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Difficulty Levels and Characteristics of TOEFL Listening Items for Korean EFL Learners*

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The study aims to investigate Korean university students' listening achievements in an English proficiency test and suggest several aspects in need to improve in for schools. The researcher examines which TOEFL testing items have high, medium, and low percentages of correct answers, and what characteristics correspond to these groups. 61 Korean university students in a local city in Korea participated in a computer-mediated test. 36 out of the 61 participants also participated in an interview for immediate reflection on what they thought during the test. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses showed that the students experienced the most difficulty with testing items requiring summarizing of presented information and understanding of relationships among concepts. This interpretation was confirmed by the interview data. We suggest that intensive instructional intervention, including material development and classroom activities, focus more on high level information processing such as summary and integration for Korean EFL university students. Another suggestion was made that EFL listening testing items for the students be developed to include more integrative information processing.

[TOEFL listening item/Korean learners/EFL education at college/curriculum development]

I. INTRODUCTION

The TOEFL has been the commonly used standardized English proficiency test (M. H. Han, 2010; B. M. Jeon, 2004; H. O. Lee, & S. Y. Lee, 2003; H. S. Shin, 2015), and many

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universities in Korea provide learning programs for the test (J. E. Park, 2004). In addition, as oral communication skills have been emphasized, two issues have emerged as critical: what gaps remain in learners' listening proficiency development and what aspects of listening instruction and measurement need to be improved (Celce-Murcia, 2001; K. H. Cha, W. S. Lee, & J. H. Shim, 2005; B. M. Cheon, & K. P. Park, 2001; E. J. Cho & H. J. Cheong, 2012; D. S. Chong & H. D. Kim, 2001; H. S. Chung, 2001; Feyten, 1991; I. S. Kang, 2004; S. J. Kang, S. J., 2011; H. Y. Kim, 2015; Rost, 1990).

As part of an overall project to develop more specific questions and answers in this arena, we examined what types of testing items are most challenging for Korean university students learning English and what characteristics those items have. The reason to target university students is that they have completed the national curriculum for the secondary education in Korea.[1] In designing the study and developing the frame for analysis, the researcher examined the previous research below, focusing on TOEFL listening items and better testing items to improve Korean EFL learners' listening proficiency. Based on the research results, we suggest curriculum and measurement guideposts, particularly regarding what linguistic or strategic aspects need pedagogic intervention. These suggestions contribute to the development of improved English instruction and measurement for EFL learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Testing Items in TOEFL Listening and Korean EFL Testing

Internet-based testing TOEFL (iBT TOEFL) at time of publishing consists of two to three conversations with 5 questions each, four to six lectures with six questions each, adding up to 60 to 90 minutes in total (Educational Testing Service, 2013; J. Y. Kim, 2008). According to the Educational Testing Service (2013, pp. 78-85), the test requires comprehension ability, specifically in three aspects: basic comprehension, pragmatic understanding, and connecting information. The following shows eight target components and the example types of questions in those three fields.

Basic Comprehension	
1) main ideas and key points	– What are the speakers mainly discussing?
	– What is the main topic of the lecture?

[1] For more discussion of this approach on curriculum development, refer to B. M. Jeon (2004) and H. O. Lee & S. Y. Lee (2003, 2004).

2) purposes or reasons	– Why does the students visit the professor?
	– Why does the professor explain X?
3) details	– According to the professor, what is one way that X can affect Y?
	– What is X?
Pragmatic Understanding	
4) intention	– What does the professor imply when he says this?
	– What does the professor mean when she says this?
5) attitude	– What is the professor's attitude toward X?
	– What is the professor's opinion of X?
Connecting Information	
6) organization	– How is the discussion organized?
	– Why does the professor discuss X?
7) relationship of information given[2]	
	– What is the likely outcome of doing procedure X before procedure Y?
	– What can be inferred about X?
8) inferencing	– What will the student probably do next?
	– What does the professor imply when he says this?

Several studies have made suggestions on how to improve English listening test results in Korea. Firstly, J. Y. Kim (2008) suggested that the college entrance examination newly introduce inferencing questions as in the TOEFL, which requires integrating pieces of information, including details. Secondly, J. H. Yoon, Y. M. Kim, and M. B. Lee (2011) advocated that the college entrance examination change the mode of instructions, questions, and options from written into aural as in the TOEFL. Finally, M. H. Kim (2014) developed ideas from those two studies and performed research on 265 subjects of high school students in Korea. M. H. Kim (2014) found better item discrimination when the listening test of the college entrance examination provided aural questions in English, instead of questions either written or in Korean. Questions with longer texts and multiple questions also provided improved item discrimination vis a vis the ones with shorter texts and/or a single question. Considering authentic language use, these results sound quite convincing. A variety of information actually seems to be stored in human memory at the moment of

[2] Some questions on information relationships require referencing ability, particularly when the relationship is not specified in a word or phrase (Educational Testing Service, 2013,p. 86).

listening processing. Those questions with higher item discrimination power would be expected to more successfully work screening for the college entrance examination itself.

There remains a gap in current research: which aspects or question types in listening tests are still critically challenging for learners even after the secondary education curriculum? In other words, for which aspects or question types do Korean learners remain at low achievement? We create and examine empirical data to inform what aspects of listening processing should be intensively introduced in curriculum and classrooms. In this context, the current research examines Korean university students' listening test performance in TOEFL, the benchmark English proficiency test in Korea. More specifically, the research analyzes accuracy for testing items and discusses the characteristics of item types still challenging for Korean EFL learners who have completed the national secondary curriculum.

2. Characteristics of Koreans' Responses to TOEFL Listening Items

K. H. Cha and Y. H. Yoo (2000) examined 46 university students' achievement through pre-, mid-, and final tests in the paper-and-pencil TOEFL listening. Their analyses of accuracy showed the consistently lowest achievement for questions with short informal conversations across all three tests. Moreover, through their examinations of responses with high and low accuracy, they concluded that Korean students tend to have a hard time catching enough details and inferring reasons of a specific behavior or feelings of a character even in a short informal conversation. They further hold that the Korean students also need to expand their vocabulary and background knowledge for more formal reading materials.

