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English Fever: Problematising language proficiency testing in South Korea

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1. Introduction

Educational testing is par for the course in almost every cycle of schooling in contemporary society, but particularly in the ‘testocracy’ of South Korea¹ (Song 2013). Here, test results – and especially English language proficiency scores – play a very important role in determining students’ future outcomes. These scores assume a gatekeeping function for educational progress, employment and even social success. The influence of English language testing permeates all aspects of English language education in South Korea. This paper seeks to explore English language testing in Korea from an applied linguistic perspective. The discipline of Applied Linguistics draws on the epistemology and methods of linguistic theories and applies these to understanding real-life situations. It is a ‘problem-driven’ discipline: Chapelle (2013, p.1) describes applied linguistic research as that which focuses on ‘language-related problems that arise in the real-world contexts where languages are learned and used’. An applied linguistic approach entails the theoretical and empirical investigation of issues such as learning languages, teaching and testing languages, creating and implementing language policies, and maintaining and revitalising languages. In the following discussion I argue that the conventional role of ‘English as a Foreign Language’ (EFL, learned for communicative interactions in the workplace or abroad) has been outstripped in Korea, and replaced by the local dispensations of English as a social signifier, an educational asset and a global commodity (Park, J.S.-Y. 2009). These roles mean that English achievement and proficiency tests have weak validity, and that the world of English language testing continues, in many ways, a long tradition of differentiation couched in meritocracy. This chapter will refer to the three principal international English language proficiency tests that have the largest market share of test-takers in Korea: the IELTS test (International English Language Testing System), the TOEIC test (Test of English for International Communication) and the TOEFL test (Test of English as a Foreign Language). I firstly discuss the importance of testing and the development of so-called ‘English fever’ (Park, J.-K. 2009; Kim 2002; Seth 2002) in Korea, followed by a review of the concerns expressed nationally regarding perceived lack of success in international English proficiency examinations. The second half of this chapter explores the influence of testing on the language classroom (‘washback’) and considers the wider impact of testing on South Korean society.

2. Testing in South Korea

Examinations have long played a gatekeeping role in human society, transforming some tests into high-stakes ventures for the candidates who knew that the only way to ensure a prosperous life for their family and future generations was to succeed. Much lore surrounds the lengths to which some scholars would go to ensure their

¹ A note on terminology: this chapter uses the terms South Korea and Korea interchangeably to refer to the Republic of Korea.

performance succeeded. For instance, in the very earliest Chinese imperial examinations which grilled candidates on the literary canon, taxation, military strategies, geography and law, Suen and Yu (2006, p.52) describe how candidates 'sought and purchased previously successful model essays, which they then memorised by rote'. 'Cheat sheets' were rolled within the seams of their clothing or concealed in their hats or shoes. With the arrival of printing presses during the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it became much easier to print and distribute model essays, which local teachers were then able to use as instructional materials. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), tiny sets of notes were reproduced on silk to be used as aide-mémoires, small enough to be easily smuggled into the examinations by candidates desperate to enter the Imperial Civil Service, a life that Crozier (2002) describes as 'aristocracy-by-examination'. In Korea, such testing was used to differentiate between potential government officials since the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1897), and all citizens except for serfs were able to take the *gwageo* examination (Choi 2008). It is noteworthy that the chief researcher of the Academy of Korean Studies recently published a comparison (Won 2014) of the dedication and sacrifice experienced by the *gwageo* candidates and their families and the contemporary experiences of struggling households who see their children's education as a foundation for future success:

'Today, both parents and children are growing weary from overheated competition for a better education. However, this fever of education has been a driving force in Korea, a small country with little natural resources. It is time to learn positive attitudes from the lives of our Korean ancestors who lived life to the fullest and progressively even under the pressure of the hell-like examination called *gwageo*.' (ibid.)

