Use of Standardized Tests as University Graduation Requirement

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Realizing the power and the status of English as an international language and faced with harsh competition to attract qualified high school graduates, several universities in Korea employ standardized tests such as the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS designed to measure English proficiency as a graduation requirement. This policy, however, has brought undesirable social impacts on Korean society and curriculum changes of universities adopting the policy. The tests, irrespective of their wide use in Korea, have shown validity-related problems, since they do not measure productive skills in English. Gauging only receptive skills, the standardized tests do not perform their mission as English proficiency tests. With these concerns in mind, this research investigates the situation of the use of the standardized tests as a graduation requirement, their validity and authenticity, and the social and pedagogical impacts of the graduation policy. Along with these, several suggestions are made for minimizing the negative impacts from the current trend of employing standardized tests as a graduation requirement.

I. INTRODUCTION

English, as a lingua franca in the late 20th and the early 21st centuries, has extended its influence over Korean society for the last several decades, leading Korean people to believe that English proficiency guarantees success in the society. It is estimated that about 400-500 billion won, equivalent to 4% of the annual budget of the country, is spent for the learning of the language and college students are known to spend about 12 million won for learning English in their four years at school (www.ike.co.kr/2000hotnews/hk.asp). It is not hard to see toddlers studying English at home and at private institutes. This over-heated enthusiasm for English in Korean society was in line with the government's ardent campaign for English education, which
had been thought to play a leading and important role in the era of globalization, one of the significant national agendas. In a 1995 press conference, President Young Sam Kim, announced that globalization was a shortcut to boosting the country’s economic development, claiming that English could fulfill that mission and would help the country cope with changes in the world. In a way to accomplish this national goal, his government started to teach English to the third graders of elementary school, which stirred a boom in English learning and teaching in Korea.

Coupled with this social atmosphere, companies in Korea require their applicants to submit scores on standardized tests such as the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS and use them, in fact, as part of the screening procedures to select the applicants. For example, one of the most popular companies among Korean university graduates has set up a minimum of 730 on the TOEIC, 630 on the TEPS, and 210 on the computer-based TOEFL for the candidates from humanities, economics and business administration and slightly lower scores for science and engineering majors. Although there are differences in the minimum scores required on the standardized tests of English for job applications for major Korean companies, they take into account English proficiency as a component of the qualifications that their would-be employees should possess.

In a similar vein, since the mid 1990s, colleges and universities in Korea have started to adopt standardized tests such as the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS as a graduation requirement. According to Jeongsook Joh (2002), fourteen out of sixty-seven universities, which participated in her research, responded that the students of the institutes should obtain certain scores on the standardized tests to meet the graduation policy. This trend reflects the awareness of the power and the status of English as an international language and, in another sense, it is viewed as the outcome of fierce competition between colleges and universities in Korea. In other words, schools face with harsh, new surroundings, in which the number of the freshmen whom all the colleges and universities in Korea can accept is larger than that of all high school graduates, have to attract qualified high school graduates by giving them the impression that their school lays emphasis on teaching English or English education.

This nationwide interest in English and educational policies concerning English teaching and learning in Korea, however, seem to be based on the misguided perception that good scores on standardized tests for English proficiency will play a decisive role for test takers’ careers and future. Many college administrators in charge of public relations of their institutes appear not to have properly judged the drawbacks and impacts of standardized tests. In other words, not realizing the problems of standardized tests as a tool for measuring English proficiency, they seem to utilize the reputation of the tests and to favor the practicality and the ease of scoring. With these concerns in mind, this paper will investigate the situation of employing standardized tests as a graduation requirement in some colleges and universities in Korea, the problems of standardized tests and their social and pedagogical impacts.
II. DATA COLLECTION

1. Results of Telephone Interviews

In order to have a clear picture of the situation of the universities where scores from standardized tests for measuring English ability are adopted as a graduation requirement, telephone interviews with an English teaching faculty member of the institutes were conducted. Out of fourteen schools that were believed to employ the TOEFL, the TOEIC and/or the TEPS, eight were contacted and responded to a telephone interview consisting of the five questions below:

1) Which body of your school initiated the adopting of standardized tests for a graduation requirement?
2) What has motivated your school to adopt the policy? Was it from the awareness of the significance of English as international language and/or from partly for public relations?
3) After the implementation of the policy, was there any change in the English curriculum at your school?
4) In case students do not meet the graduation requirement, has your institute offered other ways to help them graduate?
5) Do you think the policy should continue?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>The Main Body to Initiate Adopting the Graduation Policy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main body</td>
<td>No. of schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English faculty</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University authority</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

