

# Persistent Problems and Emerging Issues in English Education in Korea<sup>1)</sup>

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Although it is generally agreed that English education in Korea has improved greatly since its beginning in 1983, there are still many important areas that have persistent problems, and the profession of English teaching is faced with some emerging issues. English education has progressed both quantitatively and qualitatively, since English became a required school subject in elementary school in 1997. The teachers' and students' general English proficiency have also improved. However, there are still many teachers whose English ability leaves much to be desired. Also, students' losing confidence and interest in English is another persistent problem. The society's change also poses challenges to the English teaching profession. This paper discusses these improvements and persistent problems and emerging issues in English education in Korea.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Charter of National Education, which was promulgated on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1968, begins with the statement, "We were born into this land charged with the historic mission of regenerating the nation." If this statement is adapted for English professionals, it may read: "We entered this profession charged with the historic mission of renovating the nation's English education." Improving English education has been a century-long issue ever since English teaching was officially introduced into Korea in 1883, when the first official English school, Dongmunhak, was opened. Therefore, we are indeed charged with the historic

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mission of innovating and renovating English education.

In spite of the continuous efforts on the part of English policy makers, curriculum and materials developers and teachers, there are still many persistent problems and also newly emerging issues in English education in Korea. This paper will review the achievements of English education, and then identify persistent problems and emerging issues in an effort to have a broader and newer perspective toward our English education.

## II. PROGRESS AND IMPROVEMENT

Since its introduction into Korea, English teaching and educational research has experienced ups and downs, depending on the educational policies of the time. Generally speaking, there has been progress and improvement made in the practice of English teaching and research. The progress of English education can be observed in several areas. The following are some areas where significant improvement has been made.

### 1. Quantitative and Qualitative Expansion of English Education

#### 1) English as an Optional Extracurricular Activity Subject

Since the introduction of English into elementary school in 1982 as an optional extracurricular activity subject, there has been increasing interest and concern with English education among elementary school teachers and university professors. Elementary school English teachers in Seoul formed an association called "서울초등영어교육연구회"(SESETA: Seoul Elementary School English Teachers Association). In 1995, the Korea Association of Primary English Education (KAPEE) was formed by both university professors and elementary school teachers.

As of 1995, there were 9,461 elementary school teachers who were in charge of the extracurricular activity English program. As of 1996, English was being taught optionally in 5,370 elementary schools (95.2% of the total elementary schools) throughout the nation (<http://blog.daum.net/babusiki814/5090590>)

#### 2) English as a Required Subject

The introduction of English as a required subject in 1997 had a great impact on English education in Korea, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The number of students learning almost doubled, as English education from that time started with 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. It also changed the focus of English education from the written language to the spoken language. In order to meet the demand of competent teachers needed to teach in elementary schools, elementary school teacher education institutes and in-service training institutes readjusted their education programs to increase courses in English language teaching.

An inevitable impact on the society was the entire nation's attention to English education, as many parents have taken their children to private institutes for tutoring. In the academic arena, research in elementary school English has increased, mostly by professors in elementary school teacher training universities.

## 2. The Improvement of Students' English Proficiency

Are present-day students more proficient than students of the past? The answer seems to be "Yes." It is evidenced by both subjective and objective observations.

### 1) Teachers' Survey

A survey conducted by Kwon et al. (2006) shows that teachers think that their present secondary school students are more proficient than their past students. (See Kwon et al. 2006, for more information.)

### 2) Score Improvement on a Standardized Proficiency Test

According to Kwon et al. (2006), high school students who had learned elementary school English outperformed those who had not learned elementary school English. An English test called GTEC for STUDENTS, a test developed by the Benesse Corporation of Japan, was administered to 4,043 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders in 2003, to students who had not learned elementary school English (Non-ELES). An identical test was administered to 4,019 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders from the same five schools in 2006, to students who had learned elementary school English (ELES). Table 1 shows that the ELES group outperformed the Non-ELES group by 45.1 points (out of 800 points).

