A Comparison of English Proficiency of Korean, Japanese
and Chinese High School Students

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This paper reports on a comparative study of English proficiency of Korean, Japanese and Chinese high school students, as measured by a standardized test called GTEC for Students. The study involved 4,403 Japanese students, 5,133 Korean students, and 4,236 Chinese students from first and second years, that is, 10th and 11th graders. The results show that Korean students performed better than Japanese and Chinese students in reading and listening. However, the overall mean of the Chinese students was the highest because Koreans scored extremely low on the writing test. The standard deviation of the Korean students was the greatest. When the first- and second-year students were compared in each country, Chinese second-year students scored lower than first-year students. Reversed scores were observed in some sub-skill areas in Korea and Japan as well. Korean and Chinese seem to be more fluent (but not necessarily more accurate) writers than Japanese. Chinese seem to have the largest vocabulary as reflected on the writing test. Implications for education are that comparative studies are beneficial to EFL improvement in East Asia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Because of the geographical proximity and cultural affinity among the three East-Asian nations of China, Korea and Japan, there have been tri-national or bi-national comparative studies conducted in almost all academic disciplines, either jointly or individually by scholars in the related fields. In the area of English education, such comparative studies have compared the
students' English abilities, motivations, teacher training, textbooks, and the curricula.

At the end of 2003, an international comparative study was conducted to compare several academic and socio-psychological aspects of high school students' English learning in China, Korea and Japan. The study was administered by a research team from Korea and Japan, and sponsored by Benesse Corporation of Japan. It compared high school students' English abilities, their perceptions of abilities, personality types, motivational and attitudinal characteristics, study habits, future goals, and so forth. The study also compared the teachers' teaching methodology and beliefs.

The present paper reports on the results of the above-mentioned international study, focusing only on the English proficiency of the students in the three countries, mainly because of the limited space of the paper. The study is significant in that it was the first attempt to compare high school students' English abilities with an identical standardized test and with a very large sample of 13,742 students in total. It will provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of English abilities of East Asian high school students.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Comparative studies of English education in Korea and Japan were actively conducted during the 1990s. One thing to note is the relative abundance of research and surveys done by Japanese scholars on English education in Korea. (For a comprehensive review of literature on the comparative studies between Korea and Japan, see Saeki, 2001.) Not many tri-national studies comparing China, Korea and Japan have been conducted.

In 1990, Nobuyuki Honna edited a book titled, Aziano eigo, with an English subtitle, Asian Varieties of English, in which English education and regional variations of Asian Englishes were discussed by authors either from the relevant region/country or from Japan. English education in China, Korea, and Japan were all discussed in the book. The chapter on China was written by Erich Berendi, and the chapter on Korea was written by Oryang Kwon, while the chapter on Japan was written by Mineo Suenobu.

Miyahara and his colleagues (1997) from the Kyushu-Okinawa Chapter of JACET (Japan Association of College English Teachers) did an extensive survey to compare the English proficiency of college students in China, Korea, and Japan. They found that Chinese were outperforming Koreans and Japanese, while Japanese students fell far behind Koreans. Table 1 shows the results of the English proficiency test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Listening (0 - 219)</th>
<th>Grammar (0 - 189)</th>
<th>Vocabulary (0 - 136)</th>
<th>Reading (0 - 136)</th>
<th>Total (0 - 680)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>105.8</td>
<td>152.1</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>432.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>117.6</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>375.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>291.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the proficiency tests, they also conducted questionnaire surveys on the students' study habits, their perceptions on English learning including goals, self-evaluation, and so forth.

H. W. Kam and R. Y. L. Wong (2000) edited an important book that contains descriptions of English education in East and Southeast Asia. The chapter on China was written by Lin Li. The chapter on Japan was written by Nobuyuki Honna, Hiroko Tina Tajima, and Kunihiko Minamoto, while the Korean chapter was written by Rosa Jinyoung Shim and Martin Jonghak Baik.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>NA*</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>58,240</td>
<td>556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>7,475</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>86,039</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>17,338</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>144,372</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* NA = Not available.

The book also provides an overview of English education in Asia, showing the TOEFL scores of each country and the overall English education curricula. Table 2 shows the TOEFL scores of the testees from the three countries in the years of 1977-78 and 19995-96. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Chinese outperformed Koreans, who in turn outscored Japanese.

