

# Who Needs What Aspects of L2 English to What Levels of Proficiency?

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**Kim, Kitaek, Yang, Hyun-Kwon & Sung, Minchang. (2013). Who Needs What Aspects of L2 English to What Levels of Proficiency? *Foreign Language Education Research, 16*, 1-16.**

This paper explores *who* needs *what aspects* of L2 English *to what levels* of proficiency, focusing on college English curriculum development in Korea. A survey was conducted of 532 college students in Seoul. Grounded that career is one of the most important motives for EFL learning, the participants were divided into seven groups based on their desired careers. The results show that the types of desired careers of the participants are highly correlative with the strength and weakness of their need for learning English, the kinds of English skills they want to learn, and the levels of English proficiency they hope to achieve.

**Key Words:** college English curriculum, curriculum development, English as a foreign language, English needs, English proficiency levels, English skills

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hutchinson and Walters (1987) have stated that the design of a language course should consider six *wh*-domains of questions: *Who* needs to learn *what aspects* of language *to what levels* of proficiency, and also *why* they need to learn it, *where* and *when*, and then *how* such learning will be achieved. The previous studies on college English programs in Korea have focused on the question of *why* college students need to learn *what* aspects of English. It has been reported that the most important reason Korean college students have for learning English is to prepare for their future careers (Chong & Kim, 2001), and that college students prefer learning spoken language skills (i.e. speaking and listening) over written language skills (i.e. reading and writing) (Joh, 2002; Kim, Shin, Yang, & Kim, 1999; Song & Park, 2004).

One of the intriguing features these studies share is that they looked at college students as a homogenous group, while the students may be different with each other as far as their needs for English learning are concerned. Understanding that career is one of the most important motives of Korean college students to learn English, as reported in

Chong and Kim (2001), it is conceivable that the students whose desired careers are strongly associated with English may have stronger motivation for L2 English learning. Further, it may be expected that the types of English skills they want to learn are highly dependent on those of English skills necessary for their desired careers.

Although not a few meaningful studies have been made on college English programs in Korea, none of them focused on the question whether Korean college students with different desired careers show differences in the strength of their needs to learn English. It is also noteworthy that no studies to date have been interested in college students' perception of current, achievable and desired levels of English proficiency. As noted in Chong and Kim (2001), identifying the gaps between the current and the desired levels of English proficiency of college students is conducive to the development of efficient college English curriculums.

All things taken together, we need to examine *who needs what aspects* of English *to what level* of proficiency, which is certain to help us develop better college English programs with specific descriptions and goals<sup>1</sup>. The goal of this study is two-fold. First, we investigate whether Korean college English learners with different desired careers show any differences in the strength of their need for learning English. Second, we explore whether the learners with different desired careers exhibit differences in the levels of English proficiency they hope to achieve. We also compare the learners' perceptions of current and achievable levels of English proficiency with those of desired levels.

## 1. English Learning Motivation

It has been widely known that there are two major types of L2 learning motivation<sup>2</sup>: *instrumental* and *integrative* (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The instrumental motivation is related to instrumental orientations that are the practical, utilitarian advantages derived from language proficiency, such as better employment or a higher salary (Dörnyei, 1990). The integrative motivation refers to “a high level of drive on the part of the individual to acquire the language of a valued second-language community in order to facilitate communication with that group” (Gardner, Smythe, Clément, & L.Glikzman, 1976, p. 199). The integrative motivation relates to components such as interest in foreign languages, desire for interaction with the target language

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<sup>1</sup> Among the questions in Hutchinson and Walters (1987), we leave the questions of *when*, *where* and *how* for further studies.

<sup>2</sup> According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1991, p. 58), motivation refers to “the directed, reinforcing effort to learn the language” while orientations refer to “reasons for studying a second language.”

community, and attitudes toward that target language community (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). It has been reported that both integrative and instrumental motivations facilitate English learning and yield better linguistic outcomes as indicated by proficiency test scores (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991).

