

Shifts in English Proficiency in Korea

A Comparative Study of TOEFL Scores and Perceptions of
Public Education Between 2006 and 2012

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Abstract

Between 2006 and 2012, there was a notable increase in the mean TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores from ETS for Korea. This study was conducted to investigate the reasons behind this significant improvement, focusing on Korean students' English language proficiency and their perceptions of public English education. Ten students, divided into two age groups—early 20s and mid 20s—were selected to represent the change in English language proficiency between 2006 and 2012. Mini tests were administered, with the assumption that the early 20s group represented the 2012 TOEFL data and the mid 20s group represented the 2006 data. Notably, the oral proficiency of students in their early 20s was higher than their written test results. This outcome highlights the impact of Korea's new English education policy, which emphasizes communicative language skills. Students in their mid 20s exhibited lower self-esteem concerning their English competence, regardless of their actual abilities. This suggests that advanced proficiency does not always correlate with higher self-esteem. A positive discovery was that students in their early 20s held more favorable views on public education compared to the older group, indicating a general improvement in public educational standards.



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I. Introduction

English has established itself as a global lingua franca, bridging communication gaps in our interconnected world (Graddol, 1997; Jenkins, 2007). Recognizing this global trend, English proficiency has become a paramount concern for students in Korea. This is due in large part to the emphasis placed by universities and employers on English skills and standardized test scores from exams such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

In 2012, Korean students achieved a remarkable feat. Their average TOEFL score was 84 out of 120. This was not only four points higher than the global average of 80 (as seen in Figure 1) but also marked a significant 12-point improvement from their 2007 average.

This study aims to delve into the factors contributing to this impressive surge in scores over a relatively short span.

II. Literature Review

1. Transitioning from the GTM(Grammar Translation Method) as a structural method to the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in the interactive method

2. Korean English education policy

In the 6th education amendment (2001), CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) was first adopted from the Korean Ministry of Education and started teaching English through English instruction, which encourages the use of English in English classes (Korea Ministry of Education and Science Technology). However, students' communicative competence was repeatedly issued and finally, the 7th English amendment was passed in 2008 and implemented in 2011.

3. Inadequate exposure and misdirected parental expectations

Carl Blyth (2003) has written that language professionals should look to functioning bilinguals within various language communities as models for language learners rather than to native-speakers. When learners compare themselves and are compared to native speakers, they will inevitably come up short. (Horwitz, 2007; Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Horwitz 1988).

4. Significance of self-confidence in language learning

It is crucial for teacher or learner to recognize how learners feel about themselves and about language learning

5. Necessity of teacher education for CLT

Teachers' limited English proficiency in spoken language has been apparent in Korea, as their entire English education experiences were mostly form-focused, in which reading and grammar were mainly taught by GTM (Grammar Translation Method).

III. Problems and Rationales

2006		
	Korea	Mean
Reading	17	19
Listening	19	20
Speaking	17	19
Writing	19	20
Total	72	78

Effects from the 6th and 7th English Curriculum Amendment

Excessively obsessed English education throughout the country

2012		
	Korea	Mean
Reading	21	20
Listening	21	19
Speaking	20	20
Writing	22	21
Total	84	80

This 2012 TOEFL test result is quite remarkable considering the changes of other nations such as Hong Kong or India where English is spoken as a second language unlike Korea (Figure 2). Accordingly, using this data as a framework of my research, I will see whether these secondary data correspond with my research.

