

# **Perception of English Needs: Voices from Employers and Employees of a Leading ICT Company in Korea**

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While topics such as the use of English in the Korean workplace and specific industries have been studied widely, there is paucity of research that focus on the voices of various classes within a workplace that influence learners' English needs. In order to fill this gap, interviews and surveys were conducted at a major technology firm in Korea to examine the role of standardized English tests, potential discrepancies between learner's perspective of their English needs and the language skills demanded or expected by their employer. The study also attempted to analyze the needs of the learners to identify the target situation and tasks that can be incorporated into an EBP (English for Business Purposes) curriculum for the target learners. The findings from the interviews and the survey revealed that standardized tests are no longer used in the hiring process, and there were differences between the employer and employees on how English skills are perceived to influence one's chances of getting a job and being promoted. Based on the results of the needs analysis of the target group studied, examples of contexts and tasks that can be included in an EBP course are suggested. Finally, a renewed role of corporations and universities in meeting the needs of job seeking youths is proposed.

**Key Words:** English for Specific Purposes, English for Business Purposes, needs analysis, English and recruitment, tasks, adult learners

## **I . Introduction**

In Korea, many people believe English proficiency is key to being admitted to colleges, getting better jobs, and becoming a competitive individual in a global society. As Park (2011) notes, English is considered as a means for social inclusion and “a conduit for economic and social advancement” (p. 443). This belief has become particularly prominent after the Korean economy was hit by the financial crisis in the late 1990s. The transformation of the labor market and changes in the corporate recruitment culture that ensued the crisis led to a fierce competition in the job market,

placing many job seekers in “a struggle for distinction” to become more attractive in the hiring process (Jang, 2015, p. 58).

Against this background, many young adults in Korea continue to invest in studying English to gain wider access to education and job opportunities. Even after getting a job, however, white collar workers continue to be pressured to self-develop their English skills regardless of their frequency in the actual use of the language. Park (2009, 2011) observes that various ideological forces are at work which constantly establish new standards for what constitutes as ‘good English skills,’ pushing many learners to put themselves in endless pursuit of English.

Such ideological forces that exist in the Korean society serve as a major context for young adults studying English in Korea. Choi (2002) notes that Korean companies believed to be well-paying and prestigious use TOEIC, TOEFL, or other standardized English test scores as a key element to screen job applicants. Consequently, many job applicants have become reluctant to apply for a job until they receive at least a 900 on their TOEIC test (Hadid, 2014; Lee, 2014), and parents start out early in giving as much help as they can to let their children meet market expectations. According to Hadid (2014), “Koreans spend \$17 billion a year and have hired 30,000 native English speakers to meet the demands of concerned parents who want their children to match the expectations of the job market.” Some local universities in Korea even resort to providing English courses focusing primarily on improving students’ TOEIC scores to enhance their future competitiveness in entering the job market (Shim, 2015).

However, gap exists between the test scores and the actual English proficiency displayed by test takers. Yoon (2014) supports this argument by citing cases on how preparing for English exams has not improved students’ ability to actually *use* English. This gap will naturally grow in a domain specific setting such as workplace, occupation, and industry, as such settings require the use of context and task-specific language skills.

With this in mind, this paper reports on a case study conducted at a major technology corporation in Korea which examined the role of standardized English tests in the hiring process, the perceived English needs, and the tasks required to be carried out in English.

## **II. Context of the Study**

The limitations of one-size-fits-all approach to language teaching, and the need to shift from ‘the curriculum to student direction’ toward ‘the student to curriculum direction,’ have been mentioned in many studies (Byean, 2015; Hyland, 2002; Long, 2005b). Such limitations of English for General Purposes (EGP) can be overcome by English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses which aim to narrowly focus on specific learner needs and purposes. There are various domains that fall under the category of

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ESP, including English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Science and Technologies (EST), and English for Business Purposes (EBP), to name a few (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). This study addresses the domain of EBP in an English as a foreign language context.

In designing an ESP course, Belcher (2006) maintains that learners' voice should be reflected in the content selection process, and Murray and McPherson (2004) concluded that instructors often fail to identify the interests and sources of learner motivation (as cited in Belcher, 2006). Furthermore, it is highly likely that the language instructor is unaware of the domain specific knowledge, and several researchers like Long (2005b, p.4) have concluded based on an in-depth literature review that failure to perform adequately at work often has to do with their "inability to accomplish tasks required of them" rather than linguistic competence per se. The notion that English required to implement specific tasks is field and context specific, leads us to conclude that curriculum based on L2 knowledge alone will be insufficient. Consequently, the recent needs analysis carried out for the purpose of constructing an ESP curriculum is moving away from linguistically based needs analysis to considering task as a unit of analysis, and analyzing discourse samples of those target task in question (Long, 2005b).

However, simply reflecting learners' voice and identifying relevant tasks required of them may be inadequate in gaining an accurate understanding of the present situation of the learners. In addition to analyzing the needs of learners by listening to the learners themselves, several studies have noted the importance of hearing from various classes within the workplace. To name a few, Jasso-Aguilar's (1998) well-known case study on the language needs of hotel maids is a representative example that attempted to conduct a needs analysis by incorporating wide range of stakeholder views. The study utilized various methods (participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires) and sources (hotel maids, supervisors, the executive housekeeper, and a human resources staff), and found that language necessary for the maids were actually quite different from the language skills desired by their supervisors. Jasso-Aguilar (1998) concludes that it is necessary to take into account the social context as well as complex power relations involved in conducting a needs analysis.