As seen in Table 1, out of eight universities which participated in the telephone interview, five reported that their school authority, rather than the English faculty, initiated adopting standardized tests as a graduation requisite, which, in turn, brought about some tension between the English faculty and the university authority. The fact that the English faculty played a minor role in implementing the graduation policy can make us conjecture the reason why the schools have employed standardized tests such as the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS as a tool to measure English proficiency for their students. Not realizing the problems of the tests, especially the validity-related problems, the school authority might have decided to use them for their popularity, ease of scoring, etc.
Table 2 shows that public relations for attracting high school graduates constitute a major motivation for establishing the graduation policy. In other words, faced with harsh competition from a decrease in the number of high school graduates and college or university applicants, school administrators wanted to give a good impression to the candidates by publicizing that their school puts much weight on English and English education. In fact, the university which first made the announcement of adopting the TOEFL as a graduation requirement in Korea drew a lot of media attention. The argument above, however, does not mean that the implementation of the policy was only done for public relations of the schools, because four schools answered that the realization of the significance of English drove them to initiate the graduation policy. Two institutes responded that the presidents of their schools were highly interested in increasing their students’ English proficiency and took the initiative in incubating the idea.

Table 3 illustrates that only two institutes out of eight have developed and offered classes designed to teach the TOEFL and the TOEIC, respectively. One institute has been offering a TOEFL preparation class as a three-credit course, while the other one teaches the TOEIC for four semesters as a two-credit course each semester. In contrast, four universities have never offered courses developed for standardized tests.

Whether or not there are any alternatives to help students who have not satisfied the graduation requirement addresses an ethical issue of testing. If results from standardized tests designed to measure English proficiency have any decisive influence on test takers, for example, if they are forced to leave school because of low scores on the tests, is it ethically acceptable? Especially when there are no other alternatives replacing the results of standardized tests...
adopted by each institute, it raises a very serious ethical concern. As a matter of fact, several students in some universities left school without being awarded a university diploma or their graduation was suspended for at least a semester, which definitely impacted on their careers. Despite the significant influence of the test results on individual test takers, six institutes have not considered any other exits to take the place of scores on standardized tests. This is because the schools worried that if there are ways other than English proficiency tests adopted, the students will try the easier ones such as taking classes or taking a local test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Devices to Help Unqualified Students Graduate</th>
<th>No. of institutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting a grade from English courses</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking and passing local tests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No other devices except for scores on standardized scores</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Prospect of the Policy</th>
<th>No. of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The graduation policy should continue.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The graduation policy should be withdrawn.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new type of language test needs to be introduced.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of the question whether the graduation policy should continue, six respondents answered that the graduation policy, in spite of the problems related to ethical issues, lawsuits, and a low percentage of passing, should continue. This is because it has had the effect of having the students work for tests and at least have interest in English. Only one respondent claimed that the policy should be withdrawn because the score set up by the institute was too low to drive its students to study and thus it would be hard to expect a substantial increase in English proficiency. Another suggested that a new type of test should be developed and employed, replacing the current TOEFL requirement.

2. Students' Opinions about the TOEFL as a Graduation Requirement

The results of a questionnaire (Eunsil Lee, 2001), which was developed to investigate the students' opinions of employing a score of 550 on the paper-based TOEFL as a graduation policy at a university, were used as second-hand data for this study. Out of twenty-one questions in the questionnaire, four ones related to this research were analyzed below:
As illustrated in Table 6, half of the respondents of the institute passed the TOEFL requirement in their fourth year and two students did it after they had completed all the graduation requirements except for the TOEFL. From these findings, it is not difficult to guess that the TOEFL requirement must have affected their career. In fact, several students of the institute had the disadvantage of not being accepted to its graduate school, because they were not awarded a university diploma. The above table also shows that the students seemed not to have worked hard for the test in their early school years.

As to the graduation policy, about 70% of the respondents expressed their support for the policy. This response was somewhat unexpected because a score of 550 on the paper-based TOEFL turned out to be a difficult score to get for the students, all of whom were science and engineering majors. This positive attitude towards the TOEFL policy was possible because they felt that the graduation requirement had motivated them to study English as shown in Table 8.

According to Table 8, the students seemed to realize the significance of English, responding
that a score of 550 on the TOEFL is just a basic requirement and learning English is one of the major tasks for university students. On the other hand, there were some opinions that the TOEFL should not be a tool to measure English proficiency and English proficiency should not be part of a graduation requirement.