Figure 1. Korean's TOEFL Score Improvement

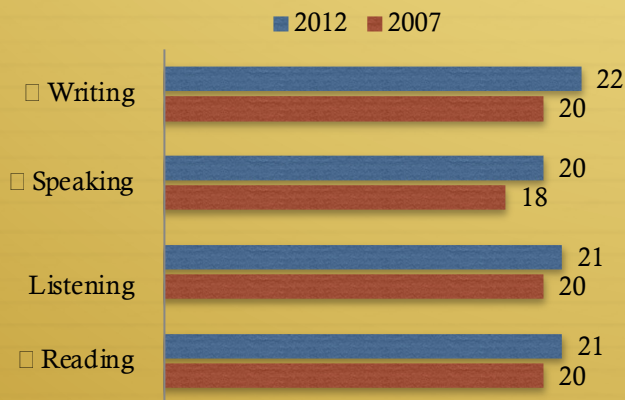
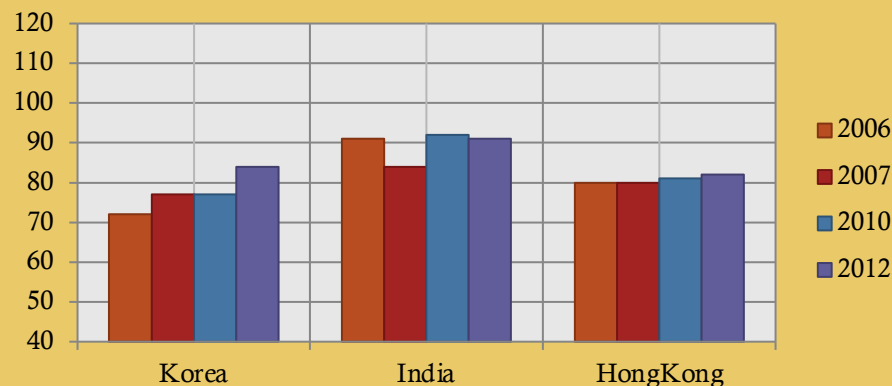


Figure 2. TOEFL scores changes among countries from 2006 to 2012



IV. Study Design

Methodological triangulation was chosen to assure the validity and reliability issues of this research. Three different types of data were collected and analyzed. To be specific, based on the secondary data, a five-minute face-to-face survey and language proficiency tests were conducted.

1. Participants

	Age	Gender	TOEIC (990)	Time in the US	Major
AA	21	F	545	3m	Management
BB	21	F	875	4m	Food and Nutrition
CC	22	F	840	2m	Journalism
EE	21	F		7m	Computer science
FF	22	F	580	2m	Food and Nutrition
GG	26	M		4m	
HH	26	M	350	4m	Industrial Engineering
II	25	M	840	4m	Management
JJ	24	M	730	3m	Electronic Engineering
KK	25	M	580	6m	Engineering

- Two different generations, the early 20s and mid 20s, will explain their English proficiency improvement between 2006 and 2012, and also show us their strengths and weaknesses.
- This study examines their English language proficiency through actual mini test and beliefs by drawing on their past and present learning experiences in Korea through a short survey.

2. Data collection

a. Instruments

- **Test**

Purpose - to verify their English levels and responses

- **Written test**
- **Oral test**

- **Survey** - Five minute Survey (a face-to-face method)

Purpose - to understand Korean students' self-esteem in English learning and the attitude toward Korean public English education

TEST SAMPLES

a. Written test

The Oxford Test constructed by the Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate was selected to evaluate their written English proficiency, and these tests were restructured to fit the target and time limit.

The target level is advanced, and the expected score is 50 out of 100.

This is a test to check your English proficiency.

Time – 18 minutes (Question 1~20)

Section 1:

**Testing reading proficiency
in a passage**

Questions 1-10

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best fits each space in the texts.
- For questions 1 to 10, mark one letter A, B, C or D on your Answer Sheet.

CLOCKS

The clock was the first complex mechanical machinery to enter the home, (1) it was too expensive for the (2) person until the 19th century, when (3) production techniques lowered the price. Watches were also developed, but they (4) luxury items until 1868 when the first cheap pocket watch was designed in Switzerland. Watches later became (5) available and Switzerland became the world's leading watch manufacturing centre for the next 100 years.

- | | | | | |
|----|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. | A despite | B although | C otherwise | D average |
| 2. | A average | B medium | C general | D common |
| 3. | A vast | B large | C wide | D mass |
| 4. | A lasted | B endured | C kept | D remained |
| 5. | A mostly | B chiefly | C greatly | D widely |

Questions 11 – 20 the second part is testing phrases and words competence.

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best completes each sentence.
- For questions 11 to 20, mark one letter A, B, C or D on your Answer Sheet.