The importance of involving informants from varying levels was also suggested in Cowling's (2007) study. Cowling presents a detailed description of a needs analysis conducted in order to design an intensive business English course for year 1-3 employees working for a large Japanese company. Like Jasso-Aguilar, Cowling also used multiple sources and methods to analyze the needs of the target group. Naturally, one of the sources he studied to identify learner needs were the target students who will be taking the English course. The analysis of questionnaires completed by these informants, however, was limited because most of these junior employees did not have

much experience of using English at work, and therefore were not aware of the kind of English required in their company. Cowling describes how he had to include a new source- senior employees who were already working in the target situation- to gain a clearer picture of future language needs of the learners. The implications of this case study may be that researcher should be aware of whether sources utilized are, in Long's (2005a, p.20) terms, "pre-experience", "pre-service", or "in-service" learners, and that not all learners are dependable source for needs identification.

The studies mentioned above indicate the importance of identifying learner needs from various stakeholder levels within the workplace in coming up with more accurate language needs of the present and future. Accurate needs identification will not only help job seekers to prepare for what is expected at work, but also contribute to constructing better curriculum contents that reflect the needs of the learner.

In the Korean context, several large-scale studies were carried out to examine the use of English and standardized English tests in major exporting firms (Choi, 2002), the use of English in the Korean workplace (Park & Jung, 2006), and English criteria by industries (Kim & Korea Development Institute, 2011). However, there is paucity of research that focus both on the perception of employees and other stakeholders within a workplace that may influence learners' English needs.

In light of the discussion so far, this case study attempts to gain an accurate insight into the needs of a group of learners working for a large technology corporation in Korea. The answers for the following research questions will be sought:

- 1) How are standardized English tests utilized in the company studied?
- 2) Are there any discrepancies between learner's perspective of their English needs and the language skills demanded or expected by the employer?
- 3) What are some possible categories of target situations and tasks that can be incorporated into an EBP curriculum for the learners studied?

### **III. Methodology**

#### **1. Participants**

The company that participated in this study, agreed to do so on condition of anonymity. The company, hereinafter referred to as Company X, is headquartered in Seoul, Korea. Its major area of business is Information Communications Technology (ICT). Building on its success in the domestic market, Company X has strived to become a global company by making concentrated efforts in broadening its global business. Employing much more than 10,000 workers (the company did not agree to disclose an accurate number), Company X is widely believed to be a prestigious company, and

regarded as a popular destination for college graduates seeking jobs in Korea. Its Global Business Group is considered to have the biggest demand for English use. The group is comprised of 210 employees who has had a minimum of 2 - 3 years of experience of working in other functions within Company X prior to joining the group.

For this study, interview and survey methods were used. For the interviews, following four sources agreed to participate in one on one interview with the researcher:

- 1) Vice President of the Human Resources Department, in charge of new recruits and human resources management since 2010;
- 2) Manager of the Human Resources Department, in charge of college graduate entry-level recruits since 2013;
- 3) Director of Asia/America Market Team of the Global Business Group, who has worked in this position for 5 years;
- 4) Deputy Director of Asia/America Market Team of the Global Business Group, who has worked for the team for 9 months;

For the survey, 21 employees of the Asia/America Market Team within the Global Business Group agreed to participate, and 15 survey results were used for data analysis<sup>1</sup>, for reasons that will be discussed later. For detailed profile of survey participants, please refer to Appendix 1.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

As stated by Long (2005a, p.32), "It is difficult to overemphasize the likelihood that use of multiple measures, as well as multiple sources, will increase the quality of information gathered." In order to gain a more complete view of the present and target situation of Company X, multiple sources and methods approach was used. The methods used for this study were interviews and survey questionnaires. Sources utilized for the interviews and the survey are discussed below. All of the interviews and surveys were carried out on a single day, in early June of 2016, in the following order:

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the study, there were 210 employees working in the Global Business Group. The Asia/America Market Team is one of many teams under the umbrella of Global Business Group, and the survey was distributed to 70% of employees (21 out of 30) of the Asia/America Market Team. In the final analysis, the results of 15 participants were used (28.5% of responses were excluded). The researcher was told that the Asia/America Market Team can be representative of all the other teams in the Global Business Group covering English speaking markets.

### **1) Semi-structured interview of an executive and a manager of the Human Resources Department**

The purpose of this interview was to investigate how standardized English tests are utilized in the hiring process and identify the perceived needs and requirements of English skills in Company X, from the perspective of the insiders who are actually in charge of selecting new recruits. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured with questions on (1) the importance of English ability in the process of hiring entry-level employees, (2) whether English ability is considered in promotion decisions, and (3) screening methods used by Company X to identify English proficient employees. Two interviewees were chosen in order to cross-check the contents of the interviews and ask additional questions that may arise from the first interview. The Vice President of the HR Department was interviewed first. After a brief review of my interview notes, the Manager of the HR Department was interviewed. More detailed questions were asked to the Manager to draw an accurate picture of the present situation. All of the interviews were conducted in Korean, and the entire interview was audio recorded.

