# THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ENTRANCE EXAMINATION: AN APPRAISAL

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There is scarcely any factor that so vitally influences the quality of English teaching in Korea as the character of the annual college English entrance examinations. It is for this reason that I have undertaken to analyze and discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of these exams with a view to possible improvements, and to point out several new directions that may profitably be pursued in the future. After some introductory remarks, I will proceed to discuss in detail a number of questions selected from recent exams and then will move on to suggestions for future developments.

#### 1. Introduction

Much could be said about the need for good language exams at every stage of the students' training: a language aptitude exam at the beginning of their training, achievement exams covering each section of a carefully planned six-year program and the final year or two in college, and lastly, a major proficiency exam in each of six large areas of language competence, to be given in the junior or senior year of college. Such an exam would rate objectively the precise level of their ability in hearing and speaking, reading and writing, cultural understanding and translation.

Without any doubt whatsoever, the ordinary Korean student emerging from this long seven- or eight-year course in English should have achieved a high degree of proficiency in each of these areas. This rare opportunity to devote so many years to learning a foreign language would be an almost unheard-of luxury in the United States. Schools there consider themselves fortunate if they can devote four years to training in a foreign language such as German, French, or Spanish, six years at the most. If an American student did not come out of six years of German with the ability to understand and speak German fluently, as well as to read the literature and write acceptable prose—these years of language training would be counted an unfortunate, indeed tragic, waste of precious time and

energy. To expect anything less of the Korean student in his long program of learning English is unthinkable. One cannot fail to be impressed by the eager enthusiasm, high motivation, excellent language learning ability, and hard work of Korean students. There is no question but that an integrated and carefully planned eight-year program of English would turn out as fully competent bilinguals as are produced by any school system in the world.

The secret of such success, of course, lies in assigning precise goals to every stage of the language-learning process, and building each year on what has been previously achieved. It would take cognizance of the fact that the twelve-year old can learn to speak and understand a foreign language much more easily than a college freshman of eighteen; that grammar is best learned in actual use; that the final years of high school and the first two years of college are the ideal time for the reading and discussion of great literature, but that real fluency in reading and writing, as well as thorough penetration of the literature, presupposes long years of acquiring native-like mastery of the language through constant practice in speaking and hearing the language; and, finally, that ability to translate easily from one language to another may be considered the culmination of all this antecedent work, rather than a skill to be acquired at the beginning. (The baby creeping across the floor must first be taught to walk before he is expected to compete in the 100-yard dash.)

It is clear that the character of college entrance exams determines to a major degree the type and the quality of training given at least in the six previous years. (It is probably not an exaggeration to say that a change one year in the entrance exams to Tokyo University influences the curriculum offered the following year in kindergartens throughout Japan.) For this reason, all who are deeply interested in improving the quality of English teaching in Korea look confidently to these entrance exams to set the proper standard and to provide a reliable guide to real achievement in language learning.

My evaluation of the content of these exams will touch on many areas. Though it will at times be frankly critical, I need not say that these remarks are meant in a friendly way, without any suggestion of sharpness or unkindness. I have no axe to grind. I speak only as one professional to others in the same profession who are equally concerned about the quality and effectiveness of these exams. The opinions I will express, I may add, are strictly my own, no one else's. They stand or fall on their own merits.

## 2. Critique

Let me begin by saying—and I would like all my future criticism to be understood in the light of this remark—that in general the exams which I have studied are, in my judgment, of a high calibre. They are good exams; some of them are excellent. Many of the questions are ingenious, for all their simplicity of structure. There is an increasing emphasis on testing the spoken language. This is all the more apparent when we compare current exams with those of several years ago. At that time an applicant could pass the exam wholly innocenot any contact with the spoken language; today this is almost impossible. There were large quantities of translation from English to Korean and vice versa. Today this is usually not the case. Even the answers to comprehension questions on reading passages were then sometimes given in Korean. This is quite clearly a thing of the past. An honest appraisal of college English entrance exams reveals that their quality is steadily improving. There is no doubt but that strong new influences have been at work in the past few years.

At the same time, a number of questionable elements are still cropping up in the exams: some of them of doubtful accuracy, others ambiguous, others simply incorrect. Let me turn now to particulars.

