

# **Favourable Teaching Approaches in the South Korean Secondary Classroom**

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When looking at South Korean high schools on the whole, they are insufficiently preparing students for an often learner centered and creative system of education that regularly necessitates students to be self-motivated at universities in and out of Korea. All in all, it is tempting to make the plea that Korean high school education is sound since high school students do comparatively well according to PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) 2006. However, I would be inclined to state the opposite, as you shall see, for reasons which I have based on both experience and research.

As it stands, the Korean secondary system of education is highly successful in preparing students for teacher centered education such as that often used to teach math since the transfer of information is mostly one way, from teacher to student. Nevertheless, this same level of success does not apply to Korean students when they enter more Western styled classroom environments wherein students are expected to take on self reliant roles requiring active and creative personalities in order to attain the best overall results.

All things considered, Korean education at the high school level and the respective system of student assessment both need to be restructured so that students can have better chances at success at the post secondary level in and out of South Korea. Not only would this prove to be a benefit for students themselves, but it would most of all be a likely advantage for the nation as a whole considering that it is becoming an ever increasing trend for Korean parents to send their children to study at higher ranked American universities wherein self reliant attitudes and resourceful thinking is a definite asset.

Perhaps, last but not least, essay writing should be a part of the Korean high school curriculum to better prepare pupils for university education wherein students are often assessed through the essays they write.

## **Korean High School Student Performance**

PISA 2006 results show South Korean students are in the lead on the reading scale while ranking fourth in mathematics and falling eleventh on the science scale (PISA Report, 2006). Overall, Korean students spend 15 hour days in high school as well as private academies in preparation for their SAT - *Scholastic Achievement Test* (Dillon, 2008). This is an impressive feat, nonetheless, it fails to show a broader picture and seems to be an apparent case of cherry picking. That is to say, the PISA figures show only half of the equation as there are other factors that need to be examined before one can come to understand the true nature of the situation surrounding the Korean high school system.

## **SAT - *Scholastic Achievement Test***

In general, while the cherry picked data is indisputable and it does show evident strong points in the Korean secondary system of education, it nevertheless reminds us of the 'half empty vs. half full' argument. That is, while Korean high school students do well in reading and math education, easily

taught in a teacher centered classroom environment, they are nevertheless insufficiently versed in creative processes as well as in the art of academic writing. What is more, the Korean SATs are for the most part based on a system of multiple choice questions, and there is little focus on assessing creativity and the skill of writing. In the words of my math education student, Park Ga-yee, (SAT) high school “examination consists of multiple choices questions. However, students only learn how to pick a good answer, therefore the Eastern approach is no longer helpful for students in current time.” What she really means is that Korean high schools fail to provide pure education in a trade off for preparing students to pass the SATs as a necessary means to enter university, and that this is no longer a viable thing to do in today’s society. Thus a move toward a Western educational approach is warranted.

In essence, the system of evaluation proves to be an evident shortcoming of Korean high schools since the entrance to universities is primarily determined not by student performance in high school but by the scores they attain on the SATs. Consequently, since the principal goal of high school education is to prepare students for the SATs and since the annual SATs fail to take skills pertaining to creative processes and class participation throughout the high school years into account, Korean students are as a result insufficiently prepared for university education since university education/assessment in and out of Korea is very much unlike that found in Korean high schools. After all, universities, especially the higher ranked Korean universities and those abroad, invariably require relatively higher levels of creative thinking, self motivation and satisfactory writing skills from their students. According to Eo Jo-Hyang, my student at Korea University, “we have to change the form of the entrance exam. Not just choosing but writing his opinion then, maybe he can improve his thinking way.”

By and large, none of the above mentioned skills and attributes are effectively assessed in the SATs, therefore, evidently pointing to the unproductive qualities of Korean high school education, at least from the point of view of preparing students for education at universities domestically and in particular abroad. Supporting proof is provided by Samuel Kim’s doctoral dissertation entitled ‘First and Second Generation Conflict in Education of the Asian American Community’, wherein it is illustrated that 44% of those Korean students who enrol in elite American universities fail to graduate (Kim in Kwon, 2008). In other words, nearly half of all Korean students do not graduate these universities. On the whole, this grim statistic does have the tendency to suggest that nearly half of all Korean students are unprepared for Ivy League university life in the USA.