### **2) Survey questionnaires using convenience samples**

Survey questionnaires adapted from Park and Jung (2006) and Shim (2015), were used to establish the nature of English use and the needs of the Global Business Group. A mixture of open-ended and closed items was used in the survey (See Appendix 2 for the complete survey<sup>2</sup>). Information sought included respondents' perceived role of English in the job seeking and promotion process, reasons for studying English, tasks requiring the use of English and their frequency, tasks/skills they want to improve, and their perspectives on an ideal English course. The survey was distributed randomly to 21 members of the Asia/America Market Team by the Director of the Asia/America Market Team, Overseas Business Group. Effort was made to distribute the survey evenly to junior levels (staffs, assistant manager, and managers) and senior levels (deputy general managers and general managers).

Six respondents of the survey that answered negatively to *both* Question 5 (*There are times when I feel that it is difficult to do my job because of my English ability*) and 6 (*Have you ever studied English after you started working for this company?*) were not reflected in the final analysis as they were considered not to have any present and future needs for studying English.

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2 An English version of the survey is included in Appendix 2. The original survey used for the study was written in Korean.

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### **3) Semi-structured interview of two senior level employees from the Global Business Group**

The Deputy-Director of the Global Business Group was interviewed first, followed by the Director of the Global Business Group. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured with questions on (1) an ideal English class for their team, (2) their perceptions of ESP or EBP, and (3) tasks that require the use of English. The purpose of these interviews were to extract more detailed information on the current English needs that may not come up from the survey. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in the Korean language.

The answers to the survey questionnaires were calculated into percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation, where applicable. The findings from different informants and different data collection methods were triangulated for final analysis. All of the excerpts of the interview chosen to be discussed in this paper will be presented in a translated version.

## **IV. Findings**

As discussed above, the current study attempted to examine how standardized English test scores are used in the hiring process, investigate potential discrepancies that may exist between the learners' perspective of their English needs and the language skills demanded or expected by the employer, and identify the categories of situations and tasks to be incorporated into an ESP course for the learners studied. Based on the analysis of the data collected, several themes emerged which can serve as a framework in answering these research questions: English in recruitment and promotion process, motivation behind studying English, and the needs of the target learners.

### **1. English in recruitment and promotion process**

The main purpose of conducting an interview with the HR executive and the manager was to investigate English language skills required by Company X as well as the profile of existing language abilities to get a clearer understanding of the present situation. To researcher's surprise, Company X did not keep a record of existing language abilities, although in the past, the average TOEIC scores of the new recruits were kept. Furthermore, in contrast to widespread beliefs on the importance of standardized English test scores in getting a job (Hadid, 2014; Lee, 2014), Company X does not require standardized test scores in the application forms nor conduct an oral English interview in their public hiring process. Reasons are explained below:

**INTERVIEW EXCERPT 1**

Vice President of the HR Department

*We don't have cut-off scores for tests like TOEIC. Actually we don't even look at them. The reason we don't have cut-off scores is because most applicants come to us with at least 800 anyway, and there are so many applicants with scores above 900 (...) Submitting standardized test scores is not a requirement for application... Job skills matter most, English is secondary... English is not used that much anyway, except for certain functions that require employees to deal with foreigners... So we do accept scores if applicants choose to submit them, but they do not implicate one's chances of getting the job at all.*

During the interview, the Vice President of the HR Department emphasized that applicants' standardized English test scores do not influence the selection decisions as they used to in the past. It is interesting how he points out that applicants submit high scores even though the company does not require the scores in the application process.

The Manager of the HR Department corroborated Vice President's comments above. He provided more specific details on how standardized test scores are actually used during the recruitment process in Interview Excerpt 2, which may provide an explanation as to why applicants submit such high test scores that is not mandatory.

**INTERVIEW EXCERPT 2**

Manager of the HR Department

*We did have a cut-off score until 2012. For applicants applying for liberal arts-related jobs, the cut-off score was 700, and for science-related jobs, 600. This system was abolished in 2013. The way English ability is used to screen applicants has changed as companies started to hire new recruits by job area. That [recruiting by job areas] is also what the government is pushing for... I think there is a trend of giving less weight to English test scores. However, we need to consider the fact that most large corporations in Korea have a 'Gongchae' system<sup>3</sup>, usually twice a year. Sometimes 10,000 to 20,000 people apply each season. Let's say 10,000 people applied, and we are planning to pick 200. In the first round [application forms review process], we select about 1/10<sup>th</sup> from the total applicant pool... which means 1,000 people are selected from the first round of screening, meaning 9,000 people do not make it through the first round. And there is*

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<sup>3</sup> *Gongchae* is a name for open hiring system in Korea, mainly for fresh college graduates.



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*not much we can use from the forms... school names, grades, language scores, and etc.... So, technically speaking, the weighting for English test scores does exist, but it is very small... It is only about 1 point or less out of 100. People who don't submit scores do get in. One time, the applicants who chose not to submit English test scores accounted for 10% of the final successful candidates, counting only those who studied English only in Korea.*

From the comments made by the Manager of the HR Department, we may infer that from the perspective of job seekers, there is a fierce competition to just make it through the first round. While submitting standardized English test scores is not mandatory, the applicants may feel that it may raise their chances of passing the first round.