**TABLE 1**  
 GTEC Scores of the Non-ELES Group in 2003  
 and the Non-ELES Group in 2006 (Kwon et al., 2006)

Skills	10 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Graders in 2003 (Non-ELES) (N =4,043)		10 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Graders in 2006 (Non-ELES) (N=4,019)		Mean Difference	t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Read	190.4	49.9	205.5	53.2	+15.1	13.132	0.000
Listen	169.7	45.7	187.6	49.3	+17.9	16.944	0.000
Write	54.4	38.4	66.5	32.3	+12.1	15.248	0.000
Total	414.5	120.4	459.6	121.5	+45.1	16.724	0.000

### 3. The Improvement of English Proficiency Among Teachers

The overall English proficiency of English teachers has improved. When the country was liberated from Japan, English education was put in the hands of Korean teachers of English, who had been educated by the Japanese; their English abilities, especially spoken language abilities, were almost non-existent. Now, the younger generation of English teachers is selected through screening tests that require a good command of English. In general, the average level of English proficiency now is much higher than that of the past.

The percentage of teachers who responded that they are able to teach English in English was 39.2% in elementary school, 55% in middle school, and 50.5% in high school (EBS, 2007).

### 4. Increased Use of ICT in English Education

#### 1) Development of Instructional Technology for English Teaching

Until the 1970s, radio, TV, phonographs, and tapes accounted for the main information and communication technology (ICT) used. Then, language laboratories were the most visible and sought-after facilities for LL throughout the

1970s. With the advancement of the computer in the 1980s, digital ICT became the main teaching aid. Table 2 shows the development of teaching aids in Korea.

**TABLE 2**  
 Development of ICT and Its Use in ELT  
 (Adapted from In-seok Kim, 2003, p. 4)

Information/Communication Technology and L2 Teaching					
	Analogue Technology			Digital Technology	
Years	1920s-40s	1950s	1960s-70s	1980s	1990s
Media	Radio	Phonograph, TV	Tape (A/V)	PC	Multimedia
Learning Theory		Behaviorist		Cognitivism	Constructivism
Learning Aids		Audio/video Tapes Textbooks		CAI (PLATO, TICCIT)	CD-ROM DVD Internet/Web

## 2) Korea's Efforts to Utilize ICT in School Education

The Korean government made important efforts to upgrade the quality of education through improving and utilizing the ICT used in school classrooms. The efforts were made in two periods.

### (1) The First Period (1997-2000)

To equip all classrooms with computer facilities, with a teacher's console, a TV monitor (32"-42"), a connection to the world-wide web, and to incorporate computer-assisted language learning (CALL) into the 7th National Elementary English Curriculum.

### (2) The Second Period (2001-2005)

To provide one personal computer to every five students, provide all teachers with ICT training, and develop web-based multimedia contents for 10 school subjects and CD-ROM's for English teacher training

## 5. The Growth of Academic Research and Activities

Research in English education and academic activities have made steady progress, especially since the late 1980s. During the Japanese colonial period, concern with the improvement was expressed by a few scholars at the university level. However, English education research had not been systematically conducted by applied linguists before the 1970s. In 1965, the ULLA (University Language Laboratory Association) was formally created, and met periodically to exchange information and ideas among the universities that operated language laboratories. The number of presentations at the meetings was less than half a dozen.

ULLA developed into the College English Teachers Association (CETA) which became the leading academic society for English education. However, the CETA was still a society for the development of friendship among college level teachers of English, including literature professors. The number of papers presented at the semi-annual conferences was still less than ten.

When CETA changed its name to KATE (Korea Association of Teachers of English), the nature of the association was also changed, from a more exclusive society of college level teachers to a more inclusive one that embraced not only teachers of English at all levels but also anyone who was interested in English education. The number of members has steadily increased; there are now about 1,000 individual members and institutional members.

The biannual journal became a quarterly in 1995 in order to meet the increasing demand of English education major professors, whose number has increased sharply since the late 1980s. The number of papers presented at the annual conference has drastically increased since the late 1990s, surpassing 100 for the first time in 2004.

