

## NESTs, Necessary or Not? Examining the Impact of Native English Speaker Instruction in South Korea

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Although Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) are extensively utilized, very little is known about the impact of these teachers on speaking or writing in Asian contexts like South Korea. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of NEST instruction on EFL learners' speech in a South Korean context. First, proficiency level of 100 learners was compared to amount of learning with a native English speaker using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient ( $r_s [100] = .26, p = .01$ ). Second, type/token ratios (variety of vocabulary) from 144 speeches of advanced learners were compared to amount of native-speaking instruction using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient ( $r_s [144] = .18, p = .03$ ). Results suggest that native English instruction does indeed have some impact. Higher proficiency learners had more native instruction. Furthermore, advanced learners with more NEST instruction had more lexical sophistication of speech. While significant, correlations may not justify massive expenditures in an EFL context. Instead, results may reveal needs for change of curricula and pedagogical style.

**Key Words:** *NEST, EFL, South Korea, Vocabulary, English Proficiency*

Writing about personal difficulties in the South Korean education system, a former fellow and lecturer of Korean Studies at Yale wrote that:

After my older brother fell ill from the stress of being a student in South Korea, my mother decided to move me from our home in Seoul to Vancouver for high school to spare me the intense pressure to succeed. She did not want me to suffer like my brother, who had a chest pain that doctors could not diagnose and an allergy so severe he needed to have shots at home (Koo, 2014, para. 1).

Unfortunately, the intense stress and anxiety exemplified by this passage is not an isolated occurrence in South Korea. Students from this country continue to receive severe parental and social pressure, beginning at the primary school level. Study of key subjects like English, for example, begin in preschool and continue until high school, where learners are forced to study in "voluntary" study halls until 11:00 PM each night (Kim 2015).

Not surprisingly, pressure for academic success has driven Korean students to study more than their counterparts in other countries; Korean learners spend the longest time studying, with 23.3 percent of the population putting in over 60 hours a week, more than twice the average of other OECD

countries (13.3 percent) (Kim, 2017). Such intense academic pressure has had a tremendous impact on society. A need to gain English proficiency, for example, has led to the separation of many families. Children and their mothers move to an English-speaking country for a linguistic advantage, while fathers stay behind to work (Kim, 2015). There is no clear sign that this kind of educational pressure will decrease. The latest statistics on private education expenditures, for example, collected in 2016, reveal that 18.1 trillion won was spent in 2016, up 1.3 percent from 2015 (*Statistics Korea*, 2016).

While monetary expenditure on key subjects like English is tremendous, the impact of the spending appears limited. Student performance on assessments such as the TOEFL, for example, is far from exemplary. In 2009, for example, TOEFL scores for Korean learners stood at 78 out of 120, a rank of 89<sup>th</sup> (Kang, 2009). In speaking, they scored even lower, ranking merely 136<sup>th</sup> out of 161 (Kang, 2009). While overall TOEFL scores have risen slightly in 2011 (Korean learners were 70<sup>th</sup> out of 150 countries) (Kim, 2012), results are lackluster when compared to educational expenditures. Explanations for this mismatch are varied and controversial, revealing a need for clear identification of factors that impact educational performance. Ultimately, these factors must be understood before effective educational reform can be realized.

## Literature Review

Although factors affecting student performance in South Korea may be disputed, one clear influence is teaching method. In public schools, rote memorization and explicit learning of formulas are predominantly used (Vinish, 2014), leading to academic excellence in receptive tasks such as listening and reading

(Kwon, Yoshida, Watanabe, Negishi, & Naganuma, 2004). Such formulaic, rote strategies help Korean students perform well on standardized tests like the Korean college entrance exam, which remains the primary motivator for study. In 2015, Koreans performed exceptionally well on an international level, scoring 7<sup>th</sup> in both reading and math on the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) (PISA, 2015).

While passive learning may promote achievement on standardized tests, speaking and writing suffer severely, which explains unsatisfactory performance on productive tasks in exams like the TOEFL. Despite have more than six years of English at the primary and secondary school levels, college students are often incapable of carrying on rudimentary conversations in English (Niederhauser, 2012). Ultimately, this issue may be caused by memorization of grammatical structures in isolation of context, which prevents any useful adaptation of language to real situations (Kim & Kim, 2005). Rote learning further inhibits critical thinking skills, thereby preventing effective construction of written or spoken arguments (Niederhauser, 2012). Attempts to revise public school curricula and teaching methods have been made. At the elementary school level, for example, functional English activities have been designed, as well as efforts to introduce English-medium instruction. Writing assessments such as the National English Ability Test (NEAT) have also been introduced (Moodie & Nam, 2016). Because Korean teachers are often ill-equipped to implement such reforms (Byun et al., 2011), failure ensues, leading to widespread skepticism.

