

High School Students' Impressions and Perceptions of Some Attributes of Each Reading Subtest in the National Unified Exam English Tests of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

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This paper aims to probe and compare reading attitudes and motivation among three national groups of EFL learners. A reading comprehension test and a related questionnaire were produced by Kinoshita et al. (2002). Three versions of the testing instruments each consisted of one original reading subtest written by the researchers, and two other subtests extracted from the reading comprehension sections of the targeted nations' NUCEE English tests. Participants did not take the subtest drawn from their own country's NUCEE English test. The questionnaire, developed by the researchers, gathered information about the subjects and their impressions of some features of the two subtests. The present research is the first attempt to analyze the data collected from senior high third-year EFL students who took the reading comprehension

subtests in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The analyses found characteristics of reading motivations as well as attitudes toward and impressions about the subtest features; some are common to the three national groups, and the others peculiar to one or two particular groups.

In Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, English is not only one of the main subjects taught in junior and senior high school curricula, but it is also included in the National Unified College Entrance Exams (hereafter, NUCEE). These tests are named “The College Scholastic Aptitude Test” in South Korea, “The Joint University Entrance Examination” in Taiwan, and “the National Center College Entrance Examination” in Japan (hereafter, abbreviated as CSAT, JUEE, and NCCEE respectively). In order to apply for admission to universities or colleges of their choice, all Korean high school students and a majority of Japanese and Taiwanese counterparts are required to take the appropriate test. The college entrance examinations function as chief sources of motivation for pre-college level students in each cultural/educational context.

BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In these exam-oriented countries, not only high school teachers' methodologies and their selections of teaching materials, but their students' learning attitudes and strategies as well are implicitly or explicitly affected by attributes of the entrance exam English tests such as styles of passages, syntactic structures, levels of difficulty with vocabulary, and types of question items used. Generally, the roles played by the NUCEE English tests on pre-college levels of education are regarded as backwash effects, investigated by Cha (1999) on listening comprehension activities and by Lee (1999) on reading activities during classroom instruction in Korea. In Japan, the explicit influence of the NCCEE English tests on teaching methodologies and material selection in high schools are acknowledged by a high percentage

of EFL college teachers polled (Yamamoto, 1999). In the three countries, the motivation to learn the target language is typically instrumental because the learners want to achieve success in their future careers or because they desire to score well in various standardized tests including the NCCEE English tests (e.g., Gates, 1995; Park, 2000).

In the process of developing the NUCEE English tests, writers and developers always need to take into account that all test-takers are able to take them in similar or equal conditions across the country. Therefore, ease of administration must be given the highest priority in designing a battery of tests administered to a large number of students at the same time.

An important point at issue is what abilities of the target language should be measured in the NUCEE English tests. For example, a listening comprehension subtest has been included in Korea since 1993, and it will be introduced in Japan in 2006. Despite these moves, reading still occupies an important position in EFL education. As Rivers (1981, cited in Bernhardt, 1998, p.1) acknowledged, “the ability to read is the most stable and durable of the second (or foreign) language modalities.” Reading comprehension skill is far easier to measure than other language skills. In this connection, Alderson (2000) considers measuring the reading abilities as the most cost-effective of second/foreign language skills.

In the three countries, most EFL learners, with a few exceptions, are rarely, if ever, exposed to their second language in real-life communicative interactions. Unlike ESL learning environments with frequent and plentiful exposures to real English, individual learners can use their target language only in EFL classrooms as a means of quasi-communication. In these EFL situations, developing reading comprehension abilities still seems to be a main activity, especially as students go on to the higher grades in high school. The NUCEE English tests must reflect the existing educational situations of each country.

Developers need to determine whether the style of the passage should be expository or narrative. In this respect, Alderson (2000, p. 64) considers an expository text to be harder to process than a narrative text. He claims that

test-takers are hard pressed to “process a variety of relationships among text units” during a limited period of time. If the contents of the passage are too unfamiliar, there is no alternative but to try to comprehend them by resorting to bottom-up reading processes. In contrast, there seems to be an advantage of a narrative over an expository passage. Denis (1982, see Alderson, 2000, p. 64) stated that the latter helps to “prompt visualization” in the mind of readers “as part of reading process.” What is essential to the examinees is whether or not the passage can be visualized as it actually should be.

Candidates find a passage more difficult to comprehend when its subject matter is unfamiliar to their background knowledge. In this connection, Bernhardt (1991, pp. 95-97) groups individual readers' background knowledge roughly into three kinds; local-level knowledge, domain-specific knowledge, and cultural-specific knowledge. In the process of selecting or writing test materials, the writers and the developers have to pay careful attention to the background knowledge which an individual test-taker needs in order to find out appropriate answers by reading the test passage.

