

## Linguistic and Educational Factors Affecting TOEFL Scores: Focusing on Three OECD Countries in EFL contexts\*

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims at investigating the linguistic and educational factors affecting TOEFL scores, focusing on three OECD countries, Korea, Japan, and Finland. The data comprise document analysis on curriculums, websites, and literature. The findings reveal that the number of Korean test-takers and their TOEFL scores gradually increased year by year. Finnish test-takers consistently gained greatly high scores, and Japanese examinees showed the lowest scores. The languages Korean, Japanese, and Finnish are all far distant from English and receive little support on historical grounds from the Indo-European family tree. In Finland, however, Swedish which belongs to Indo-European languages is still used as an official language with Finnish. Korea and Finland adopt English education from Year 3 in primary school, whereas English is not an official subject in primary school at present in Japan. Finnish students are taught a foreign language in addition to English from primary school. These seem to support the result of the high TOEFL scores of Finnish test-takers. This study concludes that social context which includes linguistic and educational environments are the main factors which affect TOEFL scores.*

**Keywords:** TOEFL scores, OECD countries, social context, linguistic and educational environments

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A large-scale English as a Second Language (ESL) admission testing has been dominated by the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) developed and administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the USA. The feature of TOEFL is its strong emphasis on reliability. That is, ETS adheres to a more psychometric approach to test construction, favoring an objective way with the multiple-choice items. In terms of instruction, ETS emphasizes dissociation of the instruction in TOEFL from any particular instructional program (Chalhoub-Deville, 2000). The purpose of TOEFL is to measure the English proficiency of non-native speakers who intend to study in institutions of higher learning in the USA and Canada. In addition, scores are used by certain medical certification and licensing agencies. As with the other tests, TOEFL scores are increasingly being used by institutions, private organizations, and government agencies in other countries as well (Al-Musawi & Al-Ansari, 1999). For these reasons, a great number of Korean students who wish to study

graduate programs either in English-speaking countries or in Korea are now preparing or taking the TOEFL. After all, the TOEFL has become a standard in Korea and other non-English speaking countries by which many institutions and individuals measure a test-taker's English proficiency.

However, there have been little concerns about TOEFL preparation courses in Korean universities to make it possible for students who need to take and wish to obtain higher scores unlike the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) preparation courses offered in greater numbers than ever before (Lee, I., 2006). Moreover, despite its importance, the issue on what affects the test-taker's TOEFL scores as his or her English proficiency remains to be an unexplored research area in the field of English education. This situation reflects that how particular countries' linguistic and educational aspects are related to test-takers' TOEFL scores and how test-takers can be helped to fulfill their goals have never been addressed in literature. Exploring the affecting factors on TOEFL scores is an important issue for researchers who wish to increase their understanding of the relationship between test-

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takers' English proficiency levels, and the linguistic and educational features in their countries in order to develop ways of establishing language education. There is a growing awareness in academic circles that how individual English proficiency in a nation is related to the economic growth or power of the nation in the global world.

I accept, that TOEFL scores can be regarded as an educational output embedded in social relations within a specific community which has its own conventional practices of language and education within which individuals have to find identities as test-takers, and this is related to the view on literacy and social context argued by Clark and Ivanič (1997). This study, therefore, aims to investigate the linguistic and educational factors affecting TOEFL scores, focusing on three OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, Korea, Japan, and Finland, in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts.

The total number of countries in OECD is currently 30, and Korea joined it in December, 1996. Out of the 30 countries, English is used as a foreign language in 25 countries except 5 (i.e., Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) where English is used as a mother tongue. The main reasons for choosing Korea, Japan, and Finland among the 25 non-English speaking OECD countries are two. Firstly, Korea and Japan are the only countries located in Asia among the members (<http://www.oecd.org/home>). Secondly, Finland is in Europe, and it is known that Finnish students have shown the highest academic achievement in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Research report No. 2008-3, KICE, 2008). For these reasons, it is significant to examine the linguistic and educational environments of Korea, Japan, and Finland and how these aspects can be related to the test-takers' TOEFL scores in these three countries. Based on the above speculations, the present study will be guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the linguistic features of Korean, Japanese, and Finnish languages?
- (2) How does the English education differ in Korea, Japan, and Finland?
- (3) How are the linguistic and educational aspects related to the test-takers' TOEFL scores in the three countries?

