

Teacher Training in Korea: A report on English Language Improvements among Korean Primary School Teachers on a Six-Month Intensive Teacher Training Program

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will report on the progress of thirty primary school teachers during an intensive English-language training program funded by the Ministry of Education and run by Jeonju University. The teachers were given an IELTS test to assess their initial English-language level and re-tested at the end of each of four key stages throughout the program. The first stage was a ten-week intensive English course in Korea focusing separately on the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. This was followed by a four-week course at the University of Queensland in Australia where some teaching methodology courses were also introduced. The third stage was in Korea and comprised integrated four-skills work over six weeks. This was followed by the final four-week stage of teaching input and monitored teaching practice. The presenter will show how the students progressed, how the course was designed and what lessons were learned. It is hoped that these lessons would be a benefit to other institutions carrying out similar programs in Korea.

Key words: IELTS, Teacher training, Ministry of Education

Background

Shortly after his successful election to the Korean presidency, Lee Myung Park made it a policy to improve the teaching of English language in Korean public schools. This was to be achieved by making it compulsory for public school teachers to teach English *in English*. Regardless of the pedagogical pitfalls of such a policy, it was soon clear that most public school teachers had either not received the necessary training, or did not possess the requisite skills to carry out this mandate. The Ministry of Education (MOE) then commissioned regional, six-month, Intensive English Teacher Training Programs (IETTPs) which would serve to make up for the gap between what was desired and what was achievable.

Jeonju University IETTP

Jeonju University, a private university in Jeollabuk-do was awarded the contract to train primary school teachers from around the region. The aims of the course were to help in-service teachers improve their English language skills as well as their instructional skills. Thirty trainees were accepted, all with over three years of in-service primary school teaching experience. The program was divided into four sessions as in table 1:

[Table 1] An Overview of the Jeonju University IETTP

Session	Length of time	Number of hours (per week)	Location
Session 1	10 Weeks	Speaking (6 hours) Listening (6 hours) Reading (4.5 hours) Writing (4.5 hours) Extensive Reading (3 hours) Integrated Skills (3 hours) Friday pm (3 hours)	Jeonju University
Session 2	4 Weeks	30 hours	University of Queensland
Session 3	6 Weeks	Four Skills (12 hours) Presentation Skills (6 hours) or Screen English (6 hours) Writing (6 hours) Extensive Reading (3 hours) Friday pm (3 hours)	Jeonju University
Session 4	3 Weeks	Teaching Methodology (7.5 hours) Teaching Practice (10 hours) Feedback (7.5 hours) Teaching Preparation (5 hours)	Jeonju University

Rationale

The trainees were given regular achievement tests throughout the program which helped to assess how much of the course content was being learned successfully. However, as an MOE-funded program, it was felt that an objective test of the trainees' overall English ability was also required. The test of choice was IELTS (International English Language Testing System) as the trainees were neither familiar nor trained in this type of test. Although the TOEIC test would have been more popular with the trainees, the validity of a TOEIC score is compromised by the test wiseness of many Korean students (Bachman 1990:114).

TOEIC is taken by over 1.2 million candidates yearly, 12% of whom are Korean (ETS 2006:4). In the 2005 testing period, 99% of Korean candidates claim to have taken the test before (ibid:21).

What is IELTS?

IELTS is a collaboration between University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, British Council and IDP:IELTS Australia and was formally launched in 1989 (Alderson & Clapham 1992:149) after an extensive revision of its immediate predecessor, the English Language Testing System test – a mainly British English proficiency test designed for students wishing to study in Britain (Taylor 2006:56). IELTS tests separately examine the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and, according to the IELTS website, are taken yearly by 940,000 people, in 121 countries and recognized by over 6000 organisations

including some immigration authorities (IELTS Annual Review 2007:2-5). There are two varieties of test: academic, for students wishing to attend an English-medium course at university and general training, for people wishing to go to an English-speaking country (IELTS Handbook 2006:2). The difference between the varieties is in the reading and writing modules. Scores are presented individually and as a whole on a band scale from zero to nine (see table 2, below). The scores for each section (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and the overall scores are reported as whole or half bands (IELTS Annual Review 2007:6).