The two interviewees from the HR Department also concurred that English ability is not considered during the promotion process. The only time when the company screens and evaluates its employees for English skills is when they need to select employees to be dispatched to functions that require frequent use of English, like the Global Business Group. In such situations, Company X outsources the evaluation process to an external institution, and employees are mostly evaluated on their speaking skills. To be assigned to Global Business Group or an overseas office, candidates do need to display the ability to communicate in English- just enough to accomplish tasks required of them. The Vice President recognizes the limits of using standardized tests in evaluating employees' English in Interview Excerpt 3.

### **INTERVIEW EXCERPT 3**

Vice President of the HR Department

*When selecting employees to be assigned for the Global Business Group, we cannot make decisions based on TOEIC or other standardized test scores. The results of the TOEIC scores and the results of interviews conducted in English for instance, have low alignment. There are people with low TOEIC scores that speak English pretty well and confidently.*

In sum, the Human Resources Department of Company X seems skeptical of standardized tests in its ability to screen employees with high English speaking proficiency. In light of the interview excerpts mentioned so far, Company X also seems to maintain a very practical view on setting requirements for English skills within their company: Except for jobs that require frequent use of English, being competent in one's job area is what matters most.

This somewhat took the researcher by surprise since employers' high expectations

for English ability proven through language tests were regarded as one of the main culprit for unnecessarily high English fever in Korea (Hadid, 2014; Park 2011). The researcher, therefore, asked the opinion of Vice President of the HR Team on whether he believes there is a possibility for Company X- and maybe other large corporations that employ similar hiring policies- to let the public know how TOEIC and other standardized English test scores are no longer considered in the application process as they used to in the past, so as to help college graduates to focus more on practical English skills required in the workplace, rather than on studying to achieve high test scores. The Vice President's reply to researcher's question is shown in Interview Excerpt 4 below.

#### INTERVIEW EXCERPT 4

Vice President of the Human Resources Department

*We have nothing to gain by doing that. Having a wide pool of applicants with high TOEIC scores would not harm us.*

The interviews discussed above were compared to the results of Question 1-4 of the survey. The purpose of these questions were to examine how employees perceive the relationship between English skills and chances of getting a job and being promoted. Interestingly, some views of the respondents were in contrast with the actual hiring and promotion practices of Company X. The survey results indicated that one's English ability is believed to implicate their chances of getting a job and being promoted. However, the respondents mostly agreed with the interviewees from the HR Department that standardized test scores should not be used for promotion decisions, and did not believe the scores to effectively reflect employees' true English skills. The results of Question 1-4 are shown in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1<sup>4</sup>**

Survey questions 1-4 (N=15)

No.	Questions		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
1	I think English ability increases one's chances of getting a job.	N	5	10	0	0	0	1.67	0.49
		%	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%		
2	I think English ability influences salary and promotion decisions.	N	3	5	7	0	0	2.27	0.79
		%	20%	33%	37%	0%	0%		

4 Note: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree; SD= Standard Deviation; N= Number of Respondents

3	I believe standardized tests such as TOEIC can adequately screen applicants with good English skills.	N	0	2	2	6	5	3.93	1.03
		%	0%	13%	13%	40%	34%		
4	Standardized English test scores should be incorporated in promotion decisions.	N	0	0	7	4	4	3.8	0.86
		%	0%	0%	46%	27%	27%		

In summary, there seems to be a difference between the HR Department and the employees of Company X in how English skills are perceived to influence recruitment and promotion decisions. The fact that Company X has no intention of letting future job applicants know that English test scores are not considered during hiring decisions is noteworthy. On the one hand, it is understandable that Company X would prefer to have a pool of employees with high scores rather than a pool of employees with low scores. On the other hand, college graduates applying for a job in Company X may never find out the ‘real’ situation, and continue to invest in studying for the standardized tests.

## 2. Learners’ motivation behind studying English

After attempting to study the language policies employed by Company X and the overall perception thereof from the learners’ viewpoint, the researcher sought to identify learners’ motivation behind studying English and the ways they pursue their motivation. Many researchers and language instructors agree that motivation is one of key factors that influence the rate and success of second language learning, as motivation can serve as a stimulus to initiate and promote the language learning process (Kim, 2016). Therefore, understanding learners’ motivation will be key in understanding their needs. With this in mind, the survey asked the participants on how they feel about their English ability in relation to their job ability (Question 5), and whether they are studying or have studied English after they started their career in Company X (Question 6). The result of Question 5 is shown in Table 2 below.

