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# An Investigation of the Private EFL Sector in South Korea: Meeting Students' and Parents' Goals and Expectations

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University of San Francisco

**An Investigation of the Private EFL Sector in South Korea:  
Meeting Students' and Parents' Goals and Expectations**

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

by  
Stephen Ostermiller  
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### **Abstract**

In South Korea, there is an abundance of expatriate educators working in the large, private English education industry. Many of these educators work for private language institutes known as hagwons, where they teach English as a foreign language (EFL) to preschool and primary school students. However, due to language barriers and other circumstances, these workers rarely communicate with the parents of their students. Couple this with a lack of knowledge about the history and current state of EFL education in Korea, and many of these educators are left unaware of the goals and expectations that these parents have for their students. The author of this research had a similar experience while teaching in South Korea, and pursued this study in order to give a voice to the parents of these students.

For this study, thirteen parents were surveyed regarding the goals and expectations that they have for their children's English education. The surveys contained eight open-ended questions based around five topics: importance of English education, the importance of achieving communicative competence, the importance of testing, the influence of competition, and the future goals of English education. The conclusion of this research resulted in insight into the goals and expectations that parents of hagwon students have for their children's education. Although results were split on many of the questions, the majority of the participants interviewed believed it to be important that their children's English education should be focused on increasing communicative competence of their children.

## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

In the Republic of Korea (henceforth referred to as South Korea), there is a booming industry for English education. English education is an obligatory part of the public education system, but there is also a large private education sector fueling the desire for English. In 2010, there were at least 23,600 expatriates from countries where English is spoken as a native language that worked as English educators in South Korea (Kang & Park, 2010). For many English as a foreign language (EFL) educators in the private sector in South Korea, it can be unclear what students and their parents' goals and expectations are for their English education. This could be due to a lack of knowledge about the Korean education system among foreign EFL educators in South Korea, socio-cultural differences, or a lack of dialogue between the educators and the parents of their students due to language barriers.

This study addresses these problems by establishing a dialogue through conducting surveys with parents of students currently being educated in the private English as a foreign language (EFL) sector in South Korea. With better knowledge about how to meet students' and their parents' goals and expectations, EFL educators working in the private education sector in South Korea could adapt their methods and approaches to meet those goals. Hopefully, this study will also influence administrators and others in charge of developing curriculum at private English institutes in South Korea to adjust their curriculum to better suit the goals and expectations of the students and parents that they serve.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The central purpose of this study is to determine the expectations and goals of students and their parents in the private education sector in South Korea with regards to their English as a Foreign Language education. This study will also serve as communicative link between expatriate EFL teachers in South Korea, and the parents of the students that they teach. Fulfilling this purpose will lead to a greater understanding of the goals and motivations of young generations of Korean EFL students, why these goals exist and create a reference point for current expatriate EFL teachers in South Korea who wish to adapt their teaching strategies to greater meet their students' goals.

I personally made the decision to pursue this study because of my experiences working in the private education sector in South Korea. Although I have over three years of experience teaching English as a foreign language in South Korea, I do not feel as though I completely understand my students' motivations and goals. Tens of thousands of expatriate English educators work in South Korea; many of them have unquestionably had experiences similar to mine. This study will help parents, students and current EFL educators in South Korea as well as prospective teachers. It will provide a voice to the parents with regards to the expectations and goals of their children's educations. This is a counter-narrative that has, for the most part, been absent from Western academic literature. For current and prospective EFL educators, it will give insight into the socio-cultural factors that shape English education in South Korea, as well as provide insight into the goals and expectations of their students and their parents. In addition, it is my hope that this study serves as an impetus to encourage current EFL educators in South Korea to open up more lines of dialogue with the parents of their students, as well as to critically

examine if the methods and approaches they are using in the classroom are effective in meeting the goals of the students and their parents.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on two theoretical areas: washback theory and communicative language teaching. Washback theory is concerned with the consequential and inconsequential effects that high-stakes assessment tests have on classroom practices and curriculum. Communicative language teaching is an approach to teaching languages that is centered on communicative interaction among learners.

Washback theory analyzes the influences that high-stakes assessment tests have on how languages are taught. According to Samuel Messick (1996), washback describes the magnitude in which assessment tests impact the way that teachers teach and students learn, often in ways that they would not do if they were not influenced by tests. Tests can have both positive and negative washback effects on teaching and learning. Korean society puts a large amount of value on the scores of high-stakes assessment tests, which is examined more closely in the later chapters of this study. This study considers the importance that parents in South Korean place on English testing and its effects on English education.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a broad approach to language teaching which encourages interaction amongst learners with a focus on communicating using the language being learned. Dell Hymes (1972) devised the term *communicative competence* to describe a speaker's ability to use linguistic features such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, coupled with an understanding of socio-linguistic, strategic, and discourse features of language use, in order to effectively communicate. To put it succinctly, communicative competence is a

speaker's ability to understand others and be understood by others. The ultimate goal of CLT is to have learners achieve communicative competence. This approach also has a strong emphasis on exposing students to authentic language use. Through my experience, many of the tasks that my students are required to complete are not communicative; they do not require interaction amongst participants. This study examines the degree of importance that parents in South Korea place on their children developing communicative competence in English.