Lexical complexities of a text also contribute to a difference between proficient and non-proficient readers. Too heavy a load of difficult words in a text will result in less comprehension among the learners. Especially in EFL learning settings, English is very likely to be learned partly for academic purposes in the higher grades of senior high school. Students, therefore, tend to become more sensitive to unfamiliar words they happen to come across in reading. During anxiety-ridden test periods in particular, students cannot look to a dictionary for lexical information on unfamiliar words. In many cases, they feel perplexed about how to process unknown words and make desperate attempts to construct any possible meaning.

Together with the lexical complexities of the text, syntactic difficulties often cause many EFL learners to feel frustrated and panic. According to Bernhardt (1998, p. 195), “the knowledge of words and of how words are related to each other is a necessary but insufficient prerequisite for understanding.” Since dictionary and other reliable help are not available during the test, test-takers frequently find their comprehension blocked

whenever they come across difficult grammatical patterns in reading the passage. Thus, the specialists developing the NUCEE English test must give careful consideration to the coverage of vocabulary and grammatical structures appearing in the test text.

The last issue in regard to a test format is the kind of questions asked in the reading test. That is, what kinds of reading tasks are required of the test-takers. Do reading difficulties come about from the passage or from the question? Pearson and Johnson (1978; see Alderson, 2000, p. 87) identify three different types of questions which might cause varying degrees of difficulty; i.e., textually explicit, textually implicit, and script-based questions. The first type consist of questions in which information necessary for a correct answer can be found in one or a few adjoining sentences, the second are those which require the learners to read a whole paragraph or passage to search for a possible clue for answers, and the last requires them to integrate information with their own background knowledge. These anticipations are corroborated by the literature (e.g., Davey & Lassasso, 1984). The research shows that local questions are easier for the test-takers than global questions. Of importance is how much the test developers localize or globalize each question in designing the reading comprehension section of NUCEE English tests.

Comparative Studies on Educational Contexts in East Asia

Back in 1991, a pioneering study was undertaken by Miyahara et al., who reported on their results in 1997. For their study, a questionnaire and a TOEFL-type test were administered to 1,870 university students learning EFL for liberal-arts requirements in China, South Korea, and Japan. Analyses of test data including average scores were made across each national group. Furthermore, attempts were made using data elicited by the questionnaire to explicate the reasons for differences in mean scores on each test section among the three national groups.

More recently, two reading comprehension subtests in the 1999 CSAT and

the 1999 NCCEE English tests were compared by Higuchi (2000), who argued that in the NUCEE reading subtest there should be a variety of sentence patterns and constructions and that the complexities of sentences in the reading passages should correspond with reading comprehension abilities required of college levels of reading. Based on his analyses of the reading passages of the two national instruments using 13 common sentence patterns, he concluded that one reading subtest was a more functional measure than the other.

Purposes of the Study

Our first studies (Kinoshita et al., 2002 and Shimatani et al., 2003) probed characteristics of the NUCEE English reading subtests of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The results indicate that: 1) the three NUCEE English reading subtests are similar in the levels of word frequency according to the JACET 4000 Word Frequency List issued by the JACET Committee of Teaching Materials in 1993; 2) the Korea reading subtest, compared with the other two, can be regarded as a well-structured format designed to differentiate test-takers with an average level of EFL reading proficiency, and 3) the Korean students tend to have some difficulty comprehending a longer passage made up of several paragraphs probably due to the backwash effect of the introduction of the CSAT English section in Korea. The salient features of general EFL reading comprehension abilities among Korean students were very likely due to washback effects of the innovated format of the CSAT reading subtest. Kwon (2000) gave a detailed account of the test format innovations which had occurred in South Korea. To the best of our knowledge, there have been very few, if any, studies aiming to probe into test-takers' impressions and perceptions of attributes inherent in the reading subtests extracted from the three nations' NUCEE English tests.

The purposes of the current study are: 1) to analyze the data gathered by the reading comprehension tests and the questionnaire administered to the high school third-year students in the three countries, and 2) to explore the

reasons for any differences. The questionnaire was designed to elicit demographic information and students' impressions and perceptions concerning some features of the two reading subtests, neither of which drawn from the NUCEE English test of the test-takers' own country.

METHOD

The Test Instruments and Questionnaire

Three versions of reading comprehension tests (Forms A, B, and C) were designed by Kinoshita et al. and each version was made up of three subtests; e.g., one original reading subtest (ORS) written by the researchers themselves, and the other two subtests, neither of which contained reading sections drawn from the NUCEE English test of the test-takers' own country. The test-takers never answered their own country's reading subtest, because some of the students were very likely to be familiar with the test contents. For instance, the Korean group took the Japan Reading Subtest (JRS) and Taiwan Reading Subtest (TRS), but not Korea Reading Subtest (KRS).