S. J. Kang (2011) compared achievement in the pre- and the post-tests with TOEFL listening questions for 33 Korean university students under a note-taking treatment and 30 under a repeated-listening treatment. The results revealed that only the lowest achieving students made a significant general improvement in the post-test. In comparative analyses, only the questions that require inferring showed a significantly higher achievement for the low achieving students in the note-taking group than for the achievers in the repeated-listening group. Results also showed that the more information units the students caught, the higher the students' listening achievement.

Finally, H. Y. Kim (2015) compared achievements in TOEFL pre- and post-tests by 45 Korean university students in 2012 and 42 in 2013. The same instructor taught the students of both the group, but she added more student-centered activities, video materials and lower-level-processing instructions (including dictation, vocabulary, and grammar) for the 2013 group. The 2013 results showed a significantly bigger improvement between the pre- and the post-test.

Notable here is the lack of structured discussion on empirical data. Only K. H. Cha and

Y. H. Yoo (2000) discussed characteristics of several TOEFL listening questions with low achievement scores rather than classified question types. Even research dealing with question types associated with low achievement scores, including S. J. Kang (2011), uses categories provided by the test developers, instead of those reflecting characteristics found in learners' actual responses.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Research Questions

The study performed a mini-test of iBT TOEFL listening for 63 Korean university students and analyzed their responses to discuss the characteristics of questions with differing difficulty. The study uses these results to suggest what efforts are to be made in curriculum and test development in order to improve Korean EFL adult learners' listening proficiency. The following are specific research questions:

1) Which of the testing items belong to groups of high, middle, and low accuracy?
2) What are the characteristics shared with the other testing items in each group?

2. Participants

63 Korean students voluntarily participated in the research. Of them, 13 students were male and 50 female. All of them were taking English or Introduction to English Linguistics as freshmen or sophomores[3] at a university in southern Korea. They belonged to either the Humanities or Social Science College.

A screening test consisted of 17 questions excerpted from the college entrance examination in November, 2010 (Appendix). Their average percentage score was 97.20 and the standard deviation 4.95 for the test. 39 students got full marks and 61 students more than 88.24. It seems quite reasonable that the participants be accepted as learners successfully completing the national curriculum for the secondary education.

3. Procedures

In order to answer Research Question 1) above, the researcher excerpted 29 testing

[3] There are three sophomores among the 63 participants, and their scores stayed within 1 standard deviation from the average scores in TOEFL and the college entrance examination.

items[4] from Educational Testing Service (2013), a book authorized as providing the most accurate and informative guide for learners by Educational Testing Service, the institute producing the TOEFL. Two testing items requiring two answers each and two testing items requiring three answers counted independently, making 29 testing items in total (Appendix).

Data collection was performed in a classroom with a computer and a projector for 27 participants, and in the researcher's office for 36 with a set of a personal computer and a monitor. The testing place was assigned depending on the time availability for the participants. Participants were given the oral and the written guidelines about the procedures by the researcher. The researcher and participants had a few minutes for questions and answers. Then a practice session was given with an examination paper. The practice session consisted of two testing items excerpted from Educational Testing Service (2013). With a participant's confirmation of being ready, the main listening test with 29 items started with the CD played by the computer. The participants in the classroom marked their answers on the examination paper, while those in the researcher's office did so by clicking the mouse button on the monitor. The listening test, including the practice session, took about 65 minutes.

The researcher also asked 36 participants in the researcher's office at intervals of every three test questions what they were thinking about while listening to the text and answering the questions. These interview statements were recorded in MP3 format and transcribed verbatim by an assistant researcher with a master's degree and the researcher herself with PhD in second language teaching (English) independently. The final statements that are transcribed by consensus were included in the data for the discussion below.

For the statistical analyses, firstly, the researcher calculated accuracy of each testing items and grouped items which had less than 5 percent score differences. Secondly, if a response to each question was correct, it was coded as 1 and if not, it was coded as 0. Then correlation coefficient of each testing item with the participants' total score was calculated by means of IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software. Based on the results of these two statistical analyses, the researcher discussed below Research Question 1, which testing items belong to groups with high, middle, and low accuracy?

To answer Research Question 2 the researcher analyzed transcripts of the interview statements and discussed the characteristics, considering eight target components above, originally cited from Educational Testing Service (2013).

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[4] Considering the task difficulty of listening with high concentration, the research was designed with the time limit of 65 minutes. For the same reason, 11 testing items in the original set of the listening test in Educational Testing Service (2013) were not included in the test for the study when the similar type of questions were already selected.

IV. RESULTS

1. Item Classification Based on Accuracy

To answer Research Question 1 (which testing items belong to groups with high, middle, and low accuracy?), the researcher classified the testing items with more than 5% differences in accuracy.[5] As can be seen in TABLE 1, the results showed four groups of testing items.

TABLE 1

Group of Testing Items by Accuracy

Group of Testing Items	Number of Testing Item	Accuracy (%)
A	1	96.8
	2b	95.2
B	3	85.7
	29	84.1
	2a	82.5
	4	81.0
	17	81.0
	20b	79.4
	21c	79.4
	25	79.5
	34a	76.2
C	22	69.8
	26	69.8
	31	69.8
	21b	66.7
	34b	65.1
	27	63.5
	21a	58.7
	24	57.1
	20a	55.6
D	23	46.0
	32	46.0
	34c	46.0
	19	42.9
	30	42.9
	5	41.3
	33	41.3
	28	39.7
	18	33.3

* (a), (b), and (c) following a item number represent a sub-item (the first, second, and third answers in order under the same question number) in the testing screen (e.g., Question #34 below).

[5] For more examples of using 5%p of accuracy in item analyses, refer to Kim, H. K. (2014, 2013), Kim, Choi, and Oh (2015), and Shin, J. A., et al. (2012).

TABLE 2 shows the results of correlation coefficient analyses between the average accuracy of each item group and the total percentage scores of the mini-TOEFL test.