TABLE 9
Reasons for not Passing the Graduation Requirement

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over-confidence in language abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of the awareness of the significance of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time for studying English due to a heavy course load of other subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of the institute’s support for the test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the above table, many of the respondents pointed to the lack of preparation as the major cause of not passing the graduation requirement. Along with it, ironically, over-confidence in language abilities was mentioned as another major cause for it.

III. DISCUSSION

1. Problems of the Use of Standardized Tests as a Graduation Requirement

1) Validity and Authenticity of Standardized Tests for Measuring English Proficiency

Since its advent in 1966, the TOEFL has been used as a worldwide tool for measuring English proficiency. When it first appeared, the test consisted of the three sections of listening comprehension, written expressions and grammar and reading comprehension. This paper-based TOEFL had kept its initial format with the three components until the computer-based test with a required writing section was implemented recently. With these components, it is evident that the test does not properly measure test takers’ general English proficiency. Duran, Canale, Penfield, Stansfield and Liskin-Gasparro (1985) and Duran (1988) pointed to the fact that the traits measured by the TOEFL do not involve any skills from the actual production of language, since the three skills evaluated by the TOEFL are only concerned with receptive skills in English. Productive skills such as speaking and writing were not measured in the paper-based TOEFL, which can be pinpointed as a critical drawback of the test. Other widely used standardized tests for English proficiency in Korea, the TOEIC and the TEPS with the components of listening comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension, are not free from this
criticism, even though the TEPS claims itself to measure communicative competence in English (Nahm-Sheik Park, Choon-Hak Cho, Choong Bae Kim, Im-Deuk Kim & Inn-Chull Choi, 1998).

The above-mentioned point can address the construct-related validity of testing. Construct, defined as a trait a test purports to measure, should be first and foremost considered while developing any type of test. Applying this general definition to language tests directs what a language test should constitute. In other words, a language test, especially one for a foreign language, should directly gauge all skills in a language in order to perform its original purpose as a tool of evaluating communicative competence of test takers (Messik, 1996). The argument that receptive skills in a language indirectly mirror test takers' productive or communication skills is not assertive in that even a positive relationship between productive and receptive skills of a language illustrates a trend, which cannot be applied to individual examinees. In short, since the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS do not directly measure productive skills in English as a foreign language, it is difficult for them to secure construct validity as language tests. As an indirect and non-performance language test, the TOEFL (Hughes, 1992; McNamara, 1996), the TOEIC and the TEPS entail inherent limits as language tests.

In a similar vein, the tests do not escape from the criticism related to content validity. Content validity is concerned with whether questions on a test represent some defined universe the test aims to assess. Applying this definition to language tests makes it clear that questions on the tests should reflect the situation of language use. In other words, as in the approach to achieving construct-related validity, to secure content-related validity, questions on language tests should mirror the situation where communication occurs. However, some questions on the TOEFL (Duran, et al., 1985) and the TEPS (Dongwan Cho, 2000), especially ones in the listening comprehension section, do not meet the standards for assuring the content validity of language tests. For example, listening comprehension questions with brief one or two-sentence statements do not provide enough context cues for understanding and cannot be representative of listening comprehension which happens in real communication.

Along with the validity issue, authenticity needs to be discussed here. The computer-based TOEFL now includes essay writing as one of its requirements possibly following the suggestions of language testing experts (Spolsky, 1979; 1981) and reflecting the prevalent ESL pedagogy or communicative competence theories. The inclusion of the writing test in the TOEFL would help it better secure the construct validity of the test because the essay test at least gauges the writing abilities of the test takers. However, it has its own limits from an authenticity perspective. In other words, the essay test focuses on mainly comparison or contrast with a limited range of topics or tasks, which casts doubt on whether the writing tasks in the test are the ones that the examinees are supposed to encounter in their life. It is quite probable that the test
takers will show good performance on the test if they prepare it with frequently used phrase and sentence level expressions, limited vocabulary and the knowledge of essay structure, or just with a canned essay. If the examinees are placed in a real life situation, say, email, letter or term paper writing situation, they would not demonstrate a similar language proficiency that they did on the test. In brief, the TOEFL essay test lacks authenticity, jeopardizing the validity of the test. In order to better assure the validity of testing, language tests should be direct and authentic, as McNamara (1996) claims, in spite of difficulties in developing authentic tests (Bachman, 1991) or the different concepts of authenticity (Stevenson, 1985; Wiggins, 1989).