The educational ideology in Korea must be understood within a Confucian value system, where schooling is part of a self-development process which, if pursued properly, will lead to success in the work-life and social/personal life of each student. Confucianism tends towards a pragmatic approach to education, where the fruits of learning are more valued than the process of learning. David Carless, in a volume on educational assessment in Confucian-heritage settings, describes how learners in such contexts are more likely to see education as a means to an end, 'to gain credentials, obtain gainful employment and so contribute to the family or collective good' (2011, p.69). He stresses that in a credential society, the epithet used by Lee (1991, p.27, in Carless 2011, p.69) is apt: 'education is for earning, not learning'.

South Korea's investment in and dedication to education is renowned. Clark and Park (2013) cite for South Korea the highest gross university enrolment ratio² of any country in the world, an indicator that is representative of the value placed on

² Total enrolment in tertiary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total population of young adults within five years of high school graduation.

education in Korean society. According to their report, 65 per cent of Koreans aged between 25 and 34 years have attained a university education, and over 97 per cent of the same age group has finished, at least, upper secondary education. South Korea ranks second in the OECD's PISA³ survey (2012), a close second to Finland⁴, and the OECD reported that, in 2012, the South Korean government contributed 15.3 per cent of its total public expenditure on public education. The English language is a national obsession: school children spend every available hour studying in order to obtain high scores in English language proficiency tests, private English language education is booming, and there seems to be no logical limit to measures which promise the production of accurate, native-like utterances, especially with an American accent. For instance, according to its test organisers, South Korea has the highest number of TOEFL test takers in the world. J.K. Park (2009, p.55) describes the roots of this so-called 'education fever' as originating from the combination of the country's long tradition of Confucianism as well as new egalitarian ideas from the West after the collapse of the old class system. Since the 1990s, this 'education fever' has made English a most powerful vehicle to achieve success in South Korea.

Given the societal context, it is perhaps not surprising that the individual's mastery of English has become a national concern, where proficiency in English does not simply represent a skill which may open doors for some of the population but rather a greater good to help promote South Korea on an international stage. Lo and Chi Kim (2012, p.259) comment how 'South Koreans' supposedly poor skills at speaking English are constructed as a hindrance to national modernisation and development, and framed as responsible for the country's low global status'. The authors argue that '[n]ewspaper editorials, presidential speeches, and laments about 'Konglish' present portraits of the linguistic insufficiency of South Koreans in spoken English.' In this paradigm, the inability to interact with English speakers is perceived as a shame and burden.

The embodiment of these national concerns is found in (i) the gradual lowering of the age at which English language instruction is introduced in the national curriculum, (ii) the expansion of the curriculum to include speaking and listening components, and (iii) in family concerns to supplement this provision with a variety of private means. English language education in the public school system starts from the third grade onwards, a starting age that has been gradually lowered in recent years. The Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology requires 204 class hours⁵ of English in elementary school, 340 class hours in middle school, and 408 class hours in high school (Jeon 2010). Current policy efforts are now directed at improving the quality and outcomes of English language education, particularly through promoting exclusive use of the target language in class, despite teacher difficulties (ibid.), and at

³ Programme for International Student Assessment

⁴ Finland and Korea are the highest-performing OECD countries in education, with average PISA scores of 543 and 541 points respectively.

⁵ One class 'hour' equates to 40 minutes of class-time in elementary school, 45 minutes in middle school, and 50 minutes in high school (Jeon 2010).

ensuring that the productive language skills of speaking and writing are adequately taught and assessed. However, as Deng and Carless point out, ‘in those contexts where examination-oriented education dominates, test formats are likely to have a greater influence on pedagogy than the latest government exhortations’ (2010, p.286).