Problems with public school curricula have compelled parents to seek out private school education as a means of developing speaking and writing, accounting for 18.1

trillion won in expenditures on private education in 2016. Despite good intentions, public-school failures have led to widespread expansion of private academies and extracurricular tutoring (Kim & Lee, 2010). To make matters worse, many private institutions reinforce public school pedagogical techniques, using rote memorization and formulaic strategies to “teach to the test.” In subjects like English, for example, grammar rules are often taught to promote achievement on the Korean college entrance exam, worsening productive skills. To address such problems, Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) have been hired in large numbers, in both private and public sectors, to provide assistance with production and critical thinking skills.

While hiring NESTs is often considered a viable solution among Korean educators, policymakers, and parents, impact on the development of English speaking and writing skills may be limited. Another issue is a mistaken belief that oral proficiency must reflect native speaker norms, which may preclude identification of practical needs for communication (Aufa, 2014). Despite potential shortcomings of NEST instruction, policy makers in Asian countries like South Korea have rushed to acquire native-speaking teachers to address stereotypical views, often resulting in the hiring of applicants that are not well-trained for the job. NESTs without proper training or understanding of the local culture may not be effective, severely impacting linguistic development of the learner.

Recruitment of NESTs may also result “in the unintended consequences of damaging the quality of English instruction and jeopardizing the professional identity of local non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in these countries” (Wang & Lin, 2013, p. 5). Although NNESTs may be criticized for overemphasizing grammar and

other receptive skills needed for test-taking, they are an essential link to the host culture and language (Brewer, 2016). Research suggests that NNESTs are essential for language development in Korean EFL contexts. They provide sensitivity and psychological support through a shared understanding of the L1 and associated difficulties learning a second language (Chun, 2014). Because English has become an international language, with diverse purposes based upon policies, politics, and sociolinguistic context (Sharifian, 2009), NNESTs can also provide a global perspective for the Korean EFL context, one which transcends Anglocentric cultural norms. Finally, sympathetic non-native teachers may provide assessments that more accurately reflect the EFL contexts in which students operate (Hu, 2012).

While Korean learners have made great progress on standardized tests, abilities to effectively communicate in English, through either speaking or writing, appear limited. Some place the blame squarely on traditional teaching methods, which treat students as recipients of knowledge and focus development on standardized tests. While NESTs may change how learners are educated, native-speaker instruction may also have a negative impact on Korean learners. Not only can NESTs be unskilled, they may lack cultural understanding needed to connect with students. Such problems can prevent learners from acquiring the communicative competence needed to effectively speak or write. While NESTs may have such shortcomings, they may also provide new methods of teaching which promote both production and critical thinking skills. Although criticism of NESTs has been cited, very little is known about the actual impact of NESTs on speaking or writing in Asian contexts like South Korea. Further investigation of communication, through evaluation of production tasks, may

provide information needed to assess the efficacy of NESTs.

### Evaluating the Quality of Production

Evaluation of communicative competence is a difficult task. For the TOEFL speaking portion of the exam, ratings are assigned based upon three criteria: delivery, language use, and topic development (ETS, 2014, p. 1).

#### Delivery

Generally *well-paced flow* (fluid expression). Speech is clear. It may include *minor lapses*, or *minor difficulties* with pronunciation or intonation patterns, which do not affect overall intelligibility.

#### Language Use

The response demonstrates *effective use* of grammar and vocabulary. It exhibits a *fairly high degree of automaticity* with good control of basic and complex structures (as appropriate). Some *minor (or systematic) errors* are noticeable but do not obscure meaning.

#### Topic Development

Response is sustained and *sufficient* to the task. It is *generally well developed* and coherent; relationships between ideas are clear (or clear progression of ideas).

While descriptions of criteria seem clear on the surface, they are imbued with implicit bias. Verbiage such as *well-paced flow*, *minor lapses*, *effective use of grammar*, and a *fairly high degree of automaticity* are highly subjective, and primarily based upon native-speaker norms. Such discrepancies cause confusion over the interpretation of indicators among both educators and

students (Li & Lindsey, 2015). Because English in Asian contexts may be distinctly different from that needed in a native-speaking context, such evaluation may be an inadequate measure of progress. Moreover, subjectivity of terms makes empirical determinations of efficacy or inefficacy of teaching techniques less reliable.