## 2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The basic assumption underlying this study is that TOEFL scores reflect linguistic and educational environments which vary by social context from one domain to another. Therefore, EFL takes on different forms and functions in different social settings. I here provide a synthesis of a range of perspectives on TOEFL scores as a result of the linguistic and educational acts, including ESL versus EFL, a theory of language, and previous studies on TOEFL and related studies.

### 2.1 ESL versus EFL

As a starting point, it is important to distinguish between and ESL and EFL context, as the three countries in this study are situated in the natural setting of EFL contexts. ESL normally

refers to the language teaching context where English prevails in national government, education, media, and commerce. For instance, English is considered to be ESL for native speakers of other languages in the USA and the UK, irrespective of the predominant language of people's local neighborhoods. The term EFL, on the other hand, is applied to English where it does not prevail as at least one of the official languages of national government, education, media, and commerce, irrespective of how widespread the actual use of English is in the community (Berman, 1995). Essentially the terms differentiate the degree of salience of English in the learner's environment and the importance of the language in the activities of daily life. In this sense, English in the three countries, Korea, Japan, and Finland, in this study is unquestionably a foreign language by definition.

It is generally thought that different teaching methods reflect the needs of learners in these two situations. Stern (1983) states that the lack of environmental deficiency support in foreign language learning requires compensatory measures in the classroom, and he attributes the more formal foreign language teaching methodology to this environmental deficiency. Ellis (1985) confirms that the less 'natural setting' of the foreign language classroom generally reveals a different methodology from its second language counterpart. Less negotiation of meaning and a smaller range of discourse functions are likely to take place there. Thus, the foreign language classroom is seen to uphold a tradition of English instruction that is intrinsically different from that of first language - perhaps more like exercises in spelling, grammar, and factual recall than a creative response to a rhetoric problem (Mohan & Lo, 1985). Perpignan (2000) differentiates the language instruction needs of ESL and EFL students: ESL students or those with more exposure outside class can benefit perhaps just as well from instruction in the medium of their first language, whereas EFL students with less exposure should have the benefit of instruction in English. I suggest that Perpignan's perspective on differences between the instructions of ESL and EFL offers important insights and methodological principles for this study on the TOEFL takers in the three EFL countries. However, Perpignan's consideration of the difference between ESL and EFL is just for the study of feedback in a language classroom in the Israel context rather than incorporating linguistic and educational aspects of several EFL countries.

In the existing research, the overwhelming weight of the differentiation between ESL and EFL has been on a specific teaching area or approach. I rather believe that relatedness of TOEFL scores needs to be conceptualized with a wider range of aspects, beyond simply a certain type of teaching areas or approach. For this reason, I am more concerned with the whole picture, combining linguistic features, English curriculum, and TOEFL scores in three OECD countries.

### 2.2 A Theory of Language

Since the native languages of TOEFL-takers in Korea, Japan, and Finland are different from one another, a language theory that applied to the native languages of the test-takers' and English can provide a useful conceptual framework to understand language learning. Central to this framework is the undergirding idea of universal grammar, drawing on generative

linguistic theory. Cook and Newson (1996) relate universal grammar to language learning:

Universal grammar is a theory of knowledge, not of behavior; its concern is with the internal structure of the human mind. The nature of this knowledge is inseparable from the problem of how it is acquired; a proposal for the nature of language knowledge necessitates an explanation of how such knowledge came into being. Universal grammar theory holds that the speaker knows a set of principles that apply to all languages, and parameters that vary within clearly defined limits from one language to another (p. 2, cited in Snow, 1998).

In this same vein, with specific reference to second language learning, White (1988) argues that "a second language learner, like the first language learner, comes equipped to language acquisition with specific linguistic universals which limit the possibilities of grammar construction" (p.54). Liceras (1986) uses universal grammar theory to suggest two different notions, what she calls "learners' perception of language distance" (p. 161) and "distance between the native and nonnative grammar" (p. 162), to identify relative 'distance' between the native and target languages of the learner. Lett and O'Mara (1990) classify 45 languages into four categories of difficulty. For example, they argue that Swahili (Category I) is easier for native speakers of English to learn than German (Category II), and Russian (Category III) is more difficult for them than Hindi (Category II). Snow (1967) suggest that, syntactically, Frisian, Dutch, and German are progressively distant from English in his study which focuses on the relatedness of rules governing the pattern of modal auxiliary expressions in these four languages.