11. If you're not too tired we could have a of tennis after lunch.

A match B play C game D party

12. Don't you get tired watching TV every night?

A with B by C of D at

13. Go on, finish the dessert. It needs up because it won't stay fresh until tomorrow.

A eat B eating C to eat D eaten

14. We're not used to invited to very formal occasions.

A be B have C being D having

15. I'd rather we meet this evening, because I'm very tired.

A wouldn't B shouldn't C hadn't D didn't

Section 2 : Testing phrases and words competence.

Sample of the Oral proficiency test

12. Now please look at the information below about a trip to Washington, D.C., that has been organized for the members of the Forest City Historical Society. Imagine that you are the president of this organization. At the last meeting you gave out a schedule for the trip, but there have been some changes. You must remind the members about the details of the trip and tell them about the changes indicated on the schedule. In your presentation do not just read the information printed, but present it as if you were talking to a group of people. You will have one minute to plan your presentation and will be told when to begin speaking.

FOREST CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY TRIP TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

Date: Saturday, April 12

Transportation: Chartered Bus

Depart: 8:00 ~~8:30~~ a.m. — Community Center parking lot

Itinerary: 10:30 a.m. — Guided Tour of White House
12:30 p.m. — Lunch* - Rock Creek Park
3:00 p.m. — National Museum of History and Technology (lecture - 4:00 p.m.)
6:30 p.m. — Dinner - ~~Embassy Restaurant~~ *Capital Inn* Georgetown

Return: 10:00 p.m. (approximately)

Cost: ~~\$20.00~~ (excluding admissions and dinner)
\$25.00

* Bring your own

(90 seconds)

- The SPEAK developed by the educational testing services at Kansas State University was chosen for the purpose of evaluating the spoken English of non-native speakers, and it was also reconstructed.
- The target level is intermediate, and the expected score is 35~40 out of 60.
- This test checks speaking fluency with a text that has a direction and contents. Personal opinion is not inquired, but how students convey given information, structure sentences and articulate words or phrases in a limited time are necessary.

Reconstructed Tests Rubrics

Written Test Score Rubric

Professional	70~100
Advanced	60~69
High Intermediate	50~59
Intermediate	40~49
Low Intermediate	30~39
Beginner	0~30

Oral Test Score Rubric

Professional	51~60
Advanced	46~50
High Intermediate	41~45
Intermediate	36~40
Low Intermediate	30~35
Beginner	0~29

Oral test evaluation criteria

50~60 Professional

Speech is clear and fluent. Students hardly making errors while communicating and accents or pronunciation do not bother understanding his or her idea. Also ideas are generally well developed and expressed coherently.

45~49 Advanced

Speech is mostly clear. Student makes a couple of mistakes with grammar and word choices, but fluent enough to deliver their own thoughts.

40~44 High intermediate

Student uses similar patterns of grammar, and word choices are limited. While speaking “Detour” is often caught, but it does not seriously interfere with overall communication.

35~39 - Intermediate level of fluency

Students have many pauses while speaking because of the translating process. Same patterns of grammar and limited word choices are found. Sometimes, listeners have difficulty understanding.

30~34 Low Intermediate

Listeners sometimes have trouble understanding because of noticeable problems with pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, and also student are experiencing obvious difficulty with delivering their thoughts.

SURVEY SAMPLE

Please share with me your precious opinion about educational experiences and Korean public education.

Basic information

1. Age
2. Major
3. What is your current level in your English language school?
4. TOEIC scores that you recently took
5. How long have you been staying in the US?

Section 1

Strongly agreed

1 2 3 4 5

1. My entire education took place in Korea.
Yes / No

a. If not, which country did you stay to learn English and how long?

2. I have difficulty with understanding when communicating with native English speakers.

3. I have difficulty with understanding when reading English texts.

4. My English reading proficiency is stronger than English speaking proficiency in general.

5. I have higher English proficiency than the Korean students who are 6 years older or younger.

6. My experiences of English education until high school years were mostly related to a written language.

7. My experiences of English education until high school years were mostly related to a spoken language.

(6-7) a. Please briefly explain your answer.

