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## **The Rise and Fall of the National English Ability Test: Exploring the Perspectives of Korean High School English Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

This study set out to investigate Korean in-service secondary English teachers' perspectives on the National English Ability Test (NEAT) with the hopes of addressing some of the issues and concerns that may have resulted in its downfall. Data was initially collected from 86 Korean in-service high school English teachers using an online survey, and followed up with semi-structured discussions in focus groups. The results revealed that the majority of teachers in this study felt that the NEAT could positively affect English education in South Korea; however, at present, key aspects of the education system have not been adequately prepared to deal with the requirements of the new test. This lack of preparation has led to skepticism and resistance, with fears of negative washback outweighing and undermining the potential positive washback of the new test. This has caused a split in support for its current implementation with 47% of teachers supportive, 44% unsupportive and 9% uncertain. Although respondents had major concerns over the current state of affairs, through further analysis of the data, future directions emerged that could assist in mitigating or eliminating worries in the implementation of the NEAT, and/or similar future tests in both the South Korean and other language learning contexts.

**Key words:** NEAT, National English Ability Test, washback, South Korea

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## Introduction

High-stakes testing of English was first introduced in South Korea in 1945 as a component of university entrance examinations, and to-date, four distinct testing periods have been observed. Each testing period has generated long lasting influences which have shaped present day English education in the country. Unfortunately, these influences have not always been positive. Since the beginning of high-stakes testing of English in South Korea there has been ongoing criticism due to the overall lack of reliable and valid productive-skill (speaking and writing) testing items (Choi, 2008, p. 41). This has resulted in detrimental effects to the overall communicative competence of Korean English language learners as the lack of need for teachers and learners to focus on productive proficiency has allowed them to avoid a focus on those skills altogether (Choi, 2008; Hong, 2000; Kim & O, 2002). Although educators have contended for a long time that it is imperative for high-stakes tests in Korea to include genuine productive skill assessment in order to promote and foster real-life communication skills (Choi, 2008; Lee, 2001), the same problems continue to persist 70 years later.

In response to the ongoing and growing concerns, in 2006, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology announced plans to design a new high-stakes English ability test, known as the National English Ability Test (NEAT). This costly multi-year initiative has aimed at addressing and resolving criticisms of previous testing systems and initiating new proficiency-based directions in English education in South Korea. Jin (2013, p. 6) outlines the specific aims and objectives of the NEAT as follows:

- To improve students' English ability in speaking and writing for an enhancement of practical English education.
- To improve students' English communicative competence.
- To align the contents of the NEAT with the national curriculum to reform school education.
- To use the test to screen college entrance applicants.
- To lower dependency on foreign tests (i.e. Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL))

With these new objectives, the NEAT has set out to be substantially different from previous high-stakes tests in five main ways; it would be the first high-stakes test in history to directly measure all four English skills, test takers are to receive two test opportunities, two levels are available for differing purposes, it is a computer based test rather than paper based, and it is criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced (KICE, 2011, p. 8). Further details of these differences can be found in Appendix A.

Since high-stakes tests in South Korea have historically had significant impacts on English language education in the country, the NEAT's focus on fostering communicative competence in learners brings with it hopes of influencing positive changes that respond to the lingering issues linked to productive proficiency. As stated by KICE, "It is expected to change the way schools measure student proficiency; English lessons in Korea are currently focused on listening and reading only. The NEAT will enhance the quality of public English education by bringing a fundamental change to the English curriculum" (2011, p. 6).

According to the original plans, the long term schedule for the implementation of the test was to occur in the following three stages, as outlined by Kwon (2010, p. 5).

Stage 1: The current College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) will be maintained during NEAT development.

Stage 2: The newly developed NEAT will be used as supplementary criteria for college/university admission.

Stage 3: Based on the reliability, validity and public opinion, a decision regarding the NEAT replacing the English portion of the CSAT will be made

The NEAT was slated to completely supersede the current English portion of the CSAT by 2016. However, signs that the future of NEAT was in jeopardy began to show in the final stage of implementation in late 2013. It was found that public concerns over a general lack of readiness (Kwon, 2011; Oh, 2013) and a fear of increased reliance on private English education (Jung, 2014) fueled strong opposition to the testing transition. After much deliberation from government officials and policy makers, the implementation of the NEAT has now been indefinitely postponed resulting in the continuation of the current high-stakes testing system which, as previously mentioned, has been widely criticized for not actually measuring test-takers' overall

communicative competence and contributing to low productive proficiency in Korean English learners (Kim & O, 2002).

Why would the NEAT, with its promising directions and huge investments in time and money, meet its demise? What are some of the issues and concerns that may have played a part in its sudden halt? By examining in-service high-school teachers' perceptions of the NEAT from the conceptual framework of washback, this study attempts to elicit some of possible reasons that may have contributed to its downfall in order to better understand some of the issues that may be avoided in the implementation of any future high-stakes testing changes in South Korea and the wider English language education field.

## **Literature Review**

### ***High-stakes Testing and Washback***

High-stakes tests of English have become increasingly widespread around the world, and the way in which they affect their educational contexts has become a topic of increasing focus in the field of applied linguistics (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2005; Pan, 2009; Spratt, 2005). Tests are referred to as 'high-stakes' when their results are employed in the process of making important decisions that affect students, teachers, administrators, communities, schools and districts (Madaus, 1998). Receiving a poor score on these tests can initiate a domino of consequences for test takers, starting with the failure to qualify for university entrance. A failure to be admitted to selected universities can in turn affect future job opportunities and this is why the stakes are so high. The score on a single test has the potential to affect the overall trajectory and quality of one's future life.

