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## Perceptions of the Importance of Studying English among Average Korean University Students

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### Abstract

When students choose to undertake English studies, one might assume that their natural drive and curiosity for the subject would lead them. However, in Korea, my observation is that most students study English at the behest of some influential force or figure in their lives or that it is a compulsory requirement but not because it is their own earnest passion. This paper will investigate this phenomenon. I have surveyed 359 students directly at two average Korean universities regarding their personal feelings about the importance of learning English. I hope to determine whether, despite the hardships, they think it is worth the effort or if they are simply learning to please overzealous parents, school, and government administrators or prepare for the corporate sector's current hiring requirements.

**Keywords:** Perceptions of English; Korean Students' Perceived Importance of English.

### 1.1 Korea's Tradition of Learning

Korea is often grouped with Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan in what the business and financial world have traditionally called the "Asian Tigers," as politically incorrect as that may be in today's intercultural milieu. Geert Hofstede, a psychologist who pioneered intercultural studies, teamed with social psychologist Michael Harris Bond to formulate a theory called "Confucian Dynamism," which attempted to pinpoint the reasons for the financial and industrial rise of those East Asian countries while countries of Southeast Asia were still foundering.

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To very simply summarize their findings, they concluded that these four cultures shared a similar trait not shared in Southeast Asia, the dominance of Confucian philosophy. Just as Europe's protestant work ethic had driven an industrial revolution, so had Confucianism, but without generating a wave of creative individualism. Instead, there was a collectivist culture where the leader and the group took precedence over the individual. Confucianism's emphasis on educating oneself as an essential lifelong effort toward finding "the Tao," which means the ultimate truth, the way, or perhaps even God or heaven, ironically drove technological advancement and the accumulation of wealth [1]. In Korea, specifically, before industrialization, the class of landed gentry, the Yangban, reinforced the Confucian worldview that the pursuit of knowledge is the highest human virtue. Still, that was not enough to transform a postwar Korea into an exporting industrial economy. The iron-fisted rule of Major-General Park Chung-hee seized power via a military coup in 1961 and pressed the country to become an industrial powerhouse. To achieve his goal, he needed to exalt and subsidize education, among many other elements, to create the human infrastructure to support the effort [2]. Import and export mandated the need to communicate effectively with business associates abroad. Being pragmatic, Koreans chose English as the most effective way to communicate globally with a single language [3].

### ***1.2 Learning English in Korea***

An article in the Korea Herald ran with the headline "Koreans' education zeal unparalleled globally." This is hyperbole, but there is a significant truth to the article. A Korean professor wrote the paper at the University of Wisconsin and listed statistics to back up the claim [4]. I have taught in Korean public schools for five years and at the university level for ten. I can personally vouch that there is a tremendous amount of time, effort, and money expended on school, university, and cram schools, which are private schools where students study math, science, and especially English, for what I'm sure feels like endless hours into the evening. Parents force kids to study for so many hours each day that it borders on abuse. It was termed "English Fever" in the first decade of the twenty-first century [5].

English ability is a way to enhance job applicants' chances of being hired by the most sought-after employers since most companies use standardized English test scores to screen prospects. To aid their children's chances, some wealthy parents send their kids to live in an English-speaking country for several years or have surgery performed on their kids to enhance their English pronunciation [5]. I knew a family who sent their son to a private school in Singapore for nearly his entire childhood and immediately afterward to the United States for a prestigious college education.

In the 1990's parents who could not afford to send their children to expensive language institutes garnered the sympathy of the government, which attempted to level the playing field with free government programs, one of them being an initiative to place a native English speaker in each public school to counteract "the English divide." This government intervention is why some people complain that English is a political tool rather than an issue of learning. It is why it has become a point of contention. Still, one of the actual reasons it is such a political lightning rod is because critics view it as a cultural threat [6].

The most notable program was called EPIK (English Program in Korea). It is still in operation. Its purpose is

not only to teach English. Its primary goal is acculturation in a Xenophobic culture [7]. It could not be anything other than that, considering that every teacher had hundreds of students. Acculturation is essential to language learning because language is culture [8]. There are nuances to language related to culture that only a native speaker can reveal. Furthermore, studies show that when a native speaker performs English instruction with adequate instruction time, students show more excellent acumen in broader, more accurate vocabulary choices, correct usage of collocated verbs, better grammar, and a keener ability to argue points of a personal nature [9].