#### 2.1. Vowel and Consonant Sound

Exam questions of the following type are excellent. There is need, however, for precise instructions:

- (1) The italicized letters represent one sound in each of the following words. Compare the four such sounds in each group, and indicate which one of the groups contains one sound which is different from the other sounds in that group.
  - A. a) looks, reaps, takes, snaps
    - b) cooked, laughed, looked, warped
    - c) runs, goes, swords, songs
    - d) pulled, strained, passed, lived
  - B. a) smile, try, isle, rice
    - b) take, race, break, veil
    - c) many, bury, laid, pair
    - d) yeast, flee, yield, machine

Such questions can just as well be included in full sentences. Thus, in testing the student's

ability to recognize a series of /3/'s, the sentence may be presented:

Collisions usually occur because of the driver's poor vision and confusion. Note, however, the following sentence, testing for /f/:

I'd like to emphasize that the problem is tough and you have to be very careful. Three hits and a foul ball, I would say, if I may borrow a phrase from baseball terminology. Emphasize, tough, and careful are good examples, but the word have is open to question. Who is to say that this word will not be stressed by the speaker (have to be...), thus producing a voiced /v/? This would make the exam item quite confusing, since the non-identical sound is actually found in another sentence in this question.

I would like to call attention to two things in questions of this type: (1) Greater sophistication can be introduced by including the same sound under different spellings. Even the uncommon sound /3/ is found in English in four or five different forms: s, si, z, zi, and g, as in: measure, division, azure, brazier, and rouge; only two of these are used in the sentence given above. This is even more true for certain vowel sounds such as /e/ and /A/, each of which occurs in twelve different spellings in English. (2) Particular attention should be given to those sounds in English which are special problems for Koreans, for example: /s/ vs. /5/, as in sip/ship; /i:/ vs. /i/, as in meet/mitt, and so forth. Such testing depends, of course, on a contrastive analysis of Korean and English phonology, which is badly needed as a basis for sound testing. But every teacher of English is aware of the principal difficulties of this sort arise.

Another type of question asks for the comparison of the vowel or consonant sound in one word with sounds in other words:

- (2) Mark on your answer sheet the two words in the answer that have a vowel sound like that of the underlined word in the following sentences:
  - A. I have a pain in my feet.
    - a. fit b. ship c. seek d. fill e. leave
  - B. I like the English course.
    - a. born b. bird c. hurt d. war e. were

Questions of this kind are quite satisfactory, especially when five or six choices are offered, and two or more of these have identical sounds. I would like to call attention particularly to question (B); quite properly, the author compares a vowel plus /r/ only with other words similarly containing a vowel plus /r/. In English, /r/ affects the phonetic quality of a preceding vowel to such an extent that it would be quite confusing

to compare vowels alone, where some are followed by /r/ and others are not.

Too narrow a comparison, however, should be avoided, since in such cases the native speaker frequently vacillates between one sound and another. Such an example is the following:

(3) Indicate the underlined sound among the four words in the answer which corresponds to the sound of the underlined "e" in the sentence.

She has exquisite hands.

a. employment b. encourage c. extensive d. entertain

Answer d. is called for, presumably because the first syllable of *entertain* has secondary stress, while each of the other words is only weakly stressed on the first syllable. This is perhaps calling for a dictionary pronunciation, but it is not quite realistic, I believe, in actual speech.

# 2.2. Stress and Intonation

Word stress or emphasis has been adequately treated in recent exams, except that the stress pattern in compound words and two-word verbs could be given more attention: coffee table vs. kitchen table, Blue House vs. blue house; and think over vs. think about, call up vs. call for, and so forth. These problems can be tested either separately or together, as in the following:

- (4) In which one of the underlined phrases should the second word (rather than the first) be more highly stressed?
  - a) Who do you want to speak with? c) I've been waiting for a phone call.
  - b) What do you have to think over? d) He's told me to wait in the dining room.

Turning then to intonation, we find much more emphasis in current exams on this highly important feature of spoken English. Questions such as the following are excellent:

(5) Which of the questions given below would receive the following answer:

# I put it in the icebox.

- a. Who put it in the icebox?
- b. Where did you put it?
- c. You put it in the icebox, didn't you?
- d. Did you put it in the icebox or on the icebox?
- (6) Indicate which one of the following intonations is incorrect (in the context given).