[Table 2] IELTS Band Scores
 (http://www.ielts.org/institutions/test_format_and_results.aspx)

Band	Level	Description
9	Expert User	Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
8	Very Good User	Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.
7	Good User	Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6	Competent User	Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations
5	Modest User	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4	Limited User	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	Extremely Limited User	Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	Intermittent User	No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non User	Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test	No assessable information provided.

Method

The trainees were tested four times during the course. They were tested over the first two days of the course and then at the end of sessions one, two and three. The test at the end of session two was an official test, taken in Australia, the other three tests were practice tests.

Each practice test used official IELTS materials published by Cambridge University Press. The speaking portion of the practice tests were videotaped and scored by two examiners to ensure greater reliability. The other three sections were marked by the same examiner to ensure internal consistency. It should also be noted that for the three practice tests, half bands were not used and the overall score was merely an average of the scores gained in the four skill areas.

Although the initial IELTS test was used as a placement test, the results of the IELTS tests did not affect the scores or grades of the trainees. This was to try and reduce the amount of test stress encountered by the trainees and to reduce the amount of specific, test-taking practice which plagues the validity of TOEIC and TOEFL in Korea. The expectation was that trainees would improve their overall IELTS scores over the period of the course, but that there would be a peak after time spent in the ESL environment of Australia.

Results

Taking a look at the average, overall bands show that our expectations were met. Trainees did improve overall, but the time spent in Australia was the high point (see table 3 and chart 1). Of course, it should also be noted that since this was the only official test taken, the differences in test scores could be attributed to differences in the marking only.

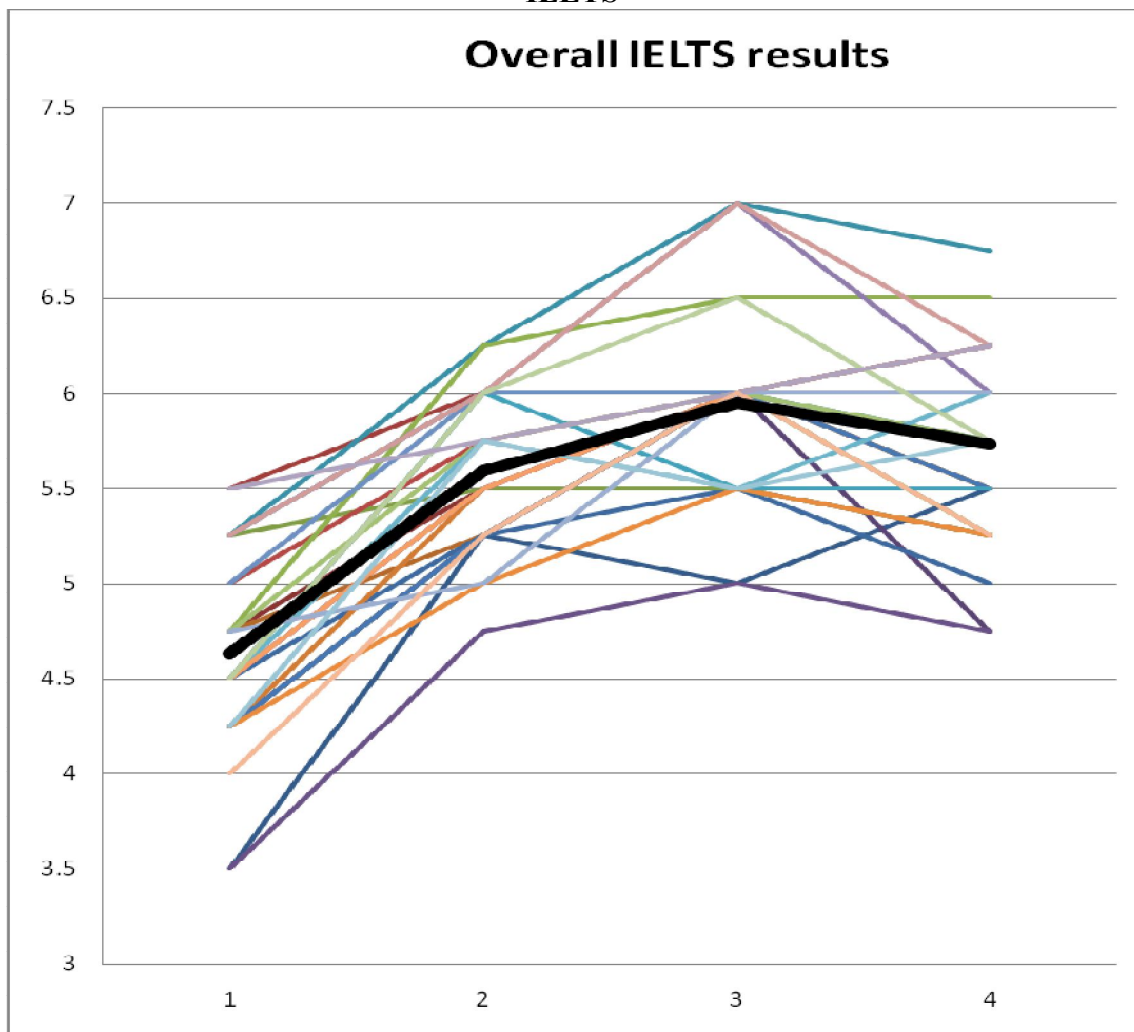
[Table 3] Overall IELTS Band Scores for Jeonju University IETTP trainees