Over the last few years, as anti-globalist reactionaries have taken the stage, resistance has mounted not just against that program but in all quarters of society touched by globalization. I believe it is the same dynamic occurring in other cultures worldwide [10]. The decline of the “English Fever” era among average Koreans has been an ongoing process [11]. A high-profile example has been the effort of certain government officials to shutter or decrease spending on the EPIK program based on its English outcomes rather than acculturation [12]. At times, the teachers defended themselves publicly, and rightly so, for over-packed classes, low frequency of student exposure due to the sheer volume of students, and being poorly equipped without the necessary books and materials [13].

Some native-speaking teachers reported being undermined by Korean staff. There is a resistance effort from Korean career teachers who resent foreigners for being given jobs that they feel belong to native Korean teachers even though the majority of Korean teachers don't have sufficient, if any, English ability [14]. Those same teachers complain that the foreigners are often given lighter loads than they are, even though they fail to consider the difficulty of navigating just a single day in an often-hostile culture being despised as an outsider who will never be accepted as a professional despite ability and credentials, a useless, replaceable part to be discarded on a whim [15].

Often native English speakers are thrown into blended classrooms of thirty, first through sixth graders without distinction regarding their age or conflicting developmental levels, not to mention the overwhelming class size, which by itself would prohibit teaching any English conversation. Usually, a conversation class requires small class sizes of six to ten students maximum of similar ability to have any educational value. There is also a terrible lack of exposure to each native English teacher, who is usually limited to seeing every student only one hour per week in groups like the ones just mentioned. Even a seasoned educator would have difficulty transcending that impossible environment. One wonders if Korean educators would consider teaching under such circumstances, which border on intentional sabotage. Veiled resistance to government programs is a documented problem in Korean educational circles [16]. Add to those hindrances community elements that disapprove of western acculturation, and we have a potent mix of educational chaos. Because of their interference, the government has even banned teaching English to first and second graders, prime language acquisition years, fearing that English will replace the Korean language, which is an unfounded belief [17].

Looking at all these problems logically, it is easy to conclude that combined, they can adversely affect students' experiences and, therefore, perceptions of the English educational process, teachers' instruction quality and availability, and the effectiveness of their programs. Why should we be concerned with students' or anyone else's perceptions? Because perception is everything! Perception defines outcomes. How someone feels about

anything drives their efforts for the better or worse. It is a crucial link to success in teaching or any endeavor [18]. As a former professor used to tell us in class, “If you can’t reach ‘em, you can’t teach ‘em.”

I would add that you could not even get ‘em in the classroom without a favorable perception, short of making English a required course, which it may have to be to survive on its own appeal. That is the purpose of my paper. I want to determine whether students think that English is a study worth undertaking without any pressure from an influential person.

### ***1.3 Added Obstacles to Favorable Perception***

Despite the loss of zeal for globalization, it is still an active force in Korean society. Likewise, a dislike for learning English does not change that it is useful for an industrial and technical economy. Companies still prefer to hire applicants with the highest English scores [3]. As a result, students face pressure from ambitious parents who map out their children’s future early in elementary school to begin their ascent to the pinnacle of future success.

Students often complain of lack of sleep due to twelve to fourteen hours a day of study with little or no recreation [19]. I tutored two boys in elementary school whose mother was so ambitious that she divided the living area of their family apartment into two classrooms with fully stocked, ceiling-high bookshelves and desks, having moved the family furniture out. As one tutor for one subject left, another would arrive. That continued until ten o’clock in the evening when the children did homework until a late bedtime, without a break, for six days a week. If a tutor does not give enough homework to keep the children’s nose to the grindstone, parents replace him/her with someone who will.

There is a tremendous work ethic that drives Korean success. It and Japan are still the only two countries in the world where people die at their desks from overworking themselves. But, where the media hype depicts wunderkinder, I see a point of diminishing returns on the educational frontlines. No person can keep up that pace without a decline in quality. As proof through comparison, Koreans worked the most hours in 36 countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Still, they were in the bottom third of the least productive. It is only logical. Even machines need downtime for maintenance and repairs [20]. There seems to be a tendency to push for quantity at the expense of sanity and quality. Students even commit suicide from the pressure [21]. From this, I conclude that there must be a balance and a strategy for a better-quality learning experience.