Along with the development of KATE, there have sprung up many other similar academic associations in different geographical regions and different academic disciplines (e.g., applied linguistics, foreign language education, primary English education, etc.).

## 6. Changes in the 1990s

Although English education had evolved to a great degree before the 1990s, the 1990s are marked with innovations and renovations that are drastically different from the practices before that time. Major changes made and introduced

in the 1990s are as follows (See Kwon, 2000, for more information on these changes.):

- 1) The 6th National Curriculums (1992)
- 2) The College Scholastic Ability Test (1993)
- 3) The EPIK Program: Hiring Native Speaker Teachers (1996)
- 4) Establishing ICT-based English Education (1997)
- 5) Mandatory English Teaching in Elementary Schools (1997)
- 6) The 7th National Curricula (1997)
- 7) New Direction for College English Teaching (1990s)
- 8) New Direction of Pre-service and In-service Education (1990s)

## 7. Foci of Attention Since 2000

At present, the foci of attention in English education are on communicative language teaching and testing, performance assessment, level-adaptive instruction, and teaching English in English (TEE). Communicative language teaching and testing were introduced in the 6<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum, but it became more widely recognized in the 7<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum. Performance assessment became a popular idea in the English teaching profession, as a part of the effort to promote communicative language teaching and testing. Level-adaptive instruction was first introduced in the 7<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum, but it was not widely implemented because of the practicality problem of the teachers and the classrooms. Teaching English in English is also encouraged, but classroom teachers find it difficult to faithfully carry out instruction solely in English.

## III. PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

Although there has been a remarkable improvement made in English education in Korea, there are still many persisting problems. Teacher and student problems are two of the major ones. However, there are other issues as well.

### 1. Incompetent Teachers

Teachers are one of the three essential components of education: teachers,

students, and teaching materials. Although the average level of the teachers' English proficiency has increased, there are still many teachers whose proficiency is not on the desired level. The low quality of teachers was mentioned as early as in 1926, as seen in the following excerpt.

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*)

Eighty years later, the same problem is pointed out by a newspaper in Seoul as follows.

학교 현장에 영어를 제대로 가르칠 수 있는 교사가 턱없이 부족하다. 앞서 가는 아이들을 따라가기가 벅찬 교사들도 적지 않다. 학교 영어교육이 '의사소통을 위한 영어'가 아니라 '독해와 문법 중심의 영어'에서 땀 들 수밖에 없는 이유다 (중앙일보, 2006. 4.13). (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 above two excerpts are impressionistic statements, and therefore may be subject to verification. The following report, however, presents empirical evidence for the low proficiency of English teachers.

4개월간 어학연수를 받은 대구시내 중고등학교 교사 50여명을 대상으로 영어회화 능력평가시험을 치른 결과 천점 만점에 평균 576.7점을 받아 같은 시험에 응시한 전국 중학생의 평균점수보다 10점 정도나 낮았다(권대회, 노컷뉴스, 2007. 3. 21). (The average score on a speaking test by 50 English teachers in Daegu, who had received a four-month in-service training [last year] 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, March 21, 2007).)



## 2. Students Losing Confidence and Interest

Like the teachers' English competence, the students' English proficiency and confidence may have improved compared with past students'. However, the students' own perceptions seem to become lower as their school years advance. First, here is an excerpt from a newspaper article in 1929, written by an English professor at that time.

이러케 된 根源은 在來의 英語工夫란 것이 『努力과 精力과 時間의 過大한 消費에 比하면 그 結果의 効力이 薄弱하고 何等의 淸된 能率을 얻지 못했다』 는데 잇는 것이오 보는 者의 觀點에 따라서는 그러케 批判하는 것이 正當할는지도 모른다. 朝鮮에 잇서서도 英語란 것이 輸入된 以來로 學校에서나 또는 一般 出版界에서 數十年동안 子弟들에게 英語 知識을 普及해 왔었다. 그러나 그 結果에 잇서서 果然 豫想하고 期待하는 程度의 効力을 社會全體로 또는 個人으로 보아서 求得하였느냐 하면 極少數의 特殊生活環境에 依하여 그 言語의 熟達을 體驗한 者 以外에는 大部分이 『英語를 배운 記憶은 잇스되 아모 所用 업는 것이 되었다』 는 甯김을 가지고 잇는 것이다 (정인섭, 조선일보, 1929. 6. 1.) (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 Chosun [Korea], English knowledge has been provided to the students by schools or publishers for several decades. However, as to the question of whether the entire society or individuals have gained the 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).)