TABLE 2

Correlation with the Total Percentage Scores by Item Groups

Group of Testing Items	Correlation Coefficient	*p*
A	0.227	0.074
B	0.787	0.000***
C	0.831	0.000***
D	0.884	0.000***

(***) represents that the corresponding correlation coefficient is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

As seen in TABLE 2, Group B, C, and D have a significant correlated accuracy with the total score for the participants. The highest correlation is found with Group D, next Group C, and the lowest Group B.

To answer Research Question 1 (which testing items belong to groups with high, middle, and low accuracy?), items in Group D (accuracy of 33.3.~46.0%) were highly difficult for participants; those in Group C (accuracy of 55.6~69.8%) medium difficult; and those in Group B (accuracy of 76.2~85.7%) least difficult. All of these three groups of testing items share a positive correlation with total scores. Group D was found to have the strongest correlation among the three groups to total score.

2. Characteristics of Question Types and Target Components

1) Questions with Low Difficulty

The study examined the question types and the target components for the testing items belonging to the three groups discussed above. TABLES 3, 4, and 5 summarize the summary of the analyses. Target Component I presents a summary by the researcher of the classification of target components discussed in Educational Testing Service (2013). The column titled Target Component II presents a classification of target components created by research team. The shaded section marks that the corresponding target component in both column I and II identical.

TABLE 3

Question Types & Target Components in Group B (Low Difficulty)

Number of Testing Item	Question Type	Target Component I	Target Component II
2a	According to the professor, what information should the student include in X?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	
3	What does the professor consider unusual about X?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	
4	Why does the professor tell a story about X?	Pragmatic Understanding 4) intention	Basic Comprehension 2) purposes or reasons
17	Why does the professor talk about X?	Basic Comprehension 2) purposes or reasons	Connecting Information 6) organization (summary, purpose)
20b	What are the two points that reflect X? (Leaders *should be responsible for Y.*)	Basic Comprehension 3) details	Connecting Information 6) organization
21c	Based on information in the lecture, indicate whether the statement below about X reflect Y? (*Emotion is what motivates soldiers.*)	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given	Connecting Information 8) inferencing
25	Listen again to X. Why did the professor say this?	Pragmatic Understanding 4) intention	
29	What is the lecture mainly about?	Basic Comprehension 1) main ideas and key points	

* (a), (b), and (c) following a item number represent a sub-item (the first, second, and third answers in order under the same question number) in the testing screen (e.g., Question #34 below).

TABLE 3 (continued)

Testing Components & Question Types in Group B (Low Difficulty)

Number of Testing Item	Question Type	Target Component I	Target Component II
34a	Indicate whether each sentence below describes X or Y.*(It encourages people with similar expertise to work closely together.)*	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given	Basic Comprehension 3) details

* (a), (b), and (c) following a item number represent a sub-item (the first, second, and third answers in order under the same question number) in the testing screen (e.g., Question #34 below).

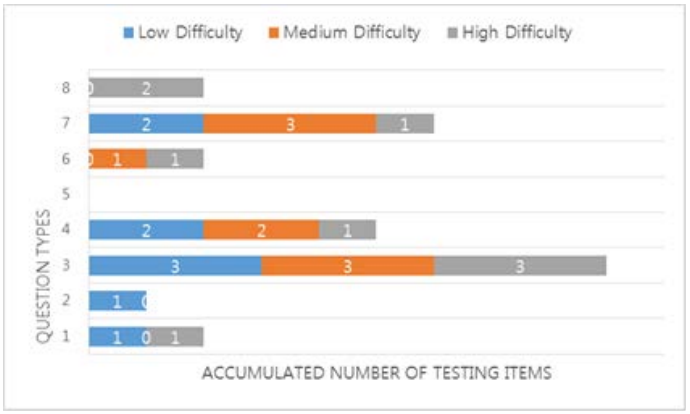
According to Target Component I in TABLE 3, the target components commonly found for the testing items with low difficulty include Question Type 3) details of Basic Comprehension, 4) intention of Pragmatic Understanding, and 7) relationship of information given, Connecting Information. However, this analysis has a problem that it fails in distinguishing characteristic target components among three groups of testing items with different difficulty found in TABLE 1 and 2. The contents in the column Target Component I are commonly shared across three groups of testing items with low, medium, and high difficulty; the Target Component system cannot provide enough distinctive characteristics to help researchers understand what aspects of testing items are more or less challenging for the Korean learners in the study. More specifically, details of Basic Comprehension, intention of Pragmatic Understanding, and relationship of information given, Connecting Information in Target Component I in TABLE 3 do not successfully work in explaining what aspects of testing items feels more manageable for the Korean learners.

In FIGURE 1, note that Question Type 3) (details, Basic Comprehension) is found in three testing items across three groups of testing items with different difficulties; 4) (intention, Pragmatic Understanding) in two items with low difficulty, two with medium, and one with high; and 7) (relationship of information given, Connecting Information) in two items with low difficulty, three with medium, and one with high.

In contrast, Target Component II generated by the current study shows distinctive characteristics among the three groups of testing items with different difficulty. FIGURE 2 shows the number of testing items reflecting the results in the column Target Component II of TABLE 3.

FIGURE 1

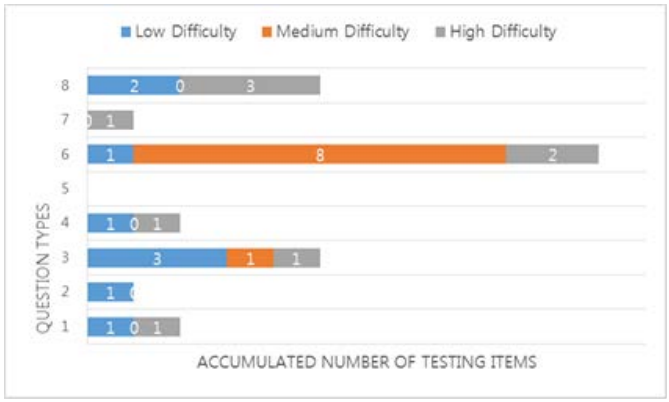
Number of Testing Items Found by Target Component I



* The numbers from 1 to 8 in QUESTION TYPES represent the question types discussed in Literature Review.