# A. a) Is your name Kim or Lee ?

b) Bill likes nothing so well as mountain climbing.

- c) We do believe you.
- d) It's my brother who wants it.
- B. a) (Will you bring it here?)

  John ny will bring it to you.
  - d) (Did you take the new book or the old one?)
     I took the new book.
  - c) (He's not working hard, is he?)

    Yes, he is working hard.
  - d) (What does he do, if he doesn't feel like walking?)

    If he doesn't feel like walking, he rides a bicycle.
  - C. a) Do you like apples and oranges? // Yes. I do
  - b) Did you go to the movie or the concert? // I went to the concert.
  - c) Who came to see you yesterday? // Jane came to see me yes terday.
  - d) When did he come to see you? // He came to see me yes terday.

These questions are well-conceived and the intonations indicated quite acceptable. There is, however, perhaps no area where it is so imperative to consult one or more native speakers as in questions concerned with intonation. Several examples could be cited where the situation indicated simply would not call for the intonation given. Such questions are a source of confusion for the student, and every caution should be taken to avoid them. In each case, a simple change would have rendered them completely acceptable.

Another area where great care must be exercised is in questions of phrasing and rhythm. The actual test questions I have seen are rarely as the examples given. Note that for each of the following only one pattern of phrasing is acceptable:

- (7) A. Next morning what a difference!
  - B. Give me and my mother the reservations.  $1 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4$
  - C. The mother of Williams was twenty years old when she made the trip. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
  - D. On every tree and bush you will catch the water drops sleeping in the form 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 8 10 11 12 13 14 of tiny crystals.

In these instances it is also easy to indicate the highest-stressed syllable in each stressphrase, as is sometimes called for. It takes considerable effort (and, I would suggest, the advice of native speakers) to choose such sentences which are easily and unambiguously broken into a definite number of stress-phrases.

# 2.3. Grammar

Grammar questions in these exams a	re, in general, very satisfactory.	Excellent questions
are often marked by their simplicity:		

(8) I saw an ox-cart
a. to be passed b. passed c. to pass d. pass
(9) Write the verb form (in parentheses) in the proper tense form required by the
sentence.
A. He (not sleep) for two days, when I met him.
B. They took her to the hospital last Wednesday. I (be) there to see her twice since
then.
(10) Rewrite each sentence, using the word indicated in parentheses.
A. He is not a good player of the piano. (can)
B. The actress was in the habit of traveling under an assumed name. (used)
C. Most likely the beggar was very ill, I believe. (must)
(11) Write questions corresponding to the following declarative sentences.
ex.: They are playing tennis. What are they playing?
A. John told her the news. Who
B. Joe went downstairs for a pencil. Why
C. It's four blocks to the post office. How far
On the other hand, ambiguous answers can creep into grammar questions and should
be carefully eliminated. The following are some examples:
(12) Bob drives (a) much too fast (b) too much fast (c) fast too much.
(13) Choose the correct forms from among those in parentheses:
I disagree (from) (at) (with) you (with) (about) (on) that matter.
(14) He was unable to remember such a thing to him before.
a. having happened c. happening
b. happened d. having been happened
In question (12), answer a. appears at first sight only to be the correct answer, but close
inspection will show that c. is also possible. In (13), "about that matter" would be mor

common, but "on that matter" could certainly be used as well. Close attention to the niceties of grammatical preciseness would call for "having happened" as the answer to the third

question; but five out of seven native speakers tested on this question answered that two answers were correct (a. and c.), while the two others said that only answer c. ("happening") was correct.

The sheer complexity of the format can also be disconcerting to the student. Consider the following question, for example:

(15) (Much) (Many a) people who (stay) (stays) (staying) in New York all their (lifes) (lives) do not realize how much beauty (has) ( ) (have) their city (has) ( ) (have) simply (because) (because of) (because that) they have never seen it properly. Surely one of (a) (the) ( ) most beautiful (sight) (sights) in the world is the view of New York's skyscrapers (raising) (rising) several (hundred) (hundreds) feet into (a) (the) ( ) air.

That view is (especial) (especially) breath taking early in the morning, when the harbor is at (its) (it's) best; yet (few) (a few) New Yorkers (had) (has) (have) ever seen it.