At the 2001 Summer International Conference of the Korea Association of Teachers of English (KATE), Oryang Kwon (2001) briefly discussed the English education situations in Asian countries including, among others, China, Korea, and Japan. He noted that all three countries were now moving towards introducing English into elementary schools. He said that Korea was already instructing English in elementary school, and China was teaching English in some elementary schools. Japan was still debating on introducing English into elementary school, although there were already some elementary schools that taught English.
III. METHOD

This chapter will describe the participants of the study, the instrument of the study, administration of the test, and analysis of the data.

1. Participants

The participants of the present study were a total of 13,742 high school students. There were 7,657 tenth graders and 6,085 11th graders from Japan, Korea, and China. More specifically, the study involved 4,373 high school students from Japan, 5,133 students from Korea, and 4,236 students from China. The details of the participants are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the participants in terms of school year and gender. In table 3, "NA" means "Information Not Available," signifying that the students did not indicate their gender in the survey questionnaire.

Table 4 shows the participants by the size of the cities they are from. As shown in the table, the regional distribution of students in each country is not ideal in terms of the representativeness of the sample. For example, all Chinese students are from large cities having the population of more than one million people. This may be one of the weaknesses of the study.

TABLE 3
Participating Schools and Students of by School Year and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>1st Year</th>
<th></th>
<th>2nd Year</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1,488</td>
<td>1,454</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2,915</td>
<td>730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>1,171</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2,566</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>1,187</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,176</td>
<td>966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3,034</td>
<td>4,241</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>7,657</td>
<td>2,412</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 4
Participating Schools and Students by City Sizes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Large cities</th>
<th>Medium-sized cities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,575</td>
<td>2,798</td>
<td>4,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3,263</td>
<td>1,870</td>
<td>5,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4,236</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4,236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Large cities: Population of over 1,000,000 people.
* Medium-sized cities: Population of 200,000 to 1,000,000 people.
2. Instrument

The instrument used in the study was an English proficiency test called “GTEC (Global Test of English Communication) for STUDENTS” developed by the Benesse Corporation of Japan. GTEC for STUDENTS was a 6-year old test of English communication ability, which was taken by about 140,000 Japanese students in the year 2003. Its validity and reliability had been tested and established over the years. The test reports the test-takers’ proficiency in absolute scale scores, utilizing the Item Response Theory to calibrate the test taker’s ability.

This test uses linguistic materials used for everyday situations, and measures the abilities of reading (320 points total), listening (320 points total), and writing (160 points total) on an 800-point absolute scale. The test items are written by trained specialists in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The reading test consists of three parts with 43 items to be answered in 45 minutes. Part A (14 items, 7 minutes) is a sentence completion test to test grammar and vocabulary. Part B (14 items, 14 minutes) assesses reading comprehension with short passages of about 100 words each. Each passage has one or two questions asking about the main ideas, details, inferential information and so forth. The passages cover a wide range of topics and genres. Part C (15 items, 24 minutes) measures reading comprehension with three long passages of about 350 words, each asking 5 questions tapping many different aspects of reading ability.

The listening test has four parts with 40 items to be answered in 25 minutes. Part A (10 items) requires the students to choose (out of three orally given options) the sentence that best describes the given photograph. Part B (10 items) requires the students to hear a short question and three options, and choose the correct answer to the question. Part C (10 items) provides the students with written descriptions of five situations in the students’ native language. The students hear a dialog between two people (one of them is supposed to be the student themselves), and read two questions and choose answers from four graphic options for each question. Part D (10 items) consists of five conversations for the students to hear, two written questions for each conversation, and four written options for each question.

The writing test gives one task of writing to be completed in 20 minutes. The instructions are presented in the students' native language. The theme of the writing task varies from test to test, but it covers students' immediate interest areas. The task given for the 2003 survey was to argue for or against raising the driving age from 18 to 20. Two statistical charts were provided to help the argument.

The candidates’ English abilities are classified into one of the 6 grade levels, based on their total scores and sub-skill scores, with G1 as the lowest level and G6 as the highest level. The grade definitions had been established through empirical research over the years. Table 5
presents the definitions of the GTEC grades for total scores.