### **Methodology**

For this study, I chose to conduct a survey of thirteen parents of pre-elementary and elementary school-aged students who were receiving education in the private English sector in Seoul, South Korea. The survey consisted of a variety of eight open-ended questions regarding the parents' decisions to have their children pursue private English education, current and future goals of their children's English education, and . By giving participants the chance to answer these survey questions, I gave a voice to a counter-narrative: that of the parents of students who receive English education in the immense private education sector in South Korea.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will help current and future expatriate EFL educators in South Korea understand the goals and expectations of their students. With the information provided in this study, these teachers will be better prepared to adapt their approaches, lessons, materials and roles in the classroom to better suit the goals of their students. Hopefully, through the implementation of the information provided from this study by current and future expatriate EFL educators, students will receive instruction that is more suited to benefit their educational goals.

This study encourages current educators to critically examine the curriculum and materials provided by the schools they work for and take action to adapt those resources to better fit the needs of their students.

This study also gave a voice to the parents of a population of students who are studying English in the private education sector in South Korea. The input from these parents opened up a discourse between expatriate EFL teachers and parents in South Korea, giving a voice to a group which was otherwise underrepresented in discussions about English education in Western academia. Hopefully, this study will encourage future dialogue between expatriate EFL instructors and parents of students they teach in the South Korean private education sector.

### **Definition of Terms**

**EFL:** This stands for ‘English as a Foreign Language’. This refers to English language education that occurs in a country where English is not a primary language. For example, in South Korea, English is taught as a foreign language because it is not an official language of South Korea. There is an important distinction between EFL and ESL (English as a Second Language). ESL refers to English language education that is given to learners who have a native language other than English, but are residing in a locale where English is a primary language. For instance, a Korean student studying in America would be designated as an ESL student.

**Hagwon:** A privately-owned institute in South Korea that operates for profit. Hagwons provide supplementary education in a variety of subjects, including English. They make up a large portion of the private Education industry in South Korea.

**ELL:** This stands for ‘English Language Learner’. This term refers to individuals who are learning English as a second or foreign language.

**CLT:** This stands for ‘Communicative Language Learning’. This term refers to an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction amongst the students in a class in order to use language to communicate in an authentic way. The ultimate goal of CLT is to increase students’ communicative competence (their ability to communicate in the language that they are learning).

## CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

This literature review has been organized around three categories: EFL testing and its effects on EFL education in Korea, communicative language teaching in Korea, and private tutoring, competition and inequality in Korean EFL education. The first section contains studies that examine the influences that high-stakes EFL tests have had on the overall implementation of EFL education in Korea. The second section contains studies that analyze the increase of communicative language teaching in EFL education in Korea and the effectiveness that this has had on increasing communicative competence. The last section contains studies that look at the effects of competition in the motivation to study EFL in Korea and the inequalities this creates.

### Overview

#### **EFL testing and its effects on EFL education in Korea**

Choi (2008) investigated the washback effects that standardized EFL testing has had on EFL education as a whole in South Korea. The term *washback* refers to the effect that high stakes tests have on educational systems and classroom curricula. In order to analyze this, the author first presented an overview of the context of EFL testing in Korea, provided examples of various EFL tests being employed in various educational settings, and surveyed test-takers and educators on the impact that these tests have on EFL education. The surveys conducted investigated the washback effects that EFL tests have had on three different areas of EFL education: elementary education, secondary education, and university/adult education.

In fall of 2005, Choi (2008) surveyed 100 fifth-grade students regarding their familiarity with tests, what tests they have taken before, as well as their reasons for taking the tests. The results show that even at a young age, elementary Korean students were most familiar with the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the most common test used by Korean companies for employment purposes. The most common test taken by these students was the PELT and over 80% of the students said their reason for taking the test was that they were encouraged by instructors at their hagwons (private institutes) or their parents.

For the same study, Choi (2008) also surveyed 40 hagwon instructors regarding their reasons for having students take EFL tests as well as providing opinions for why they believe there is varying popularity among EFL tests. Almost half of the instructors surveyed stated that the reason for having students take EFL tests is to motivate them to study English. In addition, 40% of the respondents claimed that the most important reason for choosing an EFL test was if the test was recognized as a scholastic record of achievement.

Choi (2008) concludes that while Koreans are truly committed to learning English, they often do not meet their goals of gaining communicative competence because their efforts become more focused on gaining as high of an EFL test score as possible. This is due to the enormous impact that high stakes EFL tests such as the TOEIC, TOEFL and CSAT (College Scholastic Aptitude Test) have on future education and employment opportunities.

Tae-Young Kim (2010) conducted a study on socio-cultural features that impacted Korean high school students' motivation to learn EFL. The study compared two separate questionnaires – one from 2002 and one from 2006 – given to 1,037 eleventh and twelfth-grade high school students in a major Korean city. Both of these questionnaires had identical questions.

The surveys were conducted to investigate the change in EFL learning motivation in high school students over time.