### **The Korean University**

In line with Kim’s findings, I often find that my students are ill prepared for academics at Korea University as well as at the other Korean post secondary institutions I taught at. Overall, I am consistently faced with students lacking basic academic writing skills. Moreover, they are unaccustomed to the student centered approach wherein they are required to be masters of their time, being shown the way rather than being told what to do as is often the case in Korean high schools. In support of this argument, students often make similar claims. For instance, my student Je-Yeon Park, states that

most Korean students experience difficulty in following university curriculums. It is because most professors use Western approaches in their lectures. However, a lot of Korean students are unfamiliar with the Type B Syllabus. Such a situation would not occur if Korea’s high schools teach their students in Type B syllabus. Because of the

difference between university and high school's educational systems of Korea, most Korean university pupils were confused when instructors used a new Syllabus – the Type B syllabus in their class activities.

My student Jae-eun Kim supports the idea, that students find the transition from high school to university difficult, even further by stating that “it is very difficult for students to automatically change the flow of their studies in one second.” In essence, students have a hard time making the necessary transition required of them when entering university.

My primary job at Korea University is to prepare students for a learner centered educational environment and the world of academics in the medium of English since 40% of the courses at the University are English mediated. According to my experience, not only are my students having problems with the English language as a medium of academics but most of them have no idea that an essay has 3 main parts; introduction, main body and conclusion. In particular, they need to be taught the art of writing from the beginning stage. What is more, they are rather reluctant to take active roles in activities that require them to take the initiative. Putting forth a similar view, Hye-Yeon Lim states that “commonly, Korean students tend not to speak much in class, appear reserved, rarely ask questions, and do not express opinions. ... These behaviors can be taken by teachers as signs of disinterest or lack of motivation”(Lim, 2003). That is to say, Korean students tend to come across as being passive to the American professor unversed in Korean culture. According to Lim, one might even expect that the average American professor would likely give these ‘passive’ students lower evaluation scores as a result of their apparent lack of classroom involvement. Keeping this in mind, there should be little wonder why Samuel Kim’s findings so obviously depict that Korean students do comparatively poorly in American universities. After all, American universities do require high levels of student initiative in and out of the classroom and more importantly since essay writing is considered to be such an integral part of American university education, Korean students’ lack of knowledge of the acceptable academic writing techniques may cause them to fall even lower on their course assessments. What is more, at American universities there are few academic English classes, such as the ones I teach, wherein students are prepared for university life that is so heavily reliant on the use of the above mentioned academic skills in the medium of English.

Make no mistake, stating that students are ill prepared for university life is not the same as saying that Korean university students are not up to the task. As a matter of fact, they are a very “hard working bunch” (Kwon, 2008) and are really bright. Taken as a whole, the ultimate, problem is not with them. As already mentioned, the evident setback is created by the fact that the Korean secondary system of education is so heavily based on the preparation for an SAT that is so unsuccessful in assessing the skills needed for academic success at the university level. This is certainly something that needs to change, if Korean students are to have any hopes in coming out on top in post secondary institutions both domestically and abroad.

What is perhaps the biggest indicator of the failures of Korean government operated high schools is that time and time again I come to see that the students that graduated from high schools abroad and from international high schools as well as foreign language high schools seem to acquire the top grades in my academic English classes. As a matter of fact, the two top high schools in South Korea are privately operated; Daewon Foreign Language High School in Seoul and Korean Minjok Leadership Academy (Kwon, 2008) and (Adam & Lee, 2008). This should be a major concern, for even at the higher ranked Korean universities education in the English medium is on the rise. What is more, Korean parents are more inclined to send their children to study at higher ranked universities in the United States. After all,

“Going to U.S. universities has become like a huge fad in Korean society, and the Ivy League names — Harvard, Yale, Princeton — have really struck a nerve,” (Harvard graduate; Victoria Kim in Dillon, 2008). Consequently, it is without a doubt that Korean high schools should focus more highly on English education for communicative and compositional purposes so students could actually use the English language in the real life contexts they are inevitably faced with at universities domestically and in particular abroad. In their current form, Korean high schools teach English using a teacher centered classroom approach, and with the ability to communicate in English being so essential at the university level it should in essence be taught in a student centered environment so the students could learn to use it in real time.

### **Teacher Centered VS. Student Centered Education**

When it comes to student centered and teacher centered education, at least when English education is concerned, a Type A syllabus represents the teacher centered approach while the Type B represents the Student centered approach (See Table 1). For the purposes of English education, not the Type A but the Type B system should be the one employed in the Korean secondary system of education. Nonetheless, as it stands today, English education at Korean high schools are mostly based on the Type A approach. Nevertheless, a number of foreign as well as Korean English teachers do employ the Type A method, but still, it is not nearly as wide spread as it should be.