FIGURE 2

Number of Testing Items Found by Target Component II



* The numbers from 1 to 8 in QUESTION TYPES represent the question types discussed in Literature Review.

FIGURE 2 shows that Question Type 3) (details, Basic Comprehension) is the most frequent question type among the testing items with low difficulty. Meanwhile, among the testing items with medium difficulty, Question Type 6) (organization, Connecting Information) shows the highest frequency. Among the testing items with high difficulty, Question Type 8) (inferencing, Connecting Information) is found to have the highest frequency. These results imply that analyses presented in the column Target Component II provide a better picture to understand distinctive characteristics among the testing items,

compared to the analyses in the column Target Component I.

Another rationale to use the categories presented in the column Target Component II was found after the two researchers of the study originally examined the testing items independently. The analyses in Target Component II were more likely to make consensus easy to come to, compared to the results in Target Component I. For example, Question #4 below seems reasonable to classify belonging to Question Type 3) details of Basic Comprehension as in the column Target Component II rather than 4) intention of Pragmatic Understanding as in the column Target Component I.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #4

Student: Well, I was... I was afraid that, you know, maybe the personal-type stuff wouldn't be what they wanted, but...

Professor: No, in fact **it's... um, given an example.** I... I had a friend, when I was an undergrad, um, went to medical school. And he put on his med school application-and he could actually tell if somebody actually read it 'cause, um, he had asthma and the reason that he wanted to go to med school was **he said he wanted to do sports medicine because he, you know, he had this real interest. He was an athletes too, and... and wanted to help athletes who had this physical problem.** and he could always tell if somebody actually read his letter, because **they would always ask him about that**.

Student: ...Uhm... so **something unique**.

Professor: Yeah. So see, you know, **that's what's good** and, and, **I think for you probably, you know, your music background's the most unique thing** that you've got in your record.

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

Q: Why does the professor tell a story about his friend who went to medical school?

ⓐ To warn the student about how difficult graduate school can be
ⓑ To illustrate a point he is making
ⓒ To help the student relax
ⓓ To change the subject

Question #4 above measures how much of the sections marked in bold a learner understands. The question does not propose to measure whether or how much of the sociolinguistic functions of an utterance or a speaker's intention beneath the speech a learner understands. This fact reveals itself clearly when compared to the example below, Question #25, a typical question to measure Pragmatic Understanding.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #25

Professor: What do you need to do to that water besides put fertilizer in it? Anyone ever actually tried to grow plants in water? **You must bubble water through it. Bubble gas through it.** I'm sorry, you must bubble gas through it. So, gas, you have to bubble through.

- Questions and Options Presented after the 1st Listening of the Text

Listen to the part of the lecture. Then answer the question.
(The audio material above was presented again)
Why did the professor say this?:
I'm sorry, you must bubble gas through it. So, gas, you have to bubble through.
ⓐ She wanted to correct the wording of a previous statement.
ⓑ She wishes she did not have to bubble gas through it.
ⓒ She realized the odor of gas could be unpleasant.
ⓓ She forgot to tell the students about a step in the experiment.

The listening text above does not present why the professor said 'I'm sorry, you must bubble gas through it. So, gas, you have to bubble through.' A learner has to figure out the reason or the pragmatic function of the saying in the context of the professor's lecture talk.

Another rationale for Question Type 3) (details, Basic Comprehension) on Question #4 was found from the interview data from a participant. The following is the English translated version of the interview response in Korean by a learner on Question #4. The squared brackets ([ ]) represent a note added by the researcher to help understand the text.

> First, I read through all of the options. Yeah, I didn't think 'this is it.' [I didn't select an obvious answer] in my mind before reading the options. I read all of the options and chose the answer among them. Hmm, since **the professor advised the, the student** first. And then, **he said for example, he mentioned there is a case like this**. So, I chose ⓑ for an answer. Mentioning such a case, what, thus, what I'm trying to say, I thought he is taking an example of what I [he, the professor] am trying to say, the point. As a way to make it clear to the student. That's why I chose ⓑ.
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #4 by Learner #51099

As seen in the part of the interview speech in bold above, Question #4 does not require a learner to interpret the pragmatic functions of a speech in the context given, but comprehend the purpose of the speech that the speaker and professor specified in the listening text. The key to the answer is the details presented in the listening text.

Based on reasons, the discussion below is presented on the testing components in the column Testing Component II, not in the column Testing Component I.

Going back to TABLE 3, according to Testing Components II, the testing items with low difficulty, particularly Questions # 2a, 3, and 34a have in common that all of these questions are easy to find a correct answer to, because the key or critical details are contained in one or two sentences in the listening text. Note that such a characteristic never appears other than in the testing items with low difficulty. The following shows how such details are able to guide a learner to the answer, and, however, what happens when a learner fail to comprehend the details.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #34a

Twenty years ago companies were organized **in function groups, where people with a certain expertise worked together** as a unit-the, uh, architects in one unit, the finance people in another unit. ... So instead we maintain **the functional organization-that means the engineers work together in one part of the building. And their offices are next to each other because we want them to talk to each other**.

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

34. Indicate whether the statement below describes functional organization or project organization. Place a check mark in the correct box.

	Functional Organization	Project Organization
a. It encourages people with similar expertise to work closely together.		
b. . . .(omitted for convenience)		
c. . . .(omitted for convenience)		

As seen in the part marked in bold of the listening text above, Question #34a presents a question sentence (i.e., It encourages people ~ together) very similar to the expressions given in the listening text. Thus, this question belongs to Question Type 3) details of Basic Comprehension. It measures how well a learner does in comprehending the details presented in the listening text. However, the question is not too easy in the sense that, at the same time, it requires a learner to understand similar expressions delivering the same message rather than mechanically choose the answer closest to the familiar expressions he or she heard in the text. The question sentence employs similar words or phrases such as *encourage, people with similar expertise,* and *work closely*. Thus, a learner has to comprehend the details and summarize the text, focusing on meaning or message. It is not

easy for learners to choose the answer by simply memorizing the words or phrases presented in the listening text.