Although holistic rubrics may be problematic, there are more empirically sound indicators of English proficiency. Vocabulary, for example, may provide a great deal of empirically-verifiable information about a learner's proficiency level. Research suggests that vocabulary develops in distinct ways as English language learners become more proficient (Rafi, 2013). This view is exemplified by analysis of the word *make* within Korean EFL learner writings. At beginning levels of proficiency, literal uses of the word (*to make a paper airplane*) or simple speech formulas (*to make someone go*) are used most extensively. As learners develop, they begin to use collocations that reflect more complex semantic relationships between elements or discursive functions. At higher levels of proficiency, for example, learners tend to use collocations with *make* that are more figurative and loaded with pragmatic meanings (Schenck, 2017). Such collocations may intensify (*To make matters worse*), put something into a larger perspective (*To make a long story short*), add a negative connotation (*I have to make do with the life I have*), or defend a position (*We must make allowances for students who have learning issues*). Like the word *make*, other vocabulary appears to develop along a continuum from literal to figurative usage as a learner gains proficiency (Kecskes, 2007).

The presence of a continuum for vocabulary suggests that words with complex figurative meanings reflect higher proficiency levels. In addition to analysis of individual word complexity, holistic study

of words in a speech or text can reveal proficiency level. A type / token ratio, for example, may reveal the semantic complexity of production through one empirically reliable measure. Whereas types represent a word category (*eat*, *eating*, and *eaten* represent one category), tokens represent the total number of words in a speech or text. More types (a larger type to token ratio) would suggest that there is more word variety and, thus, more meaning conveyed (Laufer & Nation, 1995).

While holistic rubrics like those of the TOEFL are imbued with an implicit bias toward native speaking norms, vocabulary analysis can yield more objective empirical assessment of language proficiency (Schenck & Daly, 2012). Because vocabulary can be an accurate indicator of language proficiency, it may be a useful tool to examine the impact of NEST instructors. Through more impartial empirical analysis such as this, important insights concerning the efficacy of Korean educational policies may be ascertained.

### Research Questions

While extensive criticism has emerged concerning English education in South Korea, little empirical evidence is available to identify the efficacy or inefficacy of Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) over their non-native peers. According to a need for further research of Asian EFL contexts such as South Korea, the following questions were posed:

1. Does NEST instruction give Korean EFL learners an advantage over Non-NEST instruction? To what extent does amount of NEST instruction serve as a predictor of spoken English proficiency?
2. Does NEST instruction impact the quality of speech production? To what extent does

variety and use of vocabulary in learner speech differ between Korean EFL learners who have received extensive instruction from NESTs, and those who have not?

Research of these factors was conducted to provide information concerning the efficacy, or lack thereof, of NEST instructors and associated Korean English educational policies.

### Method

To examine the potential impact of various factors on South Korean learners in an Asian EFL context, information about spoken data was obtained from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE). ICNALE is a freely available English corpus which contains 2.0 million words of spoken and written discourse from EFL learners in various Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. For this study, Korean university learners, which comprised 100 participants of the corpus, were considered for examination (Ishikawa, 2018).

ICNALE uses four proficiency levels based upon the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): A2\_0 (CEFR levels A1-A2), B1\_1 (CEFR level B1), B1\_2 (CEFR level B1 B1), and B2\_0 (CEFR levels B2-C2). To answer research question one, which aimed to see if learners with native English instructors benefitted more than their counterparts in spoken production, participants were evaluated in two steps. In the first step, proficiency level was compared to amount of learning with a native English speaker using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient. Proficiency levels were empirically converted into rank values from 0 to 3, with 3 represented the highest level of B2\_0. The second variable, amount of learning with a native speaker, was an empirical value taken from question 31 on the ICNALE Learner Background

survey (“Q31: I have been taught by English native speakers”). The value was ranked from zero to six; six represented the highest amount of exposure to a native English instructor and zero represented the least (Ishikawa, 2018). After empirical values for proficiency levels were correlated using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, differences were charted graphically by separating participants into two groups: extensive experience with NESTs and little or no experience with NESTs. Learners with a value from 4-6 were labeled “extensive experience”, whereas learners with a value from 1-3 were labeled “little or no experience.” Differences in number of learners in each category were compared for each proficiency level using a bar chart.