The public school curriculum represents only a portion of the time and money spent on English language learning; Korea’s ‘cram schools’ (학원 *hagweon*, ubiquitous for-profit institutes which provide after-school tuition), home tutoring, English language camps and study abroad periods are widely reported in the media and in educational research. It is estimated that eight out of ten South Korean high school students are enrolled in one of the forms of private tutoring available (Park, Byun and Kim 2011, p.5). The sums spent by Korean families on private education – that is, in addition to the state’s provision in the public school system, taking place during evenings and weekends – are mentioned at the start of this paper, and estimates range from USD\$14–\$18 billion per year. For the sake of comparison, this is the equivalent of Google’s first quarter revenue in 2013. Like elsewhere in East Asia, this ‘shadow education’ is seen as the only way to get ahead in a competitive education and employment market, where success in schooling is often also the only way to climb the social ladder. English language tutoring represents the lion’s share of the private education market. The extent to which families are prepared to go to obtain proficiency in English for their child may surprise international observers, but this is no surprise to Korean parents who are faced with a perceived Hobson’s choice in terms of their child’s future prospects, including the phenomenon of ‘wild goose’ mothers or ‘sojourner families’ (Kim and Yang 2012; Onishi 2008) who accompany young children to the USA, the UK and other English-speaking countries in order for them to enrol full-time in primary or secondary education. Although it is now illegal to send such children abroad without an accompanying family member, the author has met many teenage Koreans who have stayed with ‘host mothers’ abroad in order to complete their high school education, as well as two young Korean mothers who went so far as to travel when pregnant in order to give birth abroad and spend the first few years of the child’s life within an English-speaking environment. Many of these measures are based on (often misplaced) assumptions that very early exposure to an English-language environment will give the child an advantage in English phonology in later life, even though this exposure may be very short and incredibly isolating for the mother in question. Almost all Korean graduate employers seek English language proficiency scores from their prospective employees – not because they are likely to have to use English in the workplace, but because they are seen as an indicator of work ethic (Choi 2008). As a cursory study of Korean graduate-level job offers on a Korean employment website will illustrate, a score of 730 in the TOEIC test has become the benchmark score for entry into large companies, a score which is equivalent to the English language proficiency levels required for postgraduate study at an English-medium university, despite the fact that employees will never or only rarely speak English during their work with the Korean company. This is played out

in a comedic version in the 2009 film by Lee Hae-Joon, 김씨 표류기, *Castaway on the Moon*. The anti-hero, who has failed in his attempt to die by drowning, becomes a reluctant 'desert island' castaway on an uninhabited island on the Han river. He relives social pressures, his botched career and bankruptcy through flashbacks, including a job interview where he is asked by the interviewer, 'You only scored 700 for the TOEIC?' This flashback is interspersed with other shameful memories and disappointments, pointing towards social pressure and competition in South Korea.

3. Concerns about success in language proficiency scores

However, despite a record of investment and achievement in education in general, and emphasis on outcomes in particular, the English language competence of Korean speakers is perceived to lag behind in international rankings and is generally agreed to be an unsatisfactory state of affairs in Korean public and political opinion. Statistics such as the following are often cited. For instance, the average scores in the TOEIC English language proficiency test for South Korean examinees ranked 93rd out of 147 countries in 2004 and 2005 (Park, J.-K. 2009, p.51). In the internet-based TOEFL English language proficiency test ('iBT'), Koreans collectively ranked 136th out of 161 nations on the speaking test in 2008, with an average score of 18 points from a possible score of 30, lower than the world average of 19.3 points. Koreans' collective listening scores and writing scores in the iBT also ranked lower than the world averages, and the only above-average scores were in the reading section, where Koreans' collective scores were slightly above the world average, scoring 20 compared to the world average of 19.4 points (Kang 2009).

The South Korean media frequently feature berating articles which negatively compare Korean test scores with neighbouring countries. However, a closer look at test score data suggests that Korean candidates are not faring so badly in international assessment. For instance, in 2007, the English language version of the *Chosun Ilbo* reported:

'The performance of Koreans who take the IELTS English proficiency test to prepare for study abroad lags behind that of their counterparts in Japan and Nepal, to say nothing of candidates from Malaysia and Hong Kong. The average score of the 20 countries that took the IELTS last year was 6.06 out of 9, with Korea ranking a poor 14th with 5.77, according to the British Council, which jointly administered the test. The prize pupil was Germany with 7.23, followed by Malaysia (6.64) and the Philippines (6.54). Hong Kong (6.42), India (6.07), Nepal (5.99) and Japan (5.78) were all ahead of Korea, ranking at fifth, ninth, 10th and 12th respectively. Among East Asian countries, only China was behind Korea.'