This characteristic is commonly shared with Questions #2a and 3. This characteristic is, thus, noteworthy to help understand how Question Types 3) (details, Basic Comprehension) still successfully works only with low difficulty (76~86% accuracy) measuring Korean EFL learners' listening proficiency in our study. The following interview speech is an English version, showing what it is like for a learner lacking the ability to comprehend the details beyond identifying a familiar phrases.

> The beginning part was easy to follow, but **as the discussion proceeded, I think I missed the storylines at some points.** It seems like there was not a difficult words. But it took a while to comprehend people's talk itself, and while I was struggling to figure out the meaning of a part in the text, **I found myself lost for the next part of the text.** It just passed away before I caught the meaning. Thus, **I couldn't understand the flowing of the whole discussion. It was just like a talk on the phone when the line is bad**.
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #34a by Learner #51199

The question type secondly most frequently found in the testing items with low difficulty is Question Type 8) (inferencing, Connecting Information). Similar to 3) (details, Basic Comprehension), 8) inferencing also requires an transfer of information fitting well with the form of the potential answer among the options, not simply searching for the candidate answer among options matching with the information presented in the text. Both Question Types 3) (details, Basic Comprehension) and 8) (inferencing, Connecting Information) seemed to retain significant correlation with the total percent score of the mini TOEFL test in the study. The examples below support this interpretation.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #20b

> And then, Plato, says, the third group you need is leaders. Their main role will be to think rationally, to use their reason or intellect to make decisions. As decision makers, leaders determine what the state is to do, how the affairs of the citizens are to be run.
>
> Plato then asks himself: OK, assume we've got such a society with **these three groups**. When will this society be a good, um, a, a just society? Well, you can only have a good society when its three parts are working well together-each doing its proper thing. And Plato believes this can only happen if workers and soldiers learn moderation, or self-control.
>
> But why? Why do workers and soldiers have to learn self-control? Well, how can a

society flourish if the workers and soldiers don't control their desires and emotions? Plato thinks that if they aren't under control, workers will sleep too much and play too much, so they're not going to get their jobs done. And soldiers need to channel their high-spiritedness in a certain direction, precisely by being courageous.

But you're not going to get that automatically. you need to teach them this kind of moderation. So you need **an educational system that first of all will train the leaders**, so that they'll make good decisions, so they'll know what's wise. Then make **leaders responsible-um, uh, turn over to them the education of the other two groups. And through education, build a society so that the workers and soldiers learn to use their intellect** to control their desires and emotions. If you had all that, then for Plato, you'd have a good or just society.

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

20. What are the two points that reflect Plato's views about education? Choose 2 answers.

ⓐ All people can be trained to become leaders.
ⓑ All people should learn to use their intellect.
ⓒ Leaders should be responsible for the education of workers and sldiers.
ⓓ All people should learn about the nature of the human soul.

Question #20 requires two answers: the first answer is ⓑ and the second ⓒ. Neither of these two repeats the phrases exactly matching with the ones presented in the listening text. Thus, a learner has to find a transformed expression delivering the same meaning or message he or she understood. To be more specific, a learner has to understand the underlined parts in order to choose ⓑ for an answer of Question #20a. In the case of Question 20b, he or she has to understand the part in bold without underlines. Compared to each other, Question #20a requires a learner to process a wider range of clues than Question #20b. The latter only needs relatively simple comprehension−identifying the reference of 'them' and 'the other two groups. As a result, even though one question requires two answers in the same format of asking about the same listening text, the accuracy for these two answers were different. Question #20a belongs to Group C (medium difficulty), while Question #20b Group B (low difficulty). More than 80% of the incorrect answers were found with Option ⓓ above. This implies that learners in error chose the options with phrases familiar in their listening to the text, including *teach*, *learn*, and *spirit*.

In contrast, an easy and simple characteristic of testing items with low difficulty was found with Question #21c.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #21c

According to Plato, the key feature of workers is that they're focused on their own desires or appetites ... So you need a class of soldiers, who are supposed to protect the state from external threats. Well, **these soldiers**, well, they're going to be in dangerous situations quite frequently, so you need people with, um, a, a lot of high spirit-uh, an emotional type of individual. **Emotion is what characterizes this group**. ... And through education, build a society so that the workers and soldiers learn to use their intellect to control their desires and emotions.

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

21. Based on the information in the lecture, indicate whether the statements below about human emotion reflect beliefs held by Plato. *For each sentence, put a check mark in the YES or NO column.*

	YES	NO
a. Emotion is usually controlled by the faculty of desire.		
b. Emotion ought to be controlled by the faculty of intellect.		
c. Emotion is what motivates soldiers.		

As can be seen from the underlined part above, the key to answer for 21c is a comprehension of the simple phrases describing soldiers in the text, including *high spirit*, *emotional type*, and *characterize*. The question does not require transformation of information or understanding of relationships among pieces of information.

2) Questions with Medium Difficulty

TABLE 4 presents a summary of question types and target components for the testing items in Group C with medium difficulty.

TABLE 4

Question Types & Target Components in Group C (Medium Difficulty)

Number of Testing Item	Question Type	Target Component I	Target Component II
20a	What are the two points that reflect X? (*Leaders should Y.*)	Basic Comprehension 3) details	Connecting Information 8) inferencing
21a	Based on information in the lecture, indicate whether the statement below about X reflect Y? (*Emotion is controlled by Z.*)	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given	Basic Comprehension 3) details
21b	Based on information in the lecture, indicate whether the statement below about X reflect Y? (*Emotion ought to be controlled by W.*)	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given	Connecting Information 6) organization
22	According to X, what is the main characteristics of Y?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	Connecting Information 6) organization
24	According to the professor, why did one scientist grow X?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	Connecting Information 6) organization
26	Why does the professor mention X?	Connecting Information 6) organization	
27	Listen again to X. What does the professor intend to explain?	Pragmatic Understanding 4) intention	Connecting Information 6) organization
31	What is an example of X?	Pragmatic Understanding 4) intention	Connecting Information 6) organization
34b	Indicate whether each sentence below describes X or Y. (*It helps the company to Z.*)	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given	Connecting Information 6) organization

* (a), (b), and (c) following a item number represent a sub-item (the first, second, and third answers in order under the same question number) in the testing screen (e.g., Questions #21 and #34 above).