It is hard to change intransigent minds ingrained with stubborn habits, as I have learned. As a result, English still plays a significant role in the educational pressure-cooker. Students often complain about being forced to study English against their will. That may be true, but they are also forced to study many other subjects in the same way. I have heard students complain about the overall stress of all facets of the demands of the educational system, not only English [19]. That is why I want to determine how students feel about English as a subject. So, I got my information straight from the horse’s mouth.

### ***1.4 An Informal, Anonymous Survey***

I am not a statistician nor a mathematician. Please do not expect my survey to resemble a product that such a professional would produce. This is an informal inquiry administered by an educator attempting to be as accurate as possible. The survey was collected from universities that most Koreans would consider average. I do not believe that survey results from a top-tier university would accurately measure the overall Korean opinion on studying English anyway. I have an inkling its students would probably be biased in favor of learning English. I wanted my sample to be from an average, large student population for better reliability, so I collected the instruments from my classes over a period of a few years. I attempted to follow the advice of Geert Hofstede when writing my questions.

“In interpreting people’s statements about their values, it is important to distinguish between the desirable and the desired: how people think the world ought to be versus what people want for themselves. Questions about the desirable refer to people in general and are worded in terms of right/wrong, should/should not, agree/disagree, important/unimportant, or something similar. In the abstract, everybody is in favor of virtue and opposed to sin, and answers about the desirable express people’s views about what represents virtue and what corresponds to sin. The desired, on the contrary, is worded in terms of “you” or “me” and what we want for ourselves, including our less virtuous desires. The desirable bears only a faint resemblance to actual behavior, but even statements about the desired, although closer to actual behavior, do not necessarily correspond to the way people really behave when they have to choose [22].”

Hopefully, the questions I have devised evoked the “desired” rather than the “desirable.” Aside from that, I can rest assured that the students understood the questions and the choices. The survey questions were presented in both English and Korean. They were translated by a graduate student at Yonsei University who already held a bachelor’s degree in English translation from that school, so I have confidence that the questions are accurate and equal in both languages. A five-point Likert scale follows each question, like this:

