

Understanding English Learners Preparing for TOEIC and Their Information Technology Usage Practices in Korea

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Abstract

This paper presents two questionnaire studies that were carried out to capture an understanding of English learners, the contexts around them, and their information technology (IT) usage practices, with a special focus on Korean university students preparing for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). We examined their attitudes towards TOEIC in a study in which 232 participants answered 16 questions. In a second study on 51 university students, we also explored the patterns of IT usage in relation to studying for the TOEIC. The results of these two studies hopefully shed light on the design of realistic and usable English learning systems.

Keywords: *Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), English as a foreign language (EFL), Human computer interaction (HCI), TOEIC, Usability*

1. Introduction

To support language learning, a realistic understanding of IT usage among students should be the fundamental basis for the design of usable computer-assisted instruction (CAI) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). The CAI, CALL, and other similar systems have not been used as much as the developers of these systems had anticipated. For example, researchers considered the Internet-based educational testing service (ETS) a promising system. However, learners have found these ESL websites to be difficult to navigate, to have too many new words, and to lack material that is useful for writing reports [1]. While admitting the need for CALL, instructors tend to avoid it because it requires substantially more preparation time; limited access to the technology has also been cited by both instructors and students [2].

The primary reason for this phenomenon is a gap between theoretical assumptions and reality [3]; that is, a more practical understanding of CALL is urgently needed. This can be achieved by taking a careful look at the actual learning and teaching practices, as well as students' attitudes toward technology and language learning.

To date, many researchers have attributed the failure of CALL to the quality of the educational contents and pedagogical relevance and integrity; however, the practical aspects of both language learning and IT usage have largely been overlooked [4]. The present study assessed the attitudes and learning practices of English, and IT usage, among Korean university students, with a special focus on the Test of English for

International Communication (TOEIC). In contrast to pedagogical or theoretical interpretation, our study investigated the students' account of their experience preparing for the TOEIC.

This paper reports on two questionnaire studies. First, a study was conducted to understand students' attitudes toward TOEIC and the problems that they faced in both listening and reading comprehension. Then we explored their IT usage during their preparation for the TOEIC, as well as their perceptions of English learning [5]. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the role of English proficiency and the significance of the TOEIC as background knowledge. Sections 3 and 4 present the first and second study, respectively, and discuss the results of each. Section 5 provides a summary of our conclusions.

2. The Role of English Proficiency and Significance of the TOEIC at Korean Universities

There are currently two English courses offered at Korean universities: General English and English in EFL. The first is taught to college freshmen and focuses mainly on a general knowledge of the English language because it is part of the general education requirements. The course aims to cultivate college students' general knowledge of literature, philosophy, history, and science through English. The other course focuses more on developing English abilities that college students are expected to acquire. While the former focuses on the contents of reading material, the latter emphasizes the practical aspects of English learning [6]. Traditionally, General English has dominated college English instruction in Korea. However, most colleges have begun to favor the second English course, stressing practical English, which is changing the paradigm of English education at Korean colleges.

English plays a significant role in the world because it serves as an important medium of communication in, for example, international trade, cultural exchange programs, sports events, and conferences. Consequently, colleges offer a wide variety of communicative English courses on the basis of individual English proficiency, setting an English proficiency level requirement for graduation. Accordingly, the TOEIC, one of the standardized tests administered by the ETS, has become the standard for evaluating the English proficiency and communicative skills of nonnative speakers. Many courses related to the TOEIC are offered to Korean college students [7].

The TOEIC is the most widely used international test of English skills, with 4 million test takers worldwide. It measures the ability to answer multiple-choice questions after reading and listening to English. TOEIC is used mostly by corporations and is particularly popular in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. It is growing in popularity in Europe and elsewhere. The TOEIC has the advantage of being inexpensive, objective, and fast. It is reasonably accurate. Since its introduction to Korea in 1982, the number of those taking the test has steadily increased.