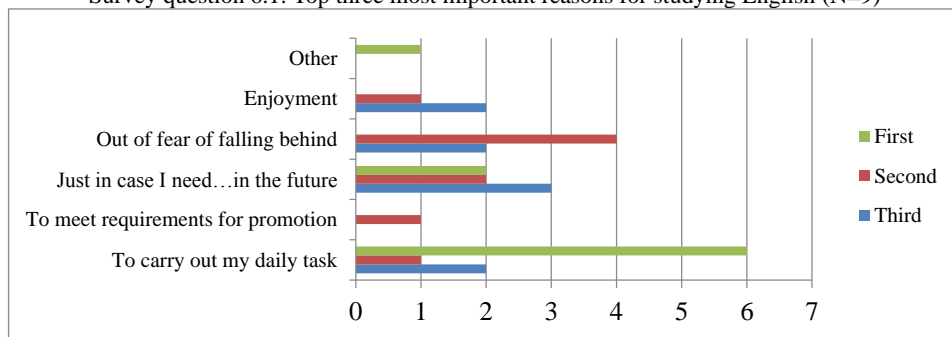
**TABLE 2**  
Survey question 5 (N=15)

No.	Question		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
5	There are times when I feel that it is difficult to do my job because of my English ability.	N	3	5	3	4	0	2.53	1.12
		%	20%	33%	20%	27%	0%		

Only one respondent answered “No” to Question 6. The remaining 14 respondents who answered “Yes” to Question 6 were asked move on to Question 6.1 and rank top three reasons for studying English after they started their career in Company X. The reasons mentioned the most included: (1) because I need English to carry out my daily tasks, (2) just in case I need more English skills in the future, and (3) out of fear of falling behind. Only 9 respondents ranked the choices in the order of importance as they were asked to. The detailed results are shown below in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**

Survey question 6.1: Top three most important reasons for studying English (N=9)



Interestingly, all of the respondents who answered negatively to Question 5 still devoted time to study English for the top three reasons mentioned above. The fact that many respondents chose “Out of fear of falling behind” and “Just in case I need more English skills in the future” may imply that English skills are not merely regarded as a necessary skill needed to carry out their jobs, but as a major competitive edge in being successful in the workplace. One respondent- having lived in Canada for more than six years during her teenage years- who is probably a fluent speaker of English, chose “Other,” and stated that the foremost reason for studying English was to *retain* her current English proficiency. Feeling the need to retain the current level of proficiency may suggest that she regards her English skills as an important asset that needs to be maintained.

In addition to the survey results above, the following comment by the Director of the Asia/America Market Team may provide additional insight into understanding learners’ motivation behind studying English.

#### **INTERVIEW EXCERPT 5**

Director of Asia/America Market Team, Overseas Business Group

*People who have had no experience living in English-speaking countries*

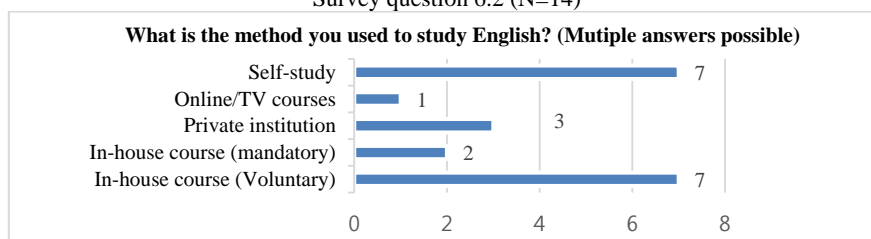
*feel the pressure to improve their speaking skills especially as they compare their speaking skills with their colleagues who are fluent. So they continue to study on their own or attend English programs offered in-house.*

Interview Excerpt 5 suggests that employees who studied English only in Korea may lack confidence in English speaking skills as they compare themselves with fluent co-workers who have experience of studying or living abroad in English speaking countries. As Block (2012) notes, the issue here may not be just about having a command of English, but about having “the right command of the English language, presumably sounding like a native speaker” (p.278).

The survey also asked the methods employed to study English and the skills they focused on the most through Question 6.2 and 6.3.

**FIGURE 2**

Survey question 6.2 (N=14)

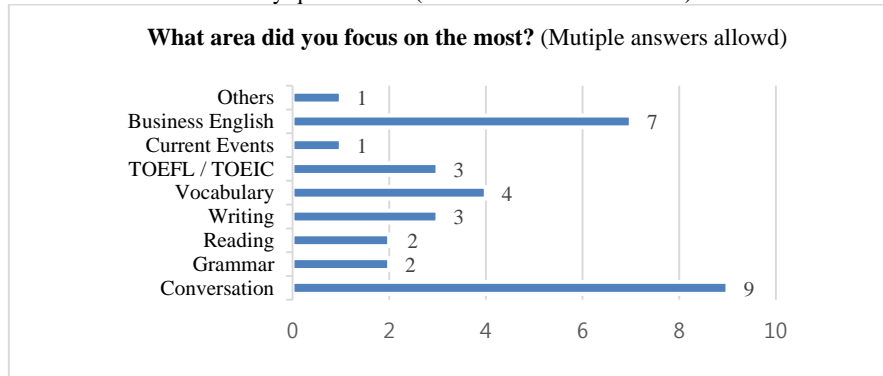


As shown in Figure 2 above, most learners surveyed chose self-study methods or voluntarily took in-house courses, which, according to one of the sources of the interview, are mostly short-term. The methods of self-study included reading English newspapers, watching American TV series, and listening to online videos or TV programs, among many.

As for the top three areas the learners focused on, most respondents just checked the relevant areas, although they were asked to rank them. Therefore, the figure below was drawn based on the number of checks marked.