For research question two, which aimed to evaluate the differences in quality of the speech itself, native-speaking instruction values were compared to type/token ratios obtained from spoken transcripts using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient. Spoken transcripts consisted of two monologues and two dialogues with an interviewer expressing opinions (one monologue and one dialogue about the importance of college students having a part-time job / one monologue and one dialogue about whether smoking should be banned in all restaurants). Of the 100 Korean participants, 36 were at the highest proficiency level, B2\_0. These participants were selected for study, since they represented the highest standard, or benchmark, for EFL proficiency. Of the 36 participants studied, each had four different speeches, yielding a total of 144 different transcripts for analysis (Ishikawa, 2018).

Type-token ratios were calculated using the English Profile Text Inspector (2015),

which provides information about types and tokens in a text or script. Types were divided by tokens from each transcript to calculate the ratio. All type-token ratios (144 in total) were then compared to degree of NEST instruction using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient. Following this correlation, differences between the two variables were further examined graphically by separating participants into two groups: extensive experience with NESTs and little or no experience with NESTs (extensive experience 4-6 / little or no experience 1-3). Following the separation into groups, type-token ratios were calculated for vocabulary commonly associated with each CEFR level (A1-C2). Difficulty levels of vocabulary, which are designated by the English profile website, represent the most common times at which the words emerge, and may yield input on the sophistication of learner vocabulary. It was thought that any discrepancies of type / token ratios may reveal an impact, or lack thereof, of NEST instruction.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Research Question One**

Correlations between spoken language proficiency and degree of instruction from NESTs did indeed reveal a significant relationship ( $r_s [100] = .26, p = .01$ ). This appears to suggest that use of native English instructors has an impact on learners’ speech. University learners who reported more instruction with native English speakers tended to be at higher proficiency levels, as indicated in Figure 1.