Meanwhile it is necessary to note that the significance of the two types of L2 motivation varies depending on the socio-educational values and roles of the target language in the learners' community: for example, whether the target language is ESL (English as a second language) or EFL (English as a foreign language). In ESL contexts, the integrative motivations have been considered more important, as explained by Gardner and MacIntyre (1991, p. 59): "...is that the integrative motive facilitates second language acquisition because it reflects an active involvement in language study... However, to date, there has been relatively little research conducted on an instrumental motive." In EFL contexts, on the other hand, it has been reported that the instrumental motivation is more dominant. Dörnyei (1990) indicated, in a study with 134 EFL learners in Hungary, that the instrumental motivation played an important role in reaching an intermediate level of target language proficiency, but that the integrative motivation was meaningful only when attempting to reach more advanced levels of proficiency. He suggests that EFL learners do not have enough experience using the target language to have a strong need or reason to integrate with that target language community. He also points out that the integrative motivation is far more meaningful for ESL learners because they must learn the target language not only for communication in the target community, but also for better adjustment to the target culture. Oxford and Shearin (1994) agree with Dörnyei, arguing that the integrative motivation does not seem to be relevant for most EFL learners because these learners are separated in space and attitude from the target culture and thus rarely surpass an intermediate language proficiency level.

More recently, it has been reported that better performance in a career is the core motive for L2 English learning in EFL contexts. Warden and Lin (2000) demonstrated that Taiwanese college EFL learners with non-English majors had instrumental motivations but lacked any integrative motivation. In their study, the primary motive of the Taiwanese learners to learn L2 English was shown to be "career improvements or at least the potential for improving their careers" (p. 542), a finding that suggests that learners' career is the crux of learning motivation in EFL contexts. In a similar vein, Chong and Kim (2001) reported that the most important reason why Korean college students learn English is to prepare themselves for better performance in their future professions. The results reported there, on the other hand, were somewhat different from those reported in Warden and Lin (2000). The Korean EFL learners were shown to have integrative motivations as well, although their integrative motivations were not as

strongly expressed as their instrumental motivations. What the two studies have in common, however, is that college English learners in EFL contexts believe career to be their most important motive for learning L2 English.

## **2. Career and English Needs**

About the roles of career in L2 English motivation, intriguing observations have been made in the studies of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) conducted in EFL contexts (Chew, 2005; Chia, Johnson, Chia, & Olive, 1999; Chostelidou, 2010; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2008; Wozniak, 2010). Emphasizing the importance of teaching actual English uses in workplaces in ESP programs, these studies suggest that systematic designs of college EFL curriculum are possible only when we take the significance of English-related career performance into full consideration.

One group of ESP studies conducted in EFL contexts investigated English needs as perceived by employees or employers in various workplaces. Wozniak (2010) collected data from 53 French mountain guides, using both a questionnaire and interviews. Almost all of the participants (52 out of 53, 98.1%) responded that mountain guides have to be proficient in mountaineering English. Chew (2005) interviewed 16 new entrants at four banks in Hong Kong. To a question of whether career difficulty arises from banking content or language (English) demands, 10 out of the 16 interviewees answered that difficulties can arise either from English demands ( $n = 3$ ) or both English demands and banking content ( $n = 7$ ). Lehtonen and Karjalainen (2008) interviewed 15 Finnish employers, and observed that the employers perceive foreign language skills as an increasingly important and basic component of professional academic skills. Based on these results, the authors propose that close co-operation with employers is needed to design college language courses that can meet the needs of the future workforce. Angelelli and Degueldre (2002) studied learners of Spanish and French as foreign languages in the fields of teaching, translation, and interpreting. They observed that even superior-level language learners encountered difficulties when using foreign language in a professional environment, and proposed that it is necessary to consider the expertise level of proficiency when developing foreign language programs for learners who want to work professionally in language-related fields. Butler (2004) investigated the necessary levels of English proficiency required for non-native speakers of English who were elementary school EFL teachers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Using a self-assessment methodology, the study found that these teachers perceived their current English proficiency levels as being substantially lower than the ones they desired and needed to teach. To reduce these gaps, the study proposed that necessary English proficiency levels should be precisely identified

for the elementary school EFL teachers. All in all, these studies emphasized the importance of proficiency-oriented English training for college students who seek jobs in which proper use of English is more than necessary.

Another group of ESP studies conducted in EFL contexts surveyed college students and faculty members on the importance of English in various workplaces. Chostelidou (2010) inquired of 395 Greek students of accountancy how English needs are related with their future careers. For these students, English was important for reasons such as *transactions in the workplace* (39.5%) and *continuing studies abroad* (34.4%). In addition, the vast majority of these participants responded that they expected to use English in workplace *very often* (38%) or *sometimes* (34%). Chia et al. (1999) conducted a survey of Taiwanese medical students ( $n = 349$ ) and faculty members ( $n = 20$ ) using questionnaires. They found that Taiwanese medical students and their faculty perceived English as a necessity for the students' academic studies and their future career: 58.8% of these respondents perceived that English played an important role in students' medical studies, and 91.1% answered that English was very important for students' future careers.