Due to the crucial importance of these high-stakes tests, impacts reach far beyond the test itself and can be easily observed in the teaching and learning process. Some researchers have gone so far as to state that these tests actually control how teachers teach and how students learn (Shohamy, 1993; Spolsky, 1997). What happens in the classroom follows what is on the test, because what is assessed becomes what is valued, and what is valued is what is taught (McEwen, 1995). The overall influence of testing on teaching and learning has become known as 'washback'

or ‘backwash’ (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Messick, 1996; Wall, 1997), and as noted by Apichatrojanakul, “In recent decades, the significance of washback effects in the world of teaching English seems to have increased, as evidenced by the availability of many English proficiency preparation courses and books...” (2011, p. 63). While the term ‘washback’ itself is a neutral term (Ahmad & Rao, 2012, Hawkey, 2006; Shohamy, 2001), researchers have generally classified effects as either positive or negative depending on how educational practices are affected (Hughes, 1989; Prodromou, 1995).

*Positive washback* - Washback is considered to be positive if there are overall beneficial effects on educational practices (Anderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2005). For example, a test that stimulates the implementation of a new national curriculum to promote higher overall communicative competency in learners would be categorized as positive washback, where increased communicative competency is seen as a positive goal (Morris, 1972). Additionally, positive washback effects may include motivating teachers to utilize new teaching-learning activities to promote a more positive teaching-learning process (Pearson, 1988). Pan (2009) summarizes positive washback as effects that induce teachers to cover their subjects more thoroughly and motivate students to work harder to have a sense of accomplishment leading to enhanced learning and an overall positive teaching-learning processes.

*Negative washback* - Washback is considered to be negative if there is a harmful impact on educational practices (Cheng, 2005; Shohamy, 1993; Donitsa Schmidt & Ferman, 1996). Examples of this could be a test causing an increased reliance upon privatized education and paid coaching (Wiseman, 1961) or teachers ignoring subjects and activities which are not directly related to passing the exam (Vernon, 1956). Pan (2009, p. 260) provides additional descriptions of negative washback effects as: tests that push teachers to narrow the curriculum and classroom aims towards testing objectives, tests that bring anxiety both to teachers and students and distort their performance, and tests that result in students failing to learn real-life knowledge by focusing on the discrete points of knowledge that are tested.

*Hangover effects* - In relation to washback, researchers have noted the continuation of trends in methods and mindsets long after new curriculum and/or high-stakes tests have been implemented

(Cho, 2010; Woo, 2001). Sometimes these lasting trends limit the ability to move forward under new curriculum and/or testing objectives and counteract possible positive washback. An example of this is found in the Korean context with the ongoing dominance of rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules despite the national curriculum objectives promoting fluency based teaching (Cho, 2010). Although this type of phenomenon has been recognized, there has been a failure to define it with respect to washback. This study will use the term *hangover effect* to refer to the continuation of trends and mindsets of the past that have obstructed, currently obstruct, or in the future will obstruct the ability for positive change to occur. Due to this obstructive nature, hangover effects are categorized as negative.

### ***Research on Washback in South Korea***

Only a small number of studies have investigated the washback of high-stakes tests in South Korea, and have primarily focused on the negative washback effects of the English portion of the CSAT.

Kim and O (2002) examined the relationship between the CSAT and characteristics of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade English teaching in Korea. The study found some inconsistencies between test designers' intentions and what was happening in classrooms. However, further details into why teachers may have reacted in such a way were not provided.

Cho (2010) and Woo (2001) both conducted studies focusing on the washback of English CSAT in high school classrooms within Korea and found that teachers and learners had developed a faith in focusing on test-taking strategies, rather than focusing on overall English language development. Throughout the history of high-stakes testing, test taking strategies and repetitive mock testing have supported good test scores. For this reason, test-taking strategies have become the main focus of secondary classrooms following the belief that this will cultivate higher scores than focusing on learners' English language development. This has resulted in learners with low speaking and writing skills in comparison to their reading, listening and grammar abilities.

Choi (2008) provided one of the first comprehensive overviews of the impact of standardized tests in English education in South Korea where he describes how washback affects English education as early as elementary school and carries on throughout higher education. Testing washback throughout the country has caused a narrowing focus on reading, listening and

test-taking strategies in the classroom and the avoidance of productive skill practice. Choi (2008) goes on further to state that this narrow classroom focus has resulted in very few English learners acquiring genuine communicative competence.

### ***Research in regards to teachers' perspectives of the NEAT***

As of yet there have been very few studies conducted that focused on examining teachers' perspectives of the implementation of the NEAT. Kim (2009) conducted a preliminary survey about the NEAT with 57 English teachers and 1990 students. She found that 31.6% of teachers and 35.9% of students had negative feelings towards the introduction to the NEAT, however, all of those surveyed expected the NEAT to have a direct influence on positive changes to English language learning and teaching methods.