2) Ethics of Employing Standardized Tests for Measuring English Proficiency

Test users should be aware of the significance of testing and its social implications, or ethical concerns. Shohamy (1997), who takes a rather extreme, radical perspective on the ethics of testing, asserts that language tests used for a different purpose can be viewed as unethical. Following her view, employing test results from the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS designed to assess language proficiency as a graduation requisite is unethical and unfair, since they are utilized for the different purpose of screening out unqualified students for the graduation. Together with the lack of ethical consideration, the test users of the standardized tests appear not to have any ethical responsibility, since six out of eight institutes participating in the telephone interview responded that they did not develop any programs or make any curriculum changes to help their students pass the graduation requirement. In cases where special programs or curriculum changes invented to increase scores on the tests are not made, test users should think over whether they are entitled to make any decision which will make a significant impact on the test takers' future. It was also found that three universities forced some of their students who had not accomplished the graduation requirement to leave school without being awarded a university diploma, taking away chances to work or further study at a graduate school. From this decision it became clear that the school administrators would not have any serious ethical responsibility for the employment of the policy and its effects on individual students. The school authority as the users of the standardized tests should ponder upon whether inappropriately measured English proficiency can serve as a method to pick out students whose English proficiency does not meet the standard the institutes have set up.

With the ethical consideration related to the use of scores from the standardized tests, the responsibility of test developers should be mentioned here. The TOEFL and the TOEIC do not provide detailed information about the implications of scores on the tests to the test takers and to the test users. Nowhere in the TOEFL (www.toefl.org) and the TOEIC (www.toeic.com) bulletins is found information about what test scores imply. For example, what can test takers
with 550 on the TOEFL or 800 on the TOEIC do with the language proficiency they were measured to have? The lack of information is understandable in that the skills measured in the tests are mainly concerned with receptive skills, not with productive ones. In contrast, the TEPS (www.teps.or.kr) encompasses some information about the implications of test scores. For example, it states that Level 1+, which falls between a range of 901-990, means to acquire the highest level of communicative competence as non-native speakers of English. This description in the TEPS deserves to be appreciated, compared to the TOEFL and the TOEIC. However, it must be noted that there are no research results and official reports of what a test taker with a Level 1+ can really do. Since the TEPS, like the TOEFL and the TOEIC, just measures receptive skills in English, there might be a mismatch between the descriptions in the TEPS bulletin and the real communicative competence of the test takers achieving some level in the test. In order for a language test to be more valid, it should provide detailed information of the implications of test scores.


In spite of the drawbacks of the standardized tests as stated above, some colleges and universities now use the TOEFL, the TOEIC, and the TEPS as a graduation requirement. This trend, along with some institutes’ special quota of giving admission to high school graduates with high scores on standardized tests for English proficiency, has accelerated the extreme fervor for English in Korean society. The whole society seems to believe that good scores on the tests help make for success in the competitive society. The media has also played a role in boosting this social atmosphere and highlighted that high scores on the standardized tests are required to get a job. Recently, a newspaper published on October 28, 2003 reported that the average TOEIC score of the final candidates for a large company was 940, taking it for granted that a high TOEIC score was a necessary requirement for getting a decent job in Korea. This overheated interest in the standardized tests has made it possible for the whole country to have a lot of private institutes teaching them. Even in small towns whose population is under several thousand, it is not hard to find English teaching private institutes putting up a banner written with the words of the Junior TOEIC and TOEFL for middle and high school students. Together with a large number of the private institutes, hundreds of off-line publishers and on-line websites publish teaching material for standardized tests. This nationwide rage for English went too far to make a suggestion of the appropriate directions for English teaching in Korea.

Secondly, time and money wasted for high scores on standardized tests for English
proficiency might weaken the country's competitive edge. If the same amount of effort is made for enhancing real, authentic communicative skills in English such as speaking and writing, the English proficiency of university graduates would develop to a great extent. However, in order to get high scores on standardized tests, many college and university students enroll in English classes on and off campus, wasting their time and money. From a personal perspective also, to leave school without a university diploma is a serious, detrimental damage. In fact, several students of universities located in the southeastern part of Korea and in Seoul were forced to leave school, since they did not acquire the scores on standardized tests that their institutes had established. A university student in Seoul filed a lawsuit, claiming that the school had no authority to force its students to leave even when they did not meet the graduation requirement for a foreign language. In short, the social atmosphere in which high scores on standardized tests are highly valued definitely has a negative impact on the country as well as individuals.