If career is the core motive for English learning in EFL contexts, then students who want to have careers in which English is highly important are likely to have strong motivation for L2 English learning. Unfortunately, less emphasis has been on what extent of motivation students with different desired careers have. In addition, as is observed in Butler (2004), there can be a substantial gap between the level of graduating students' English proficiency and the necessary level of English proficiency for their desired careers. However, again to our best knowledge, little effort has been made to examine such proficiency gaps.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 1. Research Questions

The research questions in this study are as follows:

- (a) Learning motivation by desired careers:  
Do Korean college students have different extents of motivation to learn English according to their desired careers?
- (b) Levels of proficiency by desired careers:  
Do Korean college students show differences in current and desired levels of English proficiency according to their desired careers? At the same time, do they believe that

their desired levels of English proficiency are achievable through currently available college English courses?

## 2. Participants

The participants in this study were 532 undergraduate students (285 female; 247 male) in a college of education at a university in Korea. The average number of semesters the students had completed was 5.25 ( $SD = 2.23$ ). Among the participants, 120 students (22.9%) majored in foreign language education, 196 (36.6%) in humanities/social science education, and 216 (40.5%) in science education.

## 3. Materials

Questionnaires were developed and used for the survey. The questionnaires had two sections of questions. The first section was about the students' desired professional careers and their English learning motivation, and the second was about their perceived current, achievable, and desired levels of English proficiency.

In the first section, participants were asked what type of job they are going to seek. They were also asked to identify their degree of determination to attain that desired career based on a 5-point Likert scale. Next, the participants were asked to indicate, again on a 5-point Likert scale, the extent to which the four skills of English are important to their future careers. Then, the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they currently study English and their willingness to participate in college English programs. These two questions measured L2 English motivation, based on a study by Gardner and MacIntyre (1991), who used the time devoted to learning as an index of L2 motivation. The participants in the present study were asked to mark their perception of these elements, again using the 5-point Likert scale.

In the second section, the participants were asked to choose their current, achievable, and desired levels of English proficiency. To assess perceived proficiency levels, simplified versions of the ACTFL guidelines were developed based on a 5-point Likert scale for each domain of the four English skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The Likert score of 5 corresponded to the superior level and the Likert score of 1 corresponded to the novice level in the ACTFL guidelines. The questions about perceived current, achievable, and desired levels of English proficiency were intended to investigate to what extent the levels of the current English proficiency of the participants differed from the levels of their desired proficiency, and at the same time, whether the participants believed that their desired proficiency levels could be achieved through enthusiastic participation in college English courses.

The constructs of linguistic proficiency or competence have been defined from many perspectives: grammatical competence focusing on structure-generating competence (Chomsky, 1965); communicative competence concentrating on ability for socially acceptable use (Hymes, 1972); communicative competence, including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competencies, strategic competencies, and discourse competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980); and proficiency based on the four skills of English (Carroll, 1968). We decided to adopt Carroll's four skills to measure English proficiency, not only because these four skills have received central attention in curriculum teaching method but also because the ACTFL guidelines we relied on for our self-assessment tool are based on these four skills for English competency.

#### **4. Procedure**

The survey was conducted during regular class time and administered by one of the researchers. The students were also informed that their participation was voluntary and their responses would remain confidential. The students filled out the questionnaires without any specified time limit. On average, it took about 15 to 20 minutes for the participants to complete the surveys.

#### **5. Data Analysis**

The data gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using an SPSS 17.0 program. First, a reliability test was conducted using a factor analysis on the questions to confirm that similar questions were grouped for the same factor. The Cronbach alpha index of internal consistency was also used to determine whether the data under each factor were reliable for analysis. Second, the student responses were divided into groups based on their desired careers. The descriptive statistics of the student groups in the various categories were then calculated.

