

# “Can You Recommend a Good Lecturer for a Beginner?”: Korean Students’ Perceptions of the College Admission Essay Test

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## ABSTRACT

Writing has become an essential aspect of secondary education across the world. The college admission essay exam, a high-stakes test, has a strong influence on students’ understanding and notions of “good” writing. College admission essay tests in South Korea have been developed by Korean universities to measure Korean senior high school students’ level of argumentative writing skills. While research on writing in mother tongue contexts has traditionally focused on local experiences, writing studies on learners’ views and their affective factors have emerged recently in response to educational and contextual factors. Thus far, however, not enough attention has been paid to Korean students’ perceptions of college admission essay tests. To fill this research gap, this study explores Korean high school students’ perceptions of effective ways to learn writing and the challenges they face during test preparation and/or testing situations. From these explorations, the study draws important implications for writing instruction. After analyzing 3,440 postings from an online forum, the study’s findings reveal the underlying components of learning to write in preparation for these high-stakes tests: 1) add-on and after-school learning; 2) formulaic forms; and 3) concerns regarding the tests’ complex policies and standards. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature on writing studies while also shedding light on our own assumptions about the teaching and learning of secondary writing through an exploration of learners’ perspectives.

**Keywords:** writing assessment, high stakes writing, learning to write, secondary writing, writing instruction

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## 1. Introduction

Secondary writing has become an essential subject in most national education systems. In particular, high school writing instruction and writing tests for entering university have played a crucial yet often unacknowledged role in student writing

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development (Hillocks, 2002). High school writing instruction and writing tests shape both teachers' and students' notions of good writing, effective writing strategies, and the overall learning process (Applebee & Langer, 2013). However, when compared to other areas of literacy research, writing studies have paid little attention to learners' views towards secondary writing instruction and writing tests (Jang, 2014; Song & Kim, 2016). The reason for this is readily understandable: writing studies have tended to focus on the particular textual features of written products, writing methods, and writing assessments rather than focusing on collecting data directly from secondary students and their classrooms (Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen, & Bynum, 2010).

The teaching of writing in secondary Korean language arts education has been closely related to college entrance essay exams (Kim et al., 2020; Kim, 2015), which between 1998–2007 tended to focus on classics, but from 2008 were more interdisciplinary. The focus on the classics resulted from a meeting by the deans of admissions from 12 universities, which consequently resulted in many cram schools making learners memorize exemplary essays for their college entrance essay tests. The move to interdisciplinary writing tests resulted from the Ministry of Education's nine-level grading system for student academic records and the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). However, these two types of college entrance essay tests were not developed based on educational research, curricula, or academic discussions; but appeared to be a reaction to the perceived drawbacks of the college admission system (Lee, 2013). Against this backdrop, the learners' views toward writing instruction and writing tests were marginalized with few focused Korean writing research studies. A literature search of the Korean Citation Index (KCI) revealed that there had been few studies examining the learners' perspectives on secondary school writing instructions. However, as writing is a relatively new study area within Korean language arts education, this is understandable. Korean writing instruction was established as an independent research area in the early 2000s; therefore, the two flagship Korean writing research organizations have relatively short histories, with the Korean Writing Association being founded in 2005 and the Korean College Composition and Communication Association being established in 2010. Kim and Jeong (2015) conducted a network analysis from 2009 to 2014 and found that educational curricula and university writing had become primary research topics within the field of Korean language arts education.

The aim of this paper is to explore Korean high school students' perspectives toward college entrance essay tests, particularly in order to grasp the different ways

in which they learn to write argumentative essays. In order to understand how high school students perceive college entrance essay tests and the challenges that they encounter, it is worthwhile to examine how students communicate their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about essay tests along with their choices for test preparation. In the South Korean context, argumentative writing ability (or the lack thereof) has played a key gatekeeping role in college entrance essay tests. However, few studies have investigated the perceptions and experiences of high school students as test-takers in regards to the college entrance essay as a particular form of high-stakes writing test. Although Korean language arts teachers' work and attitudes regarding secondary writing instruction have been discussed (e.g., Jang, 2013; Kim, Lee, Jang, & Park, 2020), students' views have not been explored. Against this backdrop, the present study's insights will enhance our understanding of L1 Korean writing instruction. The study's primary aim is to explore students' test preparation experiences, their choices for learning how to write in testing situations, and the challenges that they face along the way. Thus, the present study will focus on the following questions:

1. Which ways of learning how to write an argumentative essay do Korean high school students prefer for preparing for college entrance essay tests?
2. Which challenges do these students encounter when preparing for writing tests?

