

*A Discourse Analysis:
Listening Sections of Korean College Scholastic Ability Tests*

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Abstract

I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the English listening sections of the 2019 and 2018 Korean College Scholastic Ability Tests (hereafter CSAT), which are national college entrance examinations in Korea for the year of 2019 and 2018. My goal is to investigate whether the dialogues in the English listening tests are appropriate for sociocultural interactions, which is important in language learning, and whether they are presented in meaningful communicative contexts to help the students to understand and develop interpersonal communication skills. I examined three dimensions of communicative events between speaker and hearer: 1) discourse structures, 2) discursive practices 3) social practices. The Korean Ministry of Education has made tremendous efforts for the revision of the English language education policy and teaching methodology to enhance Korean students' English communicative competence. To help to achieve the goal of enhancing the students' communicative competence it is important to develop good English tests. For this purpose, it is necessary to analyze the English listening sections of the CSAT and assess their validity. I hope my research will be helpful for both English teachers and examiners in making improvements to the English listening tests.

Keywords: Korean College Scholastic Ability Tests, natural discourses, English listening tests, interpersonal communication, discursive practices

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Introduction

Since English communication ability is considered essential as a tool for international interactions in the global community, English has become the most important among the foreign languages in South Korea (hereafter Korea). The Korean Ministry of Education has formulated English language education policies to develop Korean students' English language communication ability, trying to meet global standards. English education policies in Korea have changed many ways in various aspects. One of the changes was the implementation of an English listening test as a part of the Korean College Scholastic Ability Tests (hereafter CSAT) from 1994 to assess the test takers' English listening comprehension abilities (Jung, 2008).

This study aims to find out if the English listening sections of the 2018 and 2019 Korean CSAT, which is the national college entrance examination in Korea, are properly designed with meaningful real-life communicative contexts appropriate for developing or improving Korean students' interpersonal English communication skills. For this purpose, this research analyzes the discourses in the English listening tests in the framework of a sociolinguistic approach (Cameron, 2001, 2002; Gumperz, 1982, 2001), checking whether they are appropriate for sociocultural interactions, which are important in language learning. This study addresses the following research questions: 1) How natural are the discourses in the English listening tests? 2) Do the discourses in the tests reflect today's social issues? If so, how? 3) How are students portrayed in the discourses? Do they play a role as a main participant in the discourses? 4) How are word choices and language use in the tests?

Research Background

The traditional English teaching method in Korean schools before the introduction of the 7th National Curriculum in 1997 had been grammar-oriented and teacher-centered with a focus on form (Ellis, 2016). Students learned English by memorizing words and rules just focusing on grammar and translation without any meaningful communicative activities. *Korea Herald* (December 28, 2014) reported that "The Education Ministry recently announced the implementation of a new grading system for the English section of the college entrance exam, marking the first major change in the government's bid to reform Korea's problem-laden test".

Due to the divergent problems of the present CSAT such as educational capitalism and overheated competition for higher education, the Korean government changed the evaluation system for the English test of the College Entrance Examinations from norm-referenced evaluation to criterion-referenced evaluation to not only reduce the households' expenditure for private education but also decrease students' competition in the CSAT. The norm-referenced evaluation, for which test takers are classified into nine tiers, has problems since the criterion for the evaluation of the test results is not their achievement but their number. For instance, even if test takers have received a score of 97 out of 100 points, they may fall into a lower tier below the top tier if many students have obtained a higher score than they.

Literature Review

Krashen (1981) argued that comprehensible input is essential for assisting second language acquisition since “It requires meaningful interaction in the target language--natural communication--in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding” (p. 1). Listening is an essential part of interpersonal communication (Place, 2019). Assessing listening comprehension is important to evaluate English language learners’ communicative competence (Buck, 2001). Studies on English standardized tests including listening tests show that Korean students and educators have been faced with such issues as Korean students’ pressure of English tests (Choi, 2008) and the troubles that the teachers and the students experience preparing for the tests because of huge disparity between the English test of the CSAT and the content of English education at school (Jeon, 2010).

To investigate the appropriateness of the discourses in the English listening tests, critical discourse analysis will be employed as an analytical tool in this paper. Fairclough (1995) stated that in critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) there are interactions among “three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice” (p. 2). Thus, critical discourse analysis is useful for examining language uses within social contexts in daily communicative situations. CDA includes various approaches intended for the social analysis of discourse focusing on the change of power within certain social practices (Fairclough, 1995, 2010; Fairclough & Wodak 1997).