The above studies measure the interlingual distance with a synchronic (cross-sectional) way rather than a diachronic (longitudinal) way with respect to the languages involved. In order to compensate this limitation, the relatedness between languages will be measured by exploring the language trees of Korean, Japanese, and Finnish in this study.

In the context of the arguments above, it is hypothesized that the ease with which a second language is acquired is relative rather than absolute, depending on its degree of relatedness to the learner's native language. Thus, an English speaker might find German or Spanish relatively easy to learn, other things equal, while a native speaker of Hebrew might find Arabic easier to learn than would the English speaker. Likewise, a Korean might find Japanese easier to learn than Arabic, German, or Spanish.

### **2.3 Previous Studies on TOEFL and Related Studies**

Studies on the TOEFL and related areas are scanty, and a very small number, four, of studies have dealt with different issues concerned with TOEFL, respectively. For instance, Chalhoub-Deville and Turner (2000) discussed reliability and validity considerations salient to three English as a second language admission tests - the Cambridge certificate exams, International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and TOEFL-computer-based test. They indicated that the scores obtained from these assessments are used to help make critical

decisions that affect test-takers' lives, providing high quality information. Al-Musawi and Al-Ansari (1999) examined the multivariate relationships of the TOEFL and the First Certificate of English (FCE), and determined whether 86 Bahrain students' total score on the TOEFL or their overall score on the FCE tends to be a better predictor of their success at the university as measured by the overall grade-point average (GPA). The findings in their study show that the multi-variate prediction of the GPA from the scores on the FCE was very accurate, whereas TOEFL test did not appear to be an effective predictor of students' academic achievement at university level, particularly when English was being taught as a foreign language.

There was research on the design and evaluation of a computer-based TOEFL tutorial (Jamieson, Taylor, Kirsch, and Eignor, 1998), having with 1,169 learners. In their study, the experiences of the participants were characterized in terms of timing and performance data, as well as self-reported attitudes. Lastly, Snow (1998) observed in his study that adults' success in learning English measured by TOEFL scores was regressed as a function of GNP per capita, share of foreign trade in GNP, population taking the TOEFL and the relatedness of English to one's native language. These four studies focused on comparison the TOEFL with other language tests, classroom implementation, and variables for a successful learning of English rather than dealing with both linguistic and educational factors for successful TOEFL scores which could be significant in organizing effective English education.

## **3. METHOD**

### **3.1 Data Collection**

In this study, survey method was adopted since the aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between the TOEFL scores and the existing situations of language and education in three nations. The data were gathered through document analysis of the special reports on English education and curriculums of foreign countries provided by Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE), websites of ETS, and literature research. The data on the research on 2008 international education (Research report No. 2008-3), the educational curriculums of Japan and Finland, and 2006 English curriculum of Korea were examined and compared in terms of the reports' elements: objectives and current situations of English education, number of English lessons a week, and learning-teaching content.

### **3.2 Framework for Data Analysis**

Clark and Ivanic (1997) argue that language use is embedded in social context. In order to integrate a description of test-takers' TOEFL scores with a description of its social and educational contexts, I synthesized a framework which I call 'TOEFL scores and context.' This framework is developed from the "discourse as text, interaction, and context" (p. 25) advocated by Fairclough (1989). According to Fairclough, language is the way it is because it serves three elements: text, interaction, and social context. Fairclough explains that a text is affected by the processes of production and interpretation that

create it, and these processes are also in turn affected by social conditions of production and interpretation within which the participants are situated. The outer layer is what distinguishes it from many other views of language. That is, social context contains "not only the local circumstances in which people are communicating, but also the social, cultural and political climate within which this communication takes place. The most important aspects of the social context are the relations of power that exist in it" (p. 11).

I replaced the 'text' in Fairclough's diagram with 'TOEFL scores' instead of eliminating it in order to apply the diagram to this study, as presented in Fig. 1. The degree of salience of English, educational environment, and other linguistic elements in the countries of TOEFL test-takers can also be regarded as parts of the social context in the diagram.