In many respects this is an excellent question. It examines fourteen points of grammar and spelling within the space of two short, intelligible paragraphs. I find very confusing, however, the six parentheses clustered around the words "their city." Three of these could certainly have been eliminated. To increase the confusion, among the answers listed in the published collection of exams, the answer "has" is listed twice (as if it could occur both before and after "their city"), and a further mistake has crept in: "a few" is indicated as the proper choice in the last line, whereas the occurrence of "ever" rules out this possibility.

Finally, I would say in general that, to reduce the possibility of guessing the correct answer, a minimum of four answers should be given in all multiple-choice type questions, and that the last of these could frequently be "none of these."

## 2.4. Vocabulary

Vocabulary questions are usually satisfactory, though better testing procedure would call for including the word to be tested in the context of a sentence. Occasionally instances of bad English are noted: the use of the word "outgoes" for "expenditures", "the opposition of" for "the opposite of," and so forth. One question asked the meaning of "beside oneself," using the sentence: "She was beside herself to hear the news," whereas we would always say "beside herself at hearing the news." In one exam question, a synonym for "symmetrical" was asked for, with the word "balance" given as the correct answer

("balanced" would be correct; this may have been due to a printing mistake).

Examiners should be careful not to exclude three of four possible answers by making them grammatically impossible, as in the example:

- (16) Flowers will not thrive without
  - a. sunshine
- b. botanist
- c. greenhouse
- d. gardener

The testing of phrasal items such as the following is especially good:

- (17) He applied himself to painting.
  - a. made use of
- c. applied for
- b. worked hard at
- d. was concerned about
- (18) He is leaving home for good.
  - a. for some time
- c. permanently
- b. to do something good
- d. for the benefit of himself

Another excellent question tests the multiple meanings of a tricky word like "get," in the following way:

- (19) The word "get" has many different meanings. Below are words (lettered a-f) which could be used instead of it. Choose which of them should be used to replace the word or phrase underlined in the sentences which follow.
  - a. become b. persuade c. prepare
- d. reach
- e. receive f. capture
- A. Did you get a letter from him today?
- B. Did you get tired after walking so far?
- C. What time did you get to the top of the mountain?
- D. The thief ran away. The police are trying to get him.
- E. Please get him to speak.

Finally, part of the art of testing is to provide three good distractors in addition to the one correct answer. The following question does this particularly well:

- (20) The telephone has become an indispensible instrument.
  - a. necessary
- b. expensive
- c. useless
- d. popular

While a. is the correct answer, answer b. sounds like the italicized word; c. is close to "dispensible," and d. would make good sense in the sentence. Good distractors are also found in question (18) above.

#### 2.5. Reading

Questions on reading comprehension occupy a sizeable part of every exam. This is to be expected, but a certain economy of time and effort suggests either that individual selections should be kept short and to the point, or, if a long passage is used, that half a dozen or more questions be drawn from it. Long readings which result in only one or two questions are a luxury that can hardly be afforded.

A short passage with a very effective question is the following:

- (21) Beethoven believed that music should be a medium for the expression of the composer's ideas and that all other considerations were of secondary importance. For him, the primary emphasis was upon
  - a. style b. popular appeal c. content d. form

At times two equally possible answers are found for a given question. In one such question tested on native speakers, where d. was the correct answer, four out of seven said that two answers were possible (b. and d.), two said only b., and one said only d. Ambiguities of this type are particularly unfortunate and can easily be avoided.

Sometimes the answers provided are so long and complicated that they are more difficult to understand than the passage itself. At other times the answers are difficult to understand because they are not good English; as one answer reads: "True friendship means: to conform everybody into the same patterns of life." In another example, an answer is given which is intended as the closest equivalent of the last part of a line in the text, which reads: "... (man's youth), the thing he would never willingly re-live again, could it be restored to him by any magic." The equivalent indicated is: "although it can be given back to him," whereas it should read: "if it could be given back to him."

Unfortunately, sometimes the answers given in the answer book are simply wrong. Four recent examination questions (three from one exam, one from another) were tested on seven native speakers of English, and 27 out of 28 of their answers were different from those indicated. It was not a question of ambiguous answers; the native speakers (except in three instances) all gave exactly the same answers.