According to the results in the column Target Component II, all of the testing items in Group C, except for Question #21a measure 6) organization of Connecting Information. This means that almost all of these testing items measure comprehension ability of information ranging wider than one single sentence or one information unit which is independent from the other(s). For example, in order to find the correct answer for Question #22 below, a learner has to understand the context (mainly the part marked in bold) in mentioning 'a good or just person,' which is the key of the questioning. Otherwise, simple comprehension of one single sentence is insufficient to discern the correct answer.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #22

And can you guess how Plato define **a good or just person**? Well, it's parallel how he characterizes a good per just society. **The three parts have to be in harmony.** In each of us, our desires and emotions often get the better of us, and lead to do foolish things. **They're in conflict with the intellect.** So, **to get them to all work together, to coexist in harmony**, every person needs to be shaped in the same way that we've shaped society-through the educational system.

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

22. According to Plato, what is the main characteristic of a good or just person?
ⓐ The person of the person's soul exist in harmony.
ⓑ The person does not try to control other people.
ⓒ The person's relationships with other people are harmonious.
ⓓ The person does not act in an emotional manner.

As seen from the underlined parts, the key clues to the answer ⓐ are distributed across five lines of sentences. A learner has to understand the storyline or organization. In other words, it is essential for learners to understand the connection of information, particularly the flowing of information around the key phrases or sentences. The testing items with medium difficulty measure learners' ability to integrate information and understand the way it is arranged.

In contrast, Question 21a, presents a critical clue in one sentence, '*And through education, build a society so that the workers and soldiers learn to use their intellect to control their desires and emotions.*' The answer for Question 21a is NO, since it is clear from the sentence that what controls emotion is not the faculty of desire, but intellect. Thus, it makes sense that Question 21a mainly belong to 3) (details, Basic Comprehension). However, it is, at the same time, a more complicated type of question, compared to the questions categorized as belonging to 3) (details, Basic Comprehension) in Group B (low difficulty). Question 21a requires integration of information. Assistant clues include the

relatedness of information such as workers and desire, and soldiers and emotion. This additionally complicated aspect results in medium difficulty.

Likewise, the critical clue to the answer for Question #21b is to understand the relationship between emotion and intellect. However, the text does not specify this relationship in the form of a sentence. The question requires the ability to integrate the information presented and infer the relationship.

Integrating the analyses above, the common characteristic of testing items with medium difficulty is the requirement to measure the ability to integrate presented information, inferring the relationship. The following interview speech of a learner illustrates this interpretation. The speech, particularly the underlined parts, pointed out how critical the ability to relate pieces of information was to find the answer for Question #21.

> Emotion, intellect, and what was it? Emotion, intellect? Ah, desire. These three, these three groups, the soldier, worker, [and] leader. I understand the story on the whole. But, dealing with this text [and the options] here, more specification, uhm, **emotion is controlled by desire, this way of statement requires [more specified information than what I comprehend]. It embarrassed me. I was not sure whether there was such a message in the text. Though I comprehend that three intellect should be in harmony, because it was emphasized through a lot of repetition, but I don't know about the relationship** [of those three intellect].
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #21 by Learner #41299

To summarize, testing items in Group B (low difficulty) are characterized as measuring the ability to comprehend or infer relatively simple information with fewer than two details. Meanwhile, Group C (medium difficulty) requires understanding of details and information integration with several pieces of related information.

3) Questions with Medium Difficulty

TABLE 5 presents a summary of analysis results for the testing items with high difficulty in Group D.

TABLE 5

Question Types & Target Components in Group D (High Difficulty)

Number of Testing Item	Question Type	Target Component I	Target Component II
23	What is the main topic of the lecture?	Basic Comprehension 1) main ideas and key points	
32	What is an example of X?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	Connecting Information 8) inferencing
34c	Indicate whether each sentence below describes X or Y.*(It helps to achieve uniformity in projects.)*	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given	Connecting Information 8) inferencing
19	Listen again to X. Why does the professor ask Y?	Pragmatic Understanding 4) intention	Connecting Information 6) organization
30	Why does the professor talk about X?	Connecting Information 6) organization	
5	What does the professor imply about~?	Connecting Information 8) inferencing	
33	According to the professor, where might there be a conflict in X?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	Connecting Information 7) relationship of information given
28	According to the professor, what similarity is there between X and Y?	Basic Comprehension 3) details	
18	Listen again to X. What does the professor imply about Y?	Connecting Information 8) inferencing	

* (a), (b), and (c) following a item number represent a sub-item (the first, second, and third answers in order under the same question number) in the testing screen (e.g., Questions #21 and #34 above).

As can be seen in TABLE 5, Group D (high difficulty) includes a variety of sub-question types: 6) (organization), 7) (relationship of information given), 8) (inferencing), and 3) (details). However, beneath these varieties, one specific characteristic is shared: all of their target components, except for the case of Question #23, belong to Question Type, Connecting Information.[6] Moreover, the target information to integrate is wider spread and/or the relationships between target information take more complicated forms than in the cases in Group B (low difficulty) or C (medium difficulty).

[6] Many participants pointed out that Question #23 felt exceptionally difficult due to its unfamiliar subject, botany in natural science as well as its lack of a key sentence in the text.