## 2. College Entrance Essay Tests in Korea

The Korean concept of nonsul is not new in South Korean educational systems. It has different meanings in various contexts. Although it literally means "logical articulation," many regard it as a type of university entrance exam (Chang, 2018) separate from the regular educational curriculum or an analysis of previous college entrance essay tests (Lee, 2013). College entrance essay tests have been considered by students and teachers as one of the most influential exam categories since 1997. Twelve universities in Seoul established the basic principle for college entrance essay tests in November 1997: the college entrance essay test questions would be formulated based on classics from a variety of time periods and places around the world. College entrance essay tests have been continuously revised and have influenced secondary writing pedagogy in South Korea. These argumentative writing tests serve as gatekeepers between high school and higher education in South Korea.

Perceiving these tests as potential admission tickets for prestigious universities in South Korea, Korean students often study writing prompts through other exams and learn to write argumentative essays within limited time and space constraints.

Over time, it became increasingly challenging for Korean universities to select students based on a single national standardized test called the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). Thus, a few universities-most of them prestigious institutions-developed their own argumentative writing tests in the mid-1990s. Since then, these college entrance essay tests have attracted significant interest from other universities. Consequently, in 2016, 30 out of 433 Korean universities administered college entrance essay tests for Korean 12th-grade (the final year of the secondary curriculum) students.

Since each university has developed its own set of entrance essay tests, the characteristics of each test differ from institution to institution. Generally, writing tests feature anywhere between two and eight sub-questions. For instance, Seoul National University's writing test featured eight sub-questions in 2008. The primary reason for this complex structure of multiple sub-questions is that universities want to evaluate student performance more systematically and specifically through various answers to multiple questions rather than a one-shot long essay about one question (Lee, 2013). The excerpt below from one university's writing test illustrates the features of this complex structure:

Answer the questions after reading the texts [A~H] below.

1. Explain the perspective of [A] text through the case presented in the text [B].
2. Explain the similarities between arguments shown in texts [C, this text is written in English] and [D].
3. The texts [E], [F], and [G] show different views toward violence. Articulate the distinct characteristics reflected in each view.
4. Summarize the attitude [H] author argues, for coping with violence, then write your argumentative essay about your attitude toward violence by drawing on and using every text from [A] all the way through [F].

This is a typical college entrance essay test question. Test-takers must write answers to these four sub-questions in under two hours. Different universities have different word limits, but most institutions set the cumulative limit for all answers at around 2,500 words. In other words, within one or two hours, students must read several passages (each text consisting of around 250 words), demonstrate their

understanding of those texts by summarizing, comparing, and contrasting, and then write an argumentative essay reflecting on all of the passages.

As noted earlier, Korean writing research is an emerging area of study within the field of Korean language arts education. Consequently, no detailed investigation of college entrance essay tests has been conducted thus far. A search using keywords for college entrance exams yielded 50 journal articles on KCI, and only 12 studies out of these 50 were published after 2016. Upon closer inspection, not all 12 studies focused on college entrance essay tests in terms of writing instruction. Nine studies discussed subjects about something other than writing instruction: educational policies, mathematical writing exams, philosophical writing instruction, and the CSAT writing section. The evidence presented thus far suggests that there is still much uncertainty regarding Korean writing instruction across the board.

Previous studies have indicated that all stakeholders' perceptions, notions, and interpretations of college entry essay tests should be investigated in order to increase tests' validity. For instance, Moon (2008) stressed the need to bridge the gap between the knowledge that students acquire in high school and the difficulty level of Korean universities' writing tests. In a study of the historical context of college entrance essay tests, Noh (2010) recommended that incorporating high school contexts and teachers' and students' perceptions into test development would lead to a more valid assessment of students' skills. Lee (2013) also described the phenomenon whereby writing instruction occurred after school as a "bolt-on" type, suggesting the need to incorporate teachers' and students' perceptions due to the gap between real high school curricula and essay testing situations established by universities. Kwon et al. (2017) suggested expanding the genres featured in college entry essay tests to increase the types of competencies that can be assessed. Thus far, although some studies have examined students' perceptions concerning general secondary writing education, there has been no detailed investigation of students' experiences and perceptions regarding college entrance essay tests.

