterm Exam, YI Girls Middle School)**

서술형 6. 다음 단어를 보기와 같이 변화시킬 때 빈칸 ㉠, ㉡에 들어갈 단어를 영어로 쓰시오. (4점)<sup>8</sup>  
 <보기> see – saw – seen

Go - ㉠ \_\_\_\_\_ - ㉡ \_\_\_\_\_

The examples of English achievement tests in Korean secondary schools do not seem to give much feedback on learners' communicative ability. It is rather hard to assume what the achievement criteria are for English classes. It is even harder to understand the interpretation of the results of these tests. As the example items show, English exams at schools often require learners' analytical skills about the language. Thus, even proficient speakers of English sometimes cannot select the correct answer. Since students' scores are often used as one of the criteria to be admitted to upper-level schools, and the scores are based on a curve, it is possible that if a student loses only 3 points (effectively one question on an English exam), that student's placement ranking could drop by up to 30 positions in that subject. Because of this sensitive result, even some proficient students attend good cram schools to study grammatical terms for school English tests.

It is quite surprising that research on problems related to school achievement tests are rare considering there is abundant research on language testing in Korea. Only a few studies have addressed the problems of English achievement tests at schools. Min (1998) studied to see if the achievements tests administered in Korean middle schools reflect the language content proposed in the 6th National English curriculum. After analyzing the test items in relation to the five areas of language skills, topics, communicative functions, the grammatical category, and the length of a sentence, he concluded that the proportional reflection of receptive and productive skills is the reverse of the suggestion of the national English curriculum. Kim (2009) analyzed 15 in-house middle school English tests to find out the

<sup>8</sup> Open-ended Question 6. When you conjugate the following word as the given example, write appropriate forms in the blank ㉠ and ㉡ as the given example (4 points).

weaknesses of the test items. She found the tests collected included mostly multiple-choice items and the items constructed by the middle school teachers contained quite a few problems. She further presented the weaknesses of those multiple choice items in three categories: content, structure, and options. The content of the items had the following weaknesses: required linguistic or common knowledge only; included superfluous information; did not require sufficient understanding; used unauthentic/ungrammatical language; and was cognitively too demanding. The structures also had weaknesses, such as: having stems with no problem posed; having stems not requiring reading what had been presented; having grammatical inconsistency between stems and options; and including unnecessary repetition. The options had problems because they were not attractive, were not related to each other, were exceptionally different in length, and included an extraneous clue.

Using mostly multiple-choice test items on school achievement tests is a problem. It is even more serious if those multiple choice items are full of flaws because those results are used as feedback on students' performance in English classes. It would be even unethical to provide such limited feedback when learners are exerting vast amounts of time and effort into learning English. It is certainly an important issue to be dealt with.

This problem of using poorly written multiple choice items or not using performance items can result from teachers' lack of competence in evaluating students' performance. Jeon and Oh (2006) surveyed what English teachers in secondary schools think of their own competence in student assessment. The results showed that the teachers felt they lack competence in assessing students because they were not trained during their pre- or in-service program. Lee (2007) conducted a survey of secondary school teachers and students, asking them to rate the quality of English teachers as a subject teacher and as a student assessor. She reported both teachers and students perceived that English teachers were better in quality as a teacher than as an assessor.

According to teachers, the reason that English tests at school focus more on knowledge than on communicative ability is because they have to make more test items than they can actually make from their very limited resources, which is presented to students during class time.

Furthermore, they have to make their tests good enough to put students on a curve to allow them to easily differentiate students according to their scores.

### **Culprit #3: Discrepancy among Tests and Assessments**

In addition to the discrepancy between the goals and tests at school illustrated in the above examples, there is another serious disparity in the content and the method that English is being tested for in school, for admission to prestigious schools, and for employment.

Learners are taking a long path to acquire English proficiency to be able to work with it. As their progress is naturally gradual, the content and the way they are being tested should also be gradual. However, in the line of English tests being used for different purposes as learners develop their English proficiency, Korean learners experience a big jump from one stage to the other in terms of the breadth and the depth of the content and the method of English tests.