In a similar study, Kwon (2011) investigated secondary school English teachers' concerns and psychological burdens regarding the new speaking and writing tests in the NEAT. He surveyed 169 Korean in-service secondary school teachers and found that 57.4% were in favor of the introduction of NEAT while 22% were not. One of the main reasons that surfaced for being in favor of the NEAT was that the test was to finally assess actual English abilities by including the assessment of productive skills. Respondents felt that this would help overcome the limitation of a reading-centered approach to English education in the country and promote the development of practical English (Kwon, 2011, p. 15). Individuals not in favor provided the rationale that the test frame was vague and schools and teachers are not prepared to take on the new communicative directions of the test. Furthermore, respondents were worried that the test would drive people to seek private education, creating a greater financial burden on parents and learners (Kwon, 2011, p. 16).

Although the above studies have provided a starting point in understanding in-service teachers' perspectives of the NEAT, none of these studies have examined teachers' perspectives from the conceptual framework of washback. The basis for this study was grounded on the assumption that, based on the strong impact that testing has had, and continues to have on Korean English language teaching (Choi, 2008; Kwon, 2010; Li, 1998), it is reasonable to speculate that the implementation of a new testing system that is so different from past will also yield significant washback. Since it is the teachers who have to deal with these effects first hand, their perspectives



of the implementation and washback of the NEAT are invaluable in understanding why the project may have failed.

## **The Study**

This study was exploratory and data-driven by nature as it aims to generate hypotheses rather than test them (see McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 79). The main aim of the study was to investigate Korean in-service secondary English teachers' perspectives on the NEAT in relation to washback, with the hopes of eliciting some of the concerns and issues that may have negatively affected stakeholder support for the implementation of the test and led to its downfall. Through a greater awareness of the issues at hand in regards to the NEAT, this study additionally aims at suggesting future paths that may facilitate the implementation of current and future high-stakes testing changes both in South Korea and beyond.

The following questions served as the basis for this study.

1. To what extent are Korean in-service high-school English teachers supportive of the introduction of the NEAT? Why?
2. What are some common concerns teachers have about its introduction in relation to washback?
3. What actions can be taken to facilitate the introduction of the new testing system?

## **Methodology Overview**

This qualitative study collected data in the forms of an open-ended survey that was later followed up with semi-structured discussions with focus groups. The analysis of the data was conducted in line with the constant comparative analysis procedures outlined by Tracy (2013) and Charmaz (2006). The overall nature of the study lent itself best to a qualitative rather than quantitative paradigm as the data was primarily open-ended and non-numerical and was analyzed using non-statistical methods (see Dörnyei, 2007, p. 24). Quantitative data was only collected in a single initial question to elicit teachers' overall support for the NEAT and provided a basis for

qualitative data analysis. The specific procedures of the data collection and analysis are outlined in the following sections.

### ***Participants***

This study chose to examine Korean in-service high school English teachers as they have historically been the most significantly affected by test washback (Kwon & Lee, 2003) and hold a multi-dimensional view of the situation, by constantly being in contact with other students and parents. This provides them with a wide-angled vantage point from which the issues and concerns in regards to the new NEAT testing system can be discussed.

Survey participants consisted of 86 Korean in-service secondary English teachers attending a two-month professional development course at a specialized government run provincial training institute for in-service language teachers. Participants consisted of 12 males and 74 females between the ages of 25 and 50. All teachers had been teaching English for a minimum of three years, with 55% having greater than 10 years of experience. All participants did so on a voluntary basis and provided informed consent prior to partaking in the study.

Participants from the survey were randomly requested to participate in follow-up semi-structured discussions in focus groups of four. A total of 5 focus groups were conducted and in order to maintain a relative distribution of gender, each focus group included one male and four female participants. Each discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### ***Data Collection***

Initial data was gathered through an online survey (Appendix B) asking respondents their overall feelings towards the NEAT. The survey design followed the model of McDonough & McDonough (1997) who affirm that “The designer has to choose a mix of question types that will maximize the range and detail of the information elicited” (p. 177). Thus, the survey contained a mixture of fixed alternative and open-ended questions, which allowed participants to provide details and rationale behind their close-ended responses.

To verify validity, the survey was first piloted with a small sample of 10 teacher trainee volunteers who had attended a teacher training session in the previous month. Volunteers were

contacted via email, informed of the study, and asked to complete the final version of the survey online. Their responses were then analyzed to ensure that the survey questions were being interpreted accurately and useful data relevant to this study's research questions was being elicited. Once validity was verified, the survey was administered to the study's sample group the following week at the training institute.

To ensure survey takers fully understood the study they were participating in, prior to taking the survey, they were briefed on the details. Participants were also required to read over an informed consent page and could only begin the survey once their consent was given. Participants were also notified that if at any time they wished to withdraw from the study, they were free to do so.

Since the survey responses were open-ended, it was important to expand on the information collected and clarify responses. Thus, semi-structured discussions were conducted with five focus groups consisting of four participants. In line with Berg (2001, p. 70), a semi-structured discussion set-up was specifically chosen to allow the researcher to go beyond the answers to prepared questions when necessary in order to elicit data that could be cross-referenced with the survey results and expand on trends found in the initial data. A focus group format was specifically chosen to allow participants to interact with one another resulting in more in-depth and insightful responses (see Dörnyei, 2007, p. 146). The overlap in questioning and responses from the survey and focus group discussions naturally allowed for cross analysis of the data and provided an additional self-auditing function in answering the research questions. Discussions with focus groups were arranged with volunteers and data was collected until answers from the discussions and survey data became repetitive to the point of reaching saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and research questions could be satisfied.

The following questions were used to initiate the discussions:

1. What are some of the concerns you have in regards to the future implementation of the NEAT?
2. Is there anything that could be done to ease or remove these concerns? If so, what?