Kim (2010) argues that an ideology termed *hakbul* exists in Korean society in which the obtainment of prestigious university degrees distinguishes the upper class from lower classes; he also defines this as a “degreeocracy”. Korean society places so much value on the obtainment of these degrees, which greatly increases the competition among high school students to get into prestigious universities. Both of the surveys concluded that the biggest motivating factors for students to study EFL were getting into a prestigious university, increasing career prospects, and to be positively evaluated by others. Due to the high demand for entrance into prestigious universities as well as high-paying jobs, Korean EFL education places a big emphasis on improving EFL test scores such as the KSAT, TOEIC and TOEFL.

Choi (2008) indicated the effects that EFL testing has on elementary, secondary and university/adult education in Korea. Kim (2010) surmised that gaining acceptance into prestigious universities is a big motivating factor for Korean high school students. However, these studies do not examine the effects that EFL testing has on the English education that younger populations of students receive. This study will examine the influence EFL testing has on the motivation for parents of pre-elementary and elementary school students to study EFL.

### **Communicative language teaching in Korea**

In his article, *CLT Theories and Practices in EFL Curricula: A Case Study of Korea*, Kyung-eun Yoon (2004) investigates the influence that communicative language teaching (CLT)

has had on EFL curriculum in Korea. According to Kim, the Korean Ministry of Education establishes a national curriculum which regulates instructional procedures and the subject matter of general education in primary and secondary schools. The national curriculum influences the contents in textbooks approved to be published by the Ministry of Education, which are used in public schools across the country. Recent incarnations of the national curriculum have steered away from a grammar-based approach to English language learning and have put an emphasis on increasing communicative competence. The aim of this article was to inspect the prominence of CLT instruction in Korea and propose a future path for ELT curriculum based on the new guidelines of the national curriculum.

Yoon (2004) concludes that while there was a shift away from grammar-based instruction in the national curriculum towards communicative language teaching, it overlooked one major component of CLT: providing broader contextualization of language features beyond the sentence level. The most important takeaway from this article is that in the past two decades, there has been a move towards accepting CLT as an effective approach to teaching EFL at the government policy-making level. It must be noted that, beyond the government, it is imperative that EFL educators and learners must believe in the effectiveness and feasibility of CLT as an innovative approach to teaching and learning English in order for it to succeed in an EFL environment (Li, 1998).

While Yoon's (2004) study does show an increase in interest in CLT at the government policy-making level, it does not examine the opinions of young students' parents on communicative language learning. This is something that will be addressed in this study, particularly the opinions of communicative language learning among the parents of young English language learners.

In *Local Constructions of a Global Language: Ideologies of English in South Korea*, Joseph Sung-Yul Park (2009) provides vivid depictions of how English education has become a national obsession in South Korea. He states that while Koreans spend countless hours studying the language, some Koreans declare the obsession with English as a sickness on Korean society which increases class divisions, erodes traditional Korean culture and is ultimately the product of neoliberal globalization. He argues that this is a simplistic view and that the power of English in Korea must be viewed as a local, as well as global process. He goes on to state that one of the local, socio-cultural processes that influences Koreans' current obsession with English is that it is seen as an incredibly difficult language for Koreans to learn. They are driven by apprehension that their English abilities are never as good as they should be.

Much like Yoon (2004), Park (2009) discusses how recent changes in the national curriculum by the Ministry of Education have emphasized the importance of CLT. He notes that while the curriculum has changed, classroom practices have not fully adopted CLT for various reasons. One of the reasons he is because CLT is a Western theory of language learning that is incompatible with Korean cultural values. Park argues that the difficulties with employing CLT in Korea are more complex than this, and it involves Koreans historical and social relationships with English. Korean adult learners certainly do have a complex relationship with English education and the communicate language approach. Could CLT be more effective with younger learners of English who have a much different relationship with English?

In another article by Joseph Sung-Yul Park (2011), *The promise of English: linguistic capital and the neoliberal worker in the South Korean job market*, he remarks on how English education in Korea is viewed as absolutely necessary for upward social mobility. This view is one of the major factors driving the booming English education industry. From 1995 to 2005,

the TOEIC was the preferred test used by Korean corporations for hiring purposes and was heavily studied for by adults in the workforce. However, the importance of TOEIC scores on hiring preferences started to wane due to an overall increase in average TOEIC scores over the past decade driving down the value of high TOEIC test scores. Because the TOEIC focuses on reading and listening skills, employers began to realize that high TOEIC test scores did not translate into communicative competence in English. While Park claims that there is some validity in this viewpoint, it is unlikely that all of the efforts put forth studying for the TOEIC did not have some positive effect on communicative competence. Do Korean learners of English truly believe that teaching-to-the-test has little or no effect on communicative competence? Do they see CLT and teaching-to-the-test as mutually exclusive approaches? These questions are examined in this study.

The article, *English Textbooks in Japan and Korea*, Katsura Yuasa (2010) examines the similarities and differences between EFL books used in public schools in Korea and Japan. His rationale behind this comparison is the fact that EFL education in Japan and Korea have many similarities: the native languages of both countries are similar in terms of structure, both countries are primarily monolingual, English is used as a tool for business communication, and citizens of both countries feel that their English competence is lower than it should be. His research concluded that textbooks in both countries emphasize communicative competence over grammatical accuracy. ELT textbooks in Korea stress function over form and provide discourse-based activities through readings and dialogues. One question that is not addressed in Yuasa's study is whether or not Korean learners of English have faith in English learning materials produced and published by Korean companies. Do they trust these materials to be effective in increasing communicative competence?