Section 2

8. I was taught spoken English (speaking) systemically at school.

9. Overall, I satisfied my English education at school.

10. English instructors were fluent enough to teach spoken English.

a. If not, why?

11. Would you like to explain or elaborate any of your answers above?

- Total 17 questions

- Two sections

Section 1 – 5 questions to display the privacy information, and two filter questions to ensure that participants included reflective of the desired population.

Section 2 - 12 questions including three open-ended questions asking to expend their responses.

b. Procedures

A quantitative research approach in the form of the personal interview survey with a test method, conducted in English and Korean, was adopted to appraise actual improvement of English education as a foreign language in Korea.

- Each participant was given a consent form and an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the criteria for participants, and participant rights.
- The instructions for the survey and test were provided at the beginning, but questions were not addressed.
- As a test method, 20 written questions were given for 18minutes with a 90 seconds oral proficiency test right after the written test. To have more concise results, the individually conducted oral test was recorded.

c. Analysis

-Hypotheses and variables

=> The hypotheses were categorized to two dimensions. First one is overall improvement in language proficiency by self-evaluation, and the other is details of students' language proficiency observing the task self-esteem.

-Hypothesis 1

1. One fundamental hypothesis is, considering the publicized ETS data from 2006 to 2012, Koreans who are recent high school graduates have a higher English proficiency than the others who are about 5 years older assuming the early 20s represents 2012 TOEFL test data, and mid 20s represents 2006 TOEFL test data. I assumed this improvement might be caused by the 7th English curriculum amendment in 2008 whose key concept is emphasizing communicative competence.
2. Their self-esteem will correspond with their actual language competence.

-> In order to estimate the score improvement since 2007, an actual mini test was given to two groups of students, who have age differences to verify their English levels and responses. Also, to learn their English confidence, a face to face survey was accompanied.

Result 1:

Figure 4. The early 20s students' profile including test scores and confidence level

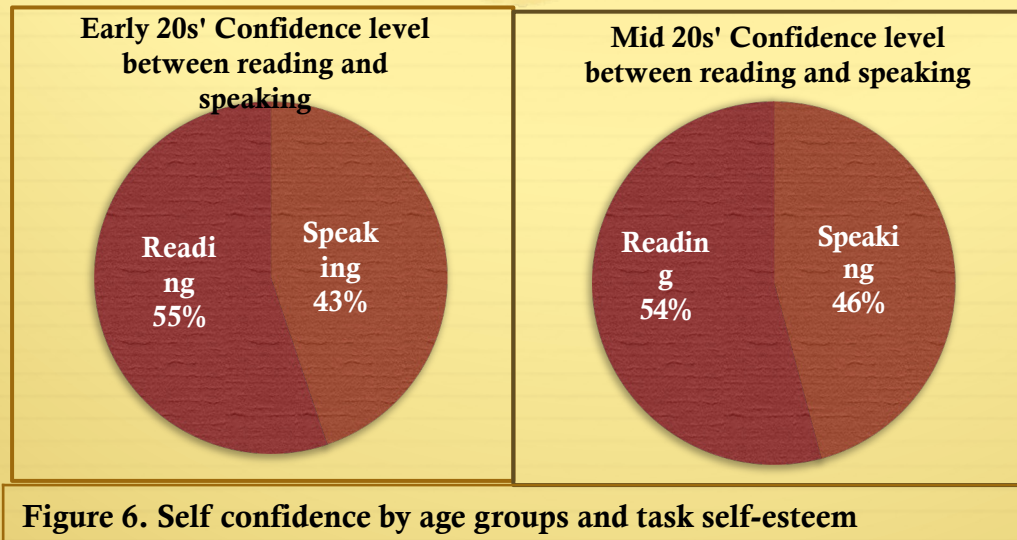
	Age	TOEIC (990) (Written test)	Written Test (100)	Speaking Test (60)	Confidence of English proficiency (20)
AA	21	545	50 HI	40 I	12
BB	21	875	60 A	50 A	17
CC	22	840	45 I	45 HI	14
EE	21		40 I	45 HI	12
FF	22	580	20 B	30 LI	12
Mean	21.4		43 I	42 HI	13.4

