

The Current Situation and Issues of the Teaching of English in Korea

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1. Introduction

This presentation will discuss the past and current situation of English education in Korea and identify problems and emerging issues in Korea's English education, and discuss the challenges and missions for the ELT professionals in Korea. The presentation has five parts: (1) Introduction, (2) Progress and Current Status, (3) Persistent Problems, (4) Social Changes and Emerging Issues, (5) The Government's New Drive, and (6) Conclusion, Challenges and Missions.

2. Progress and Current Status

We will move on to progress and current status. We will start with the examination of the progress.

2.1 The Progress Made in Korea

How much progress has Korea's English education made? We can say that there has been a steady growth of English education. Official English education started with the establishment of a governmental English school Dongmunhak (同文学) in 1883. During the Japanese colonial period, it experienced ups and downs, depending on the Japanese educational policies. At that time, in Japan, there was a movement to abolish their English education, which also affected English education in Korea. Later, when Japan got involved in World War II, English education was very much discouraged in schools. After liberation, English has become one of the three major school subjects: Korean, English and Math. Among them, English has been the focus of the entire nation and people.

The growth of English education can be seen in terms of quantitative and qualitative expansion of English education. English began to be taught as an optional subject in elementary school from 1982, as part of extra-curricular activities. As of 1995, there were 9,461 elementary school teachers teaching English. As of 1996, English was being taught in 5,370 elementary schools (95%) throughout the nation.

Then it became a required subject in 1997. The number of students studying it almost doubled. The focus was shifted from written language to spoken language. Teacher-training and in-service training institutes changed their programs to deal with the change. Elementary school teachers

were urged to learn English and English teaching methodology because English education in elementary schools was taught basically by the homeroom teachers, not by English teachers. But later, there were more and more teachers teaching only English in elementary schools. English education became the focus of attention of the entire nation, as parents took their children to private institutes for tutoring. The introduction of English into elementary schools also boosted research in elementary school English. A great amount of research has been conducted in the area of English education in elementary schools.

2.2 Improvement of Students' English Proficiency

Now, here is the improvement of the student's English proficiency. In 2006, my colleagues and I (Kwon et al., 2006) conducted a comprehensive study on the effects of ten years of elementary school English education. In the study, we surveyed secondary school teachers asking, "Are current secondary school students better than past students in their English abilities?" The teachers' responses showed that the current students were generally much better than past students, especially in listening, reading, vocabulary, expressing feeling, pronunciation, and communication. They were not better than past students in writing or grammar. This is natural, since elementary school English emphasizes spoken English and communication.

Here is another investigation in the same 2006 study. We conducted a comparative study with students from the same five high schools in Korea over a three-year period, 2003 and 2006. The 2003 group had not learned English in elementary school. The 2006 group had learned English in elementary school. We gave the same GTEC for STUDENTS test twice, the identical test, without changing any words. The results show that the 10th and 11th graders in the 2006 group scored 40 points higher than the 2003 group (See Fig. 1).

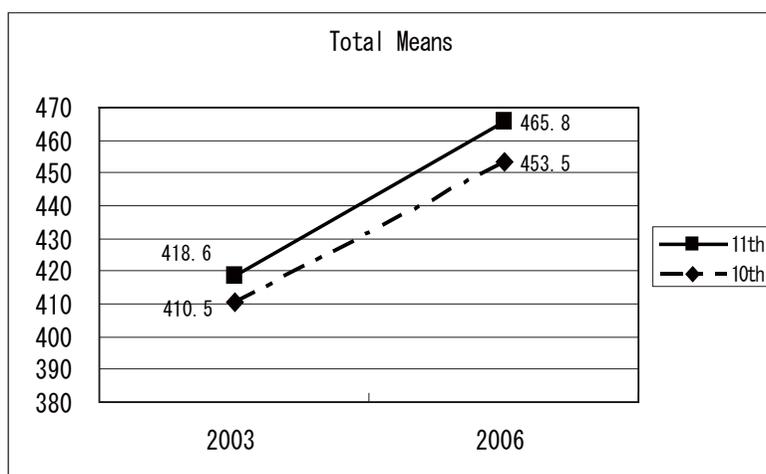


FIGURE 1
GTEC FOR STUDENTS Test Scores of Five High School Students in 2003 and 2006
 (Kwon et al., 2006)