The definitions of the different levels, from G1 to G6, are also provided for each sub-skill of the English ability, i.e., reading, listening, and writing.¹

**TABLE 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Definitions of the GTEC Grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>610 or above</td>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>(CAN-DO)</strong> The minimum level of readiness to study abroad at a 4-year college in an English speaking country (680 and above).&lt;br&gt;<strong>(Skill Level)</strong> Average level of 6 or higher in 3 skill areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>520-609</td>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>(CAN-DO)</strong> The minimum level of readiness to study abroad at a 2-year college in an English speaking country (540 and above).&lt;br&gt;<strong>(Skill Level)</strong> Average level of 5 or higher in skill areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>440-519</td>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>(CAN-DO)</strong> The minimum level necessary for going to a short-term language study program in an English speaking country and understanding the class.&lt;br&gt;<strong>(Skill Level)</strong> Average level of 4 or higher in 3 skill areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>380-439</td>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>(CAN-DO)</strong> English speaking country and enjoying it.&lt;br&gt;<strong>(Skill Level)</strong> Average level of 3 or higher in 3 skill areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-379</td>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>(CAN-DO)</strong> The level for gaining experiences such as talking with a native English-speaker teacher.&lt;br&gt;<strong>(Skill Level)</strong> Average level of 2 or higher in 3 skill areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>299 and below</td>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>(CAN-DO)</strong> The level where future possibility is looked forward to.&lt;br&gt;<strong>(Skill Level)</strong> Average level of 1 in 3 skill areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Administration of the Test

The test was administered independently in separate schools. The schools selected for the study were those whose main goals were to help students to advance to colleges and universities. The researchers made it a rule that all students in the same grade take the test without exception. This arrangement was made to ensure that the comparison of the students will not be limited to the voluntary participants.

The researchers selected schools with the above principle, and the schools were contacted directly or indirectly for their cooperation. The schools that agreed to participate in the international comparison were then given the tests. The research team and their assistants

¹ Definitions of these sub-skill grades will be available from the researchers on request.
administered the tests.

4. Analysis of the Data

Data were analyzed by the researchers to obtain basic statistics and to see the distributions of the scores according to the Grade levels. The first year students and second year students within the same country were also compared. Some qualitative analyses of the writing test were done as well. Statistical packages such as SAS and SPSS were used for data analysis.

IV. RESULTS

In this chapter, the results will be presented, in terms of the basic statistics, the distribution of the score levels, and the comparison of the first- and second-year students.

1. Basic Statistics

Table 6 presents the total scores and sub-skill scores of the three countries' students, with the ANOVA results. The table shows that Chinese scored the highest in the total mean score (432.6), followed by Koreans (414.1) and Japanese (407.8). However, the scores of the subtests reveal important variations in the relative language skills. Korean high school students performed remarkably better than Japanese and Chinese in reading and listening. Japanese were ranked third in the overall score. Although the Japanese performed better than Koreans in writing, their superior score in writing could not offset their deficit in reading and writing. Chinese so outperformed Koreans in reading that their superior score in writing made up for their lower scores in reading and writing. The ANOVA results show that the differences in the total scores and in all three sub-skill areas were significant.

One thing to note is the Korean students' extremely low scores on writing. In fact, their mean score in writing was so low that it pulled down their gains in reading and listening, to place Koreans in second place. Table 6 shows the mean scores of the total and the three subtests for Japanese, Korean and Chinese high school students.

Another thing to note in the total scores is the larger standard deviation by the Korean group (120.7) than those by the Japanese (88.7) and Chinese (77.0) groups. This means that the Koreans' test results were widely distributed, while Japanese and Chinese students clustered around the average point. Although the range of the scores by the Korean students (526) was smaller than that by the Japanese students (654), the range of the Chinese group (431) indicates
that the Chinese students were clustered most narrowly around the mean score.