After taking English achievement tests focused on discrete point items twice per semester, students are then required to take the English test section of the Korea College Scholastic Aptitude Test (KCSAT), which aims to test learners' listening and reading comprehension abilities. This English test section of the KCSAT is quite different from the school achievement tests in the width of content coverage and the depth of understanding. As can be seen in Example 4, the test item on this national test is providing more input for comprehension with the multiple options to choose from.

**EXAMPLE 4****Sample Item: ('09 English Test, Korea College Scholastic Aptitude Test)**

<p>43. 다음 글의 상황에 나타난 분위기로 가장 적절한 것은?<sup>9</sup></p> <p>In Pamplona, a white-walled, sun-baked town high up in the hills of Navarre, is held in the first two weeks of July each year the World's Series of bull fighting. The cafes under the wide arcades that run around the Plaza de la Constitucion have every table crowded. All day and all night there is dancing in the street. Bands of blue-shirted farmers circle and lift and swing behind a drum and various wind instruments in the ancient Basque Riau-Riau dances. And at night there is the beat of the big drums and the military band as the whole town dances in the great open square of the Plaza.</p> <p>① sad and desperate                      ② urgent and scary          ③ merry and festive                        ④ gloomy and miserable          ⑤ calm and peaceful</p>
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The difference is obvious if we compare the items on the English test section of the KCSAT and an example of English achievement test administered at a local middle school. The English test section of the KCSAT is composed of 17 listening items and 33 reading items. Of the 33 reading items, only 2 are related to grammar, 3 are related to expressions, and 28 are related to comprehension. On the other hand, the midterm exam of YI Girls' Middle school is composed of 10% listening comprehension and 90 % reading comprehension, which is comprised of 13 items related to grammar, 4 related to expressions, and 10 related to comprehension out of a total of 27 items (See Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**A Comparison between the School Achievement Test and the Korea College Scholastic Aptitude Test (KCSAT)**

Category	Achievement test at school	English test on Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test
Grammar	13	2
Expression	4	3
Comprehension	10	28
Total	27	33
Source	2007 YI Girls Middle School Midterm Exam	2009 Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test

<sup>9</sup> Choose the most appropriate one to depict the atmosphere of the following passage.

It is rather surprising to see this big difference in the proportions of test items between these two tests. If the English test section of the KCSAT is based on the national curriculum, and the school achievement tests are based on school curriculum which is rooted in the national curriculum, it follows that they should have similar proportions for their test items. Again, students have conflicting study goals in that they must prepare for both their school exams and the KCSAT, since both exams are considered for admission to college. College admission requires both the percentile score at school and the score from the KCSAT. If the English test section of the KCSAT is based on what students learned at school, it seems appropriate that the test method should be similar to the way students were evaluated at school. Many students and parents felt that it was a waste of time and effort to have a dual focus on their studies, specifically to achieve good results on their school English tests on the one hand, and also have good results on the KCSAT on the other hand (Jeon & Paek, 2008).

### **English Evidence Required for Admission to Foreign Language High Schools**

Even more difficult is the big gap from the English achievement tests to the use of proficiency tests required for entering prestigious schools. There has been an increase in the use of English tests for productive skills such as oral proficiency interviews, summarization, debate, and writing. While the achievement tests at school and the English test on the KCSAT require only receptive skills, the tests for entering prestigious schools suddenly require students to be able to produce with the language. As we all know there is a gap between the ability to comprehend and the ability to produce the language. It is natural to assume that students would have difficulty facing English tests for productive skills if, for example, they are exposed to English education only through school English classes, without private education and/or additional self exposure to English speaking and writing practice.

Since the opening of foreign language high schools in the early 1990s, Korean students have been faced with the added stress of having to achieve listening, speaking, and writing skills in English, which were never required in school English assessments.

Foreign language high schools are considered prestigious because they provide a better chance for admission to prestigious universities. These foreign language high schools began to request English proficiency scores such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and TEPS, for admission<sup>10</sup> and additionally administer school-made English tests mostly focusing on listening and writing to screen incoming students. As can be seen in Table 3, all six foreign language high schools in the Seoul area were found to be administering listening tests, and three out of six schools were administering essay writing tests. In addition, percentile scores from English tests at school are required. For this reason, students and parents struggle to not only be successful at English exams at school, but also to pass the admission exams for these prestigious schools.