Yet, the same article goes on to state that candidates from 120 countries took the IELTS English language proficiency test, not 20 countries, which suggests a

miscommunication of the rankings, which in fact refer to the average scores of the twenty countries with the most applicants (many of whom are repeat test-takers) – placing South Korea higher in the list of average national scores than the tenor of the article suggests. Moreover, given the Korean average attainment of 5.77 IELTS points (i.e. between a score of 5.5 and 6 in IELTS) and the typical university entrance requirements (for example, within band 6), the average IELTS performance cited here would mean that half of these students would be deemed as able to communicate independently in English in an academic setting. The IELTS test describes competence within Band 5 as having ‘partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes [...] [s]hould be able to handle basic communication in own field’ (IELTS 2012), a fairly satisfactory level of proficiency in English for many foreign language speakers. Competence within band 6, where at least half of the sample mentioned in the *Chosun Ilbo* article of 2007 can be located, is described by IELTS as ‘generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings [...] [c]an use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations’ (2012). This level of proficiency would allow speakers to operate successfully in most English-medium situations.

It appears that generalisations abound in the media on lack of communicative competence in English, but which demonstrate a lack of understanding of the proficiency levels represented by the various test scores. It is also worth scrutinising the international comparisons often used in such media analysis. For instance, the comparator countries mentioned in the *Chosun Ilbo* article of 2007 (an almost identical article appeared in 2008) list six Asian countries – Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, and Japan – four of which were formerly British or American colonies where English remains either an official language or widely used. Given the role of English in the media, public and educational spheres in countries where English has an official public role or is used extensively, and the subsequent exposure of citizens to English in some or all aspects of daily life, it is to be expected that the English language scores of test-takers from such countries would be higher than those of Korean students who are not exposed to English in similar spheres.

Moreover, the significance placed on comparing such rankings (average of all IELTS test-takers in South Korea, score 5.77; average of all IELTS test-takers in Japan, score of 5.78, *Chosun Ilbo* 2007) demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how IELTS proficiency scores are awarded and the significance of the differences in scores. The table below provides a breakdown of percentage scores by native (first) language background and IELTS band for 2012, and provides a more valid comparison of ultimate attainment. Neighbouring countries, along with Korea, appear in bold. The spread of these results, which centre around scores of 5.5 and 6 (the very scores targeted in the media as disappointing, but see above for descriptions of what candidates are able to achieve within these bands) follow similar patterns for

candidates with a first language background of Chinese (variety not specified), Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