### **III. RESULTS**

#### **1. Reliability of the Questionnaire**

A principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was used to analyze the results for the 18 Likert-scale items used in this study. According to Brown (2009), the PCA can determine what patterns emerge in all of the variance in data. Setting the eigenvalue at 1.0, this study found that four broad factors underlay the relationships between the participants' responses, which accounted for 70.36% of total variation. We labeled these factors *English Learning Motive*, *Current English Proficiency*, *Achievable English Proficiency*, and *Desired*

*English Proficiency* (see Table 1). This study chose 0.40 of the correlation coefficients as a cut-off point for deciding which loading should be interpreted. Only one variable, the degree of how much students study English by themselves, was shown to belong to both the *English Learning Motive* factor (*loading* = 0.419) and the *Current English Proficiency* factor (*loading* = 0.561). Following Gardner and MacIntyre (1991), who used time devoted to learning as an index of motivation, we decided to put this item under the *English Learning Motive* factor. The Cronbach alpha index of internal consistency was acceptable for all four factors: *English Learning Motive* ( $\alpha = 0.894, n = 6$ ), *Current English Proficiency* ( $\alpha = 0.829, n = 4$ ), *Achievable English Proficiency* ( $\alpha = 0.857, n = 4$ ), and *Desired English Proficiency* ( $\alpha = 0.887, n = 4$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation

	Suggested Factor Name				$h^2$
	English Learning Motive	Current English Proficiency	Achievable English Proficiency	Desired English Proficiency	
Importance of English (Listening)	<b>.897</b>	.200	.031	.153	0.87
Importance of English (Speaking)	<b>.896</b>	.220	.012	.140	0.87
Importance of English (Writing)	<b>.887</b>	.160	.036	.200	0.85
Importance of English (Reading)	<b>.861</b>	.104	.042	.133	0.77
Willingness to participate in English program	<b>.467</b>	-.061	.199	.338	0.38
Willingness to do English self-study	<b>.419</b>	<b>.561</b>	.117	.063	0.51
Current English proficiency (Speaking)	.183	<b>.795</b>	.227	.221	0.77
Current English proficiency (Listening)	.147	<b>.779</b>	.211	.242	0.73
Current English proficiency (Writing)	.119	<b>.676</b>	.249	.310	0.63
Current English proficiency (Reading)	.005	<b>.476</b>	.247	.389	0.44
Achievable English proficiency (Writing)	.035	.183	<b>.809</b>	.185	0.72
Achievable English proficiency (Reading)	.085	.020	<b>.795</b>	.154	0.66
Achievable English proficiency (Listening)	.043	.346	<b>.795</b>	.122	0.77
Achievable English proficiency (Speaking)	.054	.313	<b>.770</b>	.104	0.70
Desired English proficiency (Reading)	.162	.094	.204	<b>.798</b>	0.71
Desired English proficiency (Writing)	.217	.318	.154	<b>.783</b>	0.79
Desired English proficiency (Listening)	.272	.399	.123	<b>.724</b>	0.71
Desired English proficiency (Speaking)	.264	.387	.124	<b>.699</b>	0.72
% of variance explained by each factor	21.27%	16.86%	16.01%	16.22%	70.36%



## 2. English Learning Motivation by Groups

We categorized the desired careers of the 532 students into seven groups: Non-English teacher ( $n = 183$ ), English teacher ( $n = 41$ ), graduate school abroad ( $n = 35$ ), graduate school in Korea ( $n = 96$ ), government officer ( $n = 101$ ), private company ( $n = 52$ ), and miscellaneous<sup>3</sup> ( $n = 24$ ). The average determination rate for their chosen careers was 3.56 (standard deviation = 1.07) which indicated that the respondents were fairly strongly determined upon their chosen careers. Figure 1 shows the perceived importance of English skills for their prospective future careers.