**FIGURE 3**

Survey question 6.3 (Total number of checks: 32)



Based on the results of Question 5, 6, and the interviews, learners seem to be highly motivated to achieve advanced level of English proficiency to be either more competent in their jobs or to enhance their competitiveness within the workplace, or both. In addition, most learners depended on self-study and short-term courses offered by Company X, and focused mostly on conversation and business English. The reasons for relying mostly on self-study or short-term courses may be due to the difficulty for these busy workers to set aside time to study English as much as they would want. The findings may also imply that they are having a hard time finding a language program that suits their specific needs.

### 3. Learner needs

#### 1) Tasks requiring the use of English and their frequency

All of the respondents answered “Yes” to Question 7 in the survey, which asked “Do you need to use English to carry out your current job?” The purpose of 18 sub-questions that followed (7.1~7.18) were to identify the actual tasks requiring the use of English and frequency of their occurrence.

Reading in the English language seemed to be occurring most frequently for most respondents. Approximately 65% of the respondents answered that they read English documents at least 3 to 4 times a week. Reading English websites to find information relevant to their work was cited to take place at least 3 to 4 times per week by about 93% of the respondents.

As for writing, exchanging letters/fax/e-mail in English was the most frequently occurring task, which occurs at least 3 to 4 times a week for approximately 71% of the

respondents. Keeping meeting minutes in English and preparing English-written materials to be used in meetings were less frequent with at least 1 to 2 times per month for 71% and 64% of the respondents, consecutively.

For tasks requiring speaking and listening, the responses were more dispersed, and differed by individuals compared to reading and writing tasks. Two tasks stood out however, which were comprehending and offering opinions during meetings conducted in English, and telephone conversations in English. Both tasks took place at least 3-4 times a month for 57% of the respondents.

In summary, reading seems to be the most frequently needed skill for the Overseas Business Group. The Vice President of the HR Department also implied the importance of basic reading skills even for employees outside the Group as well, as shown in the following.

#### **INTERVIEW EXCERPT 6**

Vice President of the HR Department

*Our employees do need basic reading skills, of course... We are living in a globalized era, so even I need certain level of English reading skills to keep up with and study the global HR trends, which are mostly written in English.*

The findings above are meaningful, because they suggest that employees wanting to work in the Global Business Group may experience difficulty in carrying out their daily tasks without advanced reading ability. Furthermore, as the Vice President of HR implies, reading seems to be a basic English skill expected of every employee within the company, not just the Global Business Group which is known to have the biggest demand for English use. Furthermore, the specific tasks that occur frequently within the Global Business Group can be considered as a framework for developing authentic materials and activities for the target group.

## **2) Tasks and skills to be covered in an EBP course**

Question 8 of the survey was an open-ended question asking respondents the contents they want in an EBP course. Many respondents offered more than one answer, and the complete list of their answers are shown in Table 3 below. Production skills such as speaking and writing accounted for majority of the responses.

**TABLE 3**  
Survey question 8

No.	Skills	Tasks	No. of responses
8	Speaking & Listening	Business meetings, negotiations	8
		Phone calls, teleconferencing	3
		Oral presentations	2
	Writing	Business emails	4
		Contracts	2
		Business documents	1
		Meeting minutes	1
	Reading	Researching materials	1
		Contracts	1

For speaking and listening tasks, the respondents specifically wanted to focus on business meetings, phone calls and tele-conferencing, and oral presentations in English. Respondents who chose writing skills wanted to practice tasks such as e-mail, business documents, and contracts. Some respondents added details in this open-ended question with comments such as: (1) I want to be able to write and speak in a way that sounds smart and professional, (2) Learning domain-specific expressions in the meeting context would be effective, (3) Being exposed to non-native English accents (Indian accents, Southeast Asian accents, etc.) will be helpful.

Results of Question 9-13 are shown in Table 4 below.

**TABLE 4**  
Survey questions 9-13 (N=15)

No.	Questions		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
9	Along with studying English, I believe learning the culture of English-speaking countries is important.	N	9	5	1	0	0	1.47	0.63
		%	60%	33%	7%	0%	0%		
10	What I want to focus on is industry and domain-specific language related to my work rather than everyday English (e.g. technical vocabulary and expressions).	N	5	9	1	0	0	1.73	0.59
		%	33%	60%	7%	0%	0%		



	I believe focusing more on context and situation-specific English skills (i.e. Business English, English used in meetings, delivering presentations in English, renting cars and ordering food during business trips, engaging in small talk, etc.) is needed.	N	6	5	4	0	0	1.87	0.83
11		%	40%	33%	27%	0%	0%		
	I believe studying pronunciation and intonation is important.	N	3	6	6	0	0	2.2	0.77
12		%	20%	40%	40%	0%	0%		
	If more diverse English courses (such as Business English, Business Presentation in English) that can help me prepare for the situation in the workplace had been provided when I was in college, I would have definitely taken the course.	N	4	5	4	2	0	2.27	1.03
13		%	27%	33%	27%	13%	0%		

Questions 9-12 were asked to get a clearer picture of respondents' idea of an ideal English course. The results of Question 10 and 11 were corroborated by another source of this study as shown in Interview Excerpt 7.