Reading passages were selected that did not contain any blanks, charts and figures. The passages were selected out of several reading subsections of each 2002 NUCEE English tests: 2 out of 4 passages for the TRS; 5 out of 19 passages for the KRS, and the only passage that fit our selection criteria was used for the JRS. A careful attempt was made to construct each nation's subtest to have similar difficulties in terms of the lexical levels and the length of the reading passages.

The questionnaire, designed by Kinoshita et al., was constructed to gather information concerning subjects and to measure the intensity of their EFL reading motivation, their awareness of the importance of reading in their learning of EFL, and their impressions about features such as the text styles, the contents of each English passage, and the formations of their attached test items.

The Lexical and Syntactic Features of Each Test Passage

Statistics relating to the vocabulary and Flesch indices of each passage and subtest is shown in Table 1. As for the readability estimate set for native English readers, each interval of Flesch Indices is indicated as follows: 0-30 is 'Very Difficult'; 30-50 'Difficult'; 50-60 'Fairly Difficult'; 60-70 'Plain English'; 70-80 'Fairly Easy'; 80-90 'Easy'; and 90-100 'Very Easy' (Flesch, 2001).

TABLE 1
Analysis of Each Reading Passage and Subtest

Reading passage	OP1	TP1	TP2	JP1	KP1	KP2	KP3	KP4	KP5
The total no. of wds.	491	193	233	652	89	101	103	110	220
The total no. of sents.	31	13	12	40	5	13	5	7	15
The avg. no. of wds. per sent.	15	14	19	16	17	7	20	15	14
The max. no. of wds. per sent.	38	27	32	40	23	14	32	22	27
Flesch Indices	69	63	57	68	68	87	67	51	63
Reading subtest	ORS	TRS	JRS	KRS					
The total no. of wds.	491	426	652	623					
The total no. of sents.	31	25	40	45					
The avg. no. of wds per sent.	15	16.5	16	14.6					
The avg. of Flesch Indices.	69	60	68	67					

The KRS consisted of several short passages with the widest variance in respect to the Flesch indices (51 to 87). The JRS consisted of one long passage with the largest number of words (652) and sentences per passage (40). The TRS had not only the largest average in the number of words in each sentence (16.5) but also the lowest average of Flesch indices (60). Flesch indices of the other two passages in Taiwan's NUCEE English test were still lower, so if we had added one more passage to the TRS, it would have been much more difficult than the other two nations' subtests. Therefore, the TRS consisted of two passages and was shorter than the other two.

Test-Takers

In 2002, the Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese high school students (JHS, KHS, and THS respectively) were asked to take a reading comprehension test and answer a questionnaire. There were 656 students participating in our research; 258 Koreans (160 male and 98 female students) were from three different high schools in Busan, 175 Taiwanese (135 males and 40 females) from three high schools in Taipei and its vicinity, and 223 Japanese (112 males and 111 females) from five different high schools in Fukuoka City and its neighboring towns. All the Korean and Taiwanese students and a higher percentage of the Japanese students were planning to take the NUCEE to apply for universities or colleges.

The reading test and questionnaire were administered in the three countries between June and mid-September, 2002. It was impossible to administer them at the same time in the three countries due to the differences of the academic calendar in each country. Both the reading comprehension test and the questionnaire were administered to the Japanese group in June, the third month of their third year; to the Korean group in July, the fifth month of their third year; and to the Taiwanese group in September, the first month of their third year.

Table 2 shows the results of the ORS, which was taken by all of our subjects and whose scores serve as basic information for their reading proficiency. As indicated in Table 2, there were statistically significant differences among the mean scores of the three national groups for the raw ORS scores ($F = 27.68, p < .01$). It seems clear that the levels of English proficiency of our subjects in each country were not identical. Table 3 indicates the ORS score distributions of the original test-takers.

TABLE 2
Result of the Original Reading Subtest (Full score =30)

	N	Mean	SD	High	Low	<i>F</i>
KHS	258	22.71	5.32	30	4	27.68**
THS	175	25.61	4.66	30	4	
JHS	223	25.37	3.70	30	5	

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3
Distributions of the Test-Takers in the ORS Scores

	4	5	8	9	10	12	13	14	16	17	18	21	22	25	26	30
KHS	1	1	3	1	0	3	8	1	2	31	15	18	61	3	65	45
THS	1	0	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	3	5	10	31	4	49	67
JHS	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	5	58	6	86	57

Homogenizing Each National Group of Test-Takers

To perform more elaborate analyses, each national group of test-takers was homogenized randomly by extracting the test data from those who took the same scores in the ORS. Table 4 displays the modified distribution of the test-takers' scores in each national group. Each national group was reorganized to consist of 141 students: 141 Japanese students (70 males and 71 females), 141 Korean (108 males and 33 females), and 141 Taiwanese counterparts (81 males and 60 females). Table 5 shows the results of four reading subtests of the homogenized group.

