Comparing the Reading Demand of the English CSAT and English Textbooks in the Republic of Korea
ABSTRACT

The study examined the text complexity of passages from the Republic of Korea’s English College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) administered in 2015. The results were then compared to the findings of a previous study of primary and secondary English textbook complexity. The primary research question investigated was whether text complexity varied from secondary school, especially Grade 12, to the English College Scholastic Ability Test.

BACKGROUND

Historically, Koreans have placed great importance on education, an effect of the adoption of Confucian formal teachings over fifteen centuries ago. Confucian beliefs hold that through education, one may grow toward perfection and that only those who reach the highest levels of education should govern and lead society (Kwon, Lee, & Shin, 2015). For hundreds of years, if a job candidate wanted to secure a good position within the Government, and the associated wealth that came with the position, he had to study long and hard to pass state examinations (Choi, 2014). This desire for recognition through erudition is still present in modern Korea and drives the extensive spending on private education.

The trajectory of most primary and secondary education in Korea culminates with the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) taken by high school seniors. In 2015, approximately 630,000 pupils took the high-stakes CSAT with hopes of securing entrance to the university of their choice. The CSAT tests pupils in the three mandatory subjects of Korean language, English language, and mathematics, as well as several self-selected subjects in social studies, the sciences, and other foreign languages.

In 2015, 68.8 per cent of primary and secondary school pupils were engaged in some form of private education, and 40 per cent of these pupils participated in English-subject activities (Statistics Korea, 2015). These activities include attendance at after-hours intense study schools known as hagwons, group and individual tutoring, Internet courses, and textbook studies with tutor visits. Across all subjects, the greatest average monthly expenditure per pupil in 2015 was for English (Statistics Korea, 2015). Because wealthier families are more able to spend money on this extra education for their children, educational inequality driven by income levels has been a concern.

The Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) is the only educational television and radio company operating in the Republic of Korea. While EBS operates mainly through private revenue, it also receives annual grants from the Ministry of Education to further its operations. In an effort to curb the excessive spending on private education and create a more equitable education system for all pupils, the Ministry of Education has required a close link between the economical educational materials produced by EBS (e.g., television lectures, online activities, books) and the CSAT (MOE, 2004).

The content of the English CSAT is based on English I and English II instructional materials approved for use by the Ministry of Education in Grades 10 and 11 (KICE, 2016). It follows that the content of the CSAT prep books would also be based on the instructional materials for English I and English II. In 2009, the government announced that 70 per cent of CSAT items would be based on EBS materials (KICE, 2009). Item writers alter EBS practice items for inclusion in the CSAT. According to Kwon, Lee, and Shin (2015), this practice may create outcomes other than reducing private expenditures on education such as a reliance on EBS materials, problems controlling CSAT item difficulty, and the inadvertent encouragement of poor test preparation methods. In 2015, EBS published four English CSAT test preparation books. Examining the text complexity of the materials used for test preparation is a means of understanding the English demands presented to pupils at these critical stages in their education. In addition, it provides a way of evaluating the connection between the instructional materials and the assessment.

A recent MetaMetrics’s paper, Primary and Secondary English Textbook Complexity in South Korea, examined the overall text complexity (in Lexile measures) of Ministry of Education approved, English subject materials for state-maintained primary and secondary schools (Grades 5 through 12). The findings suggested that, beginning in Grade 5, the English text complexity that Korean pupils encounter increases monotonically (median Grade 5, 140L, median Grade 12, 1180L). However, the range of complexity found at each grade varies substantially (Sanford-Moore, Koons & Bush, 2016). The current study compares the complexity measures of the previously studied Grade 12 materials with those from the most recent English CSAT. The expectation is that Grade 12 materials and the English CSAT passages have similar levels of complexity as measured by The Lexile Framework for Reading.

1 Typically high school pupils take the CSAT during their senior year; however, pupils may take the CSAT again by waiting for the next administration in an effort to increase their scores.
The English CSAT is composed of both listening and reading items. The units of analysis in this study were passages from the 2015 English CSAT reading section with enough English prose to measure for text complexity (N = 25). For purposes of comparison, tables and figures refer to the previous study of primary and secondary English textbooks which focused on reading passages within each textbook and grade (Sanford-Moore, Koons & Bush, 2016). Grade 12 materials included 755 practice English reading CSAT passages.

Only the English test items that could be categorised as a passage (continuous English prose) were analysed. For cloze items, an answer choice was selected (A, B, C or D) in a rotating basis throughout the test in order to create complete sentences. Each passage was converted to electronic text and prepared for analysis. All non-prose text was removed. The electronic texts were then submitted to the Lexile Analyzer and each assigned a Lexile text measure.

The Lexile® Framework for Reading is a scientific way to match pupils with text using the same developmental scale. Lexile text measures (Stenner, H. Burdick, Sanford & D.S. Burdick, 2007) are measures of text complexity that are based on semantic and syntactic factors. Independent psychometric studies of the Lexile scale indicate that it is a valid and reliable measure of pupil ability and text complexity (Mesmer, 2008; White & Clement, 2001).

A Lexile measure is the numeric representation of an individual’s reading ability or a text’s complexity (or, difficulty) followed by an “L” (for Lexile). The Lexile scale is a developmental scale for measuring pupil ability and text complexity, ranging from below 200L for beginning pupils and beginning reading materials to above 1600L for advanced pupils and materials. Extensive information about the development of The Lexile Framework for Reading can be found in the “Research and Publications” section of the Lexile website (www.Lexile.com/research-and-publications).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>25th Percentile</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>75th Percentile</th>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 12 CSAT Prep Books</td>
<td>1030L</td>
<td>1180L</td>
<td>1310L</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015 English CSAT</td>
<td>1000L</td>
<td>1110L</td>
<td>1240L</td>
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Figure 1. Text complexity distributions

References


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