### **Private tutoring, competition and inequality in Korean EFL education**

According to Dawson (2010), the private tutoring system in South Korea is easily the biggest in the world in relation to the size of the public school system. Spending on private tutoring in South Korea in 2003 was around \$12.4 billion, which is over half the total national budget for education. The article provides statistics that show how this huge market for private tutoring has created inequality in education as the wealthiest people are the ones who can benefit from it. Private tutoring in South Korea is generally connected with academic enrichment, socioeconomic circumstances, and familial pressure (Song, Park, & Sang, 2013, p. 137). In the public education system in South Korea, English education begins in elementary school, but many of the elementary school teachers responsible for teaching English have not received sufficient training to satisfactorily teach English (Butler, 2004). For this reason, many parents have relied on the private education sector to provide English education to their children. Through an influx of private English kindergartens, and the South Korean government's zeal for establishing English education in public schools, the starting age for learning English has continued to be lowered (Jahng, 2011). This market creates anxiety among parents who feel that it is necessary to pursue private English education for their children at a young age in order to stay competitive in an educational system that relies so heavily on supplementary education.

In Mihyon Jeon's (2012) article, *English immersion and educational inequality in South Korea*, she examines the effects that English immersion education has had on the public and private education sectors in South Korea. In 2008, the South Korean government established that it would begin providing classes in public schools where English is the only language used in instruction and curriculum content. The government established this program in order to alleviate the financial burden of paying for private English education. Unfortunately, it had the

opposite effect. Although the program was deemed unfeasible and ultimately abandoned, it created a new demand for English ‘immersion’ learning which influenced wealthy parents to send their children to study in English immersion programs. This helped to increase the English educational divide in Korea along the lines of wealth and affluence.

While both of these articles address the increase in demand and spending on private education, they do not provide a dialogue from parents of children who have received education in English hagwons. There are some questions which this study attempts to consider. Do parents of young ELLs believe that competition is a driving motivation for pursuing early childhood EFL education? Do they believe that sending their children to English language hagwons is necessary to keep them competitive in the current state of EFL education? At what age do they think it’s important to begin private EFL education and how do they pursue it? What are the financial implications that these parents face when deciding to pursue private English education?

### **Summary**

The studies cited in the first section clearly showed how the importance of high-stakes EFL tests impact EFL education in Korea. These tests are important factors concerning the upward social and economic mobility of Korean students. However, these studies only look at the effects of EFL tests on primary, secondary and adult learners, but ignore pre-elementary education. This is something that this study hopes to address.

In the second section, the studies showed how official curriculum in Korea has abandoned a grammar-based approach and adopted a more communicative approach. Most of these studies concluded that although the national curriculum has embraced a more

communicative approach, the actual implementation of this approach has been difficult for a variety of reasons. These articles do not observe the opinions that parents of young English language learners have on communicative language teaching and whether or not it is an effective approach for educating their children.

The articles cited in the third section discuss the booming private tutoring industry in Korea, and the competition it creates among students. They also discuss as an increase in inequity that has occurred due to the overwhelming prevalence of private tutoring. However, these articles do not examine private tutoring in the context of EFL education and whether or not competition drives the market for pre-elementary and elementary school aged private English education. This is something that this study wishes to examine.

## **CHAPTER III – THE PROJECT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT**

### **Description of the Project**

This project is designed as an investigation into the goals and motivations of current parents of pre-elementary and elementary school-aged EFL hagwon students. The project is based around a survey and an analysis of the findings of that survey. It contains four parts: 1) Survey of current parents of pre-elementary hagwon students, 2) Findings from the survey, 3) Conclusions, and 4) Suggestions for improvement.

Part one consists of a survey containing eight open-ended questions regarding the motivations and goals of parents with children who are currently attending pre-elementary EFL hagwons. Part two provides an overview of findings from this survey. Part three deals with what conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this survey. Part four deals with making suggestions for improving EFL education in South Korea to greater meet the goals of parents of pre-elementary hagwon students.

### **Development of the Project**

As was highlighted in the literature review, there had been plenty of research conducted on EFL education in Korea from a variety of scholars addressing several implications and conclusions. However, much of this research had ignored pre-elementary EFL education in the private sector, as well as the motivations and goals of pre-elementary ELLs and their parents.

As someone who has worked in pre-elementary EFL education in South Korea, the goals of my students' parents have not always been clear to me. Being raised in the United States, I had little knowledge of the Korean education system or the history of EFL practices. Because I have had relatively little contact with my students' parents, and an obvious language barrier exists between them and me, I have not learned what motivates these parents to send their children to EFL hagwons from such a young age and what specific goals they expect from this education. There are thousands of native English-speaking educators in South Korea who have had experiences similar to mine. This research benefits both those parents and educators.