Strongly Agree 매우 그렇다

Agree 그렇다

Neutral 그럭 저럭이다

Disagree 그렇지 않다

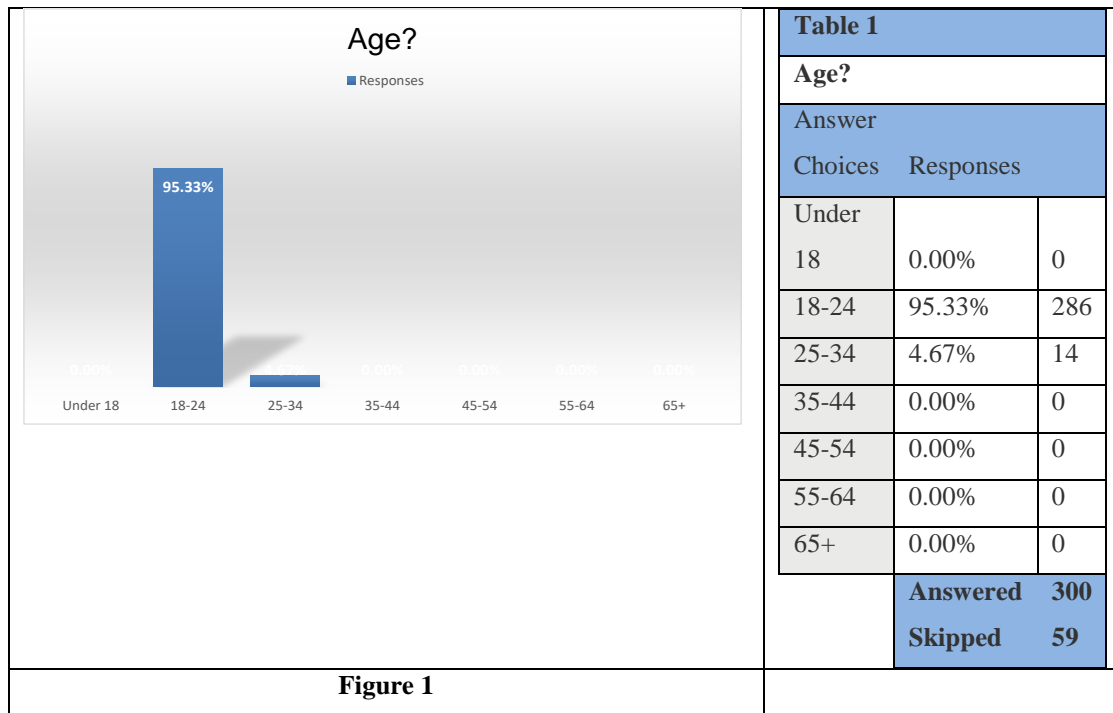
Strongly disagree 매우 그렇지 않다

I don’t know 잘 모르겠다

### **1.5 Key demographics**

**Age**

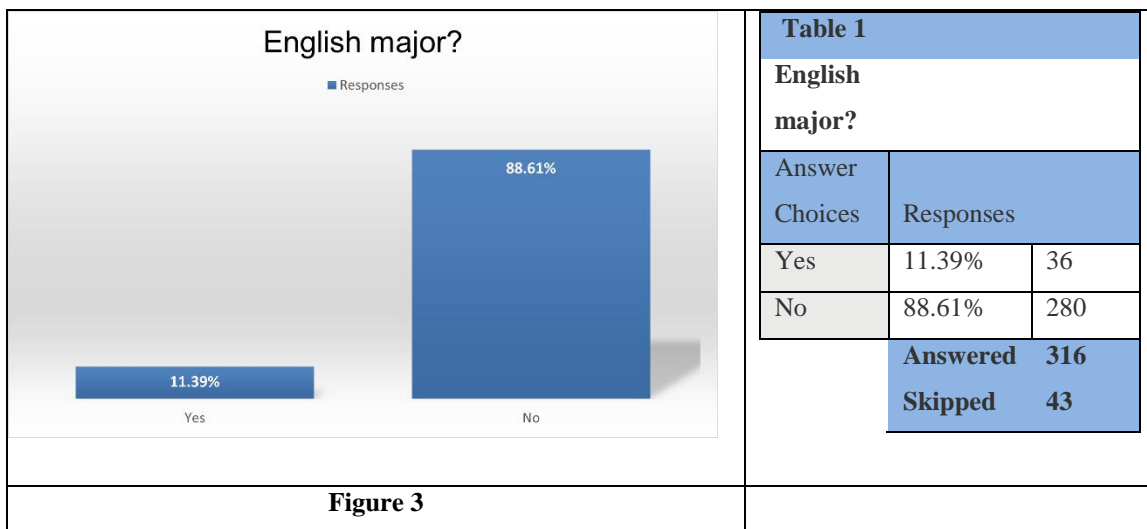
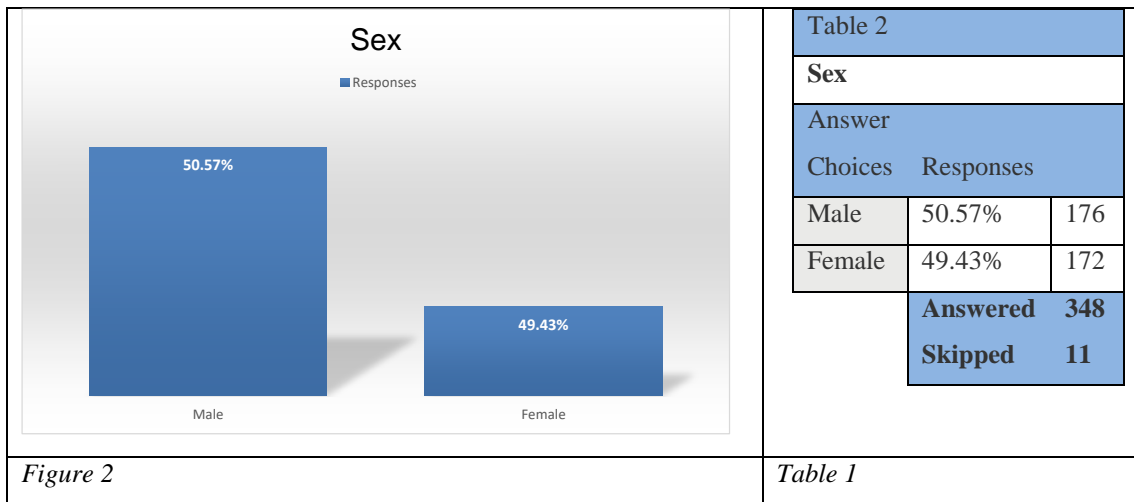
The first question addresses the issue of age. The results are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1. It is important to note that fifty-nine students skipped the question for whatever reason. However, apart from a single night course, all my classes were comprised of traditional students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, primarily first- and second-year college students. I do not believe that I have sufficient data to measure the non-traditional students. Therefore, I will limit my analysis to the predominant age group.