**FIGURE 1**

English learning motivation:  
Importance of English skills for future career

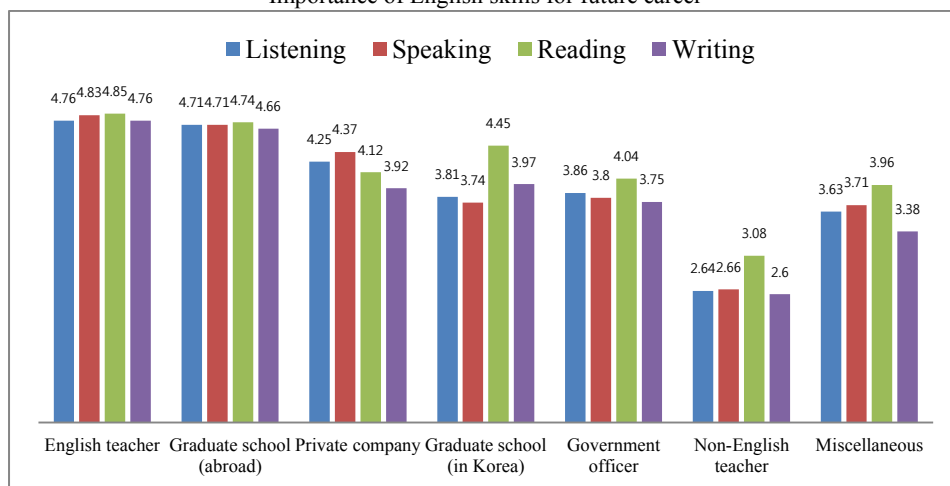


Figure 1 shows that the group of students planning to be English teachers provided the highest (*mean total* = 4.80), followed by the group that was hoping to go abroad for graduate study (*mean total* = 4.71). The students who wished to be non-English teachers, on the other hand, produced the lowest (*mean total* = 2.74). These results also indicate that the group that considered going to graduate school in Korea placed more importance on written language skills (*mean reading* = 4.45; *mean writing* = 3.97) than spoken language skills (*mean listening* = 3.81; *mean speaking* = 3.74). This finding seems to be due to the fact that graduate students in Korea are expected to read English-language texts and write English-language articles for publication. In sharp contrast, those students who desired to work for private companies placed more importance on spoken

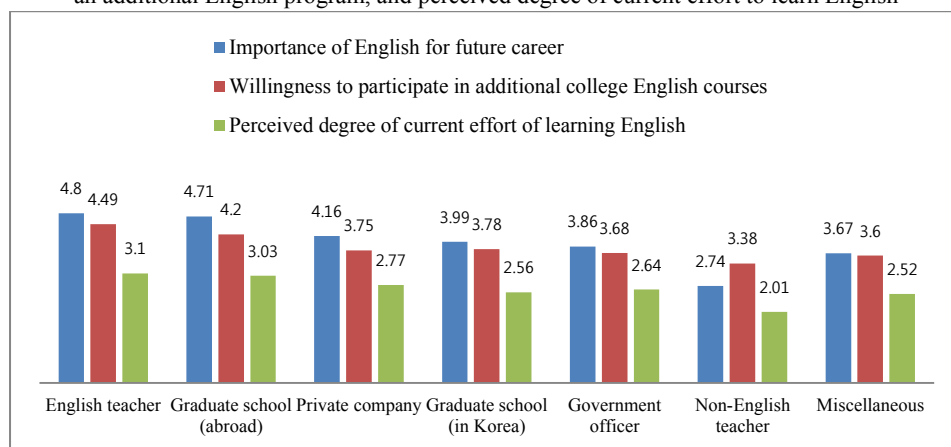
<sup>3</sup> Miscellaneous group includes jobs such as journalist, NGO specialist, announcer, and patent agent.

language skills (*mean speaking* = 4.37; *mean listening* = 4.25) over written language skills (*mean reading* = 4.12, *mean writing* = 3.92). This finding may be attributed to the higher chances of international communication business people might have with English-speaking business partners, as markets expand throughout the world. All in all, the data reported in Figure 1 strongly support the well-known observation that English is closely associated with their desired future careers for most Korean college students.

This study also inquired into the degree of willingness to participate in a college English program beyond the required English courses. Figure 2 demonstrates the students' perception of English as an important skill for their careers, willingness to participate in additional college English courses other than required courses, and perceived degree of current effort to learn English.

**FIGURE 2**

English learning motivation: Importance of English for future career, willingness to participate in an additional English program, and perceived degree of current effort to learn English