It is also interesting to note that the highest total score (768) was received by the Korean group, while the lowest total score (78) was obtained by the Japanese group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>F (p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4,235</td>
<td>407.8</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td>67.874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5,098</td>
<td>414.1</td>
<td>120.7</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td>(0.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4,225</td>
<td>432.6</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4,238</td>
<td>166.4</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>G4</td>
<td>260.901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5,124</td>
<td>190.6</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>G5</td>
<td>(0.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4,227</td>
<td>185.9</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>G4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4,240</td>
<td>156.7</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>G2</td>
<td>104.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5,100</td>
<td>171.6</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td>(0.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4,225</td>
<td>162.5</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4,238</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td>1453.822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5,133</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>G2</td>
<td>(0.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4,229</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>G3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of the GTEC Grade level, the high school students' overall mean scores in the three countries indicate that their averages are on the G3 level. However, their sub-skill scores vary across the skills. In reading, Korean students were on G5, while Japanese and Chinese were on G4, meaning that Korean students are better readers than Japanese or Chinese students.

In listening, only the Japanese group was placed on the G2 level, while the Korean and Chinese groups placed themselves on G3. However, although Koreans and Chinese are on the same G3 level, it is noteworthy that Koreans actually outperformed Chinese in listening significantly better.

In writing, however, it was the Korean students who were placed on G2, while other two groups were on G3. In fact Korean students were so poor in writing that the extremely low writing score offset their high scores in reading and listening.

2. Distribution of the Overall GTEC Grades

When individual students' GTEC Grades were computed, it turned out that Korean students were more widely and evenly spread out on the scale than Japanese or Chinese students. Table 7 and Figure 1 show the distribution of the GTEC Grades for the total scores of the individual students.
TABLE 7
Distribution of the GTEC Grades for the Total Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Korea</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>1,160</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>1,369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>1,057</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G5</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,236</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>5,098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
Distribution of the GTEC Grades of the Total Scores

While Chinese and Japanese students demonstrated a bell-shaped distribution around G3 (See Figure 1), Korean students peaked in G2 but were fairly evenly spread out in other grades. This wide distribution of the grades accounts for the largest standard deviation of the Korean scores among the three groups. This may mean either or both of two phenomena: There are regional differences in Korea, or Korean classrooms consist of more heterogeneous level students than Japanese or Chinese classrooms, making it difficult for the teachers to focus on the middle level students.

In Table 7, note that 18.8 percent of the Korean students are on G1, the lowest level, while there are only 10 percent of Japanese and 4.4 percent of Chinese on that level. On the other hand, Koreans are peculiar in that they have far more G5 and G6 achievers (13.0 percent on G5 and
7.9 percent on G6) than Japanese (8.7 percent on G5 and 1.2 percent on G6) or Chinese (10.7 percent on G5 and 1.8 percent on G6).

3. Comparison Between First- and Second-Year Students

When the scores of the first- and second-year students were compared within each country, some unexpected and even baffling results were obtained.

First of all, while the total scores indicated that second-year students performed better than first-year students in Japan and Korea, the second-year students did worse than first-year students in China. However, examinations of the subtests reveal that second-year students performed worse than first-year students even in Japan and Korea, although the differences were not statistically significant. For example, although Japanese second-year students scored higher than first-year students in overall tests, their superior overall performance was solely attributable to their higher score in reading. In fact, their listening and writing scores were lower than those of first-year students, although the differences were not statistically significant.

A similar result was observed in Korea. Korean second-year students’ overall mean score was significantly higher than the first-year students. However, the gain was mainly because of their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comparison Between First- and Second-Year Students</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st Year</th>
<th></th>
<th>2nd Year</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R**</td>
<td>161.3</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>2854</td>
<td>177.0</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>1379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>157.2</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>2855</td>
<td>155.7</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>1379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>21.5</td>
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* p<0.05
** R = Reading; L = Listening; W = Writing; T = Total.
better scores in reading. In listening, their score was not significantly better than that of the first-year students. In writing, their mean score was lower than that of the first-year students, although the difference was not statistically significant.

In China, the situation is even more intriguing than it is in Japan or Korea. The total mean score of the second-year students was significantly lower than that of the first-year students. Although the second-year students scored higher than the first-year students in reading, the gain was not statistically significant. On the other hand, the second-year students performed significantly poorer than the first-year students in listening and writing, leading them to fall behind the first-year students in total scores. Table 8 shows the comparison results between the first- and second-year students in Japan, Korea and China.

V. DISCUSSIONS

In this chapter, some of the results will be reviewed and explanations and observations will be made on the results.

