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The evolution of South Korean English language testing

Michael T. R. Madill introduces the innovative National English Ability Test (NEAT).



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Introduction

Significant deliberations are taking place in South Korea relating to a new standardised English ability test that has the potential to revolutionise the future of language education in this country. Although discussions have taken place for several years among policy makers, the details and anticipated release date have led to much speculation among the countless EFL instructors currently

residing in Korea. Regardless of such ambiguity, information is slowly beginning to surface, revealing it as an assessment that will completely change the way students acquire English in South Korea.

This revolutionary examination is entitled the National English Ability Test (NEAT) and is a three-level, computer-based assessment projected to replace the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) which dominate standardised English testing in Korea. This article will examine the inefficiencies of the CSAT, explore NEAT's potential washback effects, and analyse the overall future of English education in Korea.

The unsuccessful CSAT

Standardised testing has historically been an important part of the South Korean educational system, especially the national CSAT as it determines a student's eligibility to enter university upon graduation from high school. It was created in 1993 and is based on the U.S. designed Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). This examination is extremely crucial to students '... because it can determine many things regarding one's status, job opportunities,

and quality of life' (Kwon 2003: 10). Poor marks often lead to parental disapproval, social stigma, an overall sense of failure, and unfortunately, even suicide. Therefore, scoring well on the CSAT is a top priority for all Korean students during their middle and high school years.

In addition, being in such a competitive country where entrance to prestigious universities is the foremost goal for

the majority of high school leavers, students spend countless hours preparing for this important assessment while extracurricular activities, hobbies, and even relationships take a back seat. A student's only priority is the CSAT and laboriously preparing for the dreaded test day.

The outcome of the significant preparation for this assessment is the increased memorisation solely of the required English material that will be tested. Students have become proficient at remembering key test vocabulary, grammar, and idioms; however, this technique is not effective in gaining balanced English skills combining speaking, writing, listening, and reading competencies. As Stevens (2009) states:

The Korean educational style—rote memorization and regurgitation—may work well for math and science, but not for English (paragraph 5).

Moreover, the production aspects of language output such as speaking and writing are not tested in the current CSAT examination which severely hinder students' ability to attain overall English proficiency.

The English portion of the CSAT is composed of 45 questions which roughly break down into equal amounts of reading and listening demands with no productive language requirements such as speaking or writing. As a result, the negative washback effect has students concentrating entirely on these two receptive language components of English while essentially ignoring speaking and writing competencies altogether. As Serl (2012) maintains:

The CSAT, focusing almost exclusively on reading comprehension, forces teachers in high schools to disregard speaking and writing almost entirely in their classes; and stops teachers from using more communicative activities in class; as students are unwilling to devote time to anything that won't help them on the test ... (page 16)

Clearly, this is an issue that needs to be addressed in order to develop the language skills needed in our globalised world.

To compare the historical results of South Korea's position in relation to worldwide English abilities, since the introduction of the CSAT there has been an overall decrease in speaking aptitude. To accentuate this, according to Ramirez (2013):

... the country's global standing in proficiency of the language has fallen: It ranked 13th in 2009 on an independent ranking called the English Proficiency Index, but fell to 21st of the 54 countries assessed in 2011.

... students spend countless hours preparing for this important assessment while extracurricular activities, hobbies, and even relationships take a backseat

Another ranking even rated Koreans as the worst communicators in English among 12 Asian countries. (paragraph 9)

Even with the considerable financial resources poured into South Korea's English education programmes, language production in the form of speaking is consistently low year-on-year. Regrettably, the makeup of the CSAT is a major reason for this.

The revolutionary NEAT

Having realised that the current system has not been successful in producing students of English who can function in all areas of the language, the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) decided it was time for a change. A more contextually relevant test specifically designed for Korean students should have greater benefits in the development of their English skills.

Furthermore, this new assessment will have the added benefits of students beginning to focus more on the speaking and writing aspects of English which have long been marginalised. As Bachman (2013) summarises:

Any large-scale test that is used for making high-stakes decisions will inevitably have an impact, or washback, on the way English is taught in schools" (para.3). He continues to say that "Given the kinds of tasks that are included in the NEAT, the fact that it is based on the Korean national English curriculum, and covers all four skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the NEAT is likely to provide positive washback on English teaching in Korea ... (paragraph 8).

These constructive outcomes include increased speaking aptitude, improved writing competencies, effectual reading capacities, greater listening abilities, and an overall increase in language proficiency. This is a much needed change to the current testing system of receptive English memorisation and a more accurate measure of English ability in real-world situations.

In examining societal views, it appears that Korean citizens are content with the introduction of the NEAT. A survey was administered to assess the general attitudes towards this new assessment among a variety of constituents and an overwhelming majority agreed that this new test is much needed and will result in improved English proficiencies. These results are vital if NEAT is to be successfully phased into existence, because the approval of society as a whole is needed; it appears Koreans are ready for a change in English education initiatives.

The ultimate positive washback effects from the NEAT, and one that will truly revolutionise English education, is that students will focus more on developing the productive skills of speaking and writing that have been vastly ignored for a long time. This new test will emphasise the development of practical English skills among Korean students in order to enable them to better communicate in global affairs. Only when the NEAT has been integrated into the Korean educa-

tional system and students begin learning balanced English skills will this operative articulation become a reality.

Conclusion

Introducing the NEAT is a monumental change that will have pronounced implications for English education in South Korea. It has the potential to completely change language policies, curricula, and the overall foci of English education for the better. Eliminating the ineffective CSAT and replacing it with the innovative NEAT, will produce positive washback effects that will drive the further enhancement of English abilities among South Korean learners. Most importantly, it will induce the much needed realisation of increasing the productive speaking and writing abilities of these students. As Serl (2012) explains, the NEAT is:

... an essential step in Korea's English education, away from the ghastly grammar test method forced upon the system by the CSAT and towards a test that will beneficially affect Korea's ability to communicate with the world in English. (page17)

The time has come for a change and the NEAT is the catalyst for this change leading towards Korea's ability to better compete in worldwide affairs.

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