CDA is a critical discourse analysis methodology for looking into the complexity of discursive practices across texts. It can be extended to intertextuality since texts are a form of discourse as well. (Fairclough, 1992). For example, conversations in textbooks or tests are multimodal texts since they include different modes with words combined with images (Gee, 2011). Van Dijk (2012) stated that speakers convey various implications to the recipients since “Discourses are like icebergs. Only a minor part of their meaning is ‘visible’ as explicit propositions expressed in their sentences” (p. 596).

Method

In 1994, the Korean government decided to include an English listening section in the college entrance English test implemented once a year. The English listening section in the Korean CSAT is a multiple-choice test composed of 17 questions about conversations designed to assess Korean EFL students’ communicative ability to understand spoken discourses with a range of different topics. Five choices are given for each question about a dialogue or monologue and the test takers should select a correct answer. The Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) uploads the test with the answers every year after it is finished. I retrieved CSAT listening test papers, audio files and key answers from the KICE on-line database, and conducted a critical discourse analysis of the 2019 and 2018 CSAT English listening sections. CDA, which is an analytical tool, is an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the relations between discourse and social practices (Fairclough, 1995, 2003, 2010;

Van Dijk, 2012). By analyzing the KICE data of the audio files, answering sheets, and examination papers, I examined three dimensions of communicative events between speaker and hearer in the two English listening tests: 1) texts analysis (e.g. word choices), 2) discursive practices, 3) social practices (e.g. social relations, social events, contexts of communication).

Findings of Problems with Test Questions

1) Advertisement Discourse

In the contexts of social events, listeners can understand whether they are excluded from or included in the interaction, based on the speaker's choice of a personal pronoun like "she" or "you" (Fairclough, 2003). The choice of a pronoun in discourse can show social (e.g. we, they) relations or gender identities (e.g. he, she). Personal pronouns are markers of the roles of participants in discourse as social actors. For instance, the pronoun "I" (Jennifer Lee, who is the host of a radio program) indicates a speaker and "you", listeners, as exemplified below.

Table 1 *Text for Question 3 in the English listening test of CSAT 2018*

<p>W: Hello, NPBC radio station listeners! I'm Jennifer Lee, the host of Monday Live. More than 100,000 listeners have installed and used our radio app on their smart phones to listen to our programs. To satisfy our audience's growing needs, we've added three new functions to our app. The best function is that you can download your favorite programs. This is useful if you miss our show or want to listen to it again. Another useful function is that you can bookmark your favorite stories and listen to a personalized playlist. Finally, you can set an alarm to wake up to your favorite radio program. I hope these new functions of our radio app will make your day more enjoyable.</p>

The above spoken text is a kind of advertisement about a radio program. The host of the radio program is telling the listeners to download the radio app on their smartphones to convey interpersonal information about her show. She is speaking to the listeners in order to persuade them to download the radio app with self-promotional elements in her words. Her words "more than 100,000 listeners have installed and used our radio app." can be interpreted as explaining that her show is a popular program. There is a grammatical element in her words which serves the function of emphasizing her intention. It is a present perfective aspect, which is expressed with the auxiliary "have" and a past participle such as "installed", "added". The use of the present perfective aspect has the effect of highlighting the information that her show is so popular that many people have downloaded it, serving the function of explaining why they should download it too.

Even though the text for "Question 3" is of the monologue form and the host of the radio program and the listeners do not communicate face to face, they are the participants in the communication, which is indicated by the host's use of the first and second person pronouns. The discourses we are engaged in with other people indicate many things. For example, the use of a personal pronoun can show whether the person referred to by the pronoun is included in or excluded from our conversation.

First and second person pronouns like “I” and “you” are used more often than 3rd person pronouns like “they” or “she”. The test takers are hearers in the listening tests, so “you” are the pronoun for the test takers. In the context of conversation, personal pronouns such as “you” and “I” have a group meaning like “we”. Therefore, when the test takers hear the pronouns “you” and “I” in listening tests, they could conceive of themselves as conversation participants since with “the pronouns ‘I’ and specific ‘you’, reference is to groups rather than individuals” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 149). 1st and 2nd person pronouns are used four times more than 3rd person pronouns. The radio show host, Jennifer used adjectives such as “best”, “useful”, “new”, “favorite” as well as the second person pronoun “you”, while talking to the listeners about her program and the radio app. Those expressions imply that it will be good for the listeners to use the app, which has excellent functions useful for them.

2) Tricky Items

In the 2018 CSAT, question 7 is about office workers’ conversation concerning preparation for a workshop such as booking accommodations and ordering company T-shirts.