As shown in the figure, the 10th graders in 2006 scored higher than the 11th graders in 2003. Even though the 11th graders in 2003 learned English for one more year in high school, they did not do better than the 10th graders in 2003. This is a very impressive improvement.

Here is another study, which was done in 2003 and published in 2004. It was a three-country comparison of high school students in Japan, Korea, and China. The test used for the comparison was GTEC for STUDENTS, developed by the Benesse Corporation of Japan. Chinese students performed better than Korean and Japanese students, but in reading and listening Koreans performed better than Chinese and Japanese. The problem for Korean students was their very low score in writing. Because of the very poor score in writing, the total score of Korean students was lower than the Chinese score.

TABLE 1
The GTEC for STUDENTS Scores of Japanese, Korean and Chinese High School Students
(Kwon et al. 2004)

Tests	Country	n	Mean	SD
Reading	Japan	4233	166.4	44.5
	Korea	4351	189.5	49.8
	China	4207	185.9	30.2
Listening	Japan	4234	156.8	38.5
	Korea	4335	169.4	45.4
	China	4205	162.6	35.9
Writing	Japan	4232	84.8	22.2
	Korea	4358	53.0	38.3
	China	4208	84.4	30.2
Total	Japan	4230	407.9	88.7
	Korea	4333	412.4	119.3
	China	4205	433.0	76.8

2.3 Improvement of the Teachers' English Proficiency.

In the past, English teachers' spoken abilities were very limited. Now, a young generation of English teachers is selected through screening tests that require a good command of English. The prospective teachers now go through three stages of tests. First, they take a paper and pencil test in Education, English, English education, literature and linguistics. Second, they have an oral interview. Third, they actually do demonstration teaching for about 10 minutes. And the competition is tough because of the popularity of the teaching profession. English teachers who are employed in schools now are generally better than those of the past. Their pronunciation and their command of English are excellent. The percentage of teachers who responded that they are able to teach English in English is as follows: elementary school, 39%; middle school, 55%; and high school: 50% (EBS, 2007).

2.4 Changes in the 1990s

The 1990s were marked with innovations and renovations in Korea's English education (Kwon, 2000). First, the 6th National Curriculum was introduced in 1992, which adopted a communicative syllabus. Second, the College Scholastic Ability Test (大学修学能力試験) was introduced in 1993 for the school year of 1994. The test was drastically different from the previous college entrance examinations in that the new test introduced a listening test and emphasized communicative competence. Third, in 1996, the EPIK (English Program in Korea) program, which is like the JET program in Japan, brought many native-speaking English teachers into classrooms. Fourth, as has already been mentioned, mandatory English teaching was introduced in elementary schools in 1997. Fifth, the 7th National Curriculum in 1997 introduced level-sensitive English instruction. Sixth, college English teaching also changed its direction in the 1990s, from the old traditional reading-focused English instruction to the new, communication-oriented practical English instruction. Up until the 1980s English instruction at the college level had been almost exclusively focusing on reading difficult literary works. However, from the 1990s universities began to emphasize speaking and writing, reflecting the general trend of English education and the increasing demand from the students. For this purpose, universities began to employ many native speaker teachers. Finally, pre-service and in-service education also changed their foci of attention. Before the 1990s, they focused on theories, literature and linguistics, but in the 1990s they began to focus more on developing the communicative skills of the teachers and their teaching methodology.

2.5 Foci of Attention Since 2000

In the new millennium, English education in Korea continued to improve its practice, by emphasizing communicative language teaching, communicative language testing, performance assessment as a part of the communicative language testing, level-adaptive education, and teaching English in English.