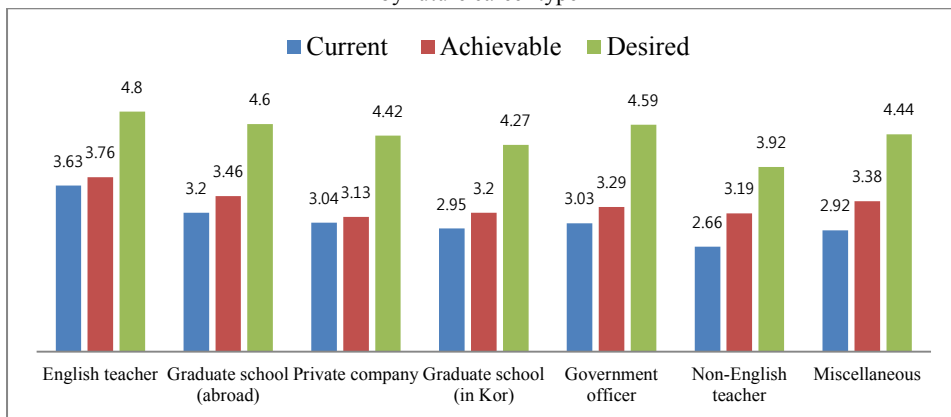
We found a strong correlation of perceived need for English for their future desired career with the students' willingness to participate in additional college English courses ( $r = .917$ ) and with the perceived degree of their current effort to learn English ( $r = .991$ ). This suggests that desired career is a very important factor for learning English. However, it is interesting to note that the non-English teacher group, who reported the lowest need for English in their desired career, still had considerable willingness (3.38) to participate in additional English courses. One interpretation of this result is that the non-English teacher group may have integrative motivation. It has been reported that although instrumental motivation to learn English is overwhelming in EFL contexts, integrative motivation also exists in Korean students' desire to learn English (Chong & Kim, 2001). Another possibility is that this group's willingness to participate in

additional English classes is due to gaps between their current levels of English proficiency and their desired levels. Even though these students do not expect to need to use English frequently in their future careers, they still desire levels of English proficiency higher than their current levels to be prepared for potential situations in which good English skills are indeed required. To clarify this possibility, the levels of current English proficiency and the levels of desired English proficiency are compared in the next section, which also examines the students' perceptions whether they are able to reach their desired levels with the help of college English programs. In other words, this study examines their perceived potential achievable levels of English proficiency.

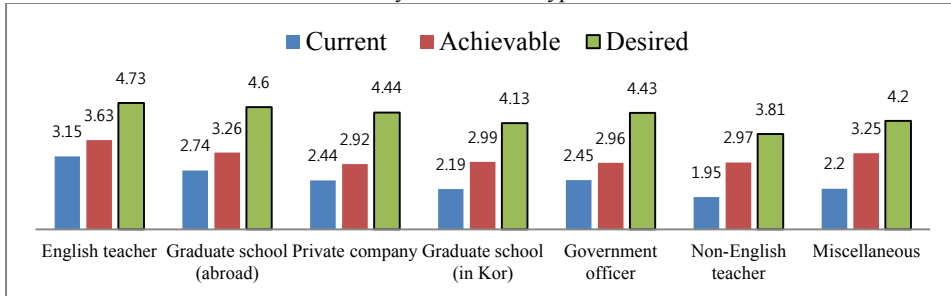
### 3. Current, Achievable, and Desired Levels of English Proficiency

Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate that the students perceived their current, achievable, and desired levels of English proficiency to be clearly different. Overall, these results indicate that the respondents were pessimistic about reaching their desired levels of English skills through the required English courses in college.

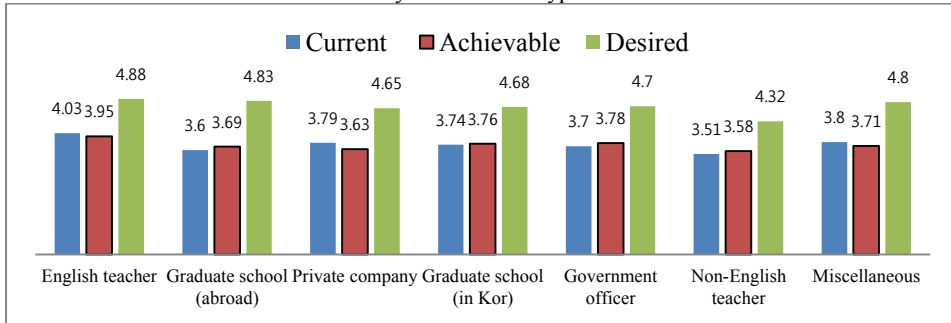
**FIGURE 3**  
Current/Achievable/Desired level of English listening proficiency  
by future career type