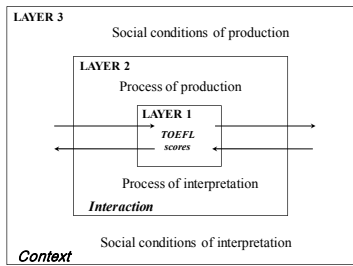


Fig. 1. TOEFL scores and context

The advantage of Fairclough's diagram is that it illustrates graphically how the TOEFL scores are embedded in the processes and social force that produce them (Lee, Y., 2008). In this sense, Fairclough's framework seems to be useful for the present study where students might experience different ways of language learning in preparing the TOEFL test in their communities. In analyzing data for the description of students' TOEFL scores and the linguistic and educational contexts around them, Fairclough's (1989) function of language seems to be useful as it reflects the complexity of language learning and interactive nature of linguistic and educational environments. The arrows in Fig. 1 show the role of language: meaning-making in individual TOEFL scores connects directly with the reproduction or contestation of values and beliefs about social reality and power relations.

**4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

To answer to the research questions, this section deals with three issues which relate to the three nations, Korea, Japan, and Finland: test-takers' TOEFL scores, language lineage and English education.

**4.1 TOEFL scores of Korean, Japanese, and Finnish**

TOEFL was converted from a paper-and-pencil (P&P) to a computer-based test (CBT) in 1998. The test was changed again to an internet-based test (iBT) in 2005 and started from the USA. In September 2005, TOEFL-iBT rolled out in specific areas around the world, and the TOEFL program is progressively implementing the iBT in the remaining areas. TOEFL includes four sections: Listening, Structure/Writing

combined, Reading in CBT, and Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing in iBT. The present study focuses on both the TOEFL-CBT and TOEFL-iBT because the test-takers' scores of the three countries, Korea, Japan, and Finland, came from the both types of TOEFL carried out from 2000 to 2007.

A major difference between the TOEFL and other tests is the computer delivery system and the adaptive algorithm in the Listening and Structure sections. An adaptive test differs from a traditional, linear test in that an item is selected based on a test-taker's performance on previous items. Ideally, this type of test optimizes the testing situation by targeting each test-taker's ability level (Chalhoub-Deville & Deville, 1999; Alderson, 2000). Table 1 and Table 2 present average TOEFL scores of the test-takers whose native languages are Korean, Japanese, and Finnish.

Table 1. TOEFL-iBT scores of Korean, Japanese, and Finnish (2005 - 2007)  
(Source: <http://www.ets.org/toefl>)

Nation	2007(iBT)					Converted CBT score
	R(30)	L(30)	Sp.(30)	W(30)	Total(120)	
Korea	20	20	18	20	77	210
Japan	16	16	15	18	65	183
Finland	24	27	23	24	98	247

Nation	2005-2006(iBT)					Converted CBT score
	R(30)	L(30)	Sp.(30)	W(30)	Total(120)	
Korea	17	19	17	19	72	200
Japan	15	17	15	17	65	183
Finland	24	26	23	24	97	243

Note) R: Reading, L: Listening, Sp.: Speaking, W: Writing

Table 2. TOEFL-CBT scores of Korean, Japanese, and Finnish (2000 - 2005)  
(Source: <http://www.ets.org/toefl>)

Nation	Cata.	Test-taker	2004-2005(CBT)			Total(300)
			L(30)	St./W(30)	R(30)	
Korea		102,340	21	21	22	215
Japan		82,438	18	19	20	191
Finland		752	27	25	26	257

Nation	Cata.	Test-taker	2003-2004(CBT)			Total(300)
			L(30)	St./W(30)	R(30)	
Korea		85,010	20	21	22	213
Japan		83,093	18	19	20	190
Finland		629	26	25	25	255

Nation	Cata.	Test-taker	2002-2003(CBT)			Total(300)
			L(30)	St./W(30)	R(30)	
Korea		73,093	19	21	22	207
Japan		84,254	18	19	19	186
Finland		667	26	25	26	255

Nation	Cata.	Test-taker	2001-2002(CBT)			Total(300)
			L(30)	St./W(30)	R(30)	
Korea		50,311	19	20	21	202
Japan		60,746	17	19	19	183
Finland		771	26	24	25	249

Nation	Cata.	Test-taker	2000-2001(CBT)			Total(300)
			L(30)	St./W(30)	R(30)	
Korea		18,839	20	20	20	200
Japan		21,636	19	19	19	188
Finland		798	26	24	25	250

Note) L: Listening, St/W: Structure/Writing, R: Reading

It is notable that the number of Korean test-takers rapidly increased from 18,839 in 2000 to 102,340 in 2005. This reflects that there are a growing number of people who prepare TOEFL for the purpose of studying or working both abroad and in society year by year. In addition, Korean test-takers' TOEFL scores were gradually increased, showing 200 in 2000 to 215 in 2005 in CBT, and 72 in 2005 to 77 in 2007 in iBT. This can be presumably related to the continuous investment and interests toward the English education in the Korean society (Lee, Y., 2003).