Passing over countless examples of excellent reading passages followed by well-conceived answers, I will cite only one which is novel and, I believe, quite effective:

(22) Thousands and thousands of books are bought every year, every month, I might even say every day, by people who do not read at all. They only think that they read. They buy books just to amuse themselves, "to (a) time," as they call it; in one hour or two their eyes have passed over all the pages, and there is left in their minds a vague idea or two (b) what they have been looking at; and this they really believe is (c). Nothing is more common than to be asked. "Have you

read (d) and such a book?" But these persons do not speak seriously. Out of a thousand persons who say, "I have read this," or "I have read that," there is not one perhaps who is able to express any opinion worth hearing about (e) he has been reading.

1. what 2. reading 3. a book 4. have 5. so 6. kill 7. such 8. in 9. at 10. about

Many passages test the analytic powers of the student; this one does not. But it does test his reading ability. If he can follow the grammatical cues of the language, he can make sense out of this passage and insert the missing words as demanded. It is a basic test of reading skill. Incidentally, this method of providing the missing words is favored over another type question that calls for the student to write in the supposedly obvious words omitted. In studying one such passage, I found that in three places out of ten at least two words could be inserted in the empty space. I trust that the ingenious student was given credit if he used the alternatives to the answers which are listed in the book.

## 2.6. Writing

Some of the questions used to test writing are short but effective:

- (23) Rewrite the following sentences in the way indicated:
  - A. What she achieved satisfied her father. (Her father.....achievement.....)
  - B. It is likely that he will get promoted soon. (He is.....)
  - C. Everyone said that he had done his duty well. (He is...(plus) infinitive phrase)
  - D. The reason why he went there alone was that he didn't want us to meet the danger. (Because.....)
  - E. He said to me, "May I call on you tomorrow?" (He asked me.....)
  - F. There is a Chinese restaurant on this street. (Rewrite as a negative question.)
- G. They sell groceries at the grocery store. (Rewrite in passive voice.)

There is something to be said as well for the scrambled series of words and phrases which are to put together into a readable sentence:

- (24) Write a sentence using all the following words and phrases:
  - A. radio/ from/ ideas/ the transmission/ to man/ of/ makes possible/ man/
  - B. can/ how/ snakes/ see/ many/ you/ the/ picture/ in/ there/

Some of the questions in this area, it must be admitted, result in rather unusual sentences; for example:

- (25) Combine the following pairs of sentences as indicated:
  - A. The top of the mountain is high.

    The mountain attracts many climbers.

    (The mountain.....whose.....)
  - B. The summer was over.

    The students came back to school. (The summer (plus) participle.....)
  - C. My teacher pointed out the mistakes to me. It was helpful. (My.....(plus) gerund.....)

The three resulting sentences are hardly typical English:

The mountain, whose top is high, attracts many climbers.

The summer being over, the students came back to school.

My teacher's pointing out the mistakes to me was helpful.

Undoubtedly an excellent type of question to test writing ability (if it can be scored consistently in thousands of papers) is the short composition. The only question of this type I have found is:

(26) Write a 100-word composition on the subject:

"The Most Interesting Book I Have Ever Read"

#### 2.7. Translation

Ability to translate should not be confused with the ability to understand or speak, to read or write English. Competence in these four skills can and should be taught and tested independently of the student's ability to translate. If, in addition to testing these skills, some limited amount of translation from English to Korean or from Korean to English is to be included in the exam, I would urge that the sentences be kept short and clear, so that this part of the exam does not consume very much of the time. An 84-word paragraph of rather difficult structure and vocabulary, such as was included in one recent exam, is, I believe, much too long. Sentences or clauses could be selected from a paragraph or dialogue; their translation can either be quickly written or chosen from a series of possible answers (a technique calling for very close attention, especially if one of the answers is "none of these"). In any case, if a translation is required, it should be a correct one, whether the terminal language is Korean or English. One English translation given as an answer reads: "I cannot agree to his opinion." This may be good Korean, but it is not good English.