1. On Korean Students' Superior Performance in Reading and Listening

Why did Koreans perform better than Chinese and Japanese in English reading and listening? The difference cannot be attributed to the sampling problem related to the disproportionate distributions of large and medium-sized cities in the three countries. The proportion of Korean large cities was bigger than that of Japanese, which may account for Koreans' higher scores than Japanese ones. If this is true, then the Chinese students, all from large cities, should have scored higher than Koreans.

Explanations for the Korean students' high proficiency will be sought in some linguistic and educational factors.

1) Linguistic Differences

As for the Koreans' superiority in listening over Japanese, the first and foremost reason for the difference can be found in the linguistic advantage that Koreans have over the Japanese, especially in listening comprehension. Both Korean and Japanese lack many English sounds, such as /θ/, /Æ/, /ð/, /ð/, and so forth. However, Korean has most of the final sounds of English that are not found in Japanese. While the Japanese language has (C)V(C) strings of sounds, the Korean language can have (C)VC strings. Besides, while Korean has most of the English vowel
sounds, Japanese has very few vowels such as /u/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/.

However, this linguistic difference cannot explain the Korean students' superiority over Chinese. The Chinese language actually has more consonants and vowels than the Korean language, and Chinese sounds in many cases are more similar to English sounds than the Korean sounds are. Although the difference between Korean listening score and Chinese listening score does not seem great, the difference seems interesting to note.

2) Educational Differences

Although the linguistic difference can provide some of the reasons for the Koreans' superior performance, especially in listening, it cannot give a full account for the different performance levels. Educational differences seem to be more adequate to explain the different proficiency levels.

(1) The College Scholastic Ability Test

Since 1993, Korea has been administering the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) to prospective college students in the admission process. The CSAT was introduced in 1993 after two years of pilot testing. The CSAT was innovative in that it differed from the previous college entrance examinations called the College Entrance Proficiency Test. What follows are the major differences of the CSAT from previous tests:

(a) Introduction of a listening comprehension test,
(b) Emphasis on communicative competence,
(c) Fluency over accuracy,
(d) Emphasis on reading comprehension,
(e) No paper-and-pencil test on pronunciation or spelling.

The CSAT has had a powerful washback effect on secondary school English education. Most of all, the CSAT's listening comprehension test forced secondary and primary schools to pay more attention to listening. Besides, since the reading comprehension test of the CSAT emphasized fluency, by requiring rapid reading and information processing, students had to develop macro-level reading abilities to cope with the bulk of reading materials in a relatively short period of time. This explains why Koreans were especially strong in reading and listening.

(2) New Curricula and Textbooks

Another important change in the Korean English education system is the change of English
curricula and the corollaries of them, the textbooks. The biggest change was made in the 6th National Curriculum which became effective in 1995 for middle school and 1996 for high school. The characteristics of the 6th Curriculum are as follows:

(a) A change from grammatical syllabuses to functional syllabuses,
(b) Comprehension before production,
(c) Emphasis on communicative competence,
(d) Fluency over accuracy.

The 7th National Curriculum adopted basically the same approach, and became effective in 2001 for primary and middle school English, and in 2002 for high school English.

Like the CSAT, the 6th Curriculum emphasized communicative competence, and adopted a kind of functional syllabus. It also emphasized comprehension before production. As a result, listening comprehension and reading comprehension became emphasized before speaking and writing. This may partly explain why Korean students performed so poorly in writing.

The new curriculum did have a strong impact on English education, as it changed the overall format of textbooks. Textbooks tried to incorporate the educational principles of the new curriculum by providing more communicative activities than before.

One thing to note here is the introduction of English education into elementary school in 1997. It may be tempting to say that the Korean high school students’ better performance in English tests may be attributable to their learning of English from early elementary school years. However, since the first cohort of the new curriculum of elementary school English started with the third graders in 1997, these students were still in middle school when the survey was conducted in 2003. Therefore, elementary school English education was not accountable for the proficiency difference.

Furthermore, the explanations in terms of the CSAT and the new curricula and textbooks do not account for the Koreans’ superior performances in TOEFL even before such reforms were introduced (Cf. Kam and Wong, 2000, cited above in the literature review chapter). Further research is necessary to identify the cause of the difference.