- From the tests, the early 20s students' English speaking proficiency level was estimated as a high intermediate level and written English proficiency was estimated as an intermediate, and the TOEIC (Test Of English for International Communication) test scores, operated from the ETS, did not correspond with my test results.
- The gap and level between two different tasks were notable in terms of the fact that it reflected the 7th English curriculum amendment in which the key concept is communication ability.
- From the survey, participants were asked to self- evaluate own speaking and reading competence including three open-ended questions asking to expend their responses. Except these three open ended questions, each question has five points and the total is 20 points. The average scores of this confidence section in the early 20s were 13.4, and this confidence and two tests scores were proportional in general, but not definite.

Figure 5. The Mid 20s students' profile including test scores and confidence level

	Age	TOEIC test scores	Written Test (100)	Speaking Test (60)	Confidence of English proficiency (20)
GG	26		40 I	45 HI	13
HH	26	350	45 I	40 I	8
II	25	840	45 I	40 I	12
JJ	24	730	40 I	45 HI	13
KK	25	580	60 A	40 I	9
	25.2		46 I	40 I	11

- From the tests, the mid 20s participants were estimated as an intermediate level in both oral and written English proficiency tests though it was hypothesized that mid 20s' written English proficiency will be higher than the spoken English proficiency.
- It was difficult to find correlation between TOEIC test scores and the reconstructed tests, but observed their confidence was highly corresponded with the TOEIC scores. In other words, if students have a high score on the TOEIC test, they had relatively higher English proficiency.
- From the survey, the average scores of this confidence section in the mid 20s were 11, which are 2.4 points lower than the early 20s, and there was no correlation between the reconstructed tests and confidence of English proficiency. This result also indicated that It is not necessarily the case that more advanced learners will have higher levels of self-esteem.



- On the condition that low self-esteem can trigger negative consequences in the context of language learning, the self-confidence was measured from the survey. The **task self-esteem** referring to one's self-evaluation of a particular aspect of the language learning process such as speaking, writing, reading, a specific ESL class (Kazumata, K. 1989) **was specifically measured**.
- Reading self-esteem in both groups was higher than speaking self-esteem regardless of the actual test results.

- Hypothesis 2

Notwithstanding age, **their written language proficiency is likely to be more advanced than the spoken one** because of the loaf sided instruction to the written language, and **that causes students to possess negative opinions in public English education due to the impracticalness.**

- ⇒ First, in order to compare English speaking and reading competence, reading and speaking test scores from all participants were examined regardless of the age. Students' proficiency level was measured by each reading and speaking test rubric, and the measured levels were compared.
- ⇒ To understand beliefs about public English education, 7 items including open-ended questions were measured by a survey.