Gaining a high score on the TOEIC can lead to a better job and/or promotion in the workplace. The Worldwide Daily Newspaper reported that, in 2008, more than 1.8 million Koreans (4 out of 100 people) took the TOEIC. Most of the test takers were college students (43.8%), followed by office workers (22.7%), but even secondary Korean students were taking it, as preparation for higher education. These data show the importance of this test in Korea. However, despite its good reputation and popularity, relatively little attention has been paid to its reliability and validity. In addition, few studies have attempted to identify learners' difficulties, which would

serve as a good foundation for improving TOEIC scores [8]. More research should be done in this regard. For this reason, it is essential to investigate Korean college students' attitudes toward the TOEIC.

Besides, the advantages of CMC include more equal learner's participation, positive attitudes, greater student empowerment, and decreased teacher control and dominance [9, 10]. In contrast, Coppaert put a strong emphasis on importance of the language learning environment as well as the learner rather than the technology [11]. With examining the limitations of today's technology, it should be considered that pedagogical guidelines in designing a computer technology language program should be incorporated in order to meet pedagogical requirements.

3. Study 1: Attitudes toward the TOEIC

Due to the popularity and importance of the TOEIC as a tool for evaluating English proficiency, and the fact that many companies and institutes are currently using TOEIC scores as an assessment tool, there are many college-level lectures and classes related to the TOEIC. Therefore, it would be meaningful to examine the general attitude of college students towards this test: what they think about it, and how they prepare for it.

In study 1, a questionnaire with 16 questions was prepared and used to collect information about students' backgrounds and their attitudes toward English and the TOEIC. Selected interesting results are discussed in this section.

A total of 232 students participated in this survey. The students were categorized into three groups based on their own TOEIC scores: high (above 730 points), middle (725–470), and low (below 465) scoring. A multiple-choice format (5-point Likert scale) was employed for each item, as follows: 1, strongly disagree; 2, disagree; 3, neutral; 4, agree; and 5, strongly agree. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete the entire questionnaire.

3.1. Attitude toward English

The questionnaire began by assessing the students' attitudes toward English with the item "I want to be a good English speaker." Table 1 shows the results. Nearly 60% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Among the high-scoring group, 68.4% of students (26 of 38) agreed, 26.3% (10) strongly agreed, and 33.3% were neutral; there were no negative responses. Overall, the lower the score group, the more students who gave negative responses.

The responses to the item "I think TOEIC has improved my English proficiency" are shown in Table 2. Less than 13% of those who answered (three students did not reply) had a negative response (disagree or strongly disagree), thus we assumed that the majority of students believed that the TOEIC had helped them to enhance their English abilities. Even in the low-scoring group, only 9 of the 64 students (14.1%) had a negative response. Accordingly, 86% of low-scoring students in total had a positive impression of the role of the TOEIC.

Table 1. Attitude toward English

I want to be a good English speaker.						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
High	0	0	2 (33.3%)	26 (68.4%)	10 (26.3%)	38
Middle	2 (1.6%)	8 (6.4%)	34 (27.2%)	60 (48.0%)	21 (16.8%)	125
Low	11 (16.9%)	11 (16.9%)	24 (36.9%)	16 (24.6%)	3 (14.9%)	65
Total	13 (5.7%)	19 (8.3%)	60 (26.3%)	102 (44.7%)	34 (14.9%)	228

Table 2. Perception of the TOEIC

I think TOEIC has improved my English proficiency.						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
High	0	2 (5.4%)	11 (29.7%)	17 (45.9%)	7 (18.9%)	37
Middle	3 (2.3%)	15 (11.7%)	46 (35.9%)	60 (46.9%)	4 (3.1%)	128
Low	0	9 (14.1%)	27 (42.2%)	26 (40.6%)	2 (3.1%)	64
Total	3 (1.3%)	26 (11.4%)	84 (36.7%)	103 (45.0%)	13 (5.7%)	229

3.2. Purpose of studying the TOEIC

Included in the survey was a question (“What is the purpose of studying for the TOEIC?”) that was not rated on a Likert scale, but rather had five responses to choose from. The results are shown in Table 3. A total of 179 (77.2%) of the students responded with “To graduate and get a good job.” This was the prevailing view across all score groups

Table 3. Purpose of studying for the TOEIC

To graduate and gain a good job	To get accepted into a graduate school	To achieve confidence in English Proficiency	To transfer to another schools	Other	Total
179 (77.2%)	11 (4.7%)	27 (11.6%)	4 (1.7%)	9 (3.9%)	230