2. On the Wide Spread of Test Scores by Korean Students

One important difference between Korean and other two countries' students in the test results is the greater standard deviations of test scores by Korean students than by Japanese or Chinese students. The scores show that Korean students were spread out evenly in G1 through G6, while Japanese and Chinese students were mostly clustered around G2 to G4.
One possible reason for the fairly even distribution of Korean students across the GTEC grades may be found in the peculiar sociological phenomenon of rampant private tutoring in Korea. An EBS TV Survey on private tutoring in English in Korea (Kyeonghyeong Shinmun, July 12, 2003) showed that 143 (70.15%) of the surveyed 200 parents had their children take private lessons in English. Table 9 shows when these students start their private lessons in English. As Table 9 shows, a great majority of the students start in low primary years. Only 17.8 percent start during middle school days.

| Table 9 |
| Starting Years of Private Lessons in English in Korea |
| Starting Year | Pre-kindergarten | Kindergarten | Low Primary | High Primary | Middle School | Total |
| % | 3.4% | 9.6% | 45.9% | 22.6% | 17.8% | 99.3% |

In Oryang Kwon's (2003) survey with 232 secondary school English teachers, the teachers thought that 44.58% of the students were taking private tutoring. Here are some of the results of the survey.

(a) Middle school teachers estimated more students are taking private lessons than high school students. Middle school teachers thought that 52.9 percent of their students were taking private lessons; on the other hand, high school teachers thought that 32.7 percent of their students take private lessons.

(b) The larger the cities, the more students took private lessons. In Seoul, 61.04 percent of the students were thought by their teachers to take private lessons; in large cities, the percentage was 53.4. In medium-sized cities, the percentage was 40.41, while the county-capital level showed 29.44 percent.

Since there are discrepancies between large and medium-sized cities in the percentages of the students taking private lessons, the abnormal distribution in proficiency levels are hard to be corrected into a normal distribution.

3. On Writing

As a whole, the Japanese group demonstrated high frequencies in the middle; the Chinese group had a large number of students who scored high; and the Korean group had a large number of students who scored low.

It has already been pointed out that Korean students scored extremely low in writing. Then, it may be asked why Korean students did so poor in writing. Just as the CSAT may be responsible for the Korean students' superior abilities of reading and listening, it may also be responsible for
the Korean students' low scores in writing. Since the CSAT is a multiple-choice test, students do not see any necessity to improve their writing ability. However, considering the fact that writing is not tested in Japan and China either, the CSAT does not seem to be the sole culprit for the low writing ability of the Korean students.

The writing section of GTEC for STUDENTS was an "essay writing test" in which the students were asked to write their opinions on a given topic. A random sample of the essays was analyzed by Professor Negishi, one of the research team members. He made the following comments:

An overall characteristic of the Korean and Chinese students is that they have the ability to write a good amount in a limited time. Compared with the Japanese students of GTEC Grade 3, the students from Korea and China seem to be able to write a certain amount at the same level. It can be said that their so-called "writing fluency" is high.

Also, Korean and Chinese students used a larger vocabulary than Japanese students. When the vocabulary size was compared, based on the developmental stage that can be inferred from the grammatical errors, the Chinese students seem to have the largest vocabulary.

These are the good points of the writings of Korean students and Chinese students, but they are not without problems. One is that the Chinese students, even if they scored high, did not necessarily understand the "notion of a paragraph." For example, some students wrote one full page without any indication of paragraphing. Besides, Chinese students did not use many conjunctions or connectives. The problem of the Chinese students may be that they were not instructed to think about the organization of composition at a macro level when writing in English. By receiving this kind of instruction in the future, the students will be able to distinguish their opinion and the support for that opinion, which would enable them to write more persuasively.

Compared with the Chinese students, Korean students' writings consisted of several paragraphs. However, it was difficult to judge if the students intended to make a new paragraph when they indented. It was not clear if they intended a new paragraph or just changed lines without being conscious of paragraphs. On the other hand, there were many Korean students who used discourse markers consciously. However, there is still a lot of room for improvement in the parts within paragraphs. Therefore, for Korean students, instruction on the roles and structures of key sentences and supporting sentences might be effective.