Table 2 2018 CSAT Item 7

W: Charlie, our department workshop in Jeju is only two weeks away.
M: That’s right. Let’s check if everything is prepared.
W: Okay. I’ve already booked the flight for everyone. Did you take care of the accommodations?
M: I did. I called several possible hotels and made a reservation at the one that gave us the best group price.
W: Excellent. Then what else do we need to do?
M: We need to figure out where to eat and also order the T-shirts with the company logo.
W: I heard there’re many good places to eat in Jeju. I’ll find restaurants online.
M: Sounds good. Then I’ll order the T-shirts.
W: You have everybody’s sizes, right?
M: Of course. I got them the other day.
W: That’s perfect.

In this conversation, two office workers are sharing interpersonal information about what should be done for their workshop by using such expressions as “booked the flight”, “made a reservation”, “where to eat”, “order the T-shirts”. Their utterances, composed of direct speech acts, imply that they are colleagues in similar job positions at work since they used such expressions as “let’s” instead of an honorific expression (polite forms of speech) like “sir” or a job title while checking on preparation for their department workshop in Jeju.

With the above discourse practice constructed in the context of the two office workers’ workshop preparation, its surface meaning could be interpreted as they are collaborating, sharing information. Notwithstanding, such expressions as “best” “perfect” or “excellent” are intermingled in their words (e.g., “the one that gave us the best group price”, “That’s perfect”). Thus, it can be inferred from such expressions

that the two office workers intend to try to work as best as they can in preparation for their department workshop to make it a success.

The directions for test item 7 are “Listen to the conversation, and choose the most appropriate work the man is supposed to do. The five choices are: 1) To cancel an airline ticket, 2) To request permission for a business trip, 3) To design the logo, 4) To make a hotel reservation, 5) To order T-shirts, and the correct answer is number 5. It is one of the tricky test items that has nothing to do with assessment of the test takers’ English communicative ability. For if they miss only one sentence “Then I’ll order the T-shirts”, which is not a key sentence expressing the main idea, it will be difficult for them to select the right answer even if they understand the whole discourse situation and the overall meaning of the dialogue.

3) Gender Bias

Fairclough (1995) argued that discourse practices may reflect prejudice and gender bias like male dominance in relationships between discourse participants such that a man’s role is a boss and a woman’s role is an employee. Gender bias is found in the following dialogues of the CSAT 2018 and 2019 listening tests:

Table 3 2018 CSAT

Q 4) M: Honey, I heard the Smith family moved out to the countryside. I really envy them. W: Really? Why is that? M: I think we can stay healthy if we live in the country. W: Hmm, can you be more specific? Q 6) M: Honey, Aunt Sophie just called me and said we can stay at her house next weekend. W: Wonderful. I really like the family room there. Q 10) M: Honey, I’m looking at the Natural History Museum’s website. The museum’s going to hold the Winter Discovery Camp. W: What’s it about?
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Table 4 2019 CSAT

Q 9) W: Good afternoon. What can I help you with, sir? M: I’m looking for inline skates for my twins. Q 10) M: Honey, what are you looking at? W: I’m looking at the International Fireworks Festival website. You know I love fireworks.
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Through these dialogue, M is a man and W is a woman speaker. Two of them are interlocutors in the conversations. They are engaged in person-to-person conversations, exchanging opinions, which are associated with a speech function of “knowledge exchanges with Statements and Questions, activity exchanges with

Offers and Demands” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 224). A man calls a woman “Honey” in such a way that it can be inferred that they have a close relationship like a married couple. Men are leading the conversations, giving information (e.g. about the Smith family or what Aunt Sophie said) to women while women are requesting more information (e.g. Hmm, can you be more specific? or What’s it about?) or giving a feedback token like “Wonderful”. In 4 out of 17 items in the listening test of the 2018 CSAT, about 24% of men’s roles are described as active information providers while women’s roles are passive respondents.

Occasionally, utterances, texts, or semiotic resources such as gestures represent a power relationship, ideology or gender bias. Thus, communication between discourse participants could show their power relationship through conversational dominance, the number of words uttered or turn-taking (Coates, 2013). Lazar (2005) argued, from the feminist critical discourse analysis, that “the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse is sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements” (p. 141). Revealing gender differences in discourse is not a problem. However, it is problematic for the English listening tests to include discourses with gender bias, which represents “the unjust or biased treatment of people based on differences (e.g. religion, race, sex, nationality/citizenship status and stereotyping)” (Waugh et al., 2016, p. 72).