3. Persistent Problems

"There is nothing new under the sun," says the Bible (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun, especially in the area of education. There are many persistent problems with English education of Korea. We can observe these problems in several areas.

3.1 Incompetent Teachers

In 1926, an American missionary observed the problem of incompetent English teachers in Seoul as follows:

Under this sort of plan, it is not surprising that 'the best teacher of English Grammar in the city of Seoul' should be an individual who cannot speak English intelligently but who has

thoroughly mastered the puzzles and trick questions of the examinations for the advanced school in this subject. (Underwood, 1926. *Modern Education in Korea*)

This was during the Japanese colonial period, so you Japanese may be responsible for this. Now 80 years later, in 2006, a local vernacular newspaper observed:

"There is a great scarcity of competent English teachers in school classrooms who can teach English properly. There are also many teachers who are having difficulty in catching up with advanced students. This is why school English education is still stuck to 'reading-and grammar-centered English', not moving to 'communicative English.'" (*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, April 13, 2006. The translation is mine.)

Here is another sad result: The average score of a speaking test by 50 English teachers in the City of Daegu, who had received a four-month in-service training (in 2006) was 576.7 out of 1,000. It was about 10 points lower than the national average of middle school students who had taken the same test (Daeheui Kwon, *No Cut News*, March 21, 2007). That is a deplorable result.

3.2 Students Losing Interest and Confidence

In 1929, a professor of English in Korea wrote about the students' sentiment regarding their English abilities as follows:

"The source of this problem lies in the fact that the outcome of studying English is minimal and has not cultivated a true competence, and such a criticism may be valid depending on the viewpoints. In Korea, English knowledge has been provided to the students by schools or publishers for several decades. However, as to the question whether the entire society or individuals have gained anticipated effects, except those very few who have experienced the mastering of the language in special living environments, most people have a feeling that, though they have a memory of learning English, it all has become useless." (*Inseop Jeong, Chosun Ilbo*, June 1, 1929. The translation is mine.)

That, too, was during the Japanese colonial period, so the Japanese seem to be responsible for such a state. However, after about 80 years, the situation does not seem to have improved much. A recent study by Kwon et al. (2006) shows the students' interest level in English has continued to deteriorate over the years. Their confidence is at its highest in the elementary school year, then it gradually dwindles down until the second year of high school. The reason why their interest in English improves slightly in the third year of high school may indicate that their interest is rekindled in the practical need to study English more seriously for the college entrance examination (See Table 2).

TABLE 2
Students' Responses to the Question "I am interested in English" on the 5-point Likert Scale

School Grade	Likert Mean	(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
ES	3.22	20.66	38.68	40.67
MS 1 st	3.04	34.03	28.05	37.92
MS 2 nd	2.89	36.32	33.79	29.90
MS 3 rd	2.95	34.51	31.78	33.71
HS 1 st	2.82	38.62	32.60	28.78
HS 2 nd	2.78	37.62	36.44	25.94
HS 3 rd	2.87	36.61	31.43	31.96

The students' confidence in English also decreases over the years as their school grade goes up. The students' confidence level is the highest in the first year of middle school, and gradually decreases until the second year of high school, to remain at the same level in the third year of high school. (See Table 3)

TABLE 3
Students' Responses to the Question "I have confidence in English" on the 5-point Likert Scale

School Grade	Likert Mean	(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
ES	2.80	37.7	35.92	26.38
MS 1 st	3.31	21.25	31.87	46.89
MS 2 nd	3.13	26.29	33.01	40.70
MS 3 rd	3.09	27.47	34.51	38.03
HS 1 st	2.68	44.26	33.09	22.64
HS 2 nd	2.64	46.43	31.99	21.58
HS 3 rd	2.64	45.18	32.50	22.32

3.3 Students' Low English Abilities

In 1886, students at Yukyeong Gongwon (育英公院), which was the first official modern school in Korea, learned 3,000 words in 10 months. After 120 years, in 2006, students are learning 3,000 words in 10 years (from the 3rd grade to the 12th grade). Although vocabulary is not the only indicator of English competence, the size of the vocabulary that the students are expected to master does show that English education has not progressed much over the past century.