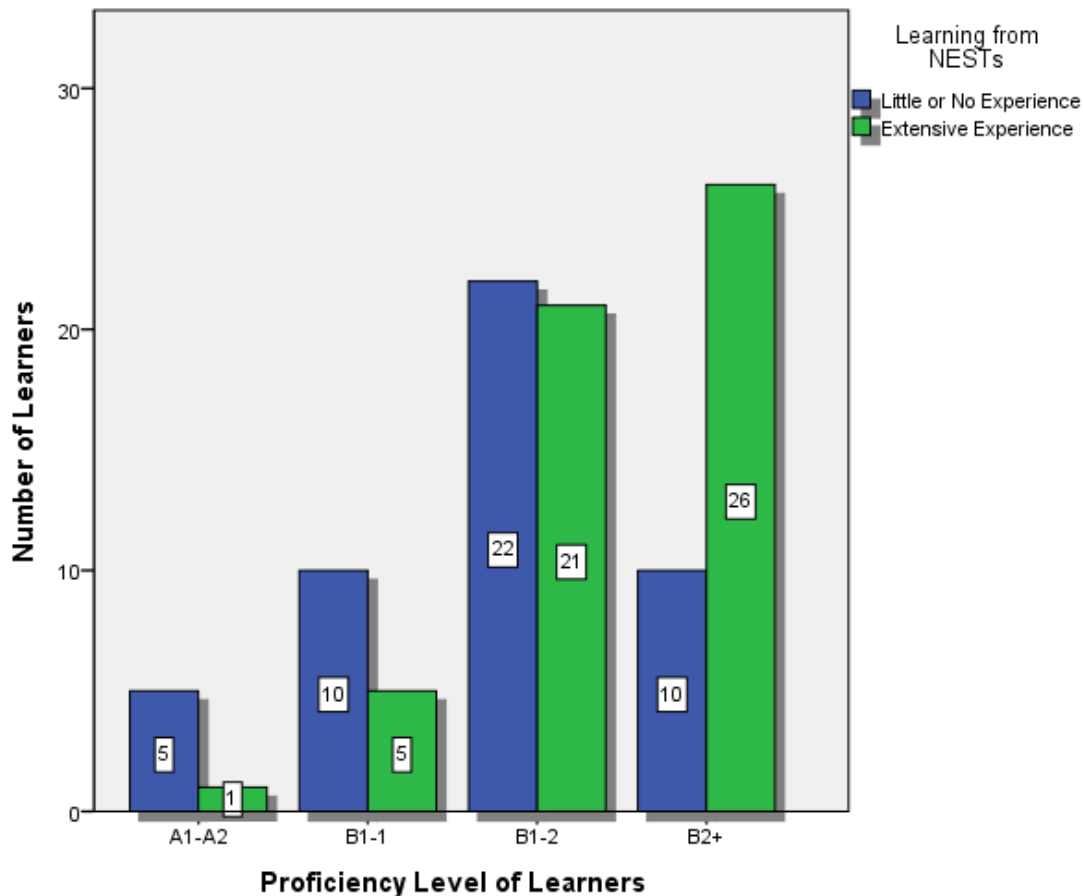


Figure 1. Learners with extensive and little to no experience with NEST instruction (separated by learner proficiency level).

As revealed in Figure 1, learners at the B2 and higher CEFR levels had much more instruction with native English speakers. At this level, 26 learners reported extensive experience with native English speakers, while 10 did not. Differences from A1-B1 revealed more learners without extensive native English instruction. From levels A1 to B1-1, the number of learners who did not receive extensive instruction from a native speaker was double, or more than double. Overall, findings suggest that there is indeed an impact from native English instruction. Alternatively, these results may suggest an influence from socioeconomic status. As learners who receive instruction from native English speakers tend to come from more

affluent backgrounds, they may have been exposed to better curricula. They may also have better resources for learning English, explaining the findings.

### Research Question Two

Investigation of vocabulary also suggests that native English instruction provides some kind of advantage for spoken English. Correlations between the amount of instruction from English native speakers and type/token ratios for learner speech revealed a significant correlation ( $r_s [144] = .18, p = .03$ ). There are two possible interpretations of this finding. First, the Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) may have more

effective pedagogical techniques (e.g., increased participation in the learning process or critical thinking skills) which promote more effective development of spoken skills. As an alternative explanation, the relatively small correlation may be a byproduct of enhanced input provided by NESTs. Whether pedagogical techniques or input is the explanation, the significant value may reveal a problem with both public and private school education in South Korea. Adherence to traditional pedagogical methods, with an emphasis on rote learning and grammar rules, may be limiting the development of spoken proficiency. Native speakers may provide more participatory tasks that promote communicative competence. In addition, NESTs may

provide better input, rather than explicit grammar rules that limit the development of natural communication.

Analysis of type / token ratios for words emerging at different levels also revealed interesting results. As revealed in Figure 2, learners with extensive experience with NESTs had a slightly larger total type / token ratio. Whereas learners without extensive NEST instruction had a ratio of .56, learners with extensive NEST instruction had a ratio of .64. Type / token ratios of vocabulary at different CEFR levels revealed that greater lexical variety could be found at levels A1 to B2 for learners with more NEST instruction.