TABLE 4
Modified Distribution of the Test-Takers in Each National Group

ORS score	17	18	21	22	25	26	30
No. of subjects	3	5	5	31	3	49	45

TABLE 5
Results of the Four Reading Subtests in the Homogenized Group

Reading subtest	Test-takers	Mean	SD	High	Low	<i>z</i>
ORS	ALL	25.72	3.63	30	17	
TRS	KHS	20.46	5.88	30	5	0.78
	JHS	20.99	5.65	30	5	
JRS	KHS	19.89	7.60	35	0	4.73**
	THS	23.95	6.80	35	3	
KRS	JHS	28.40	6.89	35	0	1.04
	THS	27.49	7.79	35	6	

Note. The full score of the ORS is 30; the full score of the other three subtests is 35.
 ** $p < .01$.

Table 5 shows that although the mean score of Japanese students was slightly higher than that of Korean students in regard to the TRS, the difference was not statistically significant. The mean score of Taiwanese students was higher than that of Korean counterparts in respect to the JRS. A statistically significant difference was observed ($z = 4.73, p < .01$). The mean score of Japanese test-takers was slightly higher than that of Taiwanese students in the KRS. However, there was no statistically significant difference.

RESULTS

The targeted test-takers for the following analyses are those who are homogenized by Shimatani et al.: 141 Japanese students (70 males and 71 females), 141 Korean (108 males and 33 females), and 141 Taiwanese counterparts (81 males and 60 females). This paper deals with results of 11 questions: 4 questions on the subjects themselves and 7 questions on their impressions and perceptions concerning some features of the two subtests.

Analyses of Each Group's Responses to Four Affective Questions of Learning EFL Reading

Questions 1 to 4 are designed to collect background information on attitudes toward reading and motivations to acquire reading skills. In the following tables, individual figures of each national group of high school students stand for percentages.

Question 1 asked test-takers about the extent to which they thought the English reading proficiency developed during their high school years would be beneficial to their future professions and activities. Table 6 indicates that, irrespective of their nationalities, students responded very positively to this question. 80% or more of the subjects in each country viewed developing their reading proficiency in high school as advantageous for their future.

Above all, more than 95% of Taiwanese students showed positive attitudes toward developing their reading proficiency. There were no statistically significant differences between the three national groups.

TABLE 6
Result of Question 1

(How much do you think the English reading proficiency you have developed in high school will be useful for your future professions or activities?)

	Not at all	Not much	Neutral	Much	Very much	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
KHS	0.00	2.84	10.64	47.52	38.30	4.22	0.75	
THS	0.00	0.00	3.55	60.28	35.46	4.32	0.54	2.86
JHS	2.13	4.26	12.77	41.84	38.30	4.11	0.93	

Those responding in the affirmative to the previous question 1 were asked to check at most two of the seven areas to which their improved reading proficiency would be helpful. Table 7 shows that, in the case of the Korean group, about 57% out of all the students opted for Choice 1 (Work) and 28% selected Choice 2 (Academics or professions).

As a whole, each group had their own unique views toward how their reading proficiency would be useful in the future. For example, the Korean group saw their reading proficiency as useful for future jobs. On the other hand, the Taiwanese group reported that “entertainment and leisure” would be the most important area for their reading proficiency. Besides, the larger number of the Taiwanese group put an emphasis on “academics and professions” in regard to this question. In contrast to the Korean and Taiwanese groups, the Japanese students showed a slightly different pattern. Over 85% of the Korean and Taiwanese groups gave instrumental reasons to the development of reading proficiency. In contrast, a relatively lower percentage of the Japanese group (69%) considered their developed reading proficiency as instrumentally useful.

TABLE 7
Result of Question 2

(If you agree to a varying degree in the previous question, in which of the following areas do you consider your improved reading proficiency to be the most useful?)
 (Two choices possible)

	KHS	THS	JHS
1. Work	57.45	44.68	46.81
2. Academics or professions	28.37	43.97	21.99
3. Culture enrichment	22.70	7.09	27.66
4. Entertainment and leisure	20.57	50.35	21.99
5. Intercultural understanding	31.21	40.43	31.21
6. Volunteer activities	3.55	0.71	4.26
7. Others	10.64	4.26	4.26

In Question 3, the test-takers were asked about the degree to which they were motivated to improve their reading comprehension abilities. According to Table 8, over 75% of both the Korean and Taiwanese students were 'much' or 'very much' motivated to improve their EFL reading skills. The Taiwanese group showed the highest mean score in the strength of their motivation. On the contrary, the Japanese group showed the lowest motivation. The statistically significant difference was observed among the three national groups ($F= 4.95, p < .01$). The difference between THS and JHS was statistically significant ($z = 3.14, p < .01$); however, other differences among the national groups were not statistically significant.