### 3. Method

This study drew on critical language testing theory (CLT) (Shohamy, 2001, 2017), which focuses on the consequences of assessments, such as how those taking assessments change their behaviors to get better scores. Qualitative data analysis was adopted for this study. While common approaches for perceptual understanding

often involve questionnaires and/or interviews with focal participants, the data for this research were collected from online forums where Korean high school students ask and answer questions, share useful information and personal experiences, and exchange honest views about college entrance essay exams. Kim (2017) also analyzed online venues in order to grasp students' perceptions of the TOEFL writing test; thus, I followed Kim's procedure to collect data for this study. Kim (2017) collected and examined 476 online postings to identify students' understanding of the preparation process for the TOEFL writing test. A major advantage of this method based on using anonymous online platforms for data collection is that a range of perspectives from individual students can be included and explored. It should be noted that the responses collected from the Internet relating to college entrance exams were not representative examples because active students tend to share their views through online platforms anyway, whereas other students do not.

The present study's data are comprised of over 250 pages of anonymous postings in online platforms from the college entrance exam information website: "the college entrance essay exam discussion forum" (<https://bit.ly/30IpKIj>). This online forum is operated by Sumanhui.com, one of the largest online communities for high school students who are preparing for college admission in South Korea. There are over 2,790,000 enrolled members in this online community, and the total number of visitors since the website's launch has surpassed 809,000,000. The online forums provided by the website Sumanhui.com are open and public venues where any person using a pseudonym can participate in discussions and post questions and answers in Korean.

Since the postings are anonymous, the collected information from these online venues can provide meaningful, raw data on Korean high school students' real struggles, questions, and perceptions regarding college entrance essay tests. Over 8,800,000 entries have been posted on the website since 2004. "The college entrance essay exam discussion forum" includes general postings and comments regarding writing tests established by Korean universities, and the data for this study are made up mostly of postings concerning writing tests between May 2019 and April 2020.

The collected data included 3440 postings. All postings were read in order to identify and sort postings on the topic of writing tests. Replies to the main postings were counted as separate posts because they often featured writing experiences, personal writing strategies, and perceptions regarding writing tests as well. All postings and comments were written in Korean; thus, the excerpts presented in the results section were translated by the first author. The names of *Hagwons*—private

tutoring institutes or cram schools, as well as lecturer names stated in several of the excerpts—were replaced with pseudonyms because particular lecturers or *Hagwons* were not the focus of the present study.

Descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016) was used to categorize data because it is an effective way to describe what occurs in a given context and helps readers to understand researchers' observations in plain common language (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Wolcott, 1994). Two coders completed their ratings independently. Both coders were experienced Korean language teachers. They coded the data to identify commonalities among and differences between the postings. The coders were tasked with inferring the assumptions and knowledge underlying the statements in each posting. The first cycle of coding was conducted in order to determine the collected data's basic topics and to categorize them under the general question, "What is going on here?" Of the first 100 postings of the 3,440 total examined in this study, 72% were coded exactly the same by both coders. Intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) estimates were calculated using SPSS 25 Mac based on a mean-rating ( $k = 2$ ), absolute-agreement, two-way mixed-effects model. During the process of developing and redefining the coding scheme's categories, the issue of overlapping between subcategories was addressed by making them mutually exclusive.

The first cycle of descriptive coding functioned as the foundational stepping stone for the second cycle of coding to ensure the analysis' reliability and validity. Following the principles of content analysis, reliability was calculated and re-assessed during each coding cycle (Weber, 1990). The obtained ICC value for the second cycle of coding was 0.842, which indicates good reliability, even though not an excellent level. When any different conceptualization of the coding scheme or any items coded to different categories were uncovered, we clarified coding instructions by a reiterative process of rearrangement and discussion of our coding frame. This adjustment process was time-consuming but ensured the production of accurate coding results. In this second round of coding, discrepancies and misunderstandings in coding were discussed and all disagreements were resolved with the revised coding frame.

In the third round of coding, validity was ensured through cross-validation and by extensive review of the coding frame. Using the same coding frame, each coder investigated the entire data a week after the second round (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). This comparison across two different time points confirmed that the coding frame was reliable since the coding results remained stable (Schreier, 2012).

## 4. Results

Table 1 presents an overview of the codes and frequencies of major themes in the online forum. Preparation methods and strategies were featured in the highest proportion of online forum postings, followed by difficulties students faced regarding college entrance essay tests. Less than a quarter of those who posted (23%) focused on various policies and guidelines regarding writing tests established and administered by different universities. The smallest category of postings featured experiences of taking mock and actual writing tests.