As suggested by Dörnyei (2007, p. 145), prior to initiating discussions, the researcher explained to participants the purposes of the follow up focus group discussion and ensured

participants that the discussion was to gather their opinions and perspectives and therefore there were no right or wrong answers. At this time, participants had the opportunity to ask questions and/or request clarification before giving their written consent to partake. In order to ensure that the questions were interpreted correctly, the researcher acted as a moderator and after each question was asked there was opportunity for clarification. In order to elicit in-depth responses and avoid lack of detail in responses due to language constraints, all focus discussion participants had the option of discussing in Korean or English. Although they had the option, all participants ended up using English only. Additionally, to ensure that discussions were not dominated by individual participants, the researcher moderated discussions and requested input from all group members. With informed consent from the participants, all discussions were audio recorded and then transcribed for further analysis, each discussion session lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis followed constant comparative analysis procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2013). Data analysis began with data immersion (Tracy, 2013), where the entire breadth of the data was explored through a detailed reading, analysis, re-reading, re-analysis process. The raw data gleaned from the online survey was automatically consolidated and summarized by the Lime Survey software used to administer it.

In order to analyze the focus group discussions, each session was transcribed and reviewed twice in order to check for accuracy and make corrections when necessary. At times, the transcription may appear grammatically and lexically inaccurate; however, this reflects the context and participants actual English usage in the discussions. Participants' responses have been transcribed verbatim in order to avoid the risk of imposing any personal interpretations.

Following data immersion, data from the surveys and focus group discussions were separately analyzed and coded using NVivo 10 software. The coding procedure involved primary coding of the survey data as well as primary coding of the focus group data. Primary-cycle coding, outlined by Tracy (2013), followed standard procedures where qualitative responses were first closely examined and compared for similarities and differences. Secondary cycle coding followed the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). In order to triangulate these two data sets, secondary-cycle coding involved the critical examination of the preliminary codes while

organizing, categorizing and synthesizing them into interpretive concepts. During this process, codes that were originally separated by question were reorganized into second level codes that helped to explain, theorize and synthesize emergent trends (Tracy, 2013).

Codes and data were under constant review allowing me to make slight modifications and create new nodes during the coding process.

## **Findings**

The results from the online survey showed a split between respondents' supportiveness and unsupportiveness of the NEAT. Of the 86 teachers surveyed, 47% were supportive, 44% were unsupportive and 9% were uncertain, indicating a strong division in opinions with regards to the NEAT and its implementation. The following sections present the findings of this study under thematic subheadings that provide a descriptive frame for the collected data. The themes presented are the outcomes of the formal data analysis previously described which resulted in data being reshuffled and reorganized multiple times. Excerpts from survey and focus group participants are provided to support each theme, however, to maintain anonymity, each respondent has been labeled with an alias.

### ***Teachers' rationale for supporting the implementation of NEAT***

In open ended survey questions as well as in focus group discussions, data showed that those in support of the NEAT, as well as many of those who stated they were unsupportive, felt that it would produce positive washback by promoting productive skill development. Many respondents noted that they felt there is general agreement amongst educators that the current testing system has to change in order for proficiency to be endorsed in classrooms.

“One good thing is there is already a consensus that it is necessary to change... and all of the Korean teachers understand that so they basically they think that it is necessary to change it.” (Min Ji)

More specifically, respondents felt that the new directions and objectives of the NEAT would allow them to focus more on communicative ability in class, and help Korean students develop a more balanced language skill set.

“...students who are learning language have to communicate with others who speak that language. If the recent test system is changed into NEAT, which focused on speaking and writing as much as reading and writing, the class will also be changed and students can have more chances to speak and write in English during the class.” (Ji Min)

Furthermore, those in support felt that the NEAT would put pressure on learners and teachers to develop writing and speaking skills, promote a more balanced approach in English language learning, increase teachers’ English usage, promote more communicative activities in class and demand an increased focus on fluency and the ability to communicate.

The supporting reasons elicited from participants aligned with both the findings of Kwon (2011), the overall objectives of the NEAT, and the administrative rationale for its creation and implementation. However, it was found that within the responses of those in support of the NEAT, the rationale for being unsupportive tended to override many teachers’ positive feelings as exemplified in the following data excerpt.

“Sure I agree with that the NEAT can have very positive washback effect for that but basically it may be too difficult to change it ....” (Jin Hee)

### ***Teachers’ rationale for being unsupportive of the NEAT***

It was discovered that even though a majority of the participants in this study expressed support toward the NEAT, negative feelings towards its implementation existed in nearly all of them. Thus, 100% of this study’s participants expressed concerns with the new system. A wide variety of issues emerged in both the online surveys and focus group discussions that outlined major factors affecting positive support for the new testing system. The following sections present each major concern that surfaced as well as teachers’ suggestions of ways that may help alleviate those concerns.

*Concerns of Readiness* - The implementation of the NEAT would result in considerable washback on all areas of English language education in South Korea. With its considerable differences from the current CSAT, many carefully planned changes in various areas are required if there is to be a smooth and successful transition. It is concern over the lack of progress in the implementation of these vital changes that surfaced most frequently in the data, contributing to majority of the respondents feeling that the Korean system is simply not ready for the major transition and the washback it will bring.