**TABLE 3**  
**Evidences of English Proficiency Required for Admission**  
**to Foreign Language High Schools (6 cases in Seoul)**

School (Year Est.)	Criteria for Special Admission	Criteria for General Admission	Tests Administered By the School
DW (1991)	Listening/Essay	Listening/Essay	Listening/Essay
DI (1992)	N/A	Listening/Essay	Listening/Essay
MD (1991)	Interview/Essay	Listening/Interview	Listening/ Interview/Essay
S (1993)	Essay/Interview/ Listening	Listening/GPA	Listening/ Interview/Essay
E (1991)	Listening/GPA/Essa y	Listening/GPA	Listening/Essay
HY (1990)	Reading/Listening/ Interview	Listening/GPA	Listening/ Interview Essay/

Source: Jeon (2009)

### **English Evidence Required for Admission to Universities**

These days Korean students and office workers need to obtain good scores on English proficiency tests to gain admission to prestigious

<sup>10</sup> From 2008, the Korean government banned the use of any proficiency test scores for admission to foreign language high schools and international middle schools.

schools, to get good jobs, and to be promoted at work. For these reasons, about 2.69 million Koreans took English proficiency tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC in 2006. In 2008, Korea had the largest number of examinees for the TOEFL test in the world, with a total of 124,000 people taking the test. According to a report (Kim, 2006), the total amount spent on standardized proficiency tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC is estimated to have exceeded 700 billion won per year.

The surge in the number of people taking these proficiency tests is in part due to their requirement for admission to certain universities. Evidence in English proficiency is required by many universities as a special admission criterion. Jeon (2009) looked at the admission criteria of 42 universities in Seoul. Of these 42 universities, 33 had special admission criterion for students who submit scores from standardized proficiency tests. As can be seen in Table 4, the most commonly accepted tests were the iBT TOEFL (36 universities), TOEIC (24 universities), and TEPS (21 universities). In addition to these test scores, 13 out of 42 universities were administering English interviews for incoming students.

**TABLE 4**  
**Evidence of English Proficiency Required**  
**for Admission to Universities (42 cases in Seoul)**

Special Admission	Accepted Tests & Criteria			General Admission	University Based Assessment
	Test	Range	Mean		
(33)	iBT TOEFL (36)	61~110	91.19	Foreign Language Area, Korea College Scholastic Aptitude Test	Interview (13) Essay (1) Reading (1)
	TOEIC (24)	550~900	813.91		
	TEPS (21)	500~857	729.96		

\*The numbers in ( ) indicate the number of universities.

### **English Evidence Required for Employment**

Evidence of English proficiency is not only required for entrance to prestigious schools, but also for getting prestigious jobs. As Korean

businesses are going global, more and more companies are seeking to employ people equipped with the ability to communicate effectively in English. One of the most frequently used proficiency measures in companies used to be TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). Currently, however, proficiency scores of productive skills are gaining popularity.

Lee (2009) asserts that until the year 2000, companies did not see needs to evaluate the English ability of incoming employees. However, as corporations became more global, they began to realize the importance of English communication skills in the workplace and began to require relevant assessments of these skills upon hiring.

Jeon (2009) investigated 25 companies in Seoul (18 domestic and 7 foreign companies. See appendix for the companies investigated). All 18 domestic companies required proficiency test scores for employment, and 3 out of 7 foreign companies required these scores. What is different from the past is the companies are now requesting oral proficiency scores: 13 out of 18 domestic companies required speaking scores, 17 domestic companies were administering group oral interviews, and 3 domestic companies were even requiring English presentation and debate skills. Most of the foreign companies, 6 out of the 7 investigated, screened new employees through group interviews in English. If oral English skills are required for employment, students need to prepare for these skills from school English classes.

**TABLE 5**  
**Criteria for Employment (25 cases in Seoul)**

Co. in Seoul	Official Score Required	Speaking Score Required	Corporation Based Assessment of English Proficiency			
			Group Interview	1:1 Interview	Presentation	Debate
Domestic Co. (18 cases)	18	13	17	4	1	2
Global Co. (7 cases)	3	N/A	6	N/A	N/A	N/A

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There have been many changes in English assessments in concepts and in practice. Since the introduction of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) and the model of communicative performance (Bachman, 1990), the methods to assess learners' English ability have moved from discrete point, indirect, and efficient manner to integrative, direct, and authentic. Reflecting these changes, the widely used PBT (Paper-based test) TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) was revised to the CBT (Computer Based Test) in 2000, and in 2005 to the iBT (Internet Based Test) to include more authentic speaking and writing tasks. TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) also began to include writing and speaking in 2007.