3.4 Initiation of Policy Making by Outsiders

English education policies have been made mostly by non-English-educators. It was Emperor Gojong who ordered the establishment of Dongmunhak (同文学) in 1883, which was the first official English language school in Korea. All subsequent English education policies were made either by government officials or statesmen. In more recent years, there have been many instances of English education policy changes initiated by outsiders. The following are some of the major

changes initiated by the government or other education “outsiders”.

- 1) Introduction of optional English into elementary school in 1982: President Chun Doo-hwan
- 2) Introduction of mandatory English education into elementary school in 1997: President Kim Young-sam
- 3) Teaching English in English in 2000: Minister of Education Moon Yong-Lin
- 4) Gyeonggi English Village in 2004: Governor Sohn Hak-gyu
- 5) Legislations about English education: National Assembly men (e.g., Lee Juho)
- 6) English Town in Jeju (2007): Korean government and Jeju
- 7) Songdo International City, Incheon: Korean government and Incheon City
- 8) English as the official language in some major business sectors

3.5 Myths About English and English Learning Held by People

Many Koreans believe in some myths about English and English learning, which are often exploited by commercially minded people. The following are some such myths.

- 1) Pronunciation is the most important.
- 2) The best English teacher is a native-speaker teacher.
- 3) The best way to learn is to go to an English-speaking country.
- 4) English should be learned through rote memorization.
- 5) School textbook English is different from the college entrance exam English.
- 6) English can be mastered by memorizing a given number (e.g., 100) of sentences.
- 7) English can be mastered within a given number (e.g., 3) of months.

There may be some English language teachers who believe in some of these myths, but no reasonable ELT professional would endorse these myths. Take, for example, the myth about the importance of pronunciation. There are many variations of English throughout the world, often referred to as World Englishes. English pronunciation, seen from the perspective of World Englishes, varies greatly. Actually, native speakers appear to comprehend most of the non-native speaker’s error-laden sentences (Kwon, 1986).

4. Social Changes and Emerging Issues

Recently, especially in the past ten years or so, Korea underwent drastic social changes that presented quite a different context for English language education. The number of students going abroad has increased yearly. Native-speaker teachers now outnumber Korean English teachers. English language teaching and testing businesses flourished, threatening school education. And people now have more knowledge and higher expectations about English language education. Each

of these issues will be briefly discussed below.

4.1 Increasing Number of Students Going Abroad

Since the year of 1997, when the economy collapsed, the number of students going abroad to study English or for general education has steadily increased. Table 4 shows that the students going abroad increased yearly. The sharp increase of young students is especially noticeable (In 2005, the number was 20,400). As the number of returnee students increases, English teachers are pressured to cope with these good speakers of English in the classroom. Accordingly, a higher level of English proficiency is expected from school teachers.

TABLE 4
The Yearly Numbers of Students Going Abroad. (Hongwon Kim, 2005)

Years	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Students going abroad	-	10,738	11,237	20,145	26,676	28,126	28,346	32,965
Young students going abroad	3,274	1,562	1,839	4,397	7,944	10,132	10,498	16,446
% increase from last year	-	-52.3%	17.7%	139.1%	80.7%	27.5%	3.6%	56.7%
Solely for schooling	0.04%	0.02%	0.02%	0.06%	0.10%	0.13%	0.13%	0.21%
Students per 10,000 people	3.9	1.9	2.3	5.5	10.1	13.0	13.5	21.0

4.2 Native-Speaker Teachers Outnumbering Korean Teachers of English

As Table 5 shows, the total number of legal and illegal native-speaker English teachers in Korea is greater than the regular Korean school English teachers. Considering the fact that illegal teachers are mostly in private institutes teaching primary and secondary school students, primary and secondary school English education does seem to be influenced by native-speaker teachers as much as, if not more than, by Korean teachers of English.