In general, the Type A syllabus is disadvantageous for Korean students since it involves the continuous run through of language rules in an ordered manner as well as the regimented presentation of vocabulary items so that students may progressively learn the language (Willis, 1990:42). Essentially, Korean students as a whole have a reasonably refined external knowledge of grammar but are generally less able to put the language to active and fluent use in real communicative contexts.

From my experience in Hungary, where I tried teaching English by utilizing an itemized syllabus, I concluded that such a syllabus proved ineffective as it gave students limited competence in making the most of the target language as a readily available communicative tool. That is to say, the itemized syllabus merely improved the learners’ basic understanding of grammar as a subject in its own right as opposed to being able to generate grammatically correct language in real time. This is largely due to the tendency of the syllabus to place most of the emphasis on grammar rules with less weight being placed on utilizing the same grammar in a dynamic and unrestrained manner as a communicative apparatus. Effectively, the kind of “knowledge that takes time and effort to retrieve is non-automatic” (Brown, 2000:286). Supporting a similar rationale, my student Min-young Jo states the following: “What will we do if we can just get an A+ on the English exam but can’t speak a word in front of foreigners?” In effect, she argues that getting an A+ on a grammar based test will do little for the students in terms of communicational proficiency. All in all, it would be in the students’ best interest to not learn but acquire the target language so that they could use it in and out of the classroom in real life contexts.

“Krashen claimed that adult second language learners have two means for internalizing the target language” (Brown, 2000:277); acquisition and learning. According to Amato (in Nolan, 2001:1), the process of acquisition is subconscious. Since acquisition doesn’t focus on the learning of language rules, the learning process can be considered to be “automatic” (Brown, 2000:286). The innate language knowledge is allowed to

take over the learning process, therefore, it's not really learning but rather acquisition. This type of knowledge is acquired through constant active use of the language. Consequently, "a language could best be taught by using it actively in the classroom." (Frank F. in Richards & Rodgers, 2004:11). Therefore, active use of the language is desirable, and as such it may very well be more effective to teach English in English and for students to speak in English since it would ensure a higher level of English usage within the classroom. After all, Korean students rarely have the chance to use the English language outside of the classroom environment.

On the whole, not only does the Type A syllabus, so widespread in Korean high schools, leave students ill prepared for English mediated classes and environments wherein real time use of the language is essential but, as already mentioned, it also provides them with inadequate academic writing skills necessary for university life both in Korea and abroad. Moreover, as is often the case in universities abroad, university education is largely based on a Type B approach which is internal to the learner, inner directed with the emphasis being on the process rather than the mastery of the subject (Table 1 - White, 1988:44). What should be the most important aspect of a Type B methodology is that, according to White, the assessment is not based on achievement or by mastery, but rather "in relation to learners' criteria" (White, 1988:44). This is highly relevant since the assessment of the SATs is invariably based on the achievement of having mastered (memorized) the subject. According to one of my Math Education students, Chae-young Kang, in a Type A education "system, students are required only to memorize all the given information." However, what is really needed in the Korean high school system of education is for the assessment to be truly "in relation to learner's criteria" (White, 1988:44). This would be the sensible thing to do since the criteria of the learner should be based on their need to learn the type of skills and information necessary for them to sustain their academic studies in the post-secondary environment both domestically and abroad.

**Table 1**

<i>Type A</i> What is to be learnt?	<i>Type B</i> How is it to be learnt?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Interventionist</li> <li>-External to the learner</li> <li>-Other Directed</li> <li>-Determined by authority</li> <li>-Teacher as lesson-maker</li> <li>-Content = What the subject is to the expert</li> <li>-Content = A gift from the teacher/knower to the learner</li> <li>-Objectives defined in advance</li> <li>-Subject Emphasis</li> <li>-Assessment by achievement or by mastery</li> <li>-Doing things to the learner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Internal to the learner</li> <li>-Inner Directed or self fulfilling</li> <li>-Negotiated between learners and teachers</li> <li>-Learner &amp; teacher as joint decision makers</li> <li>-Content = What the subject is to the learner</li> <li>-Content = What the learner brings and wants</li> <li>-Objectives described afterwards</li> <li>-Process Emphasis</li> <li>-Assessment in relation to learners' criteria</li> <li>-Doing things for or with the learner</li> </ul>