English achievement tests in Korean secondary schools, however, have been relatively unchanged. This means that when students need to take widely used and globally accepted tests, their productive skills are assessed, while at school, mostly their receptive skills are assessed. With this discrepancy, in addition to not getting relevant feedback while they are developing language skills, learners' efforts to gain English proficiency are shattered between conflicting goals for getting good scores at school and for achieving communicative competences. This is a serious waste in the long journey to achieve proficiency.

Even though there have been changes in the national curriculum, English achievement tests in Korean secondary schools have been relatively unchanged (Jeon, 2009b). At the same time, while there have been substantial changes to the English test section of the Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test required for university entrance, the English tests for admission to prestigious schools, and the evidence of English competence required for prestigious job positions, there has been little change to school achievement tests.

We need to pay particular attention to what information learners receive through these English tests at schools and how to make it function more appropriately to give relevant feedback on their progress instead of putting them on a meaningless curve. The English achievement tests in Korean secondary schools are still typically administered twice per semester, giving insufficient feedback on learners' communicative abilities. Even when they use some

performance items, the performance criteria are often unstated and the results can be interpreted only by the teacher in a given class.

In addition, learners should not have to face large gaps from one testing method to another. For example, if learners receive feedback only from achievement tests at school with discrete point items, they will be at a loss when facing speaking tests required for admission to prestigious schools because the achievement tests at school do not give learners the slightest hint as to what to expect. It would not be fair for students who are only exposed to English classes at school and their school English tests would be the only performance feedback on their English learning.

Learners have the right to be given proper feedback on their progress as they go along the long journey to achieve proficiency. Therefore, the earlier stages should prepare learners for the later stages. In this sense, the tests given at school in the beginning stage should provide relevant feedback on learner performance at that stage and at the same time gradually progress towards the performance expected at the next stage. However, Korean learners do not seem to face this gradual progression with English tests.

If people were taking a complicated route out of town, they would write down the directions. By writing down the plans, goals, and ideas, they are more likely to achieve success. If they know what they want and what they need to do to get it, it increases the chances that they will actually pursue their goals and eventually achieve them. Just like this, we need to establish clearer goals for English education in a public context, systematically connect those goals with practices and assessment methods, and provide clear guidance to learners and parents to help achieve their goals. For Korean learners to attain the necessary proficiency in English, a clear path should be shown at school so that they have a clear direction.

If schools are to develop English proficiency in English classes for particular communicative purposes, and if we define 'proficiency' in terms of learners' ability to use language for particular communicative purposes, secondary schools should develop their own achievement tests which replicate small-scale proficiency tests. Students need to prepare for their future from the school, not after school, or on their own.

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## APPENDIX

### Cases analyzed

Category	Cases analyzed
Foreign Language High Schools In Seoul	Daewon, Daeil, Myongduk, Seoul, Ewha, Hanyoung
Universities In Seoul	CUK, MTU, KHU, Korea, KW, Kookmin, KCU, Duksung, Dongkuk, MJU, SYU, SMU, Sogang, SKuniv, SNUE, SCU, SNU, SNUT, UOS, SWU, SKHU, Sungshin, Sejong, Sookmyung, SSU, Yonsei, Ewha, PCTS, CAU, Chongshin, Chugye, KNOU, Bible, HUFS, KNSU, Hansung, Hanyang, HYTU, Hongik
Companies in Seoul	Samsung Elec., Samsung Total Petrochemicals, Samsung Life Insurance, Cheil Industries, Samsung card, LG Elec. LG Philips, LG Chem, Hyundai Hysco, Hyundai Engineering & Construction, Hyundai Kia Motors, Daewoo International, Daewoo Securities, SK Networks, SK C&C, Posco, Doosan Group, Sony Korea, IBM Korea, P & G Korea, 3M Korea, Prudential Life Insurance Korea, GM Daewoo, JP Morgan