**Sex:** The second question addresses the issue of sex. The results can be found in Figure 2 and Table 2. At first glance, the graph creates the illusion that there is a large gap between males and females, when in fact, the table clearly shows that there were 178 males and 172 females, or 50.57% to 49.43%, respectively. The numbers are very nearly balanced. Given the overwhelming consistency of the agreement in the answers of the question data, it seems pointless to analyze separately based on sex. It would not reveal substantial differences given the numbers.

**Major Field of Study**

The final question about a simple set of demographics is to check to ensure that the results are not biased by an entire group of students who love English and have chosen it as their field of study. Please see Figure 3 and Table 3. One might argue that taking a survey in an English class about the popularity of English makes that effort moot. My response would be that the course is not an elective but a requirement. All students must take it regardless of their major. That means the chances are that there is a fair degree of a typical cross-section of opinion. There were a few English majors but just a marginal number, 38 out of 359, or 11.39%. It is not enough to bias the overall results unless the entire group of forty-three students who skipped the question is comprised of English majors, which is possible but highly unlikely.



### 1.6 Central Survey Questions

Now let's look at the heart of the survey. I asked questions about personal preference without regard to any other influential opinion. As Geert Hofstede suggested in the previous quote, I directed the question toward the student personally by using the word "you" in an attempt to get the "desired" answer rather than the "desirable."

The questions are very similar, each with a single variation. I partly did this to catch any wavering in students thinking that they must give the desirable answer rather than the desired one, their own opinion. Still, there is a reason to answer differently given one's feelings or beliefs because of the small change made to the meaning of each of the questions, which are as follows:

1. Personally, not depending on generally held beliefs, or what your boss, parents or teachers think, but in your own honest opinion, do you feel it's important to learn English? Then restated in Korean. 사회통념 또는

당신의 상사, 부모님, 선생님, 교수님들의 생각을 배제하고, 당신의 솔직한 의견으로 답할 때, 영어를 배우는 것이 중요하다고 생각하십니까?