About 80 years later, Kwon et al. (2006) found that students' interest and confidence are in a downward trend in the middle and high schools. Secondary school students' interest and confidence peak in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade (first year of middle school) and then gradually dwindle as they advance to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. While many students in middle school indicated that their English ability and confidence had increased since elementary school, the number of such students steadily dropped in high school. Although their English abilities, if measured

objectively, might have improved along with their advancement in school years, their perceived confidence was lowered, possibly because of the increasingly challenging vocabulary, sentence structures and content in higher school years. As the students advanced in their school years, their interest and concern were inclined toward more utilitarian goals, such as school and college entrance examinations.

A simple comparison of the vocabulary size for the students to master reveals that English teaching in Korea has not advanced much. Students at the first official modern school, Yukyeong Gongwon established in 1886, mastered 3,000 words in ten months. Today, students are expected to master 3,000 words in ten years. (The national curriculum sets the number of words at 3,000 for high school graduation.) In reality, only a few master that many words. Although the size of vocabulary is not necessarily the only indicator of students' achievements, the fact that the vocabulary size has remained for over a century does seem to illustrate a persisting problem.

### 3. Initiation of Policy Making by Outsiders

Most of the policies related to English education have been made by those who were not English education specialists but by politicians and the government. English education specialists were largely ignored or excluded from such decision makings. Here are some of such major policy changes made from outside the ELT profession in Korea.

#### 1) Introduction of optional English into elementary school in 1982

The decision was made by the Ministry of Education at the suggestion of then president Chun, who was impressed by the fluent command of English by South-East Asians during his official visit to that area.

#### 2) Introduction of obligatory English education into elementary school in 1997

The decision to introduce English into elementary school as a required subject was also made by the MOE, at the suggestion of then president Kim, whose political motto was "Globalization."

### 3) Teaching English in English (TEE) in 2000

The Minister of Education suggested teaching English in English, in an effort to improve the students' English ability. Although it was just a suggestion, the MOE actively encouraged teachers to teach in English.

### 4) Gyeonggi English Village in 2004

In 2004, Gyeonggi Province opened a permanent English camp, called Gyeonggi English Village. It became a benchmark for other provinces and cities that competitively introduced variations of English camps.

### 5) English education legislation

Several members of the National Assembly have attempted to introduce bills on English education. Although such bills did not become laws, there are still attempts by some of the legislators to introduce special laws to improve English education.

### 6) English Town in Jeju (2007)

The Korean government and the Province of Jeju announced that they will establish an English town in Jeju, where schools of different levels will be taught in English only, along with some residents speaking English.

### 7) Extending English education to first graders

In 2006, the MOE announced a plan to have 50 elementary schools experiment with teaching English to first and second graders. The MOE said that they would decide whether to extend English education to all first graders in the nation after seeing the results of the experiment at the end of August, 2008.

## IV. SOCIAL CHANGES AND EMERGING ISSUES

Because of the rapid changes in Korean society, English education in Korea is now faced with newly emerging issues and challenges. Some of these changes

and challenges are discussed below.

## 1. An Increasing Number of Students Going Abroad

Since 1998, there has been a steady increase in the number of students going abroad for education or English language training. Table 3 shows the trend in recent years. As more and more students go abroad for learning English and the number of returnee students increases, English teachers are pressured to cope with these good speakers of English in their classrooms. Accordingly, a higher level of English proficiency is expected from school teachers.