I have spent a long time commenting in detail on specific exam questions. What does the general make-up of current exams tell us about the antecedent curriculum in middle and high school on which the exams are based? These exams reflect, I believe, a sizeable change of emphasis in the past few years: away from almost exclusive reliance on the written language and translation to a greater emphasis on learning the spoken language and discovering the grammar through actual use. Far from hindering the student from acquiring the skills of reading and writing, this approach enables him to grasp the language, as it were, from the inside, to gain a feel for it much like that of the native speaker himself. Strong encouragement toward achieving this goal in middle and high school is afforded by present-day exams and can be all the more encouraged through further developments.

## Proposals for Future Developments

I would like now, finally, to indicate some of the directions such developments could take in future exams.

1) First of all, we all realize that language skills involve both production and recognition. All the questions included in these exams under sound segments, stress and intonation, phrasing and rhythm, require the student to produce what he finds indicated in the questions. He has to produce, for example: "Collisions usually occur because of the driver's poor vision and confusion"; or: "I like the English course.....born, bird, hurt, war, were;" or: "What do you have to think over?"; or: "Is your name Kim or Lee?"; or: "Give me and my mother the reservations."

As good as this is, however, it fails to test his skill in aural recognition. Can he hear the difference between rice and lice, between the white house and the White House, and so forth? A means must be found to test this skill in sound perception and discrimination; in distinguishing between two different intonations that he hears, or between two contrasting grammatical patterns. Hence it would seem that somehow sound must be brought into the testing situation. This should not be as difficult as it may at first appear. Tapes or records are already played for other English language exams; if it is considered important enough, sound engineers should be able to rig up a loud-speaker system to play to all the examinees simultaneously. If need be, several different recorders could be used at the same time in different places, each with its own amplifying system.

Such a system could be used not only for the recognition of simple sound elements, but for playing a short dialogue followed by one or two questions based on attentive listening to what the speakers have said. Only thus can the student encounter an actual speech situation, where auditory comprehension is really put to the test.

- 2) In addition, it is not beyond the realm of the possible that in future years there may be a way of recording the student's responses to several simple questions, or a brief reading, or even a short description of what each sees in one of a series of pictures.
- 3) Of immediate concern is the need to test more explicitly in every area the precise problems that Korean students have in the learning of English. There is little evidence that present tests are any different, for example, than similar tests that would be given to Chinese, German, or Russian students of English. And yet, the special problems encountered by students of each linguistic background can be pinpointed by contrastive analysis and precisely tested. If we knew they had mastered these problems, we would have greater confidence that they had learned the essentials of the language.
- 4) Besides this, it might be of considerable help to the student to indicate the weight each part of the exam carries in determining his grade. On only one of the tests I have examined has there been any statement of the number of points (or the percentage of the total score) assigned to each section. Such an indication might enable the student to spend more time on the sections considered of greater importance.
- 5) In a future year, when oral proficiency is expected of college applicants, one-half of the exam (50%) can be devoted to testing oral comprehension and production of sounds, stress, intonation, and grammar, as well as actual speech. Some of these questions will require the use of recordings, others can be handled by ordinary paper-and-pencil techniques. The remainder of such a test would be concerned with reading and writing, with reading comprehension and vocabulary accounting for 30% of the total, writing worth 15% and translation 5%.
- 6) It may be possible at some future time to require of incoming freshmen a minimum level of oral comprehension and production, as well as a minimum level of reading skill below which they will not be admitted to the university. If accepted, their actual admission as freshmen might, if they fell below the minimum acceptable standard, be contingent on their doing remedial work and passing a further exam. How this would work out in practice would have to be determined, but the adoption of such standards would mean that freshman English courses could confidently build on a solid foundation of oral proficiency, something which is not possible at present.
- 7) If entrance exam is considered primarily as a screening exam, then a comprehensive test of language proficiency should be administered before the new class of freshmen enter to determine their precise level of competence and diagnose their deficiencies, so that

they can be assigned to classes that stress one stage or another of language training, depending on which of their language skills are most in need of strengthening.

Good language testing invariably stimulates better language teaching. If this is true at other levels, it is even more true in regard to college entrance examinations. Every effort to improve the quality of these exams to make them incorporate the ideal hoped for as a result of good English training in middle and high school is bound to have its effect not only at these earlier stages, but to result in a college English program that gives full to the skills already acquired.

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#### NOTE

The principal work covering all aspects of this field is Robert Lado's *Language Testing* (London: Longmans, 1961).