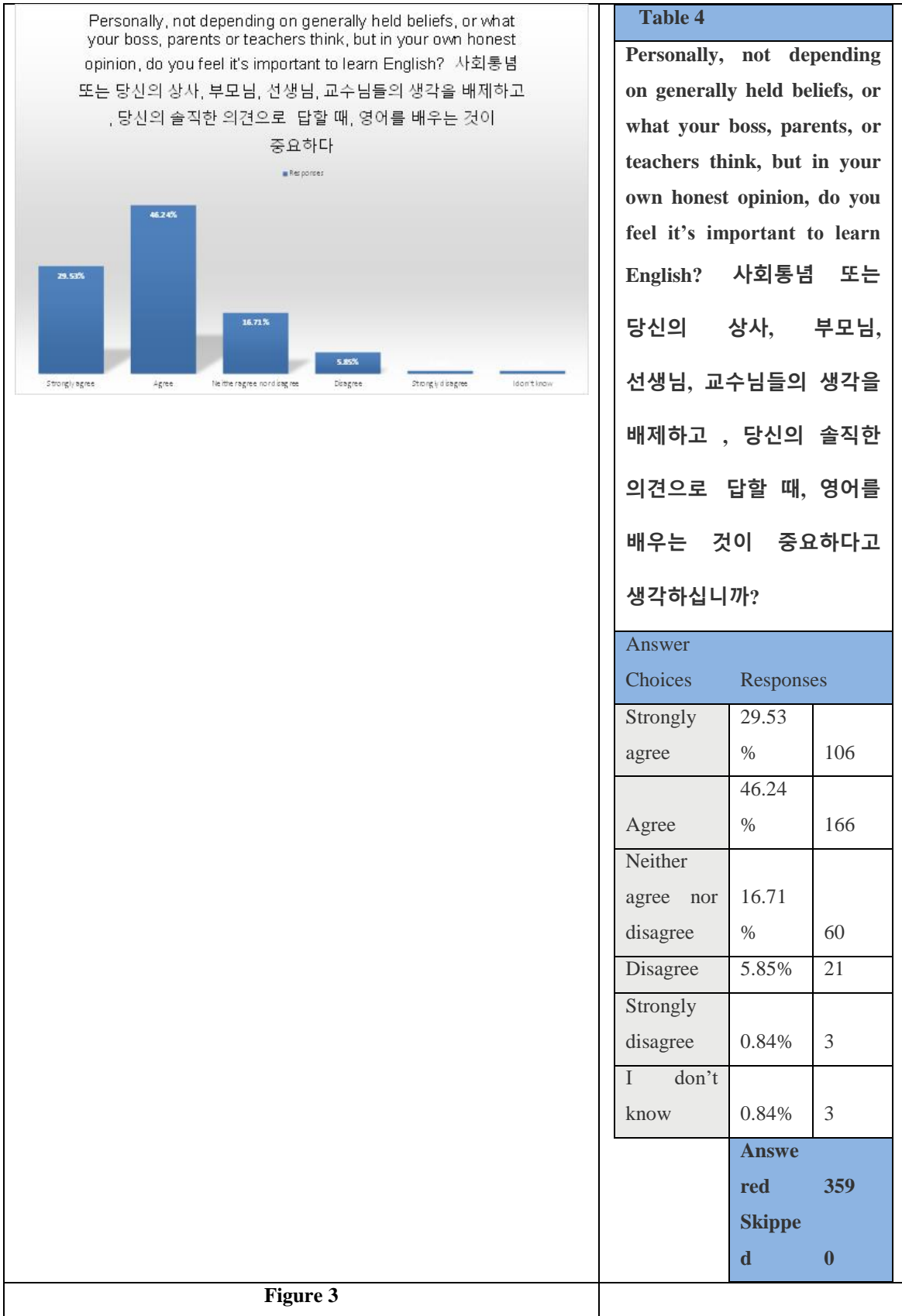
2. Personally, not depending on generally held beliefs, or what your boss, parents, or teachers think, but in your own honest opinion, do you truly believe that learning English will advance your career? Then restated in Korean. 사회통념 또는 당신의 상사, 부모님, 선생 또는 교수님들의 생각은 배제하고, 당신의 솔직한 의견으로 답할 때, 영어를 배우는 것이 정말 당신의 직업적 선택을 향상시켜 줄 수 있다고 생각하십니까?

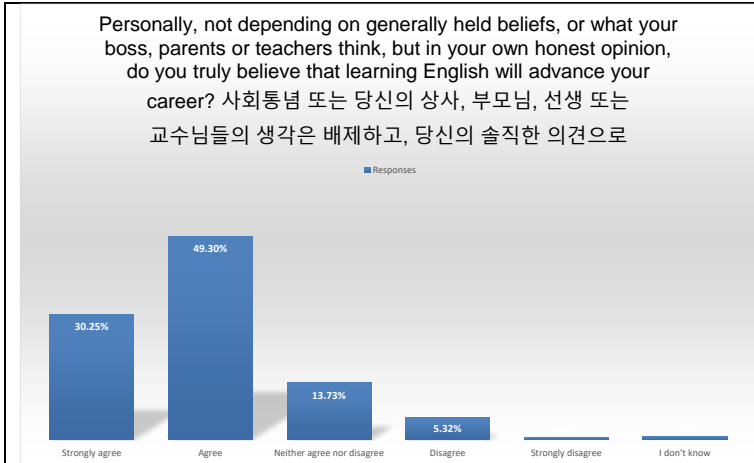
3. Personally, not depending on generally held beliefs, or what your boss, parents, or teachers think, but in your own honest opinion, do you truly believe that learning English will be useful to you in your lifetime? Then restated in Korean. 사회통념 또는 당신의 상사, 부모님, 선생 또는 교수님들의 생각은 배제하고 당신의 솔직한 의견으로 답할 때, 영어를 배우는 것이 당신의 인생 전반에 걸쳐서 정말 유용하다고 생각하십니까?