**Table 1.** Major themes in the college entrance essay exam online forum

Categories	Frequencies (%)
Preparation	1,329 (39)
Difficulties	1,061 (31)
Policies and guidelines	786 (23)
Experiences with essay tests	264 (7)
Total	3,440 (100)

### 4.1. How Korean High School Students Prepare for College Entrance Essay Tests

#### 4.1.1. Attending writing test preparation institutions

Strategies for preparing for college entrance essay tests were divided into four main sub-groups, as Table 2 shows.

**Table 2.** Preparation strategies for college entrance essay tests

Preparation	Frequencies (%)
Attending private institute	692 (52)
Practicing writing without a teacher	420 (32)
Textual features	119 (9)
Written grammar and usages	98 (7)
Total	1,329 (100)

The most frequently discussed strategy in the online forum was attending a *Hagwon*, or a for-profit private cram school, which is prevalent in South Korea. Many forum participants asked and talked about popular lecturers and *Hagwons* as well as online lectures. Postings belonging to this category largely seemed to assume that attending a *Hagwon* is the best way to prepare for college entrance essay tests, often emphasizing the limitations of trying to teach oneself writing. For instance,

(Except 1) I will stay in Seoul for one or two months during the summer in order to take a summer intensive writing program. Please let me know which Hagwon's summer program would be good for me.

(Except 2) Which Hagwon is popular in Daegu? Please share your experience of learning at a Hagwon you attended, and the positive and negative sides as well.

(Except 3) I am looking for a Hagwon in which they are good at summarizing the distinct characteristics of writing tests by different universities. I prefer a small class to get enough opportunities for one-on-one teaching.

(Except 4) I am attending Kim's class over the last ten weeks, but I am considering transferring to another class by Lee. To avoid wasting my time, I was also thinking about attending both classes together.

The benefits of attending *Hagwons* include access to templates produced by each lecturer and one-on-one teaching. Formulaic templates and one-on-one teaching in the form of writing conferences are typical approaches used by *Hagwons* for helping students prepare for college entrance essay tests. Some examples of this include the following:

(Except 5) I memorized every template from Hagwon by transcribing by hand. Many lecturers recommended this method and my friends learned it in the same way too. Transcribing repeatedly allowed me to be familiar with the templates.

(Except 6) Do famous Hagwons in Daechi or Mokdong in Seoul, such as A and

B, treat students well? I am asking in terms of one-on-one teaching.

Many other participants shared similar learning experiences. Based on the postings, other methods of writing instruction in a *Hagwon* include studying written grammar and reading books in various fields to broaden background knowledge. However, most postings under this category focused on ways to select appropriate *Hagwons* and the quality of one-on-one teaching provided by different *Hagwons*.

#### 4.1.2. Learning to write without a teacher

The second most frequently discussed topic under the preparation category was different types of self-study. One participant in particular asked about learning methods:

(Excerpt 7) I need to study writing on my own because I cannot afford to attend Hagwon due to my family circumstances. I have practiced writing essays according to writing prompts from previous writing tests. I don't know if what I'm doing is right.

(Excerpt 8) I am wondering how you guys get responses to your own writing when you are not attending Hagwon. I usually compare my essays with samples from university websites and that's all.

Since attending a *Hagwon* was regarded as the most effective way to prepare for college entrance essay tests, students who were not currently attending a *Hagwon* seemed to worry about their status and questioned their preparation strategies within their contexts. One of the biggest concerns that Korean students expressed regarding attending a *Hagwon* was the high price of writing courses provided by these schools. For instance:

(Excerpt 9) I have never learned how to write college entrance essays. How and where do I start learning to write? Should I attend a famous Hagwon? Is it possible to study alone without attending a Hagwon?

(Excerpt 10) I discovered that the intensive writing courses by Hagwons are too expensive, so how are you preparing for the college entrance essay

tests? I really wanted to take intensive courses, but it just seems too expensive. Is there any way to study alone without attending Hagwon?

This phenomenon is common because courses teaching how to take college entrance essay tests were either offered as afterschool programs or were not offered at all. Many hagwons designed various courses for students at various levels, but their tuition fees were expensive.

## 4.2. Difficulties with Writing Practices and High-Stakes Testing Situations

### 4.2.1. Universities' different types of writing tests

Table 3 below presents three items under the category of students' difficulties as shared through the online forum: writing tests' different question types; making study plans for writing; and writing tests' general features.