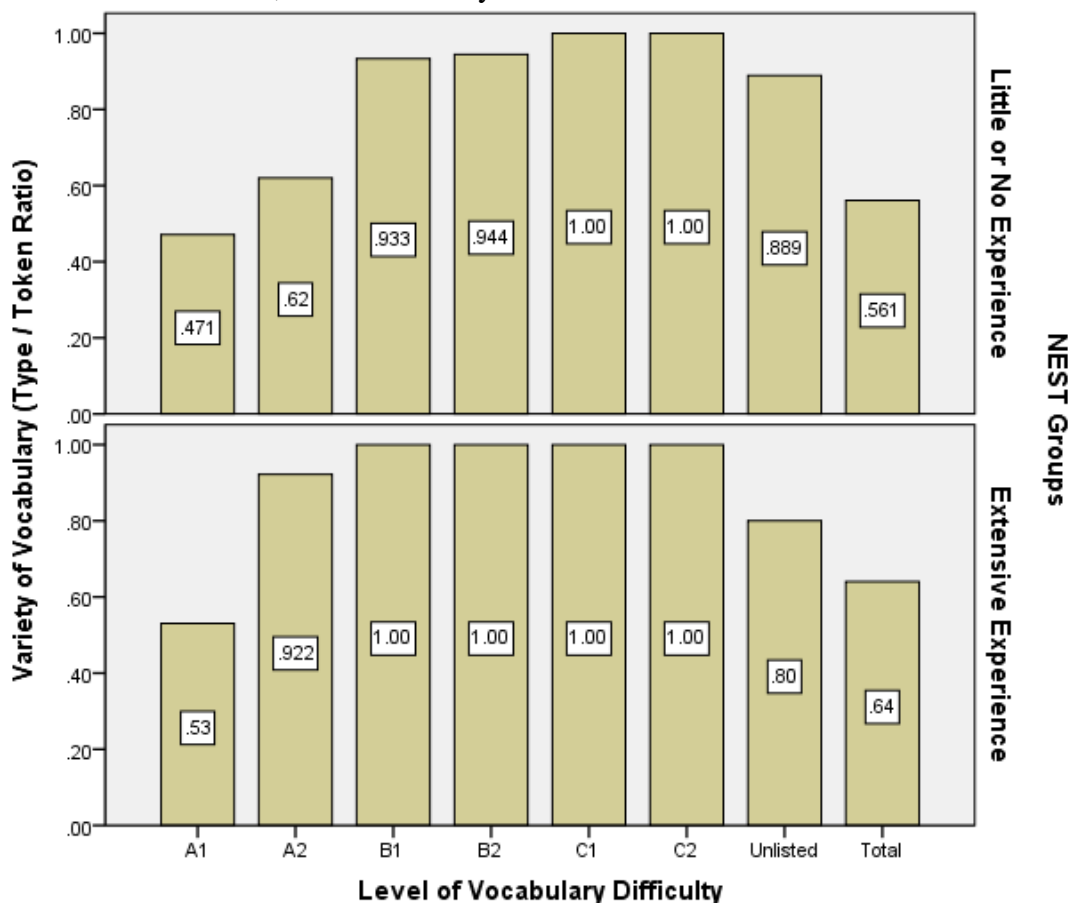


Figure 2. Vocabulary use of advanced Korean EFL learners.



Whereas there were discrepancies in type / token ratios from the A1 to B2 levels, variety at the C1 and C2 levels was the same for both groups. This finding appears to suggest that learners who have more NEST instruction gain some additional sophistication with more frequent, semantically simpler vocabulary. The finding further suggests that sophisticated vocabulary and academic discourse may not be significantly affected by NEST instruction. If inexperienced native teachers without sophisticated understanding of English concepts are hired, EFL learners may acquire “survival” English, rather than specialized language associated with more academic topics. Policies supporting the hiring of NESTs may need to be reevaluated according to teacher qualifications. Hiring native teachers with a specialization in English may have a larger impact on advanced use of language for academic discourse, which is required in colleges.

Overall, increased word variety of learners with extensive NEST instruction appears to represent more common spoken interaction with native English speakers. While values between groups differ, they appear relatively small, suggesting lexical variety is only slightly enhanced though extensive instruction with native speakers. This finding may signify that the monetary expenditures required for the gains are not cost-effective. Perhaps more effective means of providing native input may help learners in EFL contexts without access to NEST instruction.

### **Conclusion**

Although the utilization of native English-speaking teachers remains prevalent in South Korea today, very little is known about the impact of this educational strategy. Widespread policies and cultural norms supporting instruction by native English speakers continue to fuel private educational

expenditures, yet very few empirical measures exist to either support or reject the validity of such beliefs.

Results of the present study do appear to support the efficacy of NEST instructors. Learners at higher proficiency levels tended to have more instruction from NESTs. Furthermore, advanced learners revealed additional variety of more basic vocabulary in speech. While there was indeed an impact from native English instructors, the influence appears small compared to extreme expenditures on private education. Thus, the use of native English instructors may not be cost effective. An additional issue with native instruction is the apparent lack of impact at upper levels of vocabulary development. Students trained by non-native instructors may use academic English just as well as their counterparts. Input provided by native instructors, who often rely on everyday conversational English, appears to have an impact, yet it does not appear to provide the specialized vocabulary needed for gains in academic English. Perhaps additional training could help NESTs improve input and instruction of English for academic purposes. At the same time, more authentic input and pedagogical skills training could help Non-NESTs teach more effectively.

Although findings from this paper are interesting, more research is needed. Since the amount of instruction with NESTs was assessed through a survey, values may not be completely precise. To confirm claims made in this paper, more studies must be conducted to accurately measure and assess NEST instruction. In today’s challenging economy, in which efficacy of instruction is coupled with financial pressures, such research is needed to determine the most viable means of education. More cost-effective alternatives may need to be discovered to assist learners in EFL contexts such as South Korea.

### Author Biography

**ANDREW SCHENCK** now serves as the director of English Programs at the State University of New York (SUNY), Korea. He has taught English for over 15 years. During this

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