Finnish test-takers consistently gained greatly high scores, and Japanese examinees showed the lowest scores among the three groups of native language. Out of the four areas of English skills, the scores in Listening part between Korean and Finnish test-takers showed the biggest gap, reaching up to average 7 points, than any other parts which show a gap of average 4 points. This can be resulted from the Finnish social context in which people are easily exposed to a great deal of TV programs televised in English from their childhood (Research report No. 2008-3, KICE, 2008). Meanwhile, Korean test-takers obtained around 2 points more in all of the parts than Japanese examinees.

It is interesting to see that the gap of the scores of these three nations' test-takers is similar in each year rather than showing any change of rank. This indicates that the linguistic, educational, and social contexts in these three countries, which can affect TOEFL scores has little change during the period. For instance, in Korea, the 7<sup>th</sup> educational curriculum that aimed at 'communicative activities' was introduced in 1999 and developed into the revised curriculum in 2007, which included a little change. On the other hand, all of the examinees of the three countries obtained lower scores in the iBT than in the CBT in considering the converted total scores of iBT, which reflects that TOEFL-iBT is more difficult than TOEFL-CBT for test-takers.

#### 4.2 Language lineage

A measure of the relative distance or relatedness between English and a TOEFL test-taker's native language can be belonged to the social context in Fairclough's (1989) view, because it relates to foreign language learning in EFL contexts. In order to examine the relative distance or relatedness between English and other languages, the family tree of Indo-European (I-E) language is chosen as a diachronic indicator based on the relative positions of English and the native languages of TOEFL test-takers, and I call it the 'language lineage.' The most obvious cleavage appears to be the distinction between I-E and non-I-E languages. Ruhlen (1987) suggests that "even a modest amount of lexical evidence allows one to distinguish I-E from non-I-E languages, and this distinction is so sharp that there are in fact no extant languages whose membership in I-E is in doubt (p. 6)."

The lineage of the language of Korean has not been clearly identified so far in the field of language history. Although it is believed that Korean would possibly belong to Ural-Altai, this argument remains to be doubt and an unrecognized area. Nevertheless, it is assumed that Korean belongs to the same language tree which includes Turkish, Mongol, and Tungus, and Korean is close to Tungus among these three languages.

Virtually, Korean is known as a single language and thus assumed that it has been changed without a violent shaking (Lee, I.S., 1997; C. Shon & D. Lee, D., 2004).

In respect to Japanese language, there exist no agreed theories despite a number of arguments which relate Japanese to other language lineages. For example, it is mentioned with mainly two suggestions. That is, firstly, Japanese might be related to a family tree of a northern language. Secondly, it belongs to the same family tree as the languages in the southern part such as Tibetan, Burmese, and May-Polynesian. However, it is not easy to find any possible evidence of these (Migrants Language Center, [http://smlc.kr/xe\\_00/info\\_jp](http://smlc.kr/xe_00/info_jp), 2010).

Finnish is a member of the Baltic-Finnic subgroup of the Finno-Ugric group of languages which in turn is a member of the Uralic family of languages. The Baltic-Finnic subgroup also includes Estonian and other minority languages spoken around the Baltic Sea. Several theories exist as to the geographic origin of Finnish and the other Uralic languages, but the most widely held view is that they originated from a Proto-Uralic language somewhere in the boreal forest belt around the Ural Mountains region and/or the bend of the middle Volga. The strong case for Proto-Uralic is supported by common vocabulary with regularities in sound correspondences, as well as by the fact that the Uralic languages have many similarities in structure and grammar (Nordic news, 2007; Pertti, 1985).