Upon conducting the literature review, I began to understand how the importance of formal English testing in South Korea has influenced EFL education, the frustration with the lack of communicative competence that many Korean ELLs experience, as well the effect of competition and private tutoring on South Korean EFL education. I wanted to know how these products of past EFL education had affected the expectations of future EFL education.

EFL has been a major part of the Korean education system for decades now. The parents of young children currently attending English language hagwons have all their own experiences with English education. From these experiences, I wanted to know what changes they sought to see in current EFL education practices in Korea that would affect younger generations of Korean ELLs. I desired to find out what these parents had viewed as some of the flaws, as well as some of the advantages, of their own EFL education and how that had shaped their views of the ideal outcomes of their children's current EFL education.

This project gives a voice to those parents; it provides dialogue from a group who is otherwise underrepresented in currently published research. It provides information on how we

can implement changes in current EFL educational practices that will greater support the goals of those who benefit from this education. This research is published in English, providing findings, conclusions and suggestions on how to improve EFL educational practices to the many native English-speaking EFL educators currently working in South Korea. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to discuss changes that can be made to better benefit the goals of current and future generations of ELLs in South Korea. Hopefully, it will provide an impetus for researchers, educators, students, and parents of those students to participate in further dialogue about improving overall EFL education in South Korea.

### **Overview of Methodology**

For this study, data was collected through eight open-ended survey questions given to participants. The questions contained on the survey were divided into five separate topics based upon the three categories investigated in the literature review: EFL testing and its effects on EFL education in Korea, communicative language teaching in Korea, and private tutoring, competition and inequality in Korean EFL education.

In total, there were twenty participants who participated in this survey. All of the participants were parents of Korean students who were studying English as a foreign language in pre-elementary private language institutes (hagwons). All of the participants spoke Korean as a native language along with English as a second language.

There are some limitations to this study. This survey was conducted in English, which is not the native language of the participants. The scope of the research is narrowly focused on a

small group: the parents of pre-elementary English language learners (ELLs) in South Korea. The results of the study cannot be used to evaluate other populations of ELLs. The study contains a small sample size of participants; it cannot be used to draw conclusions beyond this group.

### **Survey Questions**

The survey consists of eight open-ended questions based on five topics: the overall importance of English education for Korean children, the importance of achieving communicative competence in English, the importance of standardized testing on English education, the influence of competition on English education, and the future goals of students' English education. These questions and topics contain some overlap with each other. They are addressed below.

The first topic addressed is the overall importance that the parents place on their children's English education. For this topic, there are two questions that were asked: 1) "Why is it important for your child to study English?", and 2) "When do you think is a good time for Korean children to begin studying English. These questions are very broad in scope and serve to address the overall importance that the parents place on their children's English education, as well as the importance of beginning to study English at an early age. The reasoning behind asking the second question is because many parents opt to send their children to English language hagwons at a young age; this is evidenced by the sheer amount of pre-elementary English hagwons.

The second topic concerns the importance of achieving communicative competence in English. This topic overlaps with all of the other topics in various ways. Regarding communicative competence, two questions were asked: 1) “How important is it for your child to be able to verbally communicate in English?”, and 2) “Which of these skills do you think is the most important to study: speaking, listening, reading, or writing? Why?” These questions address one of the major goals of this project. They serve to determine how important the goal of achieving communicative competence in English is for parents of hagwon students.

The third topic addresses the importance that testing has on the participants’ children’s English education. Because of the overall importance that English testing has in modern Korean society, this was an important topic to address. For this topic, only one question was addressed: “How important is it for you child to learn English test-taking strategies?” As reflected in the research, it is very clear that standardized testing has a large influence on education in Korea. This question addresses whether parents find it important for students to start learning how to complete these tests at an early age. This topic has overlap with other topics as well.

The fourth topic concerns the influence of competition on English education. There is wide-spread competition for education in Korea, as shown by the vast amount of private, supplementary education that is available. To address this topic, one question was asked: “How important is it for your child to study English at a hagwon in order to stay competitive with other students?” The research has shown that competition is a major feature of education in Korea. This question addresses how much this competition influences parents to send their children to study at private sector English language institutes.

The fifth and final topic discusses the future goals of the participants' children's English educations. As with most of the other questions in this topic, the questions contain some overlap into other topics. There were two questions related to this topic: 1) "Do you hope to send your child to study in a country where English is a native language? Why or why not?", and "Which is more important for your child's future: to be able to speak English well, or for them to perform well on standardized English tests such as the College Scholastic Ability Test (대학수학능력시험) or Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)? Why?"

As with most of the other questions in this topic, the questions contain some overlap into other topics. These questions relate back to the first topic which addressed why the parents think that English education is important. The last question relates to topics two and three, which were concerned with the importance of standardized testing as well as the importance of achieving communicative competence in English. This question serves to determine which goal the parents find more essential: achieving high scores on standardized English language tests or gaining communicative competence. Although they are not mutually exclusive, there is some significance in determining if one of these goals is viewed as more important than the other.

## **Results**

There were thirteen participants who answered the eight questions in the survey. There were a variety of different responses from each participant, but there were some overarching themes which can be analyzed. These themes are discussed below.