3.3. Problems preventing high scores on the TOEIC

Of the three groups, 34.2% of the high-scoring group indicated that vocabulary was the most difficult problem, followed by listening proficiency, test-taking strategies, lack of experience, and background knowledge (see Table 4). In the other two groups, listening proficiency was the biggest problem

Table 4. Student-identified problems limiting scores on listening comprehension

	Vocabulary	Listening proficiency	Lack of Experience	Test-taking strategies	Background Knowledge	Total
High	13 (34.2%)	12 (31.6%)	5 (13.2%)	7 (18.4%)	1 (2.6%)	38
Middle	34 (26.6%)	55 (43.0%)	30 (23.4%)	8 (6.3%)	1 (0.8%)	128
Low	20 (31.3%)	29 (45.3%)	8 (12.5%)	6 (9.4%)	1 (1.6%)	64
Total	67 (29.1%)	96 (41.7%)	43 (18.7%)	21 (9.1%)	3 (1.3%)	230

Table 5. Student-identified problems limiting reading comprehension

	Vocabulary	Grammar Knowledge	Lack of Experience	Test-taking strategies	Background Knowledge	Total
High	21 (9.2%)	2 (0.9%)	8 (3.5%)	7 (3.1%)	0	38
Middle	45 (19.7%)	33 (14.5%)	16 (7.0%)	31 (13.6%)	2 (0.9%)	127
Low	33 (14.5%)	17 (7.5%)	7 (3.1%)	6 (2.6%)	0	63
Total	99 (43.4%)	52 (22.8%)	31 (13.6%)	44 (19.3%)	2 (0.9%)	228

Regarding reading comprehension (Table 5), 43.4% of the students felt that vocabulary was the biggest difficulty, followed by grammar knowledge (22.8%), test-taking strategies (19.3%), lack of experience (13.6%), and background knowledge (0.9%).

All three groups identified vocabulary as the most difficult problem regarding reading comprehension. However, grammar knowledge was also a major problem in the middle- and low-scoring groups but not in the high-scoring group. Test-taking strategies were equally problematic for the middle-scoring group. Among the high-scoring group, about 21% and 18% of students cited lack of experience and test-taking strategies as problems. We believe that these results would be particularly helpful for instructors teaching courses on the TOEIC, as well as English in general.

4. Study 2: Information technology usage while studying for the TOEIC

Study 2 investigated how students perceive and use IT while studying for the TOEIC. The results should aid the design of IT-based tools for TOEIC preparation. A realistic understanding of IT usage in the context of TOEIC preparation should be the fundamental basis for CALL design. Our ultimate goal is to build a CALL system specifically for TOEIC preparation, based on the results of studies 1 and 2.

A total of 51 university students participated in the second study. The students were categorized into the same three groups described in study 1. Each group consisted of 17 students. The questionnaire included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and there were two parts: a set of general and basic questions (part 1, 10 questions) and IT-related questions (Part 2, 10 questions, including two open-ended ones).

4.1. Properties of the sequence selection

To Korean people, English is an object of study, not something to practice or use in everyday life. In this respect, learning is not a natural activity but rather is an activity that requires substantial personal effort to learn over time. We were interested in the factors that may affect one's progress studying English. Of particular interest was whether or not IT devices could play a role. We found that the most important factors affecting success were the students' willingness to learn and their interest in learning English. Some of them (8 participants) considered time as a key factor. However, no one thought that IT devices played a crucial role in English preparation. Figure 1 shows the results.