According to Snow (1998), Indo-European languages are historically closer to English than are any of the non-I-E languages. Snow assigned specific values, using numbers 1 to 7, in order to describe the relatedness of a TOEFL candidate's native language to English, which reflects the historical relationship hierarchy. All proposed Indo-European tree structures show the language groups Germanic, Romance, and Slavic branching from the I-E root with no hierarchical distinctions as to relatedness. If so, it is feasible to assert that the Romance (such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian) languages are more closely related to English than are the Slavic languages (such as Russian and Polish). I-E languages or language families not in this hierarchy (such as Baltic, Celtic, or Indo-iranian) are classified as being more distant from English than any but the non-I-E languages. Taken together, these considerations imply the historical relationship hierarchy and the "specific value of relatedness to English" (Snow, 1998, p. 167) as follows:

English>Dutch(7)>German(6)>Scandinavian(5)>Romance(4)>Slavic(3)>other Indo-European(2)>non-Indo-European(1)

Finnish is non-I-E language although it is spoken in Europe, and both Korean and Japanese spoken in Asia are also non-I-E languages. The value of relatedness to English of these three languages is all 1 out of 7 as shown in the above. This indicates that these three languages' familiarity with English is equally the lowest one in all of the languages. That is, the languages Korean, Japanese, and Finnish are all far distant from English and receive little support on historical grounds from the I-E family tree. However, it is notable that Swedish, one of North Germanic languages which belong to Indo-European languages, used to be an official language of Finland and is still used officially with another official language, Finnish (Nordic news,

2007; Pertti, 1985). This can be a yardstick to provide an evidence to show why Finnish test-takers' TOEFL scores are higher than those of Korean and Japanese in this study. Nevertheless, more elements need to be addressed for disclosing the factors which influence the TOEFL scores of test-takers whose languages are Korean, Japanese, and Finnish in more detail. English education in the three countries can be one of these elements.

### 4.3 English Education

In this study, English curriculum context is confined to a course of English and number of English lessons a week in primary and middle schools where compulsory education is provided in each of the three countries. Table 3 shows a summary of English curriculum including number of English lessons a week in the compulsory education, annual school days, and features of English education based on the research report entitled 'Project 2008-3' carried out by Korea Institute for Curriculum Evaluation (KICE) in 2008.

Table 3. English curriculum in Korea, Japan, and Finland

Years	Primary school						Middle school			Annual school days	Feature of English education
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3		
Korea	-	-	1h	1h	2h	3h	3h			205	A key of success
Japan	-	-	-	-	-	(1h from 2011)*	3h (4h from 2012)*			175	Introduction of a new curriculum
Finland	-	-	2h	2h / 2h(L2)			2h / 2h(L2)	3h / 2h(L2)		190	Theme-based curriculum

Note) h: hour

-: no lesson

The indication \* for (1h from 2011) and (4h from 2012) means a future curriculum rather than the current one.

The most salient feature is that both Korea and Finland adopt English education from Year 3 in primary school, whereas English is not currently taught in primary school in Japan. In Korea, English education in primary school was firstly started with one lesson a week for Years 3 and 4 and two lessons for Years 5 and 6 in 1997. English is taught three hours a week in all grades in middle school, and the annual school days in primary and middle schools are the most, 205 days, among the three countries. In 1999, the 7<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum was introduced with the need of training talented people who are able to correspond to the globalization. Its main purpose was to develop learners' communicative ability with the method of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the classroom. This reflects the great importance of education in the Korean society where particularly English is regarded as one of the most crucial elements for individual's success at schools, work places, and even in social life. Thus, most Korean students devote themselves to English, pursuing various modes of attendance such as large and small groups at institutes or individual private

lessons, in addition to the supplementary classes provided by schools (Lee, Y., 2003). These continuous interests and demand for English seem to relate to the gradual improvement of the TOEFL scores obtained by the Korean test-takers during 2000 – 2007 (see Tables 1 and 2).

In Finland, students are taught a foreign language in addition to English from Year 4 in primary school, which is very unusual in Korea and in Japan. This seems to reflect that Finnish students tend to be positive and confident in learning second or foreign languages, and the highest TOEFL scores can be the evidence of this assumption. According to KICE (2008) report, English curriculum in Finland emphasizes learning experiences around major issues, themes, and ideas that define understanding of a discipline and provides connections across disciplines. That is, themes and ideas are selected based on careful research of the primary area of study to determine the most worthy and important ideas for curriculum development, and a theme can be consistent with a reformed curriculum specifications in key areas. This is associated with the "integrated curriculum model" (VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2009, p. 13) which is a comprehensive and cohesive curricular framework which employs good curricular design and considers the features of the disciplines under study. The high level of scores gained by Finnish test-takers in every part of the TOEFL reflects these educational environments.