	Percentage of scores by IELTS band											
First language background	<4	4	4.5	5	5.5	6	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5	9
Arabic	4%	9%	19%	24%	19%	11%	6%	4%	2%	1%	0%	0%
Bengali	1%	3%	8%	14%	20%	20%	15%	9%	6%	4%	1%	0%
Burmese	0%	2%	4%	10%	17%	18%	18%	17%	10%	3%	0%	0%
Chinese	1%	3%	8%	16%	23%	22%	14%	8%	3%	1%	0%	0%
Farsi	0%	1%	3%	10%	21%	26%	21%	10%	5%	2%	0%	0%
French	0%	1%	2%	5%	11%	17%	19%	19%	15%	8%	2%	0%
German	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	8%	15%	20%	24%	22%	7%	0%
Greek	0%	0%	1%	5%	11%	17%	20%	19%	16%	9%	2%	0%
Gujurati	1%	2%	7%	16%	25%	22%	13%	8%	4%	2%	0%	0%
Hindi	1%	2%	4%	10%	17%	18%	16%	14%	10%	5%	1%	0%
Indonesian	1%	1%	2%	7%	17%	25%	22%	14%	8%	3%	1%	0%
Italian	0%	1%	3%	6%	11%	18%	20%	18%	14%	7%	1%	0%
Japanese	1%	2%	7%	16%	24%	23%	15%	7%	3%	1%	0%	0%
Kazakh	3%	3%	6%	14%	23%	26%	15%	7%	3%	1%	0%	0%
Korean	0%	1%	5%	13%	23%	24%	17%	10%	4%	1%	0%	0%
Kurdish	2%	6%	16%	26%	25%	14%	6%	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Lithuanian	0%	0%	0%	2%	9%	22%	26%	22%	14%	4%	1%	0%
Malay	0%	0%	0%	3%	11%	20%	23%	20%	14%	7%	2%	0%
Nepali	0%	1%	3%	11%	24%	27%	18%	10%	5%	2%	0%	0%
Pashto	3%	7%	13%	19%	21%	16%	11%	6%	3%	1%	0%	0%
Portuguese	1%	1%	3%	5%	10%	17%	19%	19%	15%	8%	2%	0%
Punjabi	2%	4%	10%	21%	26%	19%	10%	5%	2%	1%	0%	0%
Romanian	0%	0%	1%	3%	7%	14%	18%	21%	20%	14%	3%	0%
Russian	1%	1%	2%	7%	14%	21%	20%	16%	11%	6%	1%	0%
Singhalese	0%	1%	2%	7%	13%	17%	19%	18%	13%	7%	2%	0%
Spanish	0%	0%	2%	5%	12%	21%	22%	18%	12%	6%	1%	0%
Tagalog	0%	0%	1%	2%	5%	14%	24%	27%	19%	7%	1%	0%
Tamil	1%	1%	3%	7%	13%	18%	19%	16%	12%	6%	2%	0%
Thai	1%	2%	6%	16%	26%	22%	14%	8%	4%	1%	0%	0%
Turkish	1%	2%	5%	14%	24%	25%	15%	8%	4%	2%	0%	0%
Ukrainian	0%	0%	1%	4%	13%	21%	23%	20%	11%	5%	1%	0%
Urdu	2%	5%	10%	16%	19%	17%	13%	9%	6%	3%	1%	0%
Uzbek	3%	5%	12%	23%	25%	16%	9%	4%	2%	1%	0%	0%
Vietnamese	1%	2%	5%	13%	22%	24%	16%	9%	5%	2%	0%	0%

Table 1: IELTS Academic English scores by first language background and band (IELTS 2012)

The 2008 article in the *Chosun Ilbo* on supposedly poor IELTS scores cites a British Council official, who states that, ‘The fact that Koreans showed low scores in the IELTS, which includes one-on-one interview tests to measure actual ability in communicating in English, means that Koreans have a poor command of English’. Note that despite this ‘poor command of English’, only one in five of the IELTS test results in the Korean scores in the table above (18 per cent) would generally exclude students from accessing a place in higher education, where a score of 5.5 within the 5 band (‘modest user’) is regarded as a threshold for academic study. One in three

would be eligible to access postgraduate study in an English-medium university (with a score of 6.5 and above). In 2012, the mean band score for a Korean IELTS test-taker was 5.9, compared with 5.8 in Japan, 5.6 in China and 5.9 in Vietnam (IELTS 2012). In other words, Korean test-takers are performing largely in line with their neighbours in mean band scores. Note that all IELTS scores are rounded up or down to the whole band or half-band score (5.5, 6, 6.5 and so on).