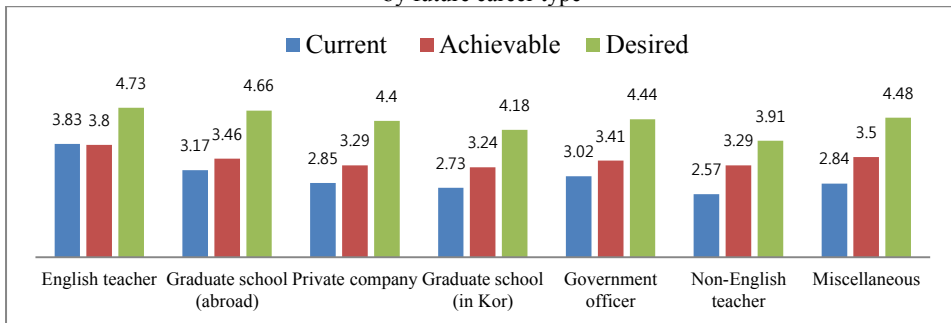
**FIGURE 4**  
Current/Achievable/Desired level of English speaking proficiency  
by future career type



**FIGURE 5**  
Current/Achievable/Desired level of English reading proficiency  
by future career type



**FIGURE 6**  
Current/Achievable/Desired level of English writing proficiency  
by future career type



These results demonstrate that the respondents perceived reading to be a skill in which they currently had the highest level of proficiency, as well as a skill in which they desired to have the highest level of proficiency. Speaking was a skill in which they viewed themselves as having the lowest current level as well as the lowest desired level

of proficiency. By contrast, reading was also a skill in which they expected to gain the least improvement, while speaking was a skill in which they wanted to have the highest improvement. These results may be due to the fact that the focus of English learning for these students in their secondary school environment was on reading, not on speaking, while in college English programs greater focus is on speaking rather than on reading. Note also that more emphasis is put on reading skills in English classes in Korea, while the focus of college English programs in Korea is on spoken language (e.g. listening, speaking) rather than on written language (e.g. reading, writing), as reported in Joh (2002).

Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 show that the career groups differed from each other with respect to their perceived levels of current, achievable, and desired English proficiency. In general, the career groups that place more importance on English tended to have higher levels of current/achievable/ desired English proficiency. For example, the English teacher group, which placed the highest importance on future English proficiency (see Figure 1), had the highest desired levels of English proficiency: 4.80 for listening, 4.73 for speaking, 4.88 for reading, and 4.73 for writing. In sharp contrast, the non-English teacher group, which placed the least importance on future English proficiency (see Figure 1), had the lowest desired levels of English proficiency: 3.92 for listening, 3.81 for speaking, 4.32 for reading, and 3.91 for writing.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The groups of students in this study, when divided by desired careers, differed in two respects, namely, the degree of their English learning motivation and their perception of the current, achievable, and desired levels of English proficiency. The present study finds that the desired careers of English learners determine the strength of their need for English learning as well as the levels of English proficiency they want to or need to reach.

The first research question was whether Korean college students have different extents of motivation to learn English depending on their desired careers. Dividing 532 students into seven future career groups, we showed that the levels of motivation for English learning are different across the groups. The tendency was that the more important English was perceived to be for future careers, the more they currently study English and the stronger need the students have for additional English classes.

The next question was whether Korean college students show differences in their current levels of English proficiency depending on their desired careers. We found that their perception of the current levels of English proficiency is related to their desired careers. We also examined whether the students show differences in their desired levels

of English proficiency depending on their desired careers, and whether they believe that their desired levels of English proficiency are achievable through the college English courses currently available to them. We observed that students whose future careers require good English skills have stronger needs for higher levels of English proficiency, and that the achievable levels of their English proficiency are clearly lower than the desired levels.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Joh's (2002) survey, Korean college students perceived that the improvement of college English programs is highly dependent upon the development of diverse English courses. What this implies in the current context is that students want to take courses which are best tuned to their future needs, but they believe the courses available are not diverse enough to satisfy their needs. If career is the students' main motive for learning English, we need to develop diverse courses which help them prepare for their future carriers. Further, Chong and Kim (2001) reported that what is most necessary for college English curriculum development is to have specific course descriptions and course objectives. This study has focused on the question *who* needs *what aspects* of English to *what level* of proficiency, which is certain to help develop efficient college English courses with specific descriptions and goals.

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Received on August 10, 2012

Reviewed on October 30, 2012

Revised version received on November 30, 2012

Accepted on December 5, 2012