On the other hand, the English education in primary school has not been established so far in Japan unlike that of Korea and Finland. Even the number of annual school days is the least, 175 days among the three countries. These situations seem to be related to the lower scores in the TOEFL than those of Korean and Finnish in Tables 1 and 2. According to a report entitled 'Education for Japanese who are able to speak English' presented in the International Education Forum in 2008, English is going to be taught 1 hour a week (35 hours a year) for Years 5 and 6 in Japanese primary school from April, 2011. In addition, the annual English lessons will be increased from the current 3 to 4 hours a week (from 105 to 140 hours a year) in middle school from April, 2012. This reflects that language education appears to occupy a far more important position in Japan than before in many aspects. For example, as Sakuragi (2008) believes, virtually all students in Japan start their foreign language, particularly English, study by the time they enter middle school, and many parents try to give their children a competitive edge by starting English earlier at juku (private 'cram schools'). Since English is one of the required subjects of entrance examinations for most high schools and universities, students must spend a considerable amount of time studying English to gain entrance into desirable schools. The vast majority of university students are required to study English. After college, fluency in English is considered as an important skill for advancing one's career as well as commanding considerable social prestige.

All of the educational circumstances in the three nations can be related to the 'social context' in Fairclough's (1989) view because English ability can establish relations of power, interests, values, and beliefs, having their own identities through the communication with people in each of the society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined firstly the TOEFL scores of the test-takers whose native languages are Korean, Japanese, and Finnish, and, secondly, how the linguistic and educational environments in the three countries, Korea, Japan, and Finland, affect their test-takers' TOEFL scores. The Finnish test-takers' TOEFL scores were always the highest, and Japanese test-takers showed the lowest ones. The scores obtained by Korean candidates showed a continuous progress with the gradually increasing number of test-takers unlike the cases of Finland and Japan from 2000 to 2007.

The language lineage of Korean, Japanese, and Finnish was not enough to explain why certain native language users could obtain higher scores than those of other candidates, because all of the three languages belonged to the non-Indo-European family tree, having the relatedness value 1. That is, these languages are all far distant from English and receive little support on historical grounds from the Indo-European group.

Instead, the context of English education in these three countries provided clear evidence in examining the relationship between certain factors and TOEFL scores. The extreme concerns and investment toward English education in Korea led to the gradual improvement in test-takers' English proficiency, and the TOEFL scores during 2000-2007 are evidence of this. Despite the importance of English in both education and society like the situation in Korea, relatively short annual school days and unestablishment of early English education in primary school seem to result in the lower scores of Japanese candidates' in the TOEFL than those of Korean and Finnish in Finland, the special language education such as foreign language learning besides English from primary school and adoption of the integrated curriculum model could be related to the highest TOEFL scores.

The findings in this study imply that English education and the social context surrounding it are the main factors which affect the TOEFL scores of the test-takers in a country. The cases of the three countries in this study are evidence of this, because the policies of English education and the social practices of English were strongly related to the TOEFL scores. This can be explained with the diagram 'language and context' (see section 3.2) in which TOEFL scores are associating with the social and cultural climate within which English practice, production, and its interpretation take place. In this sense, it would be beneficial to have the 'Revised National Curriculum' established in February, 2007 to develop more effective English education, compensating the weaknesses of the 7<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum (<http://www.kice.re.kr/kice/contents/c002/view>). From this process, it is necessary for English teachers to establish more effective Listening and Speaking practices than before in the classroom to help students obtain high scores in the TOEFL-iBT. Furthermore, English teachers, policy makers, and practitioners need to understand how public English education can be fulfilled for learners' needs and increasing demands of work places in the academic and social contexts in Korea.

Of course, an analysis of three particular ethnic groups and their TOEFL scores with a few variables does not yield sweeping implications which are generalizable to all relations

between linguistic and educational aspects, and TOEFL scores. With a large number of sampling which includes a variety of OECD countries and contexts, the research would have shown the results that could be generalized to the accounting factors affecting TOEFL scores. Nevertheless, this study may enable us to gain new insights into the role of English education in EFL contexts. The present study, therefore, suggests the need for a further study on what factors affecting TOEFL scores are in the European OECD countries that belong to the same Indo-European family tree in EFL contexts, focusing on a large number of members.

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