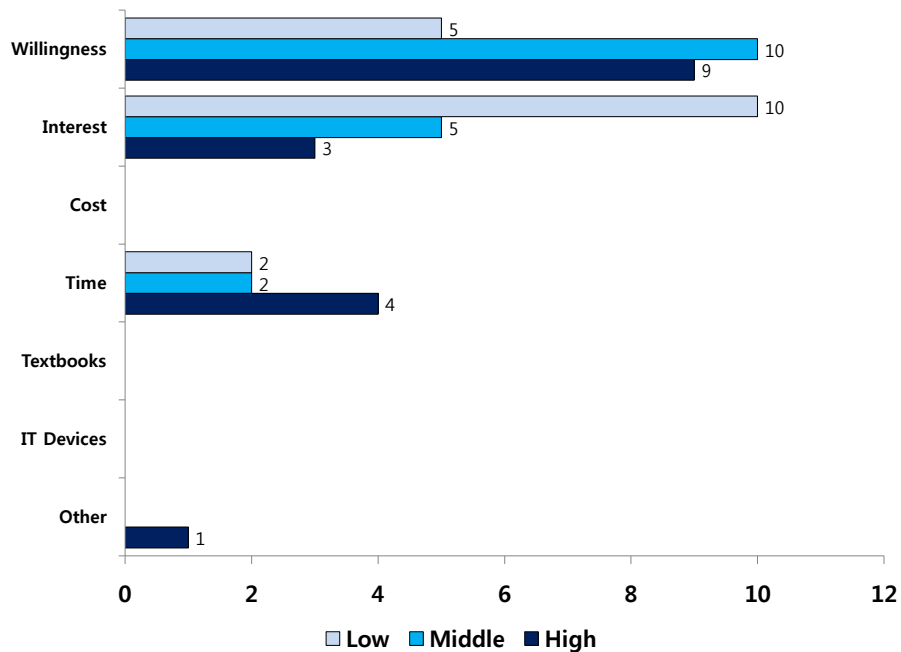


Figure 1. Factors affecting English study

4.2. Studying strategies

It is of great importance to understand how students study English in order to understand how they prepare for the TOEIC. One major goal of the study was to assess the extent to which students use online or VOD (Video On Demand) lectures as major study methods.

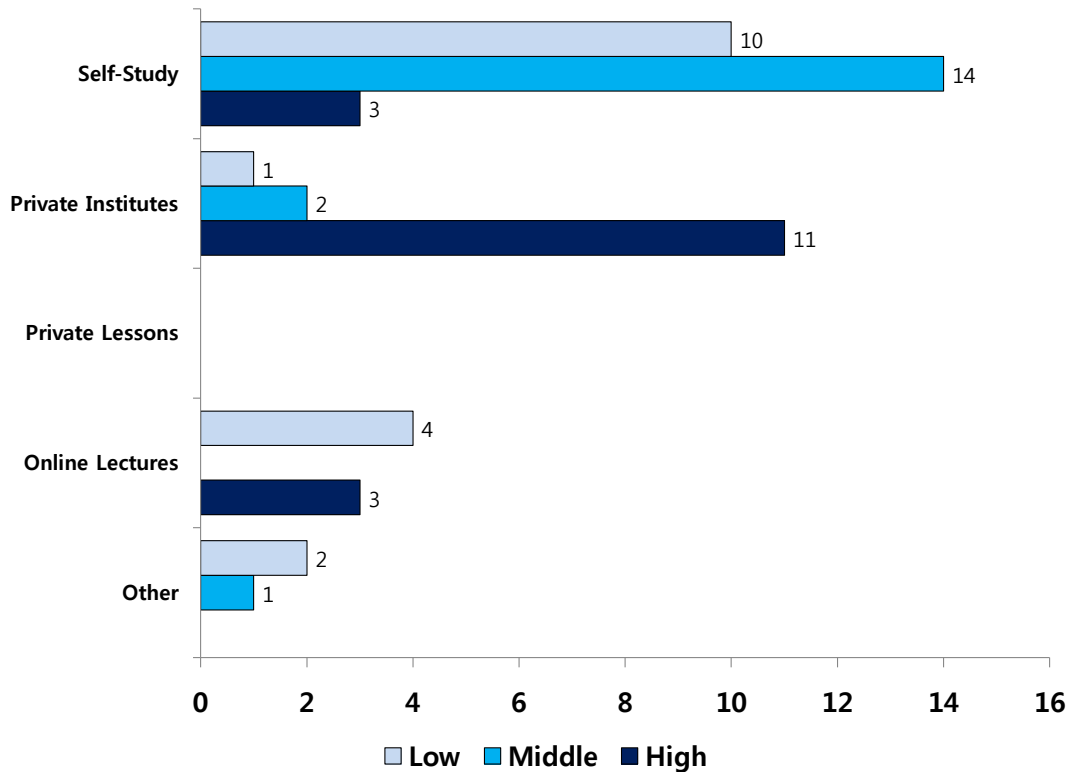


Figure 2. Studying strategies

Our results showed that about 15% (7 of 51 students) perceived online lectures as the most significant way of studying English. This result suggests that online lectures are the leading English for university students in Korea, as far as IT usage is concerned, and supports the potential of IT-based English teaching tools (*e.g.*, CALL, CAI) to some extent.