*Lack of readiness in school facilities* - Sixteen teachers (18.6% of total respondents) reported that their school's equipment and facilities do not sufficiently support what is needed to prepare students for the NEAT and that their schools need to be fitted with computers and technology to allow their students to practice for the new style of testing.

“...for the test actually we need computer a lot in the classrooms so students can practice by themselves ... but actually students' schools don't have.” (Sang Min)

In order to address this concern, many of the respondents stated that it is imperative for the government to adequately equip schools with the proper technology.

*Lack of readiness in materials* - 18.6% of the participating teachers also expressed the feeling that the necessary changes have not been made to current language learning textbooks and classroom materials and that it would be impossible to meet the demands of the NEAT in the current state.

“I have no idea what kind of materials I should use in class.” (Jung Mi)

“Materials development that is somewhat of a problem to keep up with the changes to the NEAT. The materials need to be changed in order to support communicative competency.”  
(Mi Young)

In addition to feeling that materials needed communicative revisions, eight focus group participants (40% of focus group participants) took this further stating that they have tried to make the current textbooks communicative by adding their own supplementary materials, however, many difficulties were experienced.

“In the actual situation in school ... people say like 70% of their work is not about teaching but about administrative jobs or for the homeroom teacher... I saw or experience that kind of situation in high school the teacher prepares some teaching material for their class while some other teacher or other head of the department (says) ‘Hey, what are you doing it looks like you don't have anything else to do... then take this... it is my document... finish this!’”  
(Ji Sook)

Due to issues outlined in the data excerpt above, many teachers felt concerned about the time and energy required to create supplementary materials needed to compensate for the lack of communicative aspects of current textbooks.

To address the perceived lack of readiness in materials, respondents felt it was crucial for teachers to be provided with textbooks and materials that are in-line with the objectives of the new test. Teachers reported that they want their textbooks to be right from the start so they are not burdened with the job of trying to supplement it.

*Lack of readiness in teachers* - Another major trend was that many of the respondents did not feel ready to cope with the new productive aims of the test in the classroom, with 35 participants (40.6%) expressing that they felt that their own productive skills were insufficient.

“Even I, an English teacher, sometimes feel less confident when I have to teach speaking and writing to the students. Unfortunately, when I was a student, those productive skills were less focused than now and there were not enough opportunity for me to be exposed by English. But If I realize the reality, I have to focus more speaking and writing in teaching.” (Mi Seon)



Many participants also reported feeling pedagogically unprepared to teach productive skills. A total of 40 teachers (46.5%) voiced concern over this issue.

“still many Korean teachers don’t have the real tools practical tools to teach writing and speaking the productive tools because they haven't done that before.” (Jae Min)

“It needs the changes of the way of teaching and tests, but I don't know how to change and even what to change.” (Hye Seon)

45 teachers (52.3%) also reported difficulty and uncertainty in evaluating learners’ speaking and writing skills.

“It's too DIFFICULT to evaluate students' speaking and writing skills... I'm not sure to make the right rubric.” (Mina)

It was also found that teachers were concerned about testing overlap. Sixteen teachers (18.6%) reported that if the NEAT were implemented today there would be great confusion over which test to teach towards, the CSAT or the NEAT. The differences between the two tests pose problems in regards to classroom pedagogy.

“If NEAT takes over for CSAT now, we have to teach for two tests... Some students will take the CSAT and some take NEAT... I don’t know how to do both at same time... it is too confusing. We need some plan to change slowly so it can be smooth.” (Dong Kyu)

In order to resolve the issue of teachers not feeling ready in their own proficiency and/or pedagogy, respondents felt that more training was required. Teachers felt that their needs to be more opportunity to partake in high quality training courses catering to their needs of improving their English language and teaching skills as well as their confidence. As it would be the first time for them to focus on productive skills and overall learner proficiency, respondents felt that there must be more explicit training on how to focus on communicative competence and how to teach and evaluate speaking and writing. Teachers felt that the training should be included in all pre-

service university teaching programs and well as in-service professional development programs. Since offering training courses in person may be a difficult feat to accomplish, teachers suggested that courses could be offered through various methods such as, on-campus training at government training institutes or universities, or off-campus via online courses or training CDs.

Furthermore, respondents felt that it is crucial for teachers to be provided with a detailed breakdown of how the current testing system will be phased out and the new testing system phased in, to avoid confusion on which teaching objectives to follow. With the sizeable differences between the current system and the NEAT, having to teach to both tests would be an extremely difficult task.

*Lack of readiness in students* - In addition to teachers feeling unprepared, 19 participants (22%) also voiced concern over students' lack of readiness for productive assessment because of the historical lack of need for productive skill development.

“In real class students never have a chance to speak and write in English, but NEAT has questions about all four skills.” (Sae Ra)

“It will give more pressure students because they are likely to think NEAT is to add speaking and writing test to the CSAT, so they need much more time to prepare for them.” (Tae Su)

If the NEAT were implemented today, respondents were worried that students have not had adequate time to transition to the new testing focus due to the constraints of the current CSAT combined with the issue of textbooks and materials, as previously outlined.

Teachers felt that the solutions to concerns previously discussed would directly contribute to the resolution to the lack of readiness in students. The creation of new communicative textbooks combined with trained, communicatively-equipped teachers would naturally contribute to the development of learners speaking and writing skills and overall proficiency development, readying them for the requirements of NEAT.