TABLE 8
Result of Question 3

(How much are you motivated to improve your reading ability?)

	Not at all	Not much	Neutral	Much	Very much	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
KHS	1.42	25.53	7.09	39.72	25.53	3.63	1.16	
THS	0.71	19.15	1.42	48.94	29.08	3.87	1.06	4.95**
JHS	2.13	31.91	12.06	26.95	26.24	3.44	1.24	

** $p < .01$.

Question 4 is concerned with the style (expository or narrative) of reading passages that high school students were more interested in reading. Each figure of Table 9 stands for percentages of respective alternatives between expository and narrative passages. The higher is the mean score of one group, the more narrative-oriented are the students in that particular group, and the lower, the more expository-oriented. The statistically significant difference was observed among the three national groups ($F = 1.10, p < .01$).

Table 9 shows that the Taiwanese students were more expository-oriented while the Korean and Japanese groups of students were rather narrative-oriented in their preference for the style of English passages. The difference between THS and KHS ($z = 3.08, p < .01$) and the one between THS and JHS ($z = 4.56, p < .01$) was statistically significant; however, the difference between KHS and JHS was not statistically significant ($z = 1.54, p = 0.13$).

TABLE 9

Result of Question 4

(Which are you more interested in reading, expository passages or narrative passages?)

	Expository	Rather expository	Neutral	Rather narrative	Narrative	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
KHS	19.15	10.64	21.28	25.53	22.70	3.22	1.42	
THS	30.50	17.02	19.15	17.73	14.89	2.69	1.44	1.10**
JHS	14.89	14.18	12.06	24.11	34.04	3.49	1.46	

** $p < .01$.

Each Group's Perceptions Pertaining to Some Features of the Test Passages

In Questions 5 to 11, all the subjects were asked about their perceptions of syntactic and lexical features of the passages in the two nations' reading comprehension subtests that they were required to answer.

Question 5 is related to the levels of difficulty with the vocabulary contained in the passages they read to answer the subsequent questions. In Table 10, a little more or less than 50% of Korean students were not sure

about the levels of difficulty with the vocabulary of both the TRS and JRS passages. Besides, they considered the TRS to be easier than the JRS in regard to the lexical features of their passages. This difference was statistically significant ($t = 4.04, p < .01$). The Taiwanese students have a tendency that is slightly different from that of their Korean counterparts. More than 50% of Taiwanese students perceived both the JRS and the KRS to be rather easy to comprehend. As the Korean group did, a rather high percentage of the Japanese students was not sure about the level of lexical difficulty with the TRS and KRS passages although they reported that the KRS was a little easier than the TRS. However, the difference was not statistically significant.

TABLE 10
Result of Question 5

(How did you feel about the levels of difficulty with the vocabulary contained in the subtests?)

	Subtest	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very difficult	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	2.13	31.21	47.52	17.73	0.71	2.84	0.76	4.04**
	JRS	1.42	17.73	53.19	23.40	3.55	3.10	0.78	
THS	JRS	7.80	48.23	24.11	18.44	0.00	2.54	0.89	0.99
	KRS	11.35	43.97	29.79	13.48	0.71	2.48	0.90	
JHS	TRS	1.42	31.91	46.81	16.31	2.84	2.87	0.80	1.93
	KRS	2.13	40.43	39.72	14.89	1.42	2.76	0.87	

** $p < .01$.

Question #6 inquired of the subjects about the levels of difficulty with grammatical structures of each nation's reading comprehension subtest. According to Table 11, the Korean students found the JRS to be more difficult than the TRS, and this difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.04, p < .05$). About a half or more of both the Taiwanese and Japanese groups felt the subtests they took were a little easier than did the Korean group.

TABLE 11
Result of Question 6

(How did you feel about the levels of difficulty with grammatical structures in the subtests?)

	Subtest	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very difficult	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	0.71	21.99	51.77	23.40	1.42	3.03	0.74	2.04*
	JRS	0.71	17.02	50.35	28.37	2.84	3.16	0.76	
THS	JRS	6.38	46.10	33.33	13.48	0	2.54	0.81	0.77
	KRS	9.93	43.26	32.62	13.48	0	2.50	0.85	
JHS	TRS	2.84	41.84	42.55	10.64	1.42	2.66	0.77	1.26
	KRS	2.84	44.68	42.55	8.51	0.71	2.59	0.72	

* $p < .05$.