Applying the standardized tests designed to measure English proficiency to a graduation requisite cannot be considered problematic in itself as far as their purpose is to increase the overall English proficiency of would-be test takers. But the graduation policy might bring about some changes in school curriculum such as placing much emphasis on the tests, making light of the teaching and learning of the productive skills in English, and leading students to be accustomed to multiple choice type questions. In fact, a university which has adopted the TOEIC as a measurement tool for the students' English proficiency offers TOEIC-centered classes as the core of its English curriculum. Even though high scores on standardized tests do not necessarily mean real communicative English proficiency, schools and students as well seem to regard them as a frame of reference to indicate their English abilities. This perception might create an environment in which writing and speaking skills in English do not take priority in school curriculum, which possibly has a harmful, negative washback effect (Hughes, 1992) to English learning. The prevalence and social acceptance of standardized tests have led would-be test takers to work only for the skills measured by them. Since the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPS do not include tasks for measuring productive skills in English, it would be hard to expect a positive washback effect. In order for language tests to better achieve a positive washback effect, they should include authentic tasks for measuring the traits they claim to evaluate (Baily, 1996; Messick, 1996).

The format of answering the questions in the standardized tests, or multiple choice type questions also bring a negative washback effect on the teaching and learning of English. In the standardized tests, test takers are to choose one best answer out of several possible options based on what they read or heard and they are likely to practice picking out one answer. It is evident that this practice should have bad effect on the learners, rather than bringing about a positive
washback effect. As Hamp-Lyons (1997) and the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (2003) argue, standardized tests generally fail to adequately measure important learning and to provide high quality education due to the characteristics inherent in a multiple choice format and norm-referencing.

IV. CONCLUSION AND LIMITS OF THE STUDY

Several suggestions are made for minimizing the negative impacts from this current trend of employing standardized tests as a graduation requirement of some institutes in Korea on teaching and learning English in Korean society. First, the government, school administrators and English instructors concerned with English education should realize the drawbacks of the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPs as a measurement tool for English proficiency and their social consequences which have already had enormous influence on Korean society. As Messick (1993) and Shepard (1993) claim, the interpretation and use of any type of test should be made with careful consideration and care. But, in reality, not realizing the validity-related problems of the TOEFL, the TOEIC and the TEPs, the government, school authorities and test takers as well seem to have accepted them as a reference to demonstrate one’s English proficiency. In order to correct this general, misguided concept of the standardized tests, academia should exert its efforts to make the problems of the tests known to school administrators, government officials and the public by holding conferences, seminars or writing essays for the media.

Second, if an institute wants to employ an English proficiency test, it is advised to devise its own assessment tool. As revealed in the analysis of the questionnaire for students’ opinions about the employment of the TOEFL as a graduation requirement of a university and in the telephone interview with English faculty of some universities, the students as well as the English faculty supported the policy, since they seemed to believe that the policy had driven them to study English in some ways. It is also true that English proficiency, at least in Korea, will help get a decent job. In this situation, how to properly measure English proficiency is critically important in that a proper, valid measurement tool will definitely lead to the positive washback of testing to current, prevalent English teaching and learning. One way to accomplish this goal is to develop a proficiency test which measures productive skills in English at the level of an individual school. In fact, a few universities in Korea have already developed and are now running local tests for measuring their students’ English proficiency. For example, Sook Myung University has developed the MATE, the Multi-media Assisted Test of English, which mainly consists of the components of assessing speaking and writing abilities. Another language
proficiency test, entitled the FLEX, the Foreign Language Examination of the Hankuk University of Foreign Languages, is a local test which includes writing and speaking tests along with listening and reading comprehension. If these tests turn out to be valid and reliable, they will serve as a better measurement tool for measuring general English proficiency than standardized tests.

Lastly, language testing experts and ESL/EFL professionals should make continuous suggestions for the inclusion of speaking and writing components in standardized tests developed to gauge foreign language proficiency. The TOEFL now encompasses the essay test as a required component, making itself a better measurement tool for English proficiency, at least from a face validity stance. Having an essay writing a section of the test was probably possible due to research results (Dural et al, 1985; Duran, 1989) pointing to the limits of the paper-based test. As in the case of the TOEFL, testing experts and ESL/EFL professionals need to exercise their power and authority to have the standardized tests measure the real, authentic communicative competence of English, feeling strong responsibility for their limits and drawbacks.

Here, some limits of this study should be mentioned. First, the collected data for this study are not enough to generalize the results of this research. Since only eight academic institutes were contacted and interviewed, a possibility to have somewhat different data remains. Secondly, the claims against the use of standardized tests were made without offering quantitative, statistical data. Lastly, the argument for the use of testing tools for measuring speaking and writing skills in English can be impractical, considering the reality of teaching and learning environments in our society. Thus further in-depth investigation is needed with keeping in mind the shortcomings of this research.

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Applicable levels: tertiary, adult education

Key words: standardized tests for English proficiency, validity, washback effect
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