The survey was completely anonymous, given on the first day during the first fifteen minutes of class so that students could not form predetermined opinions based on my personality. I informed students that their answers had nothing to do with their grades. I did not force anyone to take it. All seemed willing. A few asked if they should write their names on the survey. I reminded them that I did not want to identify any student personally. I just wanted their opinions as a group. I reiterated verbally to please answer with their own opinions and not those of any influential person in their life.

The results are as follows in Figures 4-6 and Tables 4-6.





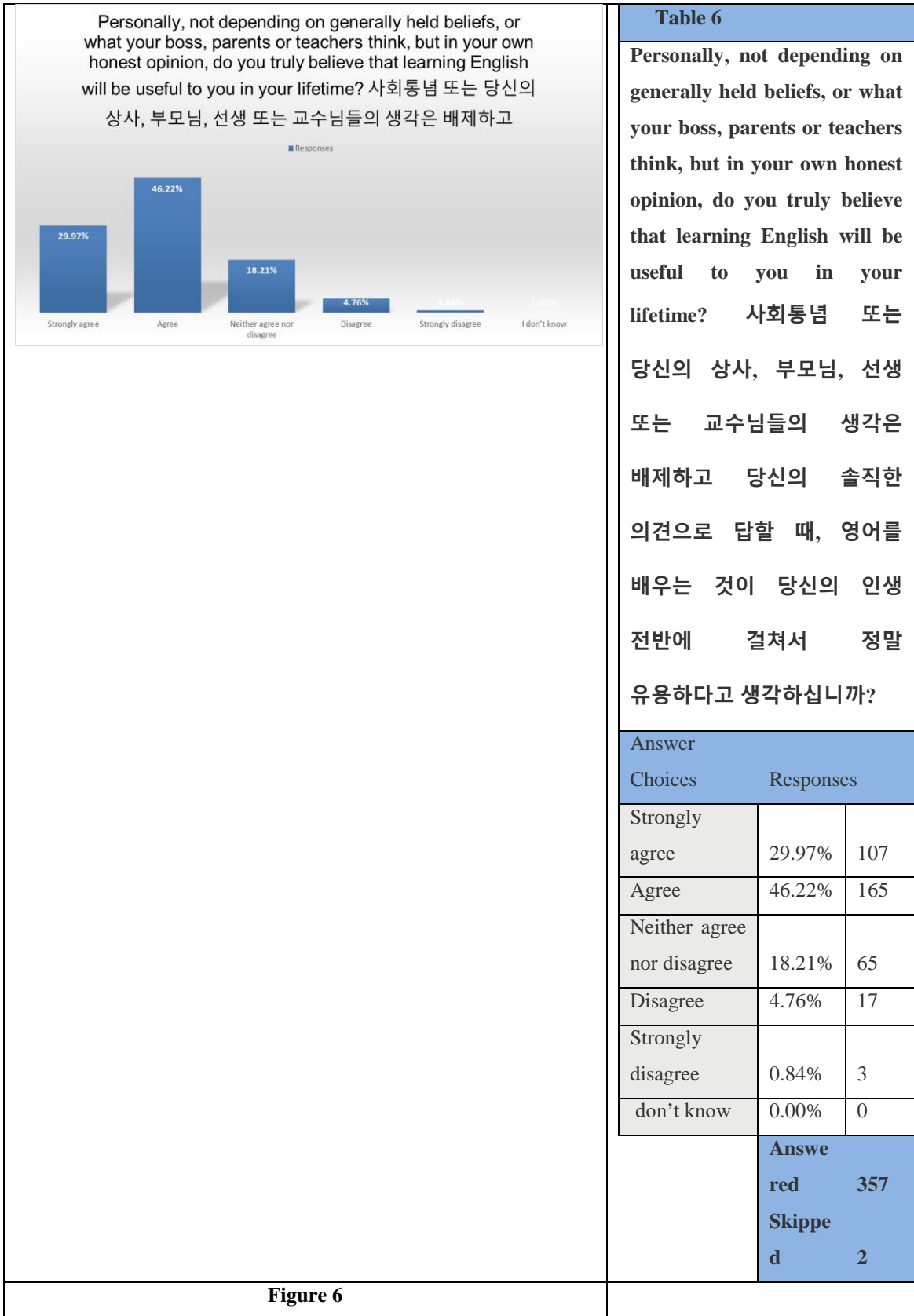


**Table 5**

Personally, not depending on generally held beliefs, or what your boss, parents, or teachers think, but in your own honest opinion, do you truly believe that learning English will advance your career? 사회통념 또는 당신의 상사, 부모님, 선생 또는 교수님들의 생각은 배제하고, 당신의 솔직한 의견으로 답할 때, 영어를 배우는 것이 정말 당신의 직업적 선택을 향상시켜 줄 수 있다고 생각하십니까?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	30.25%	10
Agree	49.30%	17
Neither agree nor disagree	13.73%	49
Disagree	5.32%	19
Strongly disagree	0.56%	2
I don't know	0.84%	3
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>7</b>
		<b>2</b>

**Figure 5**



**1.7 Results and Conclusions**

The predominantly positive answers given by students were surprising considering all the problems and the

stress the average student faces daily, the travails discussed at the beginning of the paper. That may be because I did not ask students if they “liked” studying English. Instead, I asked them if it was necessary and valuable. There is a big difference between the two. Most people hate taking their table scraps to the food disposal bin at their apartment building but still do because they realize what would happen if they did not.

Furthermore, “like” and “love” are such fickle, relative terms when describing an engaging, useful practice. Learning a skill is like a steady relationship with a partner. Both require patience and a lot of work. Some days you feel like you are in love. Some days are uneventful and dreary. Some days you are ready to give up in frustration. Still, if the person is a worthwhile partner, you stay even during the worst moments. Those are days when the words “like” and “love” are farthest from your mind, but the commitment to the value of the connection you share is what keeps you going. Even so, perhaps that is a weakness that I should address and follow up on to reevaluate.

Despite the potential weakness in my questions, 274 students out of 359, or 77.77%, still found that it is important to study English, while 284, or 79.55%, found it helpful to their careers, and 272, or 76.19%, believed English would be useful in their lifetimes. That is-- they agreed or strongly agreed. Those are consistent numbers, give or take a few percentage points. The highest percentage is regarding occupational advancement because students know studying is helpful to their careers due to the English test scores used in business hiring requirements. A few wavered on the belief that it was essential or would be useful at some point in their lives, but very few. It is important to remember that these surveys spanned a few years. That makes the consistency of the numbers even more remarkable.