Question 7 is related to the levels of appropriateness that students felt about the length of the reading passages. Table 12 indicates that over 50% of the Korean students viewed the TRS as appropriate in the length of the passages, whereas only 22% of them saw the JRS as such. Only about 16% of the Taiwanese students thought that the JRS had an appropriate length. On the other hand, about a half of that group regarded the KRS as appropriate in the length of its passages. There were significant differences between two subtests in each national group.

TABLE 12
Result of Question 7

(How did you feel about the levels of appropriateness pertaining to the length of the reading passages in the subtests?)

	Subtest	Very short	Short	Neutral	Long	Very Long	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	1.42	5.67	54.61	31.21	6.38	3.36	0.75	9.76**
	JRS	0.00	0.71	21.99	55.32	21.28	3.98	0.68	
THS	JRS	2.84	3.55	16.31	51.06	25.53	3.94	0.91	9.31**
	KRS	4.26	19.15	50.35	15.60	9.93	3.08	0.96	
JHS	TRS	0.71	20.57	68.79	7.80	1.42	2.89	0.60	2.46*
	KRS	4.97	19.15	69.50	4.97	0.71	2.77	0.65	

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Question 8 asked whether each subtest question really reflected the content of the given passages. Table 13 shows that those who felt unsure about this question accounted for over 40% among the Japanese subjects. This result is higher than the other two groups. The percentages of those responding in the affirmative were higher between the Korean and Taiwanese groups than their Japanese counterparts. There were no significant differences observed between two subtests in each national group.

TABLE 13
Result of Question 8

(Did each subtest question reflect the content of the passage?)

	Subtest	No	Neutral	Yes	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	6.38	26.95	63.83	2.61	0.63	1.22
	JRS	3.55	29.08	64.54	2.65	0.58	
THS	JRS	7.09	31.21	58.16	2.57	0.68	0.83
	KRS	7.09	26.24	63.12	2.61	0.65	
JHS	TRS	3.55	43.26	48.94	2.54	0.65	0.76
	KRS	2.84	40.43	53.90	2.57	0.64	

Question 9 asked our subjects if they had interest in the passages in each subtest. Table 14 shows that our subjects tried to get interested to a varying degree in the contents of the passages they had to read. However, there were no significant differences observed between two subtests in each national group.

TABLE 14
Result of Question 9

(Were you interested in the content of the passages in each subtest?)

	Subtest	Not at all	Not much	Neutral	Much	Very much	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	2.84	13.48	22.70	50.35	9.22	3.50	0.94	0.36
	JRS	2.84	14.89	24.11	46.10	10.64	3.48	0.97	
THS	JRS	5.67	30.50	12.06	46.81	3.55	3.12	1.07	0.50
	KRS	4.26	29.08	13.48	50.35	1.42	3.16	1.01	
JHS	TRS	4.97	19.86	14.89	49.65	9.93	3.40	1.07	0.08
	KRS	5.67	17.02	22.70	40.43	13.48	3.39	1.10	

In Question 10, subjects were asked to judge whether the passages in each subtest were appropriate in regard to their reading comprehension. In Table 15, relatively higher percentages of students in Korea and Taiwan thought of the passages of the subtests they answered as 'a little appropriate' or 'very appropriate.' In contrast, fewer than 50% of Japanese students did so toward the KRS and the TRS. The Japanese students alone showed a little different tendency from those of the two other groups. There were no significant differences between two subtests in each national group.

TABLE 15
Result of Question 10

(Were the topics of the passages appropriate to your understanding?)

	Subtest	Not at all	Not much	Neutral	A little	Much	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	2.84	12.06	29.08	38.30	16.31	3.54	1.00	0.64
	JRS	4.26	9.93	36.17	29.79	18.44	3.49	1.05	
THS	JRS	2.84	5.67	20.57	41.84	27.66	3.87	0.98	0.74
	KRS	2.13	9.22	19.86	40.43	26.95	3.82	1.01	
JHS	TRS	2.84	13.48	40.43	23.40	19.15	3.43	1.04	0.48
	KRS	2.13	12.06	39.01	29.08	17.02	3.47	0.99	

In Question 11, the students were asked whether they had any background knowledge about the topic of the passage(s) they read in each subtest. Those who knew 'much' or 'very much' about each topic did not reach even 10% of the total responses from each country. Table 16 shows that the Korean students had more background knowledge about the topic of the passages in the TRS than in the JRS and this difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.99, p < .01$). However, there were no significant differences between two subtests in the other national groups.

TABLE 16
Result of Question 11

(Did you have any background knowledge about the topics of the passages?)