*Lack of readiness in policy support* - Participants also expressed a lack of support from administrators and policies in relation to the communicative objectives of the NEAT. 15 participants (17.4%) felt that administrators were against or ignorant to what is needed in fostering communicative development in the classrooms.

“Some of them I know some school principals who have very innovative ideas act very positively and as some of the really want to listen to others teachers’ opinion but basically in Korean society it will be very difficult for the school principal to listen to some idea from his subordinates Basically the school principals are not ready to listen.” (Hyun Mi)

Teachers felt that is imperative for the Ministry of Education to empower English teachers by implementing strong policies that will support them from the bottom up. This would allow teachers to somewhat avoid the prejudice and obstruction of less competent authorities and conduct classes in line with the new testing objectives.

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“We need some policy that helps us ... like in some cases school principals or vice principals they just want to stop us because some of them think it is dangerous that is why we need kind of help from policy. If the government helps us have some power to change it if we can really recompose our own materials and curriculum we can do whatever we want but still even though we agreed all the teachers agreed with it, as long as the school principal don't want that it cannot change.” (Jae Seok)

Additionally, teachers felt that it was important to better educate all stakeholders in the educational changes required to support the new testing system. Because the concept of a communicative classroom is a relatively new idea in South Korea and is somewhat contrastive to traditional teaching beliefs, it is important for stakeholders to develop an educated understanding of what is needed to meet the new testing paradigm.

*Negative washback concerns* - In addition to the lack of readiness, another substantial reason that was reported for being unsupportive of the implementation of NEAT was a fear of an increased dependency on private English education. This concern surfaced in 32 survey responses (37.2%)

as well as in all 5 focus group discussions and stems from large class sizes and an inability to provide students with the same amount of practice and feedback as private institutes. Respondents felt that parents would do anything to try to gain an advantage for their children and the large class sizes and limited contact do not work in favor of the public classrooms. The only way to gain the advantage is to turn to private education.

“...if NEAT is replaced for the CSAT, students who grow up surrounding by all the private study will have much benefits than those who don't have that kind of support.” (Jin young)

The fear of an increased dependency on private education is an issue that teachers felt is not easily fixable and something that elicited very few practical suggestions for.

Teachers felt that it is crucial for class size to be reduced to allow teachers to give students the same quality attention that they are able to receive at private institutes; however, the majority of teachers believed this solution was not easy to attain. Furthermore, teachers felt that class time or English study opportunity in the public setting must be increased in order for teachers to provide more communicative opportunities as well as in depth feedback. Until the public system is able to offer the same advantages as private education, teachers felt that the reliance on private education will continue and/or increase.

“We have too many students in one class, so hard to teach speaking or writing and give them feedbacks. Students and parents are worried about how they can make it on the NEAT, which can drive them rush into the English private institutes. Because they don't think that English classes in school can satisfy their desire of getting high scores on the NEAT.” (Bo Mi)

## **Discussion & Implications**

Although many participants were generally aware of the objectives and positive benefits of the NEAT, the findings of this study have uncovered some prominent teacher concerns in line with the findings of both Kim (2009) and Kwon (2011). What the evidence suggests is that, at present, teachers' positive perspective towards the NEAT may be hindered by a perceived lack of readiness

in the education system to deal with the washback of the new test, making the required changes difficult and unfeasible from their vantage point. Furthermore, the fear of an increased dependency on private education adds to the negativity surrounding the NEAT, resulting in negative concerns far outweighing the positive benefits. The suggestions provided by the participants seem practical and relatively straightforward in resolving some of their issues and concerns; however, further analysis suggests that the issues and concerns are rooted much deeper than initially suggested.

Further consideration of the findings indicated that some of teachers' concerns arise from hangover effects which have an ongoing effect on their general outlook and mindset in regards to English teaching and learning. The influence of hangover effects has resulted in a skewed outlook on the new testing system as teachers are viewing it through a set of beliefs and practices rooted in the long history of teaching to test objectives and mock test practice (Kwon, 2009; Li, 1998). A prominent feature in the data that exemplifies the influence of hangover effects includes expressing the need for schools to be equipped with computers in order administer mock NEAT tests. The concern that equipment is needed for mock test practice illustrates the calibration of teachers' views to previous periods and practices as they want to continue their past practices of focusing on test drilling rather than on development of learners' overall language proficiency. If this sort of practice were to continue under the new system it would undermine the core proficiency based objectives of the test; however, teachers indicated that they felt it was necessary. This may be a result of a lack of information on how to approach the new testing objectives and a lack of communication between the agents of change and the stakeholders.

In order to counteract the influence of hangover effects, it is of great importance for all stakeholders to be provided with detailed information on how language education mindsets and practices should change, and need to change in order to align with the new testing system. This information could be disseminated by experts in the field through variety of methods for example, teacher training courses, public announcements in the news, media, flyers, newsletters and online platforms. It is crucial for teacher training programs to take aim at addressing hangover effects, and fostering understanding and confidence in suitable classroom practices that align with the core objectives of the new testing system. As noted by Kumaravadivelu (2012), it is crucial for teacher education to take into account the broader historical, political, social, cultural, and educational factors that have influenced teaching. By accounting for how the past continues to influence the present, training programs can help to reset or reconstruct teachers' paradigms, as well as

classroom approaches and techniques, in relation to the proposed future directions. With a directed paradigm shift and understanding and confidence in techniques that can develop a balanced set of learners' English skills, teachers may realize that just because the test is computer based does not necessarily mean that schools need to be equipped with more computers. Teachers should be persuaded and convinced that class time would better be spent on proficiency development and engaging students in skill building tasks, activities and projects rather than mock test practice. Increased access and exposure to detailed information would perhaps contribute to greater understanding from not only teachers, but also parents, students, administrators and additional stakeholders resulting in increased support to implement the pedagogical changes needed to work within the new testing paradigm. In addition, it is also crucial for policies to be implemented that push the new directions in testing and support teachers from the bottom up, allowing them the power necessary to make changes to their teaching and materials, and resist the suggestions and/or demands of other stakeholders who may continue to suffer from hangover effects of their own and push for ways of the past.