Like daily conversations, discourses in the listening tests are composed of utterances. As we communicate, reflecting the sociocultural aspects of our present society through our language, so also the discourses in the listening tests can reflect society. Therefore, the discourses in the tests, which are produced with the test developers’ intentions, may have an indirect influence on the test takers, who are hearers, when they take English listening tests, listening to the speakers’ words.

Authenticity

Discourse is comprised of communicative interactions we engage in for social life, which occur in our real-life situations. Waugh et al. (2016) stated that we play a role as a social actor in discourse, and by doing so we express ideas and emotions in various ways like we take pictures at different camera angles. Natural pragmatic use of language and discourse practices occur in the context of real life communicative situations, which include intuitional settings like school environment (Potter, 2012). In fact, L2 students develop knowledge of pragmatics by learning their target language through learning materials with natural discourse content (Cohen, 2018). Thus, it is important to teach L2 learners natural discourses which can be used in real communicative situations, since language has the structure and properties that serve communicative functions of transmitting and receiving information in natural contexts (Ellis & Beattie, 2017).

Nevertheless, the 2018 and 2019 Korean scholastic ability tests include unnatural discourses in the English listening sections which lack naturalness and spontaneity of speech. In the 2018 CSAT, question 7 is about office workers’ conversation concerning preparation for a workshop such as booking accommodations and ordering company T-shirts. Question 10 is about the communication of parents looking for a winter camp for their son, and Question 15 is about two teachers’ working for an after-school program. Similarly, 2019 CSAT items 2 and 9 are about

communication between a father and a saleswoman for their children. Item 10 and item 13 are about a married couple's conversation. Discourse participants are office workers, couples, parents, and teachers rather than students. Inevitably, discourse situations like a department workshop, finding a son's winter camp or preparing a school program may sound unnatural to the test takers.

Naturalness and authenticity of English discourses, which can enhance hearers' understanding, is important to help the test takers to understand English language use. Because the CSAT English listening tests are made in a short time by external test developers selected by the KICE, the dialogues lack authenticity and naturalness since they are not real-life conversations but artificially created ones even if the test developers may have tried to make natural dialogues as best as they could.

Conclusion

Recognizing the importance of English as an international language, the Korean government has been endeavoring to develop Korean students' English communicative competence in various ways. Educators and parents also have tried to support English education for improving their English proficiency. More than twenty years have passed since the Korean government introduced the new English education policy (7th curriculum in 1997) for Korean students' English language learning. Adopting CDA as an analytical tool, this study has examined how the Korean CSAT English Listening Tests are implemented and whether or not they are properly designed with natural communicative contexts and real-life situations suitable for evaluating the test takers' English communicative competence.

The findings of this study are as follows. The English listening sections of the 2018 and 2019 Korean Scholastic Ability Tests have such problems as gender bias, lack of naturalness found in real interpersonal and intercultural communicative situations. In English learning, L2 learners (whose target language is English) need to learn what natural English discourses are like that can be used in real communicative situations. Waugh et al (2016) argued that from the pragmatic point of view, "authentic language use and actual language users in interaction are primary" (p. 90) in real social contexts with a focus on the whole speech.

Implications

Education policies are often formulated and implemented to solve educational problems. Educational policies can make a great impact not only on education fields but on the society as a whole. The Korean government and the Ministry of Education have made great efforts to make and implement good education policies to improve Korean students' English proficiency (Chung and Choi, 2016). The Korean Ministry of Education decided to change the English test evaluation method from norm-referenced evaluation to criterion-referenced evaluation, beginning from the 2018 CSAT.

For L2 students to develop communicative competence, they need to learn genuine interactions through immersion in an L2 speech community (Cohen, 2018). Studies on development of L2 pragmatic competence suggest that discourses for L2 students need to contain intercultural resources that can mediate social meanings in speech acts

(McConachy, 2017; Wang & Halenko, 2019) and connect to real interaction situations through technology such as a computer or the internet (Cohen, 2018; Tang, 2019) to enhance English language learners' pragmatic abilities. Therefore, the discourses in the CSAT listening tests should include authentic English dialogues to check whether the students have an English ability to understand natural spoken English and communicate with others in their daily life. For this, the discourses in the listening tests should be designed in such a way as to match real-life communication situations with a variety of speech acts we encounter in our daily life. The result of this research will be a foundation for further research needed to address the issue of appropriateness and validity of the Korean CSAT English listening test and to develop a proper evaluation method for measuring Korean students' English listening and speaking abilities.

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