	Subtest	Not at all	Not much	Neutral	Much	Very much	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
KHS	TRS	25.53	28.37	37.59	4.97	2.13	2.29	0.98	3.99**
	JRS	34.75	33.33	27.66	2.13	0.71	1.99	0.89	
THS	JRS	8.51	18.44	63.83	6.38	1.42	2.73	0.76	0.85
	KRS	4.97	21.28	64.54	4.97	2.13	2.78	0.72	
JHS	TRS	26.95	32.62	33.33	6.38	0	2.19	0.91	0.00
	KRS	27.66	30.50	36.17	4.26	0.71	2.19	0.92	

** $p < .01$.

The Taiwanese students who were not sure in response to this question showed even higher percentages (a little more or less than 64% respectively) than the other two national groups. There were relatively lower percentages (18% and 21% each) of those Taiwanese students who knew a little about the topic. On the other hand, the Taiwanese students who did not know in the least about the subject matter showed the lowest percentages (8.5% and almost 5%). Contrarily, there were much higher percentages (varying from nearly 26% up to almost 35%) of both the Korean and the Japanese subjects who answered that they had no knowledge about each topic of the passages they read.

DISCUSSION

The survey results provide general trends among the three national groups and point to some potential characteristics about the attitudes and motivation among subjects toward EFL learning as well as the NUCEE English subtests.

In EFL learning situations in East Asia, a majority of students seemed to consider that their developed EFL reading skills were beneficial to their future jobs and professions. Their motivation to develop EFL reading skills can be viewed as instrumental. In these countries, it is generally not easy for

the learners to find a source of input for learning their target language outside of their classrooms. Therefore, the development of EFL reading skills plays a greater role in helping individuals to obtain a variety of linguistic input which helps to improve their communicative skills as well. Students' increased awareness of the importance of reading proficiency and fluency for their future is an essential source of motivation to learn their target language.

As for the style of reading passages the individual learners prefer to read, there was a clear-cut distinction observed among the three subject groups. The Taiwanese students were expository-oriented while the Japanese and Korean counterparts were rather narrative-oriented in their reading preference.

In order to determine the background reasons for these differences, we need to take a careful look at the textbooks used in each country. This is mainly because EFL learners' preferences seem to be unconsciously or semiconsciously affected by reading materials to which they are exposed during classroom instruction. It is very likely that, in Taiwan, information-searching activities are even more emphasized in the process of learning to read in the target language than in Japan and Korea.

The results obtained by the questionnaire indicate that some test attributes contributed to difficulty experienced by the test-takers in reading English passages. On the level of difficulty with the vocabulary and grammatical structures in each nation's reading subtest, more than 50% of Taiwanese students perceived both the JRS and the KRS to be rather easy to comprehend. The Korean students found the JRS to be more difficult to understand than the TRS, although the JRS seemed to be slightly easier to read than did the TRS according to the Flesch indices of each reading passage (Refer to Table 1).

As for the appropriateness of the length of the passage(s), over three quarters of Korean test-takers considered the JRS to be 'long' (55.3%) and 'too long' (21.3%), while 54.6% of the Korean students regarded the TRS as "appropriate". According to Table 1, the JRS had the largest number of words in its passage. Therefore, it is understandable that the two national

groups perceived the JRS to be the least appropriate in the length of its passage among the three reading subtests. Table 1 also indicates that the average number of words per sentence of the TRS is a little larger than that of the JRS. One possible reason for this is that the JRS reading passage was made up of eight paragraphs which are longer than what the Korean students are used to, and the JRS included about 220 more words than the TRS did. This may indicate that Korean students were more affected by the length of the passage(s), but not by the length of the sentences.

In the CSAT English test, a reading comprehension section consists of a series of short passages followed by one or two questions. Individual students' daily learning to read is very likely affected by this sort of test format of the CSAT English reading section. Kwon (2003) reports on the skill areas most influenced by the CSAT. Table 17 shows that 75.8% of Korean secondary school teachers consider that reading is most influenced by the CSAT, followed by listening, grammar, speaking and writing.

TABLE 17
The Skill Areas Most Influenced by the CSAT

N.	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Grammar
227	10.1	4.8	75.8	1.8	7.5

Influenced by their teachers' emphasis on reading shorter passages in regular classroom instruction, the Korean high school students tend to focus rather on shorter passages in their individual reading comprehension practice. As indicated by some studies, this is what is called a washback effect on EFL reading behaviors among students as well as on classroom instruction performed by their teachers.

It is more difficult to determine whether a certain test passage is appropriate to an individual test-taker's level of EFL reading comprehension. It depends partly on the level of an individual's reading comprehension and partly on the lexical loads and/or the complexities of syntactic features contained in an English passage(s). In addition, such affective and psychological features as motivation, interest and even learning anxieties are more or less

contributive to the depth of reading comprehension. In any kind of test at school, especially in the entrance exams for a higher level of education, test-takers, regardless of their reading preference and interest in text topics, are forced to read the passage(s) to answer the given questions in a limited period of time. If they can hardly deal with passages appropriately, it means getting an unsatisfactory grade or failing to get admitted to a higher institution.