When answering why it was important for their children to study English, eleven of the participants in this study unequivocally expressed that it is important for their child to be able to communicate with non-Koreans. To quote one participant, “It is global society now, so kids have lots of opportunities to meet foreigners, especially English speaking people. When they grow up, they will work with other foreigners. (ex. Foreign trade, and studying abroad).” Most of the participants explicitly conveyed that English education is important due to globalization and to help them better understand the world. Many participants also expressed that learning English is essential for future educational and professional opportunities. One participant stated that the main reason for her child to study English was so he can study abroad. All of these responses have one clear theme: it is important to be able to use English to communicate with others.

The participants were more divided on when is the optimal time for Korean children to begin studying English as a foreign language. Six of the participants clearly stated that it is important for their children to have acquired their mother tongue before beginning to learn English. Six of the participants provided specific ages when they believed it was optimal for children to begin learning English; these ages ranged between three to seven years old, with three of the participants stating that four or five years old was the best for children to begin learning English. All but one of the participants noted that it is important for their children to begin learning English no later than elementary school. One response noted that students should begin studying English “... no later than elementary school. Kindergarten may be slightly early, but as long as the child’s Korean is somewhat established, it is always easier for children to learn a foreign language at a younger age”. It is also important to note that one participant noted that they believed it was not entirely important for her child to study English at an early age as he or

she will have the same opportunities to study English as an adult. Although no parents directly addressed the impact that focusing on English might have on their children's ability to acquire Korean, three parents stated that it is important for their child to have acquired Korean before they begin to study English. Overall, most participants agreed that it is important for Korean children to begin studying English at an early age.

Eleven of the thirteen participants clearly communicated that being able to verbally communicate in English is an important goal that they have for their children. Some respondents voiced that the ability to verbally in English is important for upward career mobility. As one participant noted, "If she has serious considerations of speaking/using English in her future career, verbal communication is important". Another participant noted the social importance of verbal communication, because a person's English ability is often judged based upon how well they speak. For the majority of participants, a high level of communicative competence is certainly an expectation of their children's English education. A few participants indicated that verbal communication is especially important for young English language learners. As one participant expressed:

I think the most important part of learning English is speaking. In learning a foreign language, focusing on speaking can be very effective, especially for kids. If kids think they can express themselves in English, then they will get more interested in learning English and they will feel proud of themselves.

Much like the responses to the first question of the survey, most of the participants continued to express the importance they place towards developing communicative competence in English.

When asked which of the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are the most important for their children to actively study, the participants' responses were divided. Two participants remarked that the four skills are "interrelated" or that they "cannot be separated". A few of the responses were ambiguous as to which language skill they found to be the most important. Four respondents believed that listening was the most important skill for their child to focus on, with all four declaring that listening ability is a precursor to the other language skills. As one participant mentioned, "Listening [is the most important language skill]. First, you have to understand what [people] are saying to be able to speak." Three participants noted that speaking was the most important skill for their child to study. Three other participants remarked that reading was the most important. One respondent believed that both reading and writing are the most important skills because of their importance in business correspondence. Despite the mixed responses, it is clear that all four language skills are important.

With regards to the importance of test-taking strategies, the participants were also split. Three respondents noted that because of the gatekeeping role that high-stakes English tests have in Korea – test scores determine acceptance into universities and high test scores are required for prestigious jobs – test-taking skills are necessary. Three participants remarked that they believe tests are an important, objective way of assessing someone's English ability, and therefore learning test-taking strategies is important. Four other participants claimed that focusing on test-taking strategies is not important for their child's English education. One of these participants asserted, "It is not important for my child to learn English test-taking strategies, because I want my child to enjoy learning English and studying it. Not just because of a test." A few participants noted that although test scores are important, when young children learn test-taking strategies, it does not improve their English abilities. Although many of the participants noted

the importance that tests have in modern Korean society, there was a clear division of opinion between the participants with regards to the importance of their children to learn test-taking strategies

There were a variety of opinions among respondents in regards to the importance of sending their children to English language hagwons in order for them to learn English. One participant noted that sending her child to a hagwon is the only option that she has for her child to study English. Other participants mentioned that a hagwon education is not necessarily the only opportunity that their children have to study English, and other opportunities exist. Some of the alternatives that were mentioned included studying abroad, online education, having private tutors, as well as having parents teach their children if they are capable of doing so. Despite this, many participants expressed their belief that their children can receive a good English education from studying at hagwons.

Participants were also divided about the importance of being competitive with others in regards to English education. Three participants noted that competition amongst students often has a positive impact on students' desire to learn English. As one participant attested, "Being competitive with peers at hagwons encourages kids to study more. Having rivals can serve [as a] stimulus for their study." Other participants declared that they feel that English education in Korea is becoming too competitive.