#### INTERVIEW EXCERPT 7

Deputy-Director of the Asia/America Market Team

*It will be significantly useful for us if we can study English through scenario or context based curriculum using authentic materials.*

In sum, the analysis of the responses from Question 9-12, and the interview indicated that the participants perceived an ideal English course to be the one that prepares them to actual business situations and tasks, helps them to build cultural knowledge, and practice pronunciation.

Question 13 was intended to find out how respondents would perceive colleges providing ESP courses designed to help them develop English proficiency that may be expected in their professional career. About 60% of the sources surveyed responded positively to Question 13. Although this response may not be representative of perceptions held by employees in Korea, it is possible that there might be high demand for diverse college-level English courses designed to help Korean youths meet their future needs at work.

## V. Discussions and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to gain an accurate view of the needs of a group of Korean employees required to use English, by listening to informants from varying levels within an organization. Different sources of this study agreed on the limitations of the standardized test scores to screen English proficient employees. However, there were discrepancies in how English skills are perceived to influence the recruitment and promotion process between the employer and employees. While the HR department has not required English test scores in their open hiring process for several years now, most sources surveyed believed that English still influences one's chances of finding a job and getting promoted. Can this be a sign that major corporations in Korea are starting to discard the use of standardized English tests, and employing a realistic, needs-based criteria to evaluate the English skills of their employees?

Note, however, that the comments of Vice President of the HR Department in Interview Excerpt 4 seems somewhat paradoxical to his comments in Interview Excerpt 1. He states in Interview Excerpt 1 that English test scores are not considered in the hiring process, and adds that "English is not used that much anyway." However, while the Vice President acknowledges the inadequacy of standardized test scores in screening applicants with good English skills, and claims that job skills are what matters most, Interview Excerpt 4 has shown that the employer has no intention of publicizing the fact that English test scores do not implicate one's chances of being hired by Company X. It is possible that his comments in Interview Excerpt 4 represents most Korean corporations' desire to secure applicants with good scores, regardless of the actual need of the English language. Jang (2015, p.74) points out how such an attitude can be problematic in the following way:

*[South Korean companies] tend to ignore the fact that their language policies in the recruitment system have a sort of washback effect on job applicants' language learning. They may also neglect the importance of language training tailored to specific areas and needs, perceiving English communication skills as a panacea for any communication in business settings.*

Park (2011) also recognized the significant role corporations play in establishing the standard of good English, thereby pushing students, job seekers, and white-collar workers to endlessly invest in achieving that standard. This was evidenced by several participants of this study who are already fluent enough to do their job without any difficulty, but continue to hang on to studying English to become even better at it. If large corporations in Korea can be more transparent and be willing to voice out their realistic expectations of English skills to job seekers, young adults in Korea may be able to invest more of their time and resources on the skills that are actually needed on the job,

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which will be much more beneficial for companies as well than simply securing a pool of employees with high test scores.

Based on the triangulation of sources and methods of this study, following tasks and situations were identified for a potential EBP course designed for the learners in the Global Business Group of Company X:

- (1) Intensive business writing course focusing on formal tone and expressions, with genres focusing on emails and business memos/reports;
- (2) Intensive business speaking and listening course with individual units on business meetings, business telephoning and teleconferencing, business negotiations, and oral presentations in a business setting.

For the learners studied, such a context and task-based approaches to a course design and the use of authentic materials constructed from a needs analysis are more likely to respond to their specific needs than approaches based on English for General Purposes.

The findings of this study also shed light on the importance of advanced reading skills and the possible role universities can play in developing English skills needed after graduation. The interviews and the survey indicated that ability to read professional texts may also be expected by departments that do not require frequent use of English. Question 13 of the survey revealed that there may be a demand for diverse ESP courses designed to help students to prepare for their future needs. In an era where global communication has become an essential part of business for many companies in Korea, it might be a worthwhile endeavor for Korean universities to diversify their English courses to help their students prepare for their careers after graduation.

This case study is not without limitations. Because the Global Business Group was going through a busy sales season at the time of the study, many employees were either in meetings or business trips, and the questionnaires were randomly distributed to 21 people, and ended up using only 15 of them. With such a small number of survey participants, the findings of this study may not reflect a complete view of the Global Business Group, nor represent the kind of English skills required and expected by most Korean corporations.

The results of this study suggest, however, that it will be meaningful to carry out a similar, but an extensive study covering more companies and participants to understand the present situation of English needs and actual tasks that Koreans are expected to perform in English at work. By investigating the true expectations of other major corporations in Korea, we may be able to not only design an ESP/EBP curriculum that better serve the needs of the learners, but also help curb the obsession of job-seekers to achieve high scores on their standardized English tests. Diverting the time and effort spent on the English tests toward developing English ability required on the job, may help learners in the workplace setting over the long term.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Profile of survey participants

Sex	Age	Position	Years of residence in an English speaking country
F	20-29	Staff	6 Years (Age of Arrival: 13)
F	20-29	Assistant-Manager	
F	30-39	Assistant-Manager	4 Years (Age of Arrival: 15)
F	20-29	Assistant-Manager	
M	30-39	Assistant-Manager	5 Years (Age of Arrival: 22)
F	30-39	Manager	2 Years (Age of Arrival: 30)
M	30-39	Manager	
M	30-39	Manager	
F	40-49	Deputy-General Manager	6 Years (Age of Arrival: 18)
M	40-49	Deputy-General Manager	
M	40-49	Deputy-General Manager	6 Years (Age of Arrival: 23)
F	40-49	Deputy-General Manager	
M	40-49	Deputy-General Manager	
M	40-49	Deputy-General Manager	
M	40-49	General Manager	