**TABLE 3**  
Numbers of Students Going Abroad for Education Purposes Each Year  
(Hongwon Kim, 2005)

Academic Years	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04
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 purposes	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

## 2. An Increasing Number of Koreans Traveling Abroad

The number of Koreans who traveled to other countries was 3,066,926 in 1998. The number steadily increased every year, reaching 11,609,879 in 2006 ([http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2007/07/17/2007071700083.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2007/07/17/2007071700083.html)). Even if we admit that many of the travelers are counted multiple times every year, the total number of Koreans who have experienced traveling to other countries must now be more than half of the entire population. As the number of overseas travelers accumulates, people's perception of the English language as a means of communication is more realistic than ever, and the expectation of learning

"useable" English increases.

### 3. Native-Speaker Teachers Outnumbering Korean English Teachers

As far as the numbers of English teachers are concerned, English education in Korea seems to have already been put in the hands of native-speaker English teachers as much as in the hands of Korean teachers of English. Table 4 shows the numbers of Korean teachers of English in primary and secondary schools and the native-speaker English teachers teaching in Korea.

**TABLE 4**  
Numbers of Korean English Teachers and  
Native-speaker English Teachers in Korea

Korean Teachers of English (EBS, 2007)		Native-speaker English Teachers	
		Legal E2 visa holders**	
		-- USA: 5,860	
		-- Canada: 4,680	14,150
Elementary school*	5,896	-- UK: 1,510	(As of July
		-- New Zealand: 750	31 <sup>st</sup> , 2007)
		-- Australia: 700	
		-- South Africa: 650	
Middle school	11,411	Illegal English teachers***	30,000
High school	14,379	(Estimated in 2006)	
Total	31,686	Total	44,150

\* The number of English teachers in elementary school seems to be that of the teachers who only teach English.

\*\* Department of Information Analysis, Ministry of Justice, personal communication, August 13, 2007.

\*\*\* From: <http://www.donga.com/fbin/output?n=200603210065&top20=1>. The number of illegal native-speaker English teachers was estimated by the Seoul Immigration Office.

Although the number of native-speaker teachers includes those who teach at the

tertiary level, considering the facts that illegal teachers are mostly in private institutes, teaching primary and secondary school students, and that colleges and universities do not hire very many native-speaker teachers, primary and secondary school English education does seem be influenced by native-speaker teachers as much as by Korean teachers of English.

#### 4. English Teaching and Testing Businesses Overwhelming School Education

One of the characteristics of Korean society is that private tutoring and private institutes' teaching are prevalent, affecting the official school education more than in any other country in the world. The following are some of the facts about tutoring in private institutes.

##### 1) The Market of English Education in Korea

The estimated size of the English education market in Korea is between 10 trillion won (10.5 billion US dollars) and 15 trillion won (15.8 billion US dollars). In 2004, as much as 7 trillion won (7.38 billion dollars) was spent on study abroad and English language training abroad (Hong, 2005). The market size for early English education in Korea is estimated at 2 trillion won (2.1 billion dollars). The projected annual growth rate of the English education market is 30%.

##### 2) The Business of English Language Testing in Korea

The market size of English language testing for all levels is approximately 2 trillion won (2.1 billion dollars). The English language testing business is also growing rapidly.

#### 5. Higher Expectations of the People and Society

English education is no longer ELT professionals' monopoly. As the education levels of parents and the society have been raised and as the general level of the people's English abilities has been improved, a higher level of English proficiency is expected of the students and teachers. Such expectations put

pressures on the teachers and ELT professionals.

## V. CONCLUSION: A CHALLENGE TO ELT PROFESSIONALS

Now is the time to ask about the role of English education professionals. What have the ELT professionals done to solve the societal problems related to the extraordinary fever of English education and testing? What are the teaching methods that best fit the Korean context? What are the theories of English teaching and learning built by Korean scholars that are particularly relevant to the Korean situation? What is the best testing method for Korean learners of English?

There are many more questions that have yet to be answered. If Korean ELT professionals are to accomplish the "historic mission" to regenerate and renovate English education in Korea, they need to try to answer these questions.

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