	Listening	Writing	Reading	Speaking	Overall
South Korea	6.1	6.1	5.4	5.7	5.9
Japan	5.9	6.0	5.3	5.6	5.8
China	5.7	5.9	5.3	5.4	5.6
Vietnam	5.9	6.1	5.6	5.7	5.9

Table 2: IELTS Academic English test scores by testing rubric (IELTS 2012)

Turning to the mean scores across the four activity areas of listening, writing, reading and speaking in 2012, Korean test-takers marginally outperformed their neighbours, as the table above indicates. It is worth mentioning that Korean test-takers scored higher on the speaking task than on the reading task – counter to some media reports that Korean students are particularly weak in spoken production. In other words, media concerns regarding IELTS scores seem to be scaremongering, as the taglines of the *Chosun Ilbo*'s articles (2008; 2007) suggest: 'Korea Trails in English Proficiency' and 'Korea ranks near bottom in English exam'.

4. Impact of current approach to English language testing in South Korea and washback

The section above has demonstrated how language testing can be misrepresented in various ways. For the researcher and test designer, language testing has the aim of providing reliable and valid measures of specific language constructs such as speaking, writing and so forth, and those involved in test design have a dual concern – defining the construct to be measured, and deciding upon the best way of defining or delineating that particular construct. However, this concern is not typically shared by test-takers or those who administer a gatekeeping function based on test results: these end-users generally take scores for granted, and mostly place trust in the validity and reliability of the testing exercise. This is particularly the case for large-scale language proficiency tests which tend to be deployed across the globe for a variety of purposes.

However, the life of the test does not begin and end in these scores, but instead it ripples back to language classrooms, where much time is spent in test preparation, and forward to the school, university or workplace, where decisions are based around often arbitrary test scores often without discussion or understanding of what can be extrapolated from the results, as the newspaper articles cited above help illustrate. Test designers are aware of such effects, and much research has been conducted on

the (i) washback and (ii) impact of language tests (Wall 2005; Spolsky 1997; Alderson and Wall 1993).

Washback can be defined as how a test influences the activities which go on in a language classroom before testing, or what Alderson and Wall describe as something that ‘compels teachers and learners to do things *they would not necessarily otherwise do* because of the test’ (Alderson and Wall 1993, p.115, their emphasis). Washback can be positive and negative in terms of the types of changes in a curriculum that a test can induce. For example, incorporating spoken interaction into a test is likely to lead to washback in the classroom, and encourage teachers and learners to place more emphasis on the skills involved in dialogue, listening comprehension and creating appropriate spontaneous utterances. But washback can also be detrimental to learners’ competences, by focussing for example on inauthentic aspects of a test or indeed on how to pass the test itself. In a wide-ranging review of the empirical investigation of the washback of standardised EFL tests on EFL education in Korea, Choi shares survey data on the washback in elementary, secondary and university language classrooms. For instance, one specific aspect of the negative test washback in classrooms of standardised EFL tests includes dedicating extensive periods of time in class to test preparation strategies such as how to prepare for multiple choice examinations, so depriving students “of crucial opportunities to learn to acquire productive language skills” (2008, p.58).

As well as the concept of washback, the term ‘impact’ is helpful in understanding how tests can cast their influence on society at large, not just the language classroom. Diane Wall describes a test’s impact as ‘any of the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies or practices within the classroom, the school, the educational system and society as a whole’ (1997, p.291). In her meta-survey, Choi (2008, p.58) describes the impact on young learners in Korea who are forced to take EFL tests despite their young age, resulting in a ‘narrowly instrumental motivation in their language learning’, rather than focussing on enjoyable and age-appropriate communicative activities. In a sample of 100 5th grade elementary school children, the pupils were familiar with nine discrete English language proficiency tests; 89 children had taken a standardised EFL test, with 84 per cent of this group citing encouragement from a private institute instructor (45.9 per cent) or parent (37.7 per cent) as the reason for taking the test. Choi notes that twelve of the children had even taken the TOEFL, far beyond their language proficiency and cognitive abilities: ‘This mismatch between the difficulty of the test input and the ability level of young test-takers will lead to invalid consequences, let alone unreliable statistical results [...] This finding raises ethical issues regarding children’s right to learn in an appropriate manner’ (2008, p.53).