**Table 3.** Difficulties students have with college entrance essay tests

Preparation	Frequencies (%)
Different types of writing tests	674 (64)
Study plans for self-directed learning	276 (26)
General features about writing tests	111 (10)
Total	1,061 (100)

As Table 3 shows, over 60% of participants indicated that different universities setting different types of questions was a major hurdle for them. For instance, several students reported having difficulty studying different types of essay questions based on different target universities:

(Excerpt 11) The types of writing test from C University last year has changed when compared with the one two years ago. They gave test-takers two figures as data with short passages, but they provided three writing prompts with several Korean passages, but without any figures or tables last year. Do you think they will set writing prompts as they did last year, or in the traditional way, I mean, with figures and tables?

(Excerpt 12) Anybody know about the level of difficulty of writing tests from D University? And could you please let me know the typical types of essay questions that universities usually used?

Some results are likely to be related to students' difficulty in understanding the nature of writing prompts or the prompts' underlying intentions. In fact, some postings seemed to express a degree of resentment as to the way the writing tests were structured:

(Excerpt 13) Today's exam by E University seems to me that they wanted to find students who think in the ways they like, rather than think independently in logical ways. Each writing prompt required test-takers to summarize key points instead of organizing my own claims.

(Excerpt 14) In F university's writing test today, I had to write about specific and feasible solutions for social issues. I strongly believe that even professors could not judge which solution would be effective, but they asked students to write solutions as answers within two hours.

In their accounts of the procedures surrounding essay tests, students have had struggled to grasp the underlying assumptions of the writing prompts. As a consequence, some students have argued that the essay tests were vague and, thus, were not appropriate writing assessments.

#### 4.2.2. Study plans for self-directed learning

The findings obtained from analyzing the online forum data reveal that many students had difficulty making their own study plans. Some participants reported that they did not know where to start:

(Excerpt 15) I decided to study writing from tomorrow, but I don't know where to start.

(Excerpt 16) Is it okay to start studying writing after the CSAT? I don't have enough time right now.

(Except 17) I spent three hours preparing for the college entrance essay tests per week. Do you think it will be enough?

It seems possible that most high schools provided only a few classes or that there was no writing class at all. Some stated that they did not receive enough support from their high schools:

(Except 18) My school teachers didn't seem to know about the recent trends of college entrance essay tests.

(Except 19) My school does not open any writing classes for the college entrance essay tests. I have no idea where I can get any support for writing tests or how to plan.

The majority of students were unanimous in voicing the fact that their high schools did not provide courses for preparing for college entrance essay tests, especially when compared with *Hagwons*. The status of students and types of essay tests according to higher institutions are different, but many schools seemed to focus on general rules for good writing or on common features of various essay tests.

#### 4.2.3. General writing test features

Confusion about scoring, classmates' contradictory outcomes, and vague notions about good writing were also discussed. Examples include:

(Excerpt 20) The writing test is really just a matter of luck? So many people claim that the writing test is a matter of good luck. Do you really think so?

(Excerpt 21) Since it is challenging for raters to apply objective rating criteria to every single student's writing, I cannot trust the results announced by universities.

(Excerpt 22) Universities do not provide any scores or rubrics, but only whether a student is accepted or not.

This finding was consistent with that of Chang (2018) who illustrated which

features of essay courses were separate and isolated from the regular curriculum and that many stakeholders have different conceptions of college entrance essay exams.

#### 4.3. Each University's Policies and Guidelines

786 postings focused on universities' different policies and guidelines, with participants attempting to understand the differences or to identify which university's policies would work to their advantage. This phenomenon has emerged due to universities often changing their test formats, scoring systems, and test schedules.

(Excerpt 23) It is widely accepted that G University is famous for preferring students having a good grade point average and H University accepts test-takers having good CSAT scores.

(Excerpt 24) G university announced that they will waive CSAT minimum scores when students pass their writing tests. What does it mean?

(Excerpt 25) J University announced that they will adopt an absolute grading system from the next writing test. What does it mean? How will this impact test-takers?

Consistent with the literature, this study found that learners have struggled with grasping features of essays, the underlying principles of how to write them, and tips for improving their essay scores.