Participants also gave a wide variety of responses when asked if they hope to send their children to study abroad in countries where English is a native language. Six participants outright stated that they hope to send their child to study abroad. Although they expressed this desire, two of them mentioned that it might be financially unfeasible. Some of the reasons they

provided for wanting to send their children to study abroad include providing their children with more opportunities, as well as wanting them to be able to speak with a higher level of fluency. Seven participants stated that they do not plan to have their child study abroad. Two of these participants conveyed that it should not be their decision to send their children abroad to study English, but that it is ultimately a choice that their children should make on their own accord. Other participants mentioned financial reasons as why they do not plan to send their children to study abroad. A few participants mentioned that they believe that English education in Korea is sufficient, so it would be unnecessary to send their children abroad to study English. One participant provided a rather concise response, stating “I think children can get good English education in Korea.” Although responses were divided, it appears that sending their child to study English abroad is an important goal for many parents. From the responses of the parents who indicated a desire to have their children study abroad, many expressed that they believe it would help their children communicate better. For these parents, they clearly place importance on having their children develop communicative competence in English.

For the final question regarding the importance of speaking English well or performing well on standardized English tests, nine out of the thirteen total participants explicitly stated that speaking English well is more important than performing well on standardized tests. One participant declared that receiving high test scores is more important for her child, stating “In Korean society, getting into a good college is still very important.” Two participants stated that they believed that performing well on standardized tests and speaking well are both equally important. One participant declined to respond to this question.

For the participants who expressed that being able to speak English well is more important than performing well on standardized tests, they provided a variety of reasons as to

why it was more important. Most of these participants mentioned that it is an important goal for their children to be able to communicate well with speakers of English. For some, they believed that receiving high test scores is not a viable longstanding objective. To quote one participant, “Speaking English well [is more important], because [passing tests] is a short-term goal.” Many participants mentioned that while both test scores and speaking ability are important, they believed that being able to communicate well is more important. As another participant noted, “Practically, [a good] test score is important to get a better job, but for my kid, it is better to speak English fluently, which helps him work better”. A few participants illustrated that being able to perform well on standardized English tests does not necessarily indicate an ability to communicate well in English. To quote another participant, “a good test score does not always mean that you can use English well in everyday situations.” While achieving a viable level of communicative competence is viewed as necessary to be successful, test-taking is also a very important and unavoidable part of Korean society which must also be addressed. However, it seems that the majority of the participants placed more importance on their children being able to verbally communicate well over performing well on standardized English tests.

## Chapter IV – Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusions

There are countless numbers of English language hagwons – private institutes where English is taught – in South Korea. Many of these hagwons hire native English speakers to work in their institutes teaching English to young students ranging from preschool to middle school. For many recent college graduates in countries where English is a native language, this seems like a great opportunity to live abroad, make a decent wage, and try their hand at teaching – which could possibly lead to a future career in education. However, many of these instructors have had little or no experience teaching English before arriving in Korea, and – for a variety of reasons – receive very little dialogue with the parents of their students.

Prior to developing this study, I had taught in hagwons in South Korea for over three years myself; I chose to pursue this study because of the dearth of communication that existed between my students' parents and me. By providing a survey to parents of hagwon students, I have given a chance for them to communicate what expectations, goals and desires that these parents have for their children's English educations. Through the results of this survey, current English educators in the private sector in South Korea, and the administrators of the hagwons they work for, can gain a better understanding of the prevailing aspirations of the population that they serve.

One research study which helped to influence the formation of this study was *The impact of EFL testing on EFL education in Korea*, by Inn-Chull Choi (2008). As its title clearly states, the article investigates the effects that widespread standardized EFL testing has affected EFL education in South Korea. Choi's article provides insight into the history of testing in Korea, why standardized English testing plays a very important role in Korean society, as well as an

overview of the most important gatekeeping standardized tests in Korea – the ones whose scores are used to gain entrance into universities and are required for many high-paying and esteemed jobs. Two of the most prominent gatekeeping tests used in Korea, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) contain no speaking assessment and no extensive or intensive writing assessment. By focusing almost exclusively on listening and reading assessment, these tests do not fully assess communicative competence.

From my experiences of teaching in hagwons, students as young as six-years-old are given high-stakes English assessment tests. A great deal of pressure is placed on these students to receive high marks on these tests because they are viewed as the best way to measure their English ability. Similar to the TOEIC and CSAT tests, many of the tests that I have administered placed little emphasis on speaking or writing assessment. While Choi's article clearly showed why such a high importance is placed on testing in Korea, I wanted to investigate how much of an emphasis that current parents of young English language learners attending hagwons place on formal assessment. Furthermore, knowing that many assessment tests did not focus on speaking or writing, I wanted to ascertain how much importance these parents placed on their child's ability to communicate in English.

By interviewing these parents, this study provided insight into what they expect from the English education that their children receive from hagwons. It benefits current educators teaching in hagwons in South Korea by providing insight into the goals and expectations that parents of young hagwon students have. Hopefully, it will also encourage current and future teachers in hagwons to actively promote communication between themselves and the populace that they serve.

## **Recommendations**

One major feat of this study was providing a voice to parents of hagwon students that had otherwise been ignored in Western academia. This study was conducted because I had an interest in what Korean parents expected of the English educations their children received from hagwons. In my three years of teaching, I always felt as if I had too little contact with the parents of my students and was therefore unaware of the expectations they had for their English educations. A dialogue between my students' parents and me, although desired, proved hard to establish due to a language barrier and policies enforced by the hagwons which I worked for. I suggest that current hagwon administrators find ways to promote dialogue between the native English speaking teachers that work and the parents of their students. This would greatly benefit all of the parties involved: the teachers, the parents, the hagwon administrators, and especially the students. Hopefully, this study will encourage current hagwon teachers to push for more dialogue between the parents of their students and themselves.