(White, 1988:44)

Current South Korean president Lee Myung Bak, seems to be aware of some of the general shortcomings of the Korean post-secondary system of education, at least when it comes to English education, therefore, he is pushing to implement pure English mediated English education in Korean

high schools. Currently, English is taught for the most part in Korean and students have few opportunities to use English either for conversational or writing compositional purposes in the high school classroom environment. What is more, “in November, the then-presidential candidate [Lee Myung Bak] said it might be a good idea to teach Korean history and language classes in English” (Korea Beat, 2008). On the whole, this could prove to be an important milestone for Korean secondary education, for it is a significant chance to better prepare students for English mediated classes at universities both abroad and in Korea where an increasing percentage of courses are English mediated. Currently, for instance, the proportion of English mediated courses at Korea University is 40%. This fact alone should strongly suggest to Korean policymakers and educators that high school students require much more than the basic Korean mediated English education that is so teacher centered and so prevalent in today’s Korean high schools.

### **The Importance of Student Independence**

Korean students need to be taught more independence and teachers need to allow for this to happen, however, this may be too much to ask from the average Korean educator since s/he is used to the authority and respect teachers are afforded in the Korean teacher centered classroom environment. Overall, it may be especially difficult for educators to give up their control on education and the respect that comes with the territory. According to Cortazzi, “Confucianism, with its emphasis on ... respect for age and learning, has been particularly influential on the Korean way of life” (in Finch, 2000: Ch. 2.4.2). Consequently, since Confucian teaching traditions, wherein teacher is the most respected profession (Hofstede, 1986:304), is based on a teacher centered approach, it may become understandable why teachers are rather hesitant in giving up the respect afforded to them in such a system. After all, in a student centered system of education the same level of respect does not seem to exist.

Nevertheless, learning is not for teachers but rather for the students. In the words of Yong-a Lee, one of my students from the Department of Math Education at Korea University; “Type A is a system that teachers want. [however] main characters of education are not teachers but students”. What she is really saying is that educators must take the students’ needs into account because education is for the students alone. The main role of the teacher should be to provide the necessary skills and information learners need to succeed later on in life. Consequently, the focus must be on the students and not the teachers.

### **Comparatively Different Approaches**

While, the author of the article ‘Korea’s Students Not So Top at American Universities’, Kwon So Yeon and I would agree on several key issues pertaining to the Korean system of education, for the most part already mentioned in this article, I would strongly disagree with her on a number of other fronts. More importantly, I would also add additional reasons why Korean students perform inadequately in American universities.

At the outset, I agree with Kwon with regard to the following five points:

- 1) The “comparison [between Korean and American colleges and universities] has usually resulted in calling for an improvement in Korea’s education system” (Kwon, 2008).

- 2) Paraphrasing Kim's words, Kwon declares that the strong focus on readying students for the SATs actually makes it unnecessarily difficult for students to succeed at universities domestically and in particular abroad.
- 3) "Leadership, which consists of logic and rationality, is essential in American colleges. But Korean students tend to attach more importance to logic" (Kwon, 2008).
- 4) Using a quote by Hye-Yeon Lim, Kwon hints towards the hesitancy of Korean students to display adequate levels of participation due to their fear of openly making mistakes.
- 5) Moreover, through the words of Yoonie Hoh, Kwon points our attention to the inabilities of some Korean students to manage their time with regard to academic work efficiently.

While I do agree with Kwon on the above five points, she nonetheless seems to be overly hesitant in making any clear statement and is taking an overly cautious approach in revealing the reasons why 44% of Korean students do not complete university life at the better ranked American universities. In other words, she fails to give clear explanations as to why she considers the above points to be true.

For instance, while the first point is evident and needs no further explanation, Kwon gives little rationale as to the reason why she holds the second point to be accurate. That is to say, she fails to clearly state that the Korean SATs are based on a system of multiple choice questions, and thus are an insufficient means of measuring classroom participation (fourth point), creativity and the ability to write academic compositions which are all necessary traits for success at American universities. All in all, even if the Korean SATs are not completely redesigned, there should be more questions related to measuring levels of student creativity. What is more, essay writing should be taught at high schools and the SATs should no doubt contain a few essay type questions that require students to demonstrate their essay writing and compositional abilities. All things considered, this is all essential in setting up a well rounded system of evaluation.