#### 4.4. Experiences with Essay Tests

Two-hundred and sixty-four postings featured accounts of personal experiences of taking writing tests or on the circumstances surrounding the testing situations. In some postings, university students shared their experiences of preparing for college entrance essay tests when they were high school students; for example:

(Excerpt 26) I preferred to listen to online lectures. Although I wasn't able to get feedback on my writing at all, I practiced writing repeatedly according to suggestions by online lecturers.

(Excerpt 27) One of the common issues may not be your writing skills, but may be your reading comprehension ability. Students who get a great score are often good at understanding passages and figures along with writing prompts. In this way, they successfully demonstrate their understanding of multiple passages through their writing, but students who didn't make sense of the reading materials often end up writing very surface-level and superficial features on topics.

As shown above, some learners shared their views about college entrance essay tests. Readers of this online forum usually liked those types of postings because they are written from the perspective of learners as test-takers rather than from the perspectives of teachers, educators, or parents.

## 5. Discussion

Prior research has pointed to the need to explore the perceptions of both test-makers and test-takers in order to derive meaningful insights to enhance the validity of high-stakes writing assessments (Hyytinen, Löfström, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017; Kim, 2017; Xie, 2015). The present study's findings suggest that Korean high school students have struggled with understanding the largely tacit nature of high-stakes writing assessment systems established and used by different universities. The approach taken throughout this study has been to conceptualize student perceptions regarding effective ways to learn how to write an argumentative essay.

### 5.1. Hagwons, or the Primary Place for Teaching and Learning Writing

This study's most obvious finding is that the first step in writing test preparation is often to look for a good *Hagwon*, a private cram school. A possible explanation for this might be that there is little writing instruction in many Korean high schools' language arts classes (Kwak, 2017). The majority of Korean high school students in this study seemed to look for information about popular *Hagwons* independently because their school teachers did not teach them how to deal with college entrance essay tests (e.g., excerpts 9, 18, and 19). It has become commonplace for many Korean students to attend private institutes in order to learn to write in English as a second language or to prepare for English proficiency tests such as the TOEFL

or IELTS (Kim, Kim, & Zhang, 2014). In South Korea, the same phenomenon is true when it comes to learning to write in the mother tongue; in other words, this does not apply exclusively to second language writing.

Issues of educational inequality have emerged within the context of English language learning in Korea because only parents who can afford the cost of private education are able to provide their children with sufficient opportunities to use and practice English, especially when it comes to conversational English (Park, 2009). A similar hierarchical phenomenon has been observed regarding writing assessments in the mother tongue. In this study, most students preparing for writing tests via self-study made that choice due to financial concerns (e.g., excerpt 10). Some students made plans to study writing away from home during the summer by attending a *Hagwon* (e.g., excerpt 1). Given that most well-known *Hagwons* are concentrated in Seoul's posh Daechi and Mokdong areas, students' residential locations could also prevent them from having access to certain *Hagwons*.

Moreover, it should be noted that the widespread use of college entrance essay exams has influenced epistemological beliefs regarding notions of good writing, writing procedures, and texts as final products. One of *Hagwons'* typical approaches in the teaching of writing is to use templates or textual structures to prescribe a particular order of writing. This tends to strongly define writing as a pre-set form. It is fairly common to ignore validity—whether college entrance essay exams can effectively assess students' real writing abilities—and instructors at *Hagwons* and their students often only care about achieving higher scores on these tests. According to John Dewey (1938), without doubt, uncertainty, or a question, real inquiry cannot begin. However, the problem is that the kind of writing taught by *Hagwons* encourages the rapid production of sentences without thinking, reasoning, or deliberation. Such writing is merely the product of filling in the blanks because many students rely heavily on a pre-set structure instead of generating their own meanings.

In an ideal world, Korean language arts teachers would understand the underlying assumptions of college entrance exams and use those assumptions to guide their writing instruction. While the present study demonstrates less-than-ideal realities of learning how to write, it also suggests that schools and teachers need to change their teaching practices and help students to shift their beliefs about writing. One way to address this hurdle would be to investigate students' writing experiences, challenges, and interests through one-on-one conferences or group meetings. This approach would allow teachers to identify gaps that need to be filled and look for concrete ways to make classroom practices supportive of writing assessments, and

vice versa. More research is also needed to develop instructional units to address the inconsistencies between college entrance essay exams and high school writing instruction.