Name	IELTS 1	IELTS 2	IELTS 3	IELTS 4
1	3.5	5.25	5	5.5
2	4.75	5.5	5.5	5.25
3	4.25	5.25	6	5.25
4	4.25	5.25	6	4.75
5	4.5	6	6	5.75
6	4.75	5.25	6	5.5
7	4.5	5.25	5.5	5
8	5.5	6	6	6.25
9	5.25	5.5	5.5	5.25
10	3.5	4.75	5	4.75
11	5.25	6.25	7	6.75
12	4.25	5.5	6	5.5
13	4.25	5.25	6	5.5
14	5	5.75	6	6.25
15	4.75	6.25	6.5	6.5
16	4.5	5.5	6	6
17	5.25	6	5.5	5.5
18	4.25	5	5.5	5.25
19	5	6	6	6.25
20	4.5	5.5	6	6
21	4.75	5.75	6	5.75
22	5.25	6	7	6

23	4.5	5.75	5.5	6
24	4.5	5.5	6	6.25
25	4.75	5	6	6
26	5.25	6	6	6.25
27	4.5	6	6	5.75
28	5.5	5.75	6	6.25
29	4.25	5.75	5.5	5.75
30	4	5.25	6	5.25
Average	4.633333	5.591667	5.95	5.733333

This line shows the average

[Chart 1] Overall IELTS Band Scores for Jeonju University IETTP trainees over four IELTS



With regards to the opinions of the trainees towards the test, the following is a fairly representative selection from the feedback surveys we undertook. All surveys were conducted at the end of a session and were answered anonymously.

- “IELTS test is the most valuable and reliable test. IELTS test is very good experience.”

- “We took four IELTS tests until Session 3. I understand our professor and teacher’s intention, but two times is enough to measure our development. Whenever taking the test, my index of stress increased. I think progress test of each course is enough.”
- “In this course there are too many tests for us to be stressed and down. I think that [the achievements tests] are enough to evaluate our ability. I think that IELTS test is not suitable for us. I would like to say just one IELTS test if you want to know our general English ability.”
- “Stop to take IELTS test. It’s useless. We don’t need that result. I think the test result’s only for Prof. _____.”

Conclusions

While the evaluation of our trainees’ English language proficiency did increase their levels of stress, the use of the IELTS tests did allow the course administrators to feel confident in the ability of the program to improve the English language skills of the trainees. By not using familiar or useful tests, such as TOEIC or TOEFL, trainees did not find it necessary to focus on the test and spend time practicing test-taking techniques. Spratt suggests that it is largely in the hands of teachers and institutions to decide how much of a positive or negative impact an exam will have (2005:23), and we tried to ensure the negative washback from the tests was limited.

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About the Presenter

Tim Dalby was KOTESOL's 2008-2009 1st Vice-President and Co-chair of the 2009 KOTESOL National Conference. He holds an M.A. in ELT from The University of Reading, UK. Originally from Portsmouth, England, Tim has been teaching English since the summer of 2000. He has taught in Korea, New Zealand and the Czech Republic in many contexts including business English, general English, EAP, FCE, CAE, IELTS, TOEIC and TOEFL. He currently teaches and trains teachers at Jeonju University. *Email: tim_dalby@yahoo.co.uk*