This study has communicated the important role that English standardized tests have in modern Korean society. While educators in some hagwons may feel frustrated with emphasis that they place on testing, this study has shown why these hagwons, and many Koreans, place such significance on assessment tests. For educators working in these environments, it is important to understand the underlying reasons why they are administering these tests. It is the responsibility of these educators to question the validity of the tests they give to their students. Ultimately, it is up to the teachers to determine if the tests are a true assessment of their students' abilities. If they have doubts on the validity of the tests they are administering, they should communicate with the administrators at their hagwons about the concerns they have with their

tests. It is important, especially when teaching in a society that places such importance on testing, to uphold test validity.

I suggest that current educators working in hagwons, or the administrators and other officials of the hagwons, consider using or developing tests that accurately assess the communicative competence of the students that they serve. It's clear from the responses received that many parents believe it is important to use standardized tests to assess their children's English ability. However, it's also clear that many parents place a lot of importance on raising the communicative competence of their children. Tests that assess speaking and writing will help parents better determine the communicative abilities of their students.

Testing is important, but hagwons and the instructors that work for them should not overemphasize its importance. Many of the respondents reported that they believed that testing does not help their children learn to be communicative in English. It is important to not rely too heavily on testing, and not letting negative washback effects (or "teaching to the test") dictate the approach and materials that you use in your classroom.

Because respondents overwhelmingly voiced their desire for their children to be able to communicate in English, hagwon teachers should do their best to adopt some communicative language teaching (CLT) methods in their classroom. If the ultimate goal of your students is to be able to communicate in English, make sure that there is a focus on all four language skills; do not ignore developing your students speaking and writing skills. Contextualize grammar and vocabulary that you are teaching in discourse-level reading and listening exercises. Do not just provide recognition exercises; expand upon recognition by providing production activities.

Remember, languages are a tool for communication, so that should be the primary goal of learning and teaching a language.

This study could have been improved or expanded upon in a few of ways. First, instead of using a survey of open-ended questions, I could have conducted interviews with the parents. Interviews could have provided a longer dialogue and provided a dialogue with more interlocution. Conversations between participants and me would have allowed more questions to be asked and answered leading to expansion of ideas. Second, the project focused on a small community of parents, most of them from affluent backgrounds. All of the parents who participated in this survey lived in Seoul, and had received a good English education. In order to benefit the greater population of South Korea, a future study could be conducted using participants from other neighborhoods, cities and towns around the country. Last, the project could have also had a greater emphasis on the goals of the students themselves, as opposed to their parents. A future study could include surveys or interviews given to young English hagwon students to determine their motivations for learning English.

The lasting impact of this study is that, although there were some overarching themes that were present from results of the survey, it is clear that each parent has different, distinct goals and expectations for their children's educations. There is no one-approach-fits-all procedure that will work for every classroom. Each parent, and each student, has different goals and expectations, as well as different learning styles and ways to achieve those goals. Hagwon teachers should create communicate with the parents of their students to understand exactly what their goals and expectations are. This communication will not only benefit the teachers by having them gain an understanding of the parents' goals and expectations; the teachers will be able to provide the parents with valuable input about their children's education and English

abilities. Each teacher should take an eclectic approach to how they teach their class. Take time to investigate the wants and needs of your students, as well as their learning preferences, and adapt your approach accordingly.

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**APPENDIX**

**An Investigation of the Private EFL Sector in South Korea:  
Meeting Students' and Parents' Goals and Expectations**

## Appendix A

### Protocol Exemption Notification

To: Stephen Ostermiller  
From: [REDACTED]  
Subject: Protocol # [REDACTED]  
Date: 07/14/2014

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your project (IRB Protocol # [REDACTED]) with the title **An Investigation of the Private EFL Sector in South Korea: Meeting Students' and Parents' Goals and Expectations** has been approved by the University of San Francisco IRBPHS as **Exempt** according to [REDACTED]. Your application for exemption has been verified because your project involves minimal risk to subjects as reviewed by the IRB on 07/14/2014.

Please note that changes to your protocol may affect its exempt status. Please submit a modification application within ten working days, indicating any changes to your research. Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your endeavors.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

IRBPHS – University of San Francisco

[REDACTED]

## Appendix B

### Survey questions

1. Why is it important for your child to study English?
2. When do you think is a good time for Korean children to begin studying English?
3. How important is it for your child to be able to verbally communicate in English?
4. Which of these skills do you think is the most important to study: speaking, listening, reading, or writing? Why?
5. How important is it for your child to learn English test-taking strategies?
6. How important is it for your child to study English at a hagwon in order to stay competitive with other students?
7. Do you hope to send your child to study in a country where English is a native language? Why or why not?
8. Which is more important for your child's future: to be able to speak English well, or for them to perform well on standardized English tests such as the CSAT (대학수학능력시험) or TOEIC? Why?