TABLE 5
Numbers of Korean and Native-Speaker Teachers of English (Korean Immigration Office, 2007)

Korean School Teachers of English		Native-Speaker Teachers of English	
Elementary school*	5,896	Legal E2 visa holders** USA (5,860), Canada (4,680) UK (1,510), New Zealand (750) Australia (700), S. Africa (650) Illegal Teachers** (Estimated, 2006)	14,159 (July, 2007)
Middle school	11,411		
High school	14,379		30,000
Total	31,686	Total	44,150

4.3 English Teaching and Testing Businesses Overwhelming School Education

The business of English teaching is one of the fastest growing and the most profitable businesses in Korea. The estimated size of the English education market in Korea is 10-15 trillion won (7 – 12 billion US dollars). In 2004, 7.38 trillion won (6.5 billion dollars) was spent on study abroad and English language training abroad (Bank of Korea, 2005). The market for early English education in Korea is 2 trillion won (1.5 billion dollars). The projected annual growth rate of the English education market is 30%.

The business of English language testing is also very prosperous. The market size of English language testing for all levels is approximately 2 trillion won (1.5 billion dollars). In the year of 2005 alone, 1,850,000 Koreans took TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), while 1,580,000 Japanese took it in the same year. Considering the fact that the Japanese population is almost three times larger than the Korean population, this unusually large number of test takers in Korea reflects the Korean fever over English language learning. A very unique and unusual phenomenon found only in Korea is that a great number of elementary and secondary school students take the TOEIC. Why are they taking the TOEIC? To get a job in business? There used to be a very strange policy of so-called “special-purpose high schools”; they required a TOEFL, TOEIC, or TEPS (Test of English Proficiency Developed by Seoul National University) score from the prospective students. This requirement made middle school students take the tests in order to check their readiness for such high schools. Besides, some universities are also giving extra points to those submitting high test scores when they apply for admission to such universities. Very recently, the government prohibited the special-purpose high schools from using such test scores for screening purposes.

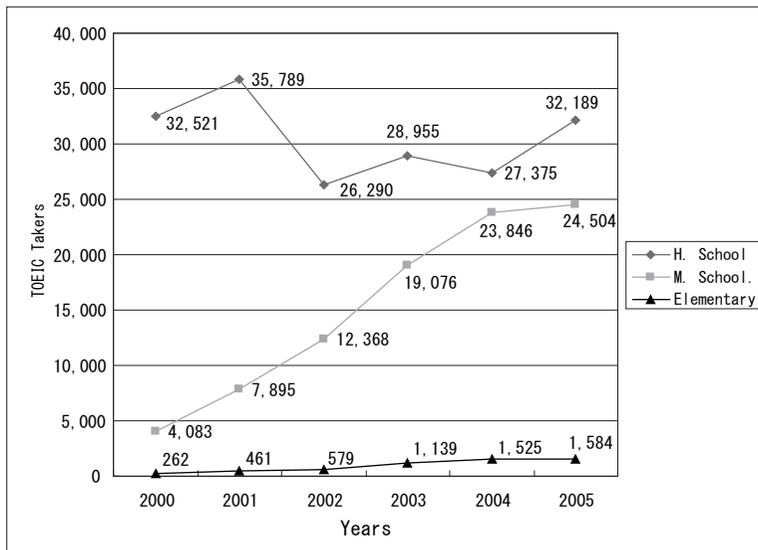


FIGURE 2.
Numbers of Korean Primary and Secondary School Students Taking TOEIC

4.4 Higher Expectations of the People and Society

As the education level of parents and the society has been raised, the general level of people's English abilities also has been raised. Naturally, a higher level of English proficiency is expected of the students and the teachers. Such high expectations put pressure on the teachers and English language teaching professionals.

5. THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW DRIVE

Recently the Korean Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) announced three initiatives to improve and enhance English education. They are (1) developing the National English Competence Assessment Test, (2) increasing the class hours of English in elementary schools, and (3) hiring English conversation instructors (MEST, December 19, 2008).

5.1 Developing the National English Competence Assessment Test (國家英語能力評價試驗)

The MEST is going to start developing an officially accredited national test called the National English Competence Assessment Test (國家英語能力評價試驗) in 2009, with a plan to use it in 2010. The test will assess all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Actually the test will have three levels, in order to satisfy different purposes. The three levels are as follows:

Level 1: the level of college sophomores or juniors. For college graduation, job application, and/or study abroad (to replace TOEIC/TOEFL)

Level 2: the level required in college departments that use much English

Level 3: the level required in general college education

The test will be internet-based, and whether or not it will replace the existing College Scholastic Ability Test (大学修學能力試驗) will be decided in 2012.

5.2 Increasing the Class Hours in Elementary Schools

In an effort to improve the elementary school students' English abilities, the class hours of English will increase by one additional class hour per week. Thus, from 2010, 3rd and 4th graders will learn English 2 hours per week, and from 2011, 5th and 6th graders will have 3 hours of English per week. Although a simple increase of class hours does not necessarily guarantee the improvement of English abilities, it will contribute to improvement to some degree.

5.3 Hiring English Conversation Instructors (英語會話專門講師)

In addition to regular school teachers, English conversation instructors will be introduced into schools. The time-line is as follows: by summer 2009, necessary preparations will be made for

employment. Recruiting and orientation/training will be completed by the end of 2009. Then these instructors will start teaching from March of 2009, when the new school year starts.

As for the instructors' status and payment, the MEST announced that they will be called "instructors" (講師), and they will be employed on a one-year contract basis, which is renewable up to four years. Their payment will be equivalent to that of the first-year regular school teachers, but will be adjusted based on the work load and their past experience. The qualification for the job application requires a teacher-certificate and competence in English conversation. However, an exception can be made if the municipal / provincial commissioners of education deem it necessary.

Actually, this exception may cause some problems for the teacher certificate holders. Because of this exception, some provincial commissioners may want to hire those who are not certified teachers but who have spent some time in English speaking countries and whose English speaking skills might be good, superficially, at least. Their pronunciation or English might be good but they are not fully qualified to teach because they did not have professional training as the certificate holders did. We cannot guarantee the quality of their teaching.

6. Conclusion: Challenges and Missions

Korean ELT (English language teaching) has made important progresses, yet there are still many challenges facing the Korean ELT professionals. What CAN and SHOULD the ELT professionals do to solve the societal problems related to English teaching and testing in Korea? What are the theories of English teaching and learning that Korean scholars have built that are particularly relevant to the Korean situation? If Korean ELT professionals are to accomplish their mission to renovate English education in Korea, they should respond to the above challenges. Educational innovations and renovations need orchestrated efforts by the government, the ELT professionals, the society, the parents, and the students. More than ever before, the Korean ELT professionals are challenged with the mission to initiate and coordinate their efforts to improve English education.

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The Question-Answer Session:

Coordinator : Thank you very much, Kwon sensei. I'd like to invite questions and comments from the floor. If you wish to speak in Japanese, Nozawa sensei will help you.

Questioner 1 : OK. Thank you very much for your informative lecture. My name is Jin Liu. I'm from Shanghai, China. Before I came to Japan, I had been an English teacher at a university for six years. I've been here in Japan for 15 years, and I'm also an English teacher at a university. You referred to your comparison between China, Korea and Japan, and as a matter of fact I'm also doing research about college English between Japan and China. I'd like to ask you a question. As you said, in Korea your English teachers' quality now is increasing very much. Most of the teachers are conducting the English class in English. I just wonder... Is it required that all English teachers conduct the English class in English, no matter whether it is in elementary, junior high school, senior high school or at a college? Thank you.