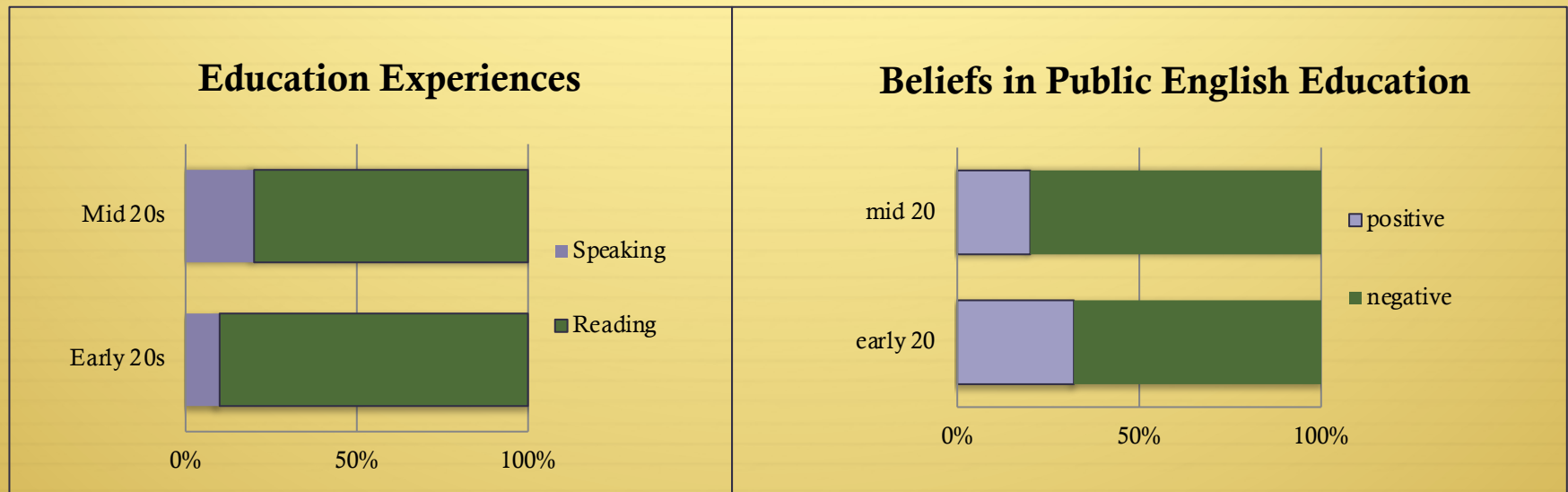
Result 2

Early 20s			Mid 20s		
	Written Test (100)	Oral Test (60)		Written Test (100)	Oral Test
AA	50 HI	40 I	GG	40 I	45 HI
BB	60 A	50 A	HH	45 I	40 I
CC	45 I	45 HI	II	45 I	40 I
EE	40 I	45 HI	JJ	40 I	45 HI
FF	20 B	30 LI	KK	60 A	40 I
Mean	43 I	42 HI	Mean	46 I	40 I

Figure 7. Comparison of oral and written test scores

Written test scores were intermediate levels in both age groups, and it did not correspond with the hypothesis that mid 20s students will have a better proficiency in reading. what's more, in the case of early 20s, the higher oral proficiency was observed than the reading one, so their oral proficiency was higher than the hypothesis (Figure 7).

To understand beliefs or attitudes to the public English education, seven items including open-ended questions were measured. The survey comprised three questions requesting overall English learning experiences, and four questions asking personal opinions about public English education.



- Though there was some extent of difference, both age groups recalled their English education was unhelpful. Also, both groups of participants strongly regarded their previous English instruction as a reading focused education.

Findings

- There wasn't a significant difference in test scores between the two age groups. However, the similarity in scores across different age brackets highlights an improvement in proficiency among those in their early 20s. This is notable since they've had less exposure to English education.
- From the research, it became evident that the oral proficiency of individuals in their early 20s exceeded expectations. This improvement is likely a result of recent policy changes.
- While survey participants generally displayed negative attitudes toward public English education, it was challenging to conclude that the improvement was solely due to public schooling. Nevertheless, the introduction of the new policy that emphasizes communicative language has undeniably transformed English education in Korea.
- Both age groups showed that the educational experiences predominantly focused on reading competence. Additionally, the sentiments toward public English education were generally negative. Yet, a promising observation was that students in their early 20s held a more positive view of public education compared to the older cohort, hinting at some improvements in the system.
- Lastly, it's crucial to note that higher proficiency does not always equate to greater self-esteem. As learners progress, they might become more cognizant of their linguistic limitations.

V. Implication

The increasing prevalence of multilingual programs worldwide underscores the significance of effective bilingual education, mirroring evolving social policies and a rising interest in languages. In Korea, where Korean is the predominant language, the government has recognized the growing interdependence between nations. This realization has spurred a shift towards enhancing communicative competencies within English education, considered a vital area of foreign language instruction. As a result, numerous programs have pivoted to prioritize communicative language competence. However, despite meticulous design and implementation, it remains essential to acknowledge and incorporate prior methodologies that emphasized written languages. For instance, studies from Canadian immersion programs highlight the crucial role of focus-on-form in communicative interaction within a comprehensive curriculum (Lyster, 2007). Consequently, future research should explore effective strategies and guidelines for focus-on-form in communicative interaction. This balance between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) will assist educators in devising the most effective instructional strategies, ensuring optimal learning outcomes in regions where a different primary language prevails.