For example, examining Question #19 below, its question type is 6) organization of Connecting Information, which is the same as the one of Question #22. However, the distance among the target hints is much farther, and the relationship among the target information is much complicated than in Question #22.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #19

Plato then asks himself: OK, assume we've got such a society with these three groups. When will this society be a good, um, a, a just society? Well, **you can only have a good society when its three parts are working well together-each doing its proper thing. And Plato believes this can only happen if workers and soldiers learn moderation, or self-control.**

But why? Why do workers and soldiers have to learn self-control? Well, how can a society flourish if the workers and soldiers don't control their desires and emotions? **Plato thinks that if they aren't under control, workers will sleep too much and play too much, so they're not going to get their jobs done. And soldiers need to channel their high-spiritedness in a certain direction, precisely by being courageous.**

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

19. Listen again to part of the lecture. Then answer the question.

Professor: But why? Why do workers and soldiers have to learn self-control? Well, how can a society flourish if the workers and soldiers don't control their desires and emotions?

Why does the professor ask this?

Professor: Well, how can a society flourish if the workers and soldiers don't control their desires and emotions?

ⓐ To find out if students have understood what she just said
ⓑ To suggest an answer to a question that she just asked
ⓒ To express disagreement with a point made by Plato
ⓓ To explain why harmony is difficult for a society to achieve

To figure out the answer, ⓑ, a learner has to understand the flowing of the lecture, relating the target information marked in bold in the transcript. In order to find out the reason that the professor asks the question, *how can a society flourish if the workers and soldiers don't control their desires and emotions?*, a learner should not stay within the literal meaning of the question itself. The learner has to understand the context that the professor asked the question after explaining the good society comes ***when its three parts are working well together-each doing its proper thing.*** In addition, the learner should

consider what follows the question, '*how can a society flourish ?*'. These relationships among the clues are the important target component for Question #19. Compared to the distribution of clues as in Question #22 with medium difficulty, the clues in Question #19 are distributed much more widely from each other, the quantity of target information is much more larger, and the relationship of target information is much more complicated.

On the other hand, the target testing component for Question #28 below is mainly 3) (details, Basic Comprehension), not the one of Connecting Information.

- Clues Marked in Bold Excerpted from the Listening Text for Question #28

Professor: ...So **let me explain to you about this rye plant. If you take a little seed of many grasses-and remember rye is a grass if you take a tiny little seed and you germinate it**-actually, take one of my least favorite grasses that starts growing about May. What's **my least favorite grass** that starts growing about May?

Male student: Crabgrass.

Professor: **Crabgrass.** Remember how I showed you in the lab. **One little seed starts out producing one little shoot. Then at a week or so later you've got about six shoots, and then, three weeks later you've got about fifteen shoots coming out all direction** like this-all those little shoots to there? Well, **that's what they did with the rye. And the little seedling started and pretty soon there were several shoots, and then more shoots. In the end, that one single seed produced eighty shoots, with an average of fifty centimeters of height, from one seed. Eighty shoots coming out, average fifty centimeters high. <u>When they looked at the shoot versus the root surface, they found that the shoots surface, with all of its leaves, had a total surface area of about five square meters.</u>** Now, here's the biggie, when they looked at the root surface area, you would expect that the root and the shoot would be in balance, right? So they should be pretty close in terms of surface area, right?

Male student: Uh-uh.

Professor: What's that? Did somebody say "no"? Well, you're absolutely correct. Instead of five square meters, **<u>the root system was found to have more than two hundred square meters of surface area.</u>** Where did all of that extra surface are come from?

- Questions and Options Presented after Listening

28. According to the professor, what similarity is there between crabgrass and rye plants?

ⓐ Both start growing in the month of May.

ⓑ Both have root systems that require a lot of water.
ⓒ Both have more shoot surface than root surface.
ⓓ Both produce many shoots from a single seed.

In order to figure out the answer, ⓓ, a learner has to understand the clues marked in bold, that is the explanation of crabgrass and rye plants. Different from Question #19, the target testing component is not the relationship or the context, but the details themselves. At the same time, Question 28 is different from the testing items with low or medium difficulty in the terms of the wider distance among the clues, the larger quantity of clues to integrate and the indirect way of presenting the key information. More specifically, the answer for Question #28 has to be inferred, based on the information around the key sentence, *that's what they did with the rye*. A learner has to infer that a lot of shoots comes out of one seed. In addition, to opt out of the options other than the correct answer, learners have to comprehend the underlined parts in the text above.

The following is the English version of an interview script where a learner confessed the challenges in integrating and inferring.

> In fact, I rarely understood the later part explaining about crabgrass in Question 28. Thus, there is nothing I remember about this crabgrass, but in the testing situation I had to choose an answer, uh, considering the text talked about water, the option ⓑ, mentioning water, I chose that one.
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #28 by Learner #40399

> Question #28, uhm, asked what is a common between crabgrass and ryeplants. Uh, I didn't understand this part, but according to the pieces of information I caught, uhm, **because the text explained together *shoot surface* and *root surface,*** I chose simply ⓒ. I still don't understand [what the text said].
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #28 by Learner #40399

Neither of these two learners caught the information relevant to crabgrass or understand the commonality between *crabgrass* and *rye plants*. Instead, they related wrong clues such as *water* and *shoot surface* to choose an incorrect option for an answer.

> **I thought at the moment 'Simply listening to words doesn't work at all … Once losing the flow of the text, all messed up.'**
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on the overall evaluation on TOEFL questions by Learner #41999

The opposite case in listening process was found in two cases below, where the learners successfully integrate the target information relevant to the correct answer.

> **At first I thought the text was about science.** Whenever I face with science text, because I don't have much background knowledge, I was afraid that I might not know about the topic. But next, **I learned that the text is about root system,** to see the root system, they grew plants in water, in order to grow plants, I heard that they need to provide, bubble gas, that **80 shoots can sprout out even from one seed**, and I also heard about the plant taking nutrients ... **Crabgrass, rye plants are mentioned**. But I couldn't note down the content [of the options]. I didn't write down [the fact that both plants start growing in the month of May, while listening to the text]. So, I was not sure [about the fact]. I remembered I had heard that crabgrass and rye plants come out in May. But it is not sure, since I could not note down the content [of options]. I just thought I had heard May. Thus, I thought hard, but I did not chose the one with May, but I chose the other option, meaning **even 80 shoot grow out of one seed, which matched with what I remember I had heard.**
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #28 by Learner #50999

> **I understood that it was a conversation on business between a professor and students. Hmm, and, the professor explained two kinds of structure types: one is a functional, the other is a project.** In the middle of listening, um, at first, since he mentioned project, by project, so I expected the next was about structure, uhm. At the moment when he asked why keeping this functional structure was benefitial, I changed the frame of my understanding. Thus, I expected more about functional. That was my expectation. And the example of producing four cars, what, he took an example mentioning functional and project. It made easier to follow. Then **he explained why people kept** a **functional structure and said that method was not entirely positive. He also mentioned its downside, [. . .]**
>
> - Excerpted from the interview speech on Question #29-#34 by Learner #41999

The part in bold above shows that the learner did not remain at the level of decoding the narrated information, but that she integrated a variety of information.