Concerns over teacher and student readiness align with the findings of Kwon (2011) and seem to be embedded in a complex situation where this substantial change in the direction of testing has caught teachers and students off-guard. Although talk of the NEAT has been around for many years, the high-stakes testing has remained the same. The quick changeover from the CSAT, with no productive focus, to the NEAT, with major productive focus, has left no time for teachers and students to transition both mentally and pedagogically. Without a gradual changeover, sudden transition to the new testing system may have left little opportunity to develop the skills and confidence needed to be effective under the new testing objectives. It has been well documented that teachers and students have been strongly influenced and even somewhat controlled by the objectives of the high-stakes tests (Choi, 2008; Shohamy, 1993; Spolsky, 1997). As long as the CSAT continues to neglect productive proficiency, there is little incentive for teachers, students or policies to focus on the new directions of the NEAT (Jeon, Lee, & Kim, 2011; Park, Chang, Park, & Paek, 2012).

To avoid this issue in the future in Korea and other similar contexts, a perceived lack of readiness is something that may be resolved again through proper communication and education. If new testing objectives, preparatory procedures and future implementation plans are made transparent and explicit, and training courses are offered and/or mandated, teachers, as well as

additional stakeholders can be much more convinced that when the time comes for it to be implemented the education system will be ready. Additionally, as the data has indicated, it may be important for more proactive and gradual measures to be taken prior to full implementation that allow the old system to slowly transition to the new with possibly a phase out, phase in approach to the new testing system which would allow various parts of the system to catch up. For example, productive questions could slowly be introduced into the current CSAT and the amount of questions could be increased each year until the NEAT has completely superseded it.

The concerns that surfaced over material readiness and the alignment of materials with the new proficiency based objectives may be a sign for the Korean Ministry of Education to initiate the reconstruction of public English textbooks taking into account the opinions and desires of in-service teachers. In any context it is important for tests, textbooks and curriculum to be supporting the same objectives in order to have harmony in the system. If these components are in opposition to one another, as they have been, it is difficult for teachers to decide which objective to follow and therefore they default to their past habits. If these components are aligned, teachers may find it much easier to make the transition to new requirements.

In line with Kwon's (2011) findings, the results of this study also found major concerns over increased reliance and expenditure on private education indicating that teachers' concerns reach beyond the context of the classroom. This finding was of interest as participants seemed to consider this from a broader social perspective rather than simply their perspective as a teacher. From the data, it was unclear why teachers were concerned about this, whether they were concerned as parents who may be worried of an increased financial burden, as citizens generally concerned about fellow members of society, or as public teachers who feel at competition with private education. Concerns over private education have been reported in the South Korean media many times over the past 20 years stemming from the feeling that the advantage of private education unfairly burdens those who are in financial difficulty. This has led to successive government policies trying to curb the spending by imposing curfews, imposing cost regulations, and even banning private teaching (Lartigue, 2000). It seems like it is the case that the NEAT has not necessarily created this concern, but teachers are worried that it may exacerbate the ongoing issue.

The fear of an increased dependency on private education, is something that history has shown is not easy to control. Even with strong government policies put in place, private education

has found its way around them. Unless the public system is able to offer the same benefits of private education, it is an issue that may indefinitely persist in a competitive high-stakes testing environment as everyone is trying to gain the advantage. It comes down to the personal choice of stakeholders to partake in additional English education and as long as they are convinced that private education can provide additional benefits, they will probably continue enroll. In order to help resolve some of this concern in Korea and similar contexts, it may be worthwhile for governments to consider ways in which public and private sectors could work together and support one another. This may include investing in the creation of public funded after school academies to provide more equal opportunities for lesser privileged students.

## **Conclusion**

This study has aimed at providing insights into the concerns of in-service teachers in regards to the washback of the NEAT in order to better understand issues that may have influenced its demise, and outline possible directions that may facilitate high-stakes testing changes in the future.

There is a common agreement amongst educators that it is imperative for high-stakes tests in South Korea to include genuine productive skill assessment in order to foster overall communicative competence in learners. If high-stakes tests continue to exclude genuine productive skill assessment, teachers and learners have little need to develop speaking and writing skills, resulting in an ongoing productive deficiency amongst learners. Although the objectives of the NEAT are well-intentioned, theoretically sound, and a push in the right direction, teachers in this study tended to hold negative perspectives.

The negative perspectives expressed in this study seem to arise from many years of washback from previous testing periods that has resulted in the obstruction of a clear and unbiased view of the directions of the new testing system. This obstructed view is unlikely to be unique to teachers and may be found in additional stakeholders as well (i.e. parents and students), however further research must be conducted to provide insight into this. Additionally, these phenomena are unlikely to be unique to the Korean context as all individuals are influenced by hangover effects of one kind or another; it is human nature for our current outlook and beliefs to be influenced by our pasts. However, what is important is for stakeholders in any context as well as agents of change to be aware of those effects and understand how they may be influencing their outlook.