**APPENDIX 2**

## Survey questionnaires

1. I think English ability increases one's chances of getting a job.
  - ① Strongly agree
  - ② Agree
  - ③ Neutral
  - ④ Disagree
  - ⑤ Strongly disagree
2. I think English ability influences salary and promotion decisions.
  - ① Strongly agree
  - ② Agree
  - ③ Neutral
  - ④ Disagree
  - ⑤ Strongly disagree
3. I believe standardized tests such as TOEIC can adequately screen applicants with good English skills.
  - ① Strongly Agree
  - ② Agree
  - ③ Neutral
  - ④ Disagree
  - ⑤ Strongly disagree
4. Standardized English test scores should be incorporated in promotion decisions.
  - ① Strongly agree
  - ② Agree
  - ③ Neutral
  - ④ Disagree
  - ⑤ Strongly disagree
5. There are times when I feel that it is difficult to do my job because of my English ability.
  - ① Strongly agree
  - ② Agree
  - ③ Neutral
  - ④ Disagree
  - ⑤ Strongly disagree
6. After you started working for this company, have you ever studied English?  
[    ] Yes            [    ] No            (If you answered "No," move on to Q.7)

- 
- 6.1 What are your three most important reasons for studying English? (Please rank them “1, 2, 3” in the order of importance)
- To carry out my daily tasks.
  - To meet requirements for promotion.
  - Just in case I need more English skills in the future.
  - Out of fear of falling behind.
  - For my own enjoyment.
  - Others (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- 6.2 What is the method you used to study English?
- Voluntarily took English courses provided in-house
  - Took mandatory courses provided in-house
  - Enrolled in private institutions such as ‘hakwon’
  - English courses provided on TV, Internet, radio, etc.
  - Self-study (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
  - Others (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- 6.3 Which area did you focus on the most in the methods chosen in Q6.2?
- Conversation
  - Grammar
  - Reading
  - Writing
  - Vocabulary
  - TOEFL
  - TOEIC
  - OPIc
  - GRE
  - Current Events
  - Business English
  - Others (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
7. Do you need to use English to carry out your current job?
- Yes       No      \*If you answered “No,” move on to Q8.
- How often are the following tasks described in 7.1~7.18 required? To answer questions from 7.1 through 7.18, choose from the following choices below:
- ① Not at all
  - ② 3-4 times/year
  - ③ 1-2 times/month
  - ④ 3-4 times/month
  - ⑤ 1-2 times/week

⑥ 3-4 times/week

⑦ almost every day

- 7.1 Reading and understanding documents/books written in English. [    ]
- 7.2 Reading and understanding business reports written in English. [    ]
- 7.3 Reading and understanding product manuals in English. [    ]
- 7.4 Finding information from English websites. [    ]
- 7.5 Translating English documents into Korean. [    ]
- 7.6 Writing meeting minutes in English. [    ]
- 7.7 Exchanging letters, fax, emails in English. [    ]
- 7.8 Writing resumes in English. [    ]
- 7.9 Preparing meeting materials in English. [    ]
- 7.10 Writing contracts in English. [    ]
- 7.11 Meetings conducted in English. [    ]
- 7.12 Listening to and understanding meetings or presentations conducted in English, and expressing my opinions in English. [    ]
- 7.13 Having a conversation with English-speaking foreigners in work related receptions, lunch, dinner, etc. [    ]
- 7.14 Having a phone conversation in English. [    ]
- 7.15 Negotiating with and persuading a business partner in English. [    ]
- 7.16 Conducting an English presentation in meetings or seminars. [    ]
- 7.17 Business trips to English-speaking countries. [    ]
- 7.18 Talking to a colleague who can only speak English. [    ]
8. If you can decide the contents to be learned in an English course, what skills (e.g. speaking, listening, reading, writing) and what tasks (e.g. conducting meetings, writing emails, making phone calls, conversation with a foreign business partner, business trips, researching materials written in English) would you like to focus on the most? Please specify.
- Skills: \_\_\_\_\_
- Tasks: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Along with studying English, I believe learning the culture of English-speaking countries is important.
- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly disagree
10. What I want to focus on is industry and domain-specific language related to my



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work rather than everyday English (e.g. technical vocabulary and expressions).

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly disagree

11. I believe focusing more on context and situation-specific English skills (i.e. Business English, English used in meetings, delivering presentations in English, renting cars and ordering food during business trips, engaging in small talk, etc.) is needed.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly disagree

12. I believe studying pronunciation and intonation is important.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly disagree

13. If more diverse English courses (such as Business English, Business Presentation in English) that can help me prepare for the situation in the workplace had been provided when I was in college, I would have definitely taken the course.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Neutral
- ④ Disagree
- ⑤ Strongly disagree

**< Respondent Profile >**

14. Sex

- [    ] Female                      [    ] Male

15. Age

- [    ] 20-29  
[    ] 30-39  
[    ] 40-49