There are still those 60 (16.71%), 49 (13.73%), and 65 (18.21%) students who are ambivalent about all three questions, respectively. However, that is still a hopeful disposition. If the right teacher or professor finds them, they could be persuaded to pass into the group that finds English important or valuable. On the other hand, with all the politics and harmful practices, they could also have a negative experience that causes them to lose out on learning a valuable skill. It could mean the difference between connecting with another person at a critical moment or missing out.

Then we have those very few negative 27 (7.53%), 24 (6.72%), and 20 (5.62%) students who have either had a negative experience with an English teacher or have been made to feel incompetent or embarrassed. Or it could just be something that holds no interest to that student, like NFL football for me. In any case, as educators, we must be gentle, understanding, and merciful to our students while holding firm to necessary educational standards.

I have found that instead of telling a person they have made a mistake, it is better to lead the student to the correct answer together, which leaves them on a positive, especially in a classroom setting and perhaps even more critically in Asia where people have historically committed suicide for making significant errors. That is my observation. I am also working on a fascinating survey that reveals how students feel about making errors to shed a more data-driven light on that possibility. In short, however, a careless ‘no’ could cut a sensitive student to the quick. I think it is essential to find ways to soften the negatives and make the most of helping a student do

the best possible work while making him or her feel less threatened by being wrong. All in all, the results have clearly shown that while the problems of politics, cultural conflict, and sabotage are essential issues to solve, serving the student is the ultimate goal. We need to look at how we can improve to ensure we do not make our students suffer even if we as teachers suffer directly due to some of the same problems mentioned in this paper. Misplaced grudges that affect the student only prove the detractors right in the students' eyes. We need to show the students that the malice is unfounded. Kindness and creative best practices will win allies. Currently, miraculously, despite all of the issues that beset us, we can look at the numbers in this survey and be pleased that we still have a chance to improve on all these challenging difficulties, despite all of our combined past failures.

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