## 5.2. Formulaic Structure and Surface Features of Texts

Another equally important concern is that Korean students in this study seemed to have a narrow view of writing. According to Hillocks (2002), large-scale writing assessments often shape students' beliefs about what good writing and good writing ability actually as well as their perceptions of different ways of learning to write. White (1995) has described the timed essay as "dreary and formulaic." Undoubtedly, as mentioned above, a *Hagwon's* writing test preparation course would provide some form of writing instruction; however, what students actually learn and practice at *Hagwons* may be up for debate. *Hagwons'* primary teaching methods include providing templates developed by instructors, examining writing prompts from past writing tests from target universities, and analyzing exemplary essays. Accordingly, these methods mostly prepare students for writing tests through the rote memorization of formulaic templates and stock expressions.

Although Korean universities may design and develop their own writing tests to assess students' understanding and level of writing competence, many Korean students in this study seemed to have difficulty understanding the meaning of writing and of learning to write (e.g., excerpts 13 and 14). As a result, students sometimes severely criticized the validity of writing tests (e.g., excerpts 21 and 22) or relegated writing test outcomes to a matter of good luck (e.g., excerpt 20). Through an analysis of 476 online postings, Kim (2017) identified that a majority of Korean students learned how to write in English by memorizing templates. It is somewhat surprising that, in South Korea, learning to write in the mother tongue and learning to write in a foreign language are both related to the memorization of formulaic structures, expressions, and surface textual features.

The ubiquity of formulaic structures might represent one of the failures of writing instruction in South Korea. The purpose of learning, memorizing, and relying on a formulaic template is to achieve an adequate enough score to gain admission to university. Nevertheless, by itself, the use of pre-set structures is not necessarily an issue that must be solved. A pre-set template could function as a form of scaffolding, much like a swimming kickboard for beginner-level swimmers. Of course, writing following a strict template is not real writing but rather artificial writing. However,

it is still a useful tool for teaching the basic elements of writing in a classroom setting. It would be futile to blame the swimming kickboard simply because it is a temporary tool that can aid beginners to learn how to swim. The problem, thus, is not a formulaic template in and of itself but rather its influence on students' ideas, understanding, and beliefs about writing. Writing instruction for college entrance essay tests is most Korean students' singular experience of learning how to write; this finding also confirms evidence from prior studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Kim, 2015; Lee, 2013). Therefore, such instruction can shape the students' entire notions of writing, the writing process, and writing practices. For these reasons, we must confront the reality of current writing instruction where students are taught to rely heavily on formulaic templates. This reality stands in our way as we aim to further investigate how to best help learners understand their own writing behaviors.

### 5.3. Rest Concerns: Feedback, Scoring Systems, and Changing Politics

One of the biggest concerns that Korean students expressed regarding their preparation for college entrance essay tests was where and how to obtain meaningful responses to their writing. Providing feedback to student writing is one of the most effective methods to improve student achievement in the teaching of writing (Chen, Chung, & Wu, 2013; Yu & Lee, 2013). Many of the online postings reviewed in this study suggested that students were aware of the value of feedback in improving the quality of their writing (e.g., excerpts 3 and 26). Problematically, however, many students had difficulty finding experts who could provide meaningful feedback—even *Hagwon* instructors often did not provide feedback to student writing. Consequently, students often had to resort to comparing their own writing with exemplary essays to identify areas requiring improvement.

Different universities employ different exam policies, writing prompt types, and scoring systems. Moreover, universities often change their own standards, scoring systems, and writing test types over time. For instance, students were asked to write a summary rather than an argumentative essay in E University's writing tests (see excerpt 13), which was unexpected because students were generally asked to write an argumentative essay. Some universities have established holistic scoring systems reflecting high school grades and CSAT scores (the CSAT is a standardized test offered in Korea only once per year in November). Although some universities have briefly described the changes made to their writing tests, many of the details remain unknown. For instance, how can universities score over 30,000 student tests in such

short periods of time? What element of writing is valued the most? What are the widespread criteria for 'good' writing applied by professors to assess student writing, even when professors come from different disciplines?

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to explore students' perceptions concerning college entrance essay tests and the ways of learning how to write an argumentative essay. The investigation of an online platform has shown that many students rely heavily on private tutoring via *Hagwons* to prepare for essay tests. Additionally, formulaic approaches are pervasive, regardless of whether students learn to write at *Hagwons* or have taught themselves. The third major finding was that most students seem to have difficulty grasping the nature, underlying assumptions, and expectations of college entrance essay tests.