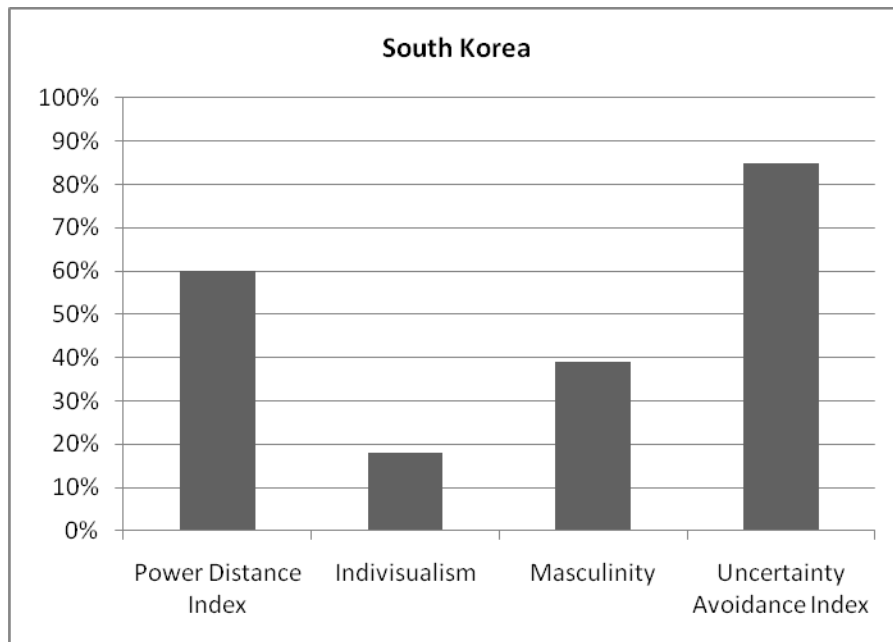
Furthermore, Kwon gives little reason why Korean students lack in leadership abilities. After all, as already mentioned, in Korean Confucian society teacher is the most respected profession (Hofstede, 1986:304), and thus commands a lot of respect from his/her students. More importantly, since traditional Korean classrooms are based in a large power distance setting (Hofstede, 1967-2003) (Figure 1), teachers possess unsurpassed levels of command and authority in the Korean classroom and students merely follow what the teacher has laid out for them. As a matter of fact, some of my students do tend to make the plea against their subordinate positions in the Korean classroom. For instance, my student Jo-Hyang Eo, believes that "teachers in Korea must throw away their authority. They are too conservative and not accepting student's opinion." What is more, another student, Hye-in Lee underlines this further by stating that "if we choose Type B, things will be changed. The Type B encourages active behaviour. Not only teachers lead the class but students participate in the class more actively".

Generally speaking, according to Hofstede: *Students are* "[1] expected to speak up only when invited by the teacher ... [2] to follow a strict order ... [3] to respect the teacher at all times ... [4] to listen to the teacher giving lectures" *in a Large Power Distance Society* (1986:313). When all is said and done, this style of classroom is clearly not a supportive environment for the development of leadership skills in the student population. All of this also goes the distance in underlining the fourth point which talks about the hesitancy of Korean students to speak up in class. After all, they are taught to speak up only when directed by the teacher (Hofstede, 1986:313).

All things considered, some of my students are quite aware of this dilemma. For example, Myung-Sun Kim, from the Department of Geography Education, states that “for solving the social problem and doing the education with students’ active participation, a Western approach is more appropriate for the Korean educational system”. In essence, she is stating the obvious. That is to say, Korean education must change to a more Westernized system in order to better develop students’ levels of classroom participation.

As for the lack of Korean student ability to properly manage their time, once again, it is essential to look for answers by looking back at the words of Hofstede. That is, since students, accustomed to a large power distance classroom environment, are so used to follow teacher commands in and out of the classroom, only doing work designated by the teacher, it should be no real surprise that university students are unable to properly manage the time they devote to academics since the post secondary educational environment provides more ‘freedom’ in this regard. Kwon does attempt to state this through the words of Yoonie Hoh in saying that “college gives [students] ... a lot more freedom in how you want to distribute the work over time” (Hoh in Kwon, 2008). However, aside from hinting at increased freedom for students at the university level, she fails in clearly explaining as to why this is. That is to say, it is because of the differences in the educational freedoms students are afforded in large and small power-distance educational settings at Korean high schools and American post secondary institutions respectively. After all, in a small power distance society, like the USA, education is learner centered with the students having larger roles in the decision making processes in and out of the classroom.