A learner's interest in the topics of a particular English passage is another important feature, to which the test developers have to give careful consideration. In all three of the subtests, more than a half of each national group showed their interest. Test-takers' interest in the topic helps to use reading strategies more actively to increase comprehension of the passage given in the test. It is more than likely that the specialists involved in developing each NUCEE English test must have taken great pains with writing and selecting reading passages in an effort to arouse the interest of as many test-takers as possible in their contents.

Finally, what matters to the test-developers in writing or selecting a passage for the NUCEE reading comprehension sections is whether they can predict how much students in general are becoming acquainted with its content by using their own knowledge of the world. However, this is not as easy as anticipated, and it depends more or less upon what each test-developer views as ingredients of reading comprehension skills. If the subject matter of a certain English test passage is very familiar to test-takers, a correct alternative is rather easy for them to pick up in multiple-choice questions. In contrast, if the test-takers know very little or nothing about it, then that passage alone is the potential source of its general idea or information on which they rely in an attempt to find a correct answer to each question. The bottom-up approaches and/or strategies are all they are forced to utilize without any recourse in their reading process.

According to Question 11, our test-takers who claimed that they knew 'much' or 'very much' about each topic did not reach even 10% of each national group. It seems that the topics with which some of the high school students in East Asia might be unfamiliar were carefully selected. We could

not make sure how our subjects tried to utilize their background knowledge during the test. One question arises as to how often they attempted to use their knowledge of the world when they read something daily in their target language.

The subjects struggled to try to comprehend the passages during a limited period of time. Along with the three reading comprehension tests, the questionnaire, newly developed for this comparative study, seemed to serve our purposes of giving a general picture of how not only the levels of the vocabulary, the syntactic features, and the length of reading passages, but also affective features such as each learner's motivations, interests, anxieties and familiarity with the content of each text can complexly cause difficulties experienced by the test-takers under the pressure of time constraints.

CONCLUSION

Analyses of the data obtained using such instruments as a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire to probe our subjects to look for their impressions about each English test format in the NUCEE provided general trends among Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese high school students. The results pointed to some potential characteristics about the attitudes and motivation among our subjects toward EFL reading as well as the NUCEE English subtests.

First, a majority of students seemed to consider their developed EFL reading skills as beneficial to their future jobs and professions. Students' increased awareness of the importance of reading proficiency and fluency for their future is an essential source of motivation to learn their target language.

Second, as for the styles of reading passages the individual learners preferred to read, there was a clear-cut distinction observed among our three subject groups. The Taiwanese students are rather expository-oriented. The Korean and Japanese counterparts, in contrast, are rather narrative-oriented in their preferences for reading.

Third, the results indicate that some test attributes caused difficulty experienced by the test-takers in reading English passages. On the level of difficulty with the vocabulary and grammatical structures in each nation's reading subtest, more than 50% of Taiwanese students perceived both the JRS and the KRS to be rather easy to read. The Korean students found the JRS to be more difficult to comprehend than the TRS was, although the JRS was slightly easier to read than was the TRS according to the Flesch indices of each reading passage. On the appropriateness of the length of the passage(s), over three quarters of Korean test-takers considered the JRS to be 'long'(55.3%) and 'too long' (21.3%), while 54.6% of the Korean students considered the length of the TRS passages to be 'appropriate.'

The whole processes of EFL teaching and learning at both junior and senior high schools, for better or worse, are influenced and quite often even regulated by the entrance examination for higher education. This study is the first attempt that has actually been made in the three targeted countries to get high school third-year students to take extracted versions of the NUCEE English reading tests and to systematically analyze the test data and students' perceptions of the test formats. Hopefully, the present study will lend fresh impetus to comparative research into educational/psychological effects that each nation's NUCEE English test has on high school students' EFL learning behaviors and attitudes. In view of some test attributes dealt with in our questionnaire, there seems to be some distinctive factors which may cause difficulties experienced by the students who read English passages. What is needed is to probe into what makes difference between their reading during the tests and reading school textbooks or some other books in EFL learning environments. This will be an intriguing incentive for further research employing East-Asian EFL learners as subjects.

We would like to emphasize the significance of this kind of comparative research in regard to NUCEE English tests and the effects of the test contents on each teacher's teaching and student's learning behaviors. We would be very pleased if our present research could shed some light on the latent problems underlying the NUCEE English tests and their administration in

each country and provide the developers/writers with key clues for any possible renovations of the NUCEE reading comprehension sections.

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