To summarize, the testing items with low difficulty in TOEFL measure the ability to comprehend details or to process one or two pieces of information. The testing items with medium difficulty has a characteristic that measures the ability to not only comprehend the details, but integrate more than three units of information. Moreover, most of the testing items with medium and high difficulty were found to require the ability to understand a

range of information. Many of the testing items with high difficulty involve the widest range of information to integrate or relate with each other and the most complicated relationships among the three groups of testing items.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study discussed the results above, considering that the participants' TOEFL scores showed which aspects were strong and weak in their English proficiency. The results do not imply that TOEFL test constructs should be reflected in the current curriculum. Learners, particularly dealing with questions above the medium difficulty in TOEFL listening, have to be equipped with the ability to connect information. In order to do that, they should be trained on how to relate information presented while listening to a text. Such practice may include a summarizing process or completing a storyline. One promising possibility has been found in E. H. Jung (2004). She showed how successfully summary writing revealed learners listening comprehension.

Another implication is that the Korean university students have the most challenging experience dealing with the testing items requiring understanding of complicated relationships of information as in summarizing or inferring. Thus, these two activities should be emphasized through curriculum and testing in order to improve Korean learners' listening proficiency. Such results support the results in K. H. Cha and Y. H. Yoo (2000), but implies a contradiction with the claim by S. J. Kang (2011). While S. J. Kang (2011) claimed that only at a low level of learners shows a significant improvement in inferring by listening instruction with note-taking, the current study shows that such a limited improvement may be due to the fact that inferring is a listening skill with high difficulty performed, resulting in low accuracy. The results of the current study also provide a way to explain why low-level-processing makes a positive improvement in H. Y. Kim (2015). The reason might be that the students with difficulty in dealing with both low-level- and high-level-processing became more skillful through the practice of low-level-processing (that is, dictation, vocabulary, and grammatical analyses). The point is that such improvement is not the result of simple memorization of vocabulary and grammatical rules. As D. K. Kim (2001) emphasized, vocabulary learning is very important and can be a productive practice to follow the flowing of conversation or lectures in listening with predictions. The current study showed that connecting information, including understanding the relationship of information and inferring, is an ability challenging for even objectively skilled university students. Further research could examine effects of instructional intervention on improvement in listening proficiency.

At this moment, the most critical but still remaining gap in research now would be how

to scaffold these activities in order to give more benefits to the poorly scoring listening learners. We recommend active introduction or emphasis of testing items that require the process of summarizing, inferring, and other integrative thinking. These skills are, of course, desirable for higher education in general. The characteristics of testing items across the different difficulty levels found by the study can also be used as a better indicator for diagnosing an accurate level of proficiency.

The study provides practical information on the developmental aspects corresponding with levels of difficulty in TOEFL listening. It also contributes to useful suggestions for curriculum and the test development. Beyond the classification of question types by the test developers, the study provides empirical and qualitative data by learners and examines the characteristics of these data to explain what aspects of specific testing items remain a gap for the Korean EFL learners.

The researcher hopes to develop concrete and effective teaching activities or programs for classrooms and examine their improvement. This will further shared goals of giving learners the chance to experience of joy of learning and improvement in language skills and thinking power, including integration and inferencing.

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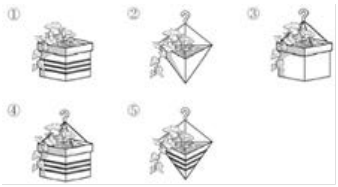
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APPENDIX

Sample of Items

CSAT	TOEFL
1. 대화를 듣고, 여자가 구입할 화분을 고르시오.  2. 대화를 듣고, 여자의 심정으로 가장 적절한 것을 고르시오. [1점] ① proud ② relaxed ③ angry ④ jealous ⑤ satisfied 3. 다음을 듣고, 남자가 하는 말의 주제로 가장 적절한 것을 고르시오. ① 이름이 첫인상에 미치는 영향 ② 청중의 이름을 쉽게 기억하는 요령 ③ 좋은 연설을 많이 들어야 하는 이유 ④ 흥미 있는 연설 주제 선택의 중요성 ⑤ 청중의 이름을 언급하는 효과적인 연설법 4. 대화를 듣고, 여자가 남자를 위해 할 일로 가장 적절한 것을 고르시오. ① 학교 콘서트 일정 조정하기 ② 공공도서관 자원봉사 함께하기 ③ 학교 축제 때 피아노 반주하기 ④ 강사에게 레슨 가능 여부 알아보기 ⑤ 피아노 연주 기법 동영상 찾아보기	 1. Why does the student go to see the professor? Ⓐ To prepare for her graduate school interview Ⓑ To get advice about her graduate school application Ⓒ To give the professor her graduate school application Ⓓ To find out if she was accepted into graduate school 2. According to the professor, what information should the student include in her statement of purpose? Ⓐ Her academic motivation Ⓑ Her background in medicine Ⓒ Some personal information Ⓓ The ways her teachers have influenced her

- Excerpted from Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (2012). College Scholastic Ability Test (English). (p.1) [Publisher is confidential by law.]	- Excerpted from Educational Testing Service. (2013). The official guide to the TOEFL test (4th ed.) (pp. 190-191). Seoul: YBM.

Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Levels: Secondary

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