However, the above observations are rather for the high-achievers than for the low-achievers.
As pointed out before, many Koreans were incompetent writers as their mean score was much lower than those of Japanese and Chinese students. More research and practical actions are necessary for Koreans to catch up with Japanese and Chinese counterparts in writing.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In this chapter, a summary of the study will be presented first, followed by discussions of its strengths and weaknesses, and implications and suggestions for future research and English education.

1. Summary of the Study

So far, the paper discussed the results of the tri-national comparative study that compared high school students' English abilities in Korea, Japan, and China. The Korean high school students scored higher than Chinese and Japanese students in reading and listening. However, they performed so poorly that their overall score was lower than that of the Chinese students, although it was higher than that of the Japanese students. Korean students were also unique in that their standard deviation of the scores was far greater than those of Japanese and Chinese.

When the first- and second-year students were compared within each country, the second-year students did not do any better than the first-year students in many subtests, leading the Chinese second-year high school students to fall behind the first-year students in the overall test scores.

The project has strengths and weaknesses. In what follows, these strengths and weaknesses will be briefly discussed, followed by suggestions for future research and education.

2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Present Study

The most important contribution of the current research project comes from the fact that it compared English abilities of the three important nations in East Asia, using an identical standardized test. The test measured three important skill areas of reading, listening and writing. Although the test did not measure the speaking ability, the study fairly well covered the general English abilities of high school students.

Another strength of the study is the size of the sampling for the study. Since the survey involved 4,000 to 5,000 subjects in each country, the results are significant indicators of the high school students' abilities, although the sampling procedures were not necessarily ideal. Except in the case of China, the Korean and Japanese results can be fairly well generalized to the entire
student population.

The third strength of the project is that it compared the English abilities of the first- and second-year high school students within each country. Although previous studies attempted to compare the students' abilities across the nations, the present study was the first to compare between two school grades.

The study, however, is not without weaknesses. One of the serious weaknesses of the survey research is the sample problem. As Chinese students were all from large cities, comparison of these three samples should be taken with some reservation. Another weakness is that the assessment of the student abilities could not guarantee the subjects' willing and sincere participation. This is especially true as the subjects saw no penalty for not cooperating sincerely. Therefore, even though the students were asked to do their best on the test, some of the students might not have registered their fullest potential on the test.

3. Implications and Suggestions for Future English Education

In this section, implications of the present study will be drawn first, followed by suggestions for future research and English education.

1) Implications

The present study showed that the three countries in East Asia, i.e., China, Korea, and Japan, have similarities and differences in students' English abilities. Because of the tremendous washback effect of the CSAT in Korea that emphasizes reading comprehension, Korean students outperformed Chinese and Japanese students in reading and listening. This demonstrates the importance of testing on language education, especially when the test is a high-stakes test. The implication derivable from this result is that, high-stake test developers need to incorporate all four skills of English in the testing. The characteristics of the CSAT need to be taken seriously by test developers in Japan and China.

The current research also successfully proved that a good international comparative study can benefit all the nations involved in the study. The research raised the awareness of the necessity to continue such international research in all the sub-areas of English education. Sometimes we can see ourselves better through a comparison with others.

Although the global community is becoming smaller, teaching and learning English as a global language remains to be an overwhelming task for most teachers and students. Through these types of comparative studies, teachers and students will learn that the difficulties that they encounter are not just their idiosyncratic problems but rather universal among the countries.
2) Suggestions for Future Research and English Education

The present study showed that international comparisons of English abilities can reveal some very important aspects of each country. Suggestions from the current research for future research and English education are as follows:

(1) Systematic efforts need to be made to continue international comparative research in English education. Future research needs to carefully sample the students in order to enhance the external validity of the research.

(2) Networking of teachers and researchers in Asia is necessary to share experience and information about English education in the East Asian region where common cultures are shared.

(3) Exchange and cooperation of students and teachers through joint workshops or camps is necessary to discuss and work for the improvement of English education.

English teaching and learning in the future will be quite different from that of the past, and the teachers will be faced with new educational environments and challenges. Cooperation among the English teachers in East Asia can be beneficial to the teachers and students in the region in their efforts to improve their English education.

REFERENCES


A Comparison of English Proficiency of Korean, Japanese and Chinese High School Students 21

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Applicable level: secondary school
Key words: English testing, high school English, comparative study, international comparison

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