In order to address this issue, it is imperative to work on fostering mindsets that can work in the present but are open to, and directed towards, the future. It may take respected experts in the field (i.e. professors, researchers, teachers) to take steps to advocate changes more publicly, or for the agents of change to use experts to disseminate information that will shift paradigms positively towards future directions. If hangover effects are ignored, stakeholders will continue to look at things through the lens of the past and new directions will continue to be met with scrutiny.

Although this study has focused on the Korean context, its implications may be far-reaching. The NEAT was, and may still be an exciting option for the future of English education in Korea. However, the findings of this study highlight that the implementation of future testing systems, must be handled with care. The initiation of blind policy changes has resulted in the possible waste of 42.5 billion won (about US \$41 million) on the development of the NEAT (Jung & Jung, 2014). In order to avoid similar circumstances in language learning contexts worldwide, when changes are to be implemented, whether it is in testing, curriculum, policies or other areas, it is important to consider how these changes will affect stakeholders prior to implementation in order to alleviate their concerns, gain their support, and preemptively resolve possible pitfalls. If stakeholders are not convinced that the benefits of change will outweigh the costs, negative perspectives will persist. This is likely to result in the demise of possible positive directions forward, as has occurred in South Korea with the downfall of the NEAT.

### ***Limitations & Suggestions for Future Study***

This study included some limitations. The sample size for this study was relatively small and therefore the opinions of teachers in this study cannot be generalized nationwide. Further research would need to be done to investigate the transferability of the findings. Additionally, this study was not able to capture all of the problems that the NEAT faces as it only investigated the perspectives of teachers. Ideally, a collective study from multiple stakeholders' perspectives would have provided a more accurate representation of the issues at hand. As this study chose to focus on teachers' perspectives only, additional reasons that have not been discussed may have also contributed to its postponement. Additionally, even if the problems addressed in this paper are resolved, the success of NEAT is not guaranteed as other unknown variables may also be at play.

The issue of the implementation of the NEAT or any new high-stakes testing system is complex, and its success is dependent on many factors. Additional research needs to be conducted with additional stakeholders in order to get multi-faceted and in-depth view of perspectives and concerns with the NEAT and/or other future testing changes. It may be beneficial for this research to be conducted prior to changes being implemented rather than in the midst of or post change as the issues may be late to address at that point.

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## Appendix A

*The NEAT directly measures all four English skills.* Possibly the most significant change that the NEAT purports to bring is the introduction of speaking and writing assessment through performance tasks. In addition to paper-based items focusing on listening and reading, the NEAT would be the first test in the history of Korean college entrance examinations set to assess productive skills through performance tasks. This new direction of assessing productive skills through tasks aims to be more valid and reliable than the indirect paper-based multiple-choice questions of the past.

*Test takers receive two test opportunities.* When the CSAT was first introduced in 1993 two different exams were offered, however, in 1995, the CSAT was reduced to a single annual opportunity. The NEAT would once again offer students two opportunities per year to take the test.

*Two levels are available: Levels 2 and 3.* The NEAT would also offer three versions of the test as opposed to the single version of the CSAT. NEAT options aimed to allow test takers to choose which test to take based on their situation, aptitude and future goals. Kwon (2010) outlines the objectives of the different levels as follows:

**Level 1** is a proficiency test for university students and is to be used in civilian and government sectors for selection, placement and promotion.

**Level 2** is to be used for admission to university departments that require advanced English.

**Level 3** is to be used for admission into university departments that require basic, practical English.

Since the objectives of the two versions differ, the distribution and types of questions were also planned to differ slightly. Below is the proposed framework of item distribution for levels 2 and 3 as released by MEST in September, 2010.

**Table 1.**

*NEAT item distribution*

<u>Skills</u>	<u>Level 2</u>	<u>Level 3</u>	<u>Time (mins.)</u>
Listening	35	35	35
Reading	35	35	60
Speaking	4	4	15
Writing	2	4	5
Totals	76	78	145

*Note.* NEAT item distribution. Adapted from “The National English Ability Test of Korea: Levels 2 & 3” by, O. Kwon, 2010, paper presented at Japan Language Testing Association Conference at Toyohashi University of Technology, Japan, page 9. Adapted with permission.

***The NEAT is administered using the Internet.*** The NEAT was to be the first high-stakes test to be internet-based. The test was slated to be administered at a number of test centers around the country with a total of 50,000 test takers at the same time. It would also be the first test to use a virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) where recorded answers could be immediately consolidated and sent to the scoring center for further processing.

***The NEAT is criterion-referenced.*** Previous tests have followed a norm-referenced scoring system where test takers have been compared with their peers in order to identify whether the test taker performed better or worse than others. The NEAT was to be the first test to introduce a criterion-referenced system in which scores would indicate how well test takers performed on a given task without further comparison.



## Appendix B

### Teachers' Perspectives of the NEAT Implementation

1. I am...
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
2. I currently teach at...
  - a. Elementary school
  - b. Middle School
  - c. High-school
  - d. Other:
3. How long have you been teaching English for?
4. Are you in support of the NEAT replacing the English portion of the CSAT?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Uncertain
5. Please explain the reasons why you **are**, *or are not* in support of the NEAT replacing the CSAT.
6. What are your biggest concerns with the implementation of the NEAT?