Over the last twenty years, writing research has provided valuable insights regarding writing theories, pedagogies, and curricula as an emerging field within Korean language arts. The present study's main goal was to investigate Korean high school students' perceptions of college entrance essay tests. In particular, the study focused on exploring student perceptions from the 'inside' rather than from teachers, educators, or practitioners. Through an analysis of data collected from an anonymous online forum, this study has identified several themes of primary concerns expressed by Korean students had regarding high-stakes writing assessments administered by Korean universities. These themes include the ability (or lack thereof) to attend private institutes, self-study, and difficulties stemming from the largely tacit nature of writing assessments. This study's findings provide insights for the future development of high-stakes writing assessments. As the set of themes and categories was designed inductively, the scope of discussion is wide, covering topics from sociocultural dimensions to formalistic features of writing instruction.

In South Korea, students repeatedly practice one-draft argumentative writing. Although there are often several sub-questions requiring students to summarize or demonstrate their understanding through comparative/contrastive writing, the one-draft argumentative essay written in a short period of time is the most valued assessment tool by educators and teachers. Due to a lack of sufficient writing instruction in South Korean schools, there is a pervasive emphasis on formulaic templates; the memorization of stock expressions is also popular. Thus, approaches

to college entrance essay exams are important issues for future research because there are still many unanswered questions, including questions of the specific landscapes of writing instruction that work or are preferred.

College entrance exams as high-stakes assessments in the form of timed essays are usually not an exemplary way for students to demonstrate their writing skills. A typical timed essay is an artificial genre requiring a completely unnatural writing process (Applebee & Langer, 2013). However, South Korea's formulaic approach to handling writing tests is not an uncommon phenomenon; the usefulness of other large-scale writing assessments—including the SAT's essay section in the United States or the GCSE's writing section in the United Kingdom—have also often been called into question. According to Anson (2008, p. 119), high-stakes writing tests usually have the following serious limitations: 1) no purpose except for the test itself; 2) no intended audience except for anonymous evaluators or machines; 3) limited time and space without any writing resources; 4) protocols restricting structures and variations; and, 5) no useful feedback except for a numerical score. Korean college entrance essay tests are characterized by the same five drawbacks. Even more problematically, such a limited form of writing assessment exerts a heavy influence on writing instruction and curricula. A diverse range of writing genres, audiences, and contexts has been marginalized as the development of narrowly defined writing skills specifically meant for writing tests has become a major learning objective.

This challenge will not be easily resolved, particularly as it relates to college entrance policies. A critical challenge to overcome is the fundamentally different perspective between writing scholars and writing assessment specialists about what constitutes "good writing". Sixty years of writing studies have repeatedly confirmed that writing is complex, context-based, and a complicated social practice. On the other hand, assessment specialists and administrators tend to regard writing as a simple, linear, and uncomplicated process without taking into account important contextual factors. It is very difficult to address these different viewpoints since writing scholars value both validity and reliability, while assessment specialists "often worry primarily or exclusively about reliability" (Isaacs & Molloy, 2010, p. 519). Yancey (1999) pointed out this issue in reference to large-scale writing assessments: "Validity means you are measuring what you intend to measure, reliability that you can measure it consistently. While both features are desirable in any writing evaluation, advocates of each tend to play them off against each other" (p. 483).

Writing instruction is complicated and context-dependent. As for the issue of validity, other types of writing assessments, such as portfolios, can be employed.

However, validity-oriented assessments including portfolios are not suitable for college entrance exams given their limitations in terms of time, cost, and/or reliability. Rather than severely criticizing large-scale writing assessments or formulaic templates, we must consider how to address the current reality of writing instruction. The teaching and learning of writing do not ultimately have a finish line because writing is a process rather than a product. Developing new writing approaches, instructional plans, and resources will take a long time, but it is necessary. Root-level research is also required to further evaluate different ways of teaching writing and the usefulness of current writing assessments. All of these processes will likely evolve over time as further research is conducted.

Through a comprehensive analysis of 3,440 online postings, this research study extends our knowledge of writing assessments in Korea. The study has illustrated some of the ways in which Korean students struggle with writing and with different universities' writing assessments. Perhaps the study's major limitation is that highly active participants are more likely to share their opinions in an online space (Graham & Wright, 2014); thus, this limitation unavoidably raises questions about the generalizability of the study's findings. However, this exploratory study can serve as a useful starting point for future research on learning to write from students' perspectives and for the further development of Korean writing studies.

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Received: June 19, 2020

Revised version received: July 30, 2020

Accepted: October 29, 2020