**Figure 1 Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimension Values for South Korea**



(Hofstede, 1967-2003)



Geert Hofstede conducted cultural research for 66 countries from 1967 until 1973, giving South Korea a power distance dimension value of 60 out of a possible 100 (See Figure 1). This number translates to a value of 60%, which gives Korea a relatively large power distance figure. Korea also received a value of 18 for individualism, placing the individuals at the service of the society with little individual freedoms. This in effect gives the country a high collectivist value, since pure collectivism and pure individualism are opposite extremes. [Nonetheless], it must be taken into account that ... [32 years have passed] since Hofstede completed his research, and Korea was largely an agricultural nation then. [In contrast,] modern day Korea is a changing society ... [and the system of government has become less authoritarian over the years, however,] the basic fundamental cultural principles that shaped Korea ... [36] years ago still exist today.

(Jambor, 2005)

As for the USA, Hofstede gave it a value of 91 on the dimension of individualism (Hofstede, 1967-2003). All in all, this is in stark contrast from the South Korean value of 18, and this does go far in exposing the differences in the levels of individualism students are afforded in the educational systems of the two countries. Thus, all things considered, one would expect that an American student would be more inclined to be self directed than a South Korean student, and so the American student is expected to better manage his/her own time while the Korean student would be likely to have difficulties in this respect. Therefore, the logical thing to do, if the goal is to remedy this problem, would be to introduce more learner centered education in the Korean high school system so as to familiarize students with the type of educational values they would be expected to thrive in at the university level domestically and especially in the United States.

What is more, Kwon states that one must not rush to “blindly criticize Korean schools” (Kwon, 2008), but in reality, there should be healthy criticism on the whole as it is not only Kim’s research that states that Korean students are ill prepared for university life, but their unpreparedness is also evident in my classrooms according to my own experience as an educator who is in his eighth year of teaching Korean freshman students. As a matter of fact, I find my freshman students grossly unprepared when it comes to participation, self motivation, essay writing, creative thinking and vocalization of their points of views, all necessary ingredients for success at universities.

Last but not least, Kwon states that as far as success is concerned students should keep in mind that “it is just a matter of stepping up their game to first, survive and second, do well, in the competitive ... colleges and universities in America” (Kwon, 2008). In this respect, Kwon puts a heavy portion of the blame on the students and not enough blame on the Korean high school system. Whereas in reality, the high school system deserves the majority of the blame for not preparing students adequately for university life in the first place. Therefore, it should by now be evident that it is essential to criticise the Korean high school system, for it is clearly not student motivation that is lacking since Korean students are in fact highly motivated when it is required of them to be so. After all, they spend fifteen hour days studying (Dillon, 2008) and they “are definitely an intelligent and hard working bunch” (Kwon, 2008). On the whole, I would go as far as stating that the Korean high school system should take the overwhelming majority of the blame.

## Conclusion

All things considered, it would be highly beneficial for Korean high school students to learn English in English and as such Korean educators need to be in support of Korean President Lee Myung Bak's educational policies since education is for the students and not the teachers. What is more, an increased level of emphasis needs to be put on English communicational proficiency and academic essay writing so as to ensure that students are provided with all the necessary skills needed for the successful completion of university both domestically and abroad.

Overall, it is ill advised to base the system of evaluation at the secondary school levels on nothing more than the successful mastery of the subject matter commonly found in the annual SATs. That is to say, what should be equally as important is the learning of the actual skills which enable students to be successful in the academic life at universities. After all, what good is the acquired knowledge if students are ill equipped to employ it in academic essays and for real-life communicative output? Moreover, without the basic skills needed to turn basic knowledge into academic output, the acquired information suddenly becomes an overwhelming burden. That is, students must be allowed to unload this burden through intellectual means in line with conventional academic criteria.

Korean students are intelligent and are highly capable individuals, however, it is not their fault that 44% of them fail at top American universities, after all, it is the shortcomings of the Korean secondary system of education that the basic skills necessary for post-secondary educational success is not taught at the high school level. On the whole, students should be taught the necessary skills before they enter university, for as it stands students are forced to learn from their failures at the university level, and it is these very same failures that discourage students and may even predestine 44% of them to fail academic life at top universities in the USA.

All in all, the needs of students must come first and it should be a priority to teach learners the necessary skills they need to succeed in academic life at universities both domestically and abroad, for the future of the country hangs in the balance. That is to say, it is the very same students being neglected at high schools nationwide who will one day inherit the governing duties in this wonderful nation that I came to love so much.

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