The efforts of Korean students and their parents, within the national curriculum as well as within the private education sector, are all initially targeted at succeeding in the Korean version of the Scholastic Aptitude Test/College Scholastic Ability Test

(KSAT or CSAT), which determines entrance to South Korea's universities, and, in turn, students' employability, future salary level, social status and even marriage prospects. For outsiders, these stakes seem extraordinarily high: Choi (2008, p.55) describes the KSAT as 'the most important high-stakes test in Korean education'. The English language component is mandatory, along with Korean and mathematics. Beyond the KSAT, Korean students are faced with the prospect of an inevitable series of English language proficiency tests. Whilst this experience is shared with students in other countries in the region and indeed further afield, as described above South Korean companies require graduate applicants to submit their language test scores, and view such scores as an 'essential prerequisite for employment' (Choi 2008, p.41). Choi (2008, p.40) describes how 'almost all Korean citizens are aware of the overwhelming washback effects of EFL tests in Korea', and asserts that 'under such an enormous impact, there is no denying that virtually all EFL instructors teach to these tests'. This consistent and widespread 'teaching to the test', or in other words, washback, means that the tests themselves rather than communicative language needs define the English language curriculum and shape its delivery.

Some specific aspects of washback and impact in the English learning context in Korea are visible in the phenomenon of repeat language testing, the attitude to and use of textbooks and the perceived role of the teacher in test preparation. Repeat language testing has become a norm in South Korea, to the extent that Korean students are the most frequent repeat international test-takers in some tests. The financial commitments involved in repeat testing are considerable, and visitors to any bookstore in Korea will see a large section on English language teaching and testing, with a multitude of choices particularly in workbooks specifically geared to the various English language proficiency tests mentioned in this chapter as well as to the KSAT and other standardised tests. The creators of the TOEIC test, the Educational Testing Service (ETS 2014), share statistics regarding students who have previously taken the Listening and Reading Test. In 2013, the majority of TOEIC test-takers had already taken the test at least once (77 per cent), and half have taken it three times or more previously (49.5 per cent). Korean students top the international list of multiple TOEIC tests at 85 per cent, compared with 79 per cent in Japan. Just 9 per cent of TOEIC test-takers had repeated the test in Chile and Egypt.

Whilst some communicative language teaching approaches have been integrated into classroom practice in Korea, the textbook occupies a primary role in terms of specifying the start and end point of a curriculum, its learning outcomes, activities and materials. If textbooks are supplemented, it is generally through use of another textbook rather than, say, through authentic materials. The centrality of the textbook may be understood within a Confucian-influenced educational system: the textbook is selected by the teacher and trusted as a key means of succeeding in the examination. The teacher's role in Korean society, within the concept of the 'Confucian trinity' of king, teacher and father (君師父一體 *gunsabu-ilche*), means that they are respected

individuals who should decant knowledge to their students as well as act as moral role-models in a transmission model of education. The role of the foreign teacher in this regard can be rather suspect; parents worry for instance that teachers from overseas may not fully grasp the importance of test performance. Jeon (2010) describes how students did not consider the English class taught by a native-speaker as a 'real class', as what she taught was not on the test (i.e. speaking), unlike Korean English teachers who are responsible for grammar and translation teaching. The pressure on teachers to maintain a high student success rate in examinations is considerable. Online training with tips and guidance for passing the tests is a growing market. The online *hagwon* (as described earlier, a type of private language tutoring service, sometimes described as a 'cram school') Megastudy is listed on the Korean Stock Exchange (Ripley 2013). The internet teaching 'phenomenon' (ibid.) Kim Ki-hoon earns USD \$4 million per year teaching English online, with lectures sold at \$4 per hour. Such 'educational sideshows' are becoming a thorn in the side of the public education system, which cannot afford to keep up with developments in private language academies (ibid.) or meet the expectations of parents and students.