KWON Oryang : Thank you very much. A good question. It is not required but encouraged. The teachers are strongly advised to do so. But there are always teachers who don't comply. Well, actually I don't personally believe that English education only in English is possible or necessary. But the government advised and encouraged to use English in teaching English. A very strong drive. One positive outcome is that, since the drive, the actual amount of English spoken by English teachers has increased. Yet it's not 100% in English.

Questioner 2 : Thank you very much for your information and a good suggestion. My name is Hirofumi Wakita, from Ryukoku University. I'm very interested in Korean English education. I'm now conducting a research project about teacher certification, teacher training or things like that. So my question is about developing the National English Competence Assessment Test. I knew why you had different kinds of standardized tests, of course TOEIC, TOEFL, and TEPS. You told Seoul National University developed TEPS and this is also one of the standardized tests in Korea, conducted in Korea, I think. So I'm not sure, you know, how powerful the TEPS is, you know, compared with TOEFL/TOEIC. So what is the relationship between the new assessment test and the TEPS. Will the TEPS disappear?

KWON Oryang : A good question. The TEPS is a test developed by Seoul National University. "TEP" means the "Test of English Proficiency", and "S" means "Seoul National University." It is one of the standardized tests in Korea, which is somewhat like TOEFL and TOEIC. What the

government is trying to do is because...once, about three or four years ago, there was a big fuss or problem with the internet registration of the TOEFL. It was called a "TOEFL Daeran (大乱)" The candidates had a difficulty in registering to take the TOEFL because of the flood of registrations from so many candidates. After that, there has been some discussion going on that we need to develop a Korean version of TOEFL, a Korean style TOEFL.

The TEPS has been playing that kind of role, and has been growing more popular these years. But what the government is trying to do is have a nationally accredited, nationally developed test. Actually it started a couple of years ago, and I have been involved in developing the national test. What we did was develop a prototype of the English test. I was in charge of developing a test for secondary school students. Another team developed a test for elementary school students. They were prototypes of the actual tests to be developed subsequently. But then, last year, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) decided to put them aside and, instead, develop a college level test first. So this is, in a sense, a new plan, which actually may compete with the TEPS. If the government puts more emphasis on this new test, then maybe more and more students will take this test.

Questioner 2 : Thank you very much. You mentioned the national assessment on the college level. Are you going to develop a kind of standardized test for junior and senior high school, too? In Taiwan and Japan we have a kind of standardized test called Eiken or...

KWON Oryang : OK. We had a meeting with the MEST about this test. And the people in the MEST were all aware of the STEP test here in Japan, and other countries' tests. They had done some research about the tests in the world. We are, in a sense, benchmarking part of the STEP test here. So later, we may actually develop the secondary school level test. But at the moment, this three-level test will be basically for college level students.

Coordinator : Thank you very much. I hope we can save the rest of the questions and comments until the second part of the conference. And I will be leaving these paper slips at the entrance. If you have any questions or comments to make, please fill in the paper slip and return it to me or to the presenters. And Kwon sensei and Liu sensei will be able to respond to the questions or comments later. Shall we take a 20 minute intermission? We will continue our conference at 3:40. We'll have a 20 minute intermission.

KWON Oryang : Before I close, I would like to express my gratitude for your inviting me over here to this university, Ritsumeikan. A very old friend of mine, who was my classmate about 30 years ago in the United States during my master's program, Professor Seiji Shibata, used to teach here at Ritsumeikan. He is now teaching at Kagawa Medical School (Ika Daigaku). So this university has some relationship with me in that sense. I am very much honored to be invited here

and have a chance to talk with you about English education in Korea. And also, if it doesn't embarrass her, I would like to acknowledge the presence of my former graduate student, Saeki Tamie san. Dr. Saeki was my graduate student for her master's program, so I'm very happy to see her. Actually I e-mailed her that I would be giving a talk here today, and she came here all the way from Kobe. So I thank her. And thank you all. Thank you.