5. *Discussion and conclusion*

The points outlined in this chapter with regard to the language learning and testing journeys of Korean learners of English reveal several important tensions: between the public provision of English language teaching, versus the perceived need of families to complement this provision with private measures; the role of English within a high-stakes national standardised test and its washback, versus the government's drive to avoid negative washback and ensure that speaking and writing receive adequate attention in the language classroom; projected lack of success, versus actual success in internationally benchmarked tests.

Explanatory theories abound regarding the role of English language testing in Korea; for instance, as mentioned earlier, that the predilection for selective testing is simply the ancient and time-honoured Korean way of allowing citizens to become members of the social elite. International language proficiency tests in Japanese and Chinese also have high uptakes, not just English language tests. Choi (2008, p.41), in an analysis of the impact of tests on Korean English language learning, describes how, 'Given that it has been the test that provides equal opportunities for the entire population to climb up the ladder of social status, Koreans in general have tended to have an implicit faith in the potential usefulness of testing.'

However, testing by definition means winners and losers. There is intense competition for a limited number of places in Korea's top universities, and the winners also gain the concomitant advantages of access to alumni networks, career opportunities and social status for a small group. A critical perspective on the role of English in this testing context is brought forward by Song (2011, p.36), who argues that English language learning in Korea should be recognised as a 'mechanism of elimination'. In

this argument, the impetus for attainment is, in the guise of a meritocracy, a means of conserving 'the established social order in South Korea'. Song suggests therefore that the English language has been recruited, in the name of globalisation, to reproduce and rationalise a hierarchical power structure. Whilst controversial, this is arguably a useful paradigm within which we could better understand the intersecting roles, washback and impact of English language learning and testing in Korean society, which impact so heavily on individual lives and pockets.

Just as the use of the English language (and other European languages) projects an image of prestige, so aspirational desires for cosmopolitanism, affluence, education and success are encapsulated in and expressed through 'English fever' in Korea. Efforts at English language learning are directed towards the aim of attaining a place in a top university, a job in a good company, access to the right networks, and so forth. In Elana Shohamy's critical approach to understanding assessment, language tests have become powerful social agents (2001) in their own right, used to select or reject candidates aspiring to education, employment or citizenship. In contemporary Korea, the pressure on certification of English language proficiency has taken on such weight and impetus that it is now understood by school pupils and university students alike as an essential hurdle to be cleared in their journey to future success. The problem is that English in fact plays a central role in reproducing social inequalities rather than engendering a meritocracy: the playing field is simply not level. Public education is supplemented by private tutoring and cram schools; private education is supplemented by summer camps or study abroad programmes; these programmes are trumped by students who have taken their entire undergraduate degree abroad, in turn trumped by students who have spent their formative years in an English-language environment and have acquired a fully authentic North American variety of English. A game of educational one-upmanship in which many families cannot afford to compete.

This chapter has examined some of the contemporary functions of and parts played by the English language in Korea from an applied linguistic perspective. As described at the start of this chapter, the discipline of Applied Linguistics sets out to tackle language 'problems' in the research sense, especially within language learning and teaching, issues that we do not (yet) fully understand. The consequential validity of English language testing in Korea, which can be understood as the effect that tests have on the teaching and learning environment, has taken on a life of its own, to the extent that test preparation is an industry and test scores are a rite of passage for young Koreans (Park, J. S.-Y. 2009). In many ways, this is seen as a necessary evil, or what Choi (2008, p.59) describes as a 'double-edged sword' in 'a fiercely competitive world':

'This is very true for the Korean society, which has to capitalize on only human resources, who need to be cultivated, screened, and selected on a national level to survive global economic competition (ibid.).'

The current situation regarding the impact and washback of standardised English language testing in Korea represents as a very specific set of conditions and consequences that merit further study in the field of applied linguistics and language testing, especially given the stakes involved for individual language learners and language instructors. It is hoped this examination of English language learning and testing in Korea has helped illuminate some aspects of the Korean context of English language learning and testing.

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