However, it is difficult to draw further conclusions based on the data obtained from this study. Interestingly, students in the high-scoring group tended to depend on private English institutions, while those in the middle- and low-scoring groups preferred self-study.

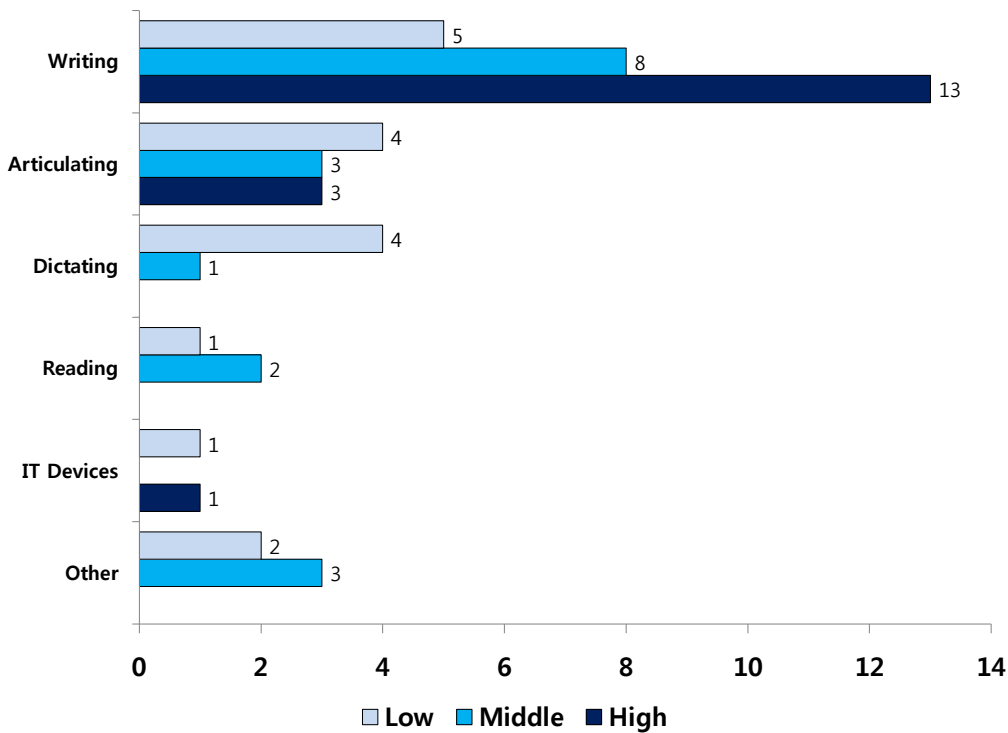


Figure 3. Perceived best ways for memorizing vocabulary

Considering that students in study 1 indicated that vocabulary was the most difficult problem regarding reading comprehension, we assessed students' preferred method for memorizing vocabulary. The results showed that 51% of the participants (26 of 51) preferred to memorize vocabulary by writing words down (Figure 3). However, only two students perceived IT devices as the best tool to do so. We believe that this does not imply that IT is unnecessary, but instead, that IT-based systems should be developed to fit current preferred practices.

4.3. Information technology devices for Learning English

About half of the participants (25 of 51 students) utilized IT devices for learning English, and they used different tools for different purposes (Figure 4).

MP3 players were the most popular tools for learning English, with 15 students indicating that they used these. Ten participants used electronic dictionaries, while several students used smartphone applications. A device for memorizing vocabulary, "Blinker," popular in Korea, was used by only one of the students to improve vocabulary.

We believe that the use of smartphones including cell phones will gradually increase [9]. However, we did not find any device that helps students speak for oral reactions [10]. Overall, the results suggest that listening devices with high portability are helpful for one reason or another. In fact, it was interesting that MP3 devices were used more than traditional IT devices such as the personal computer. A more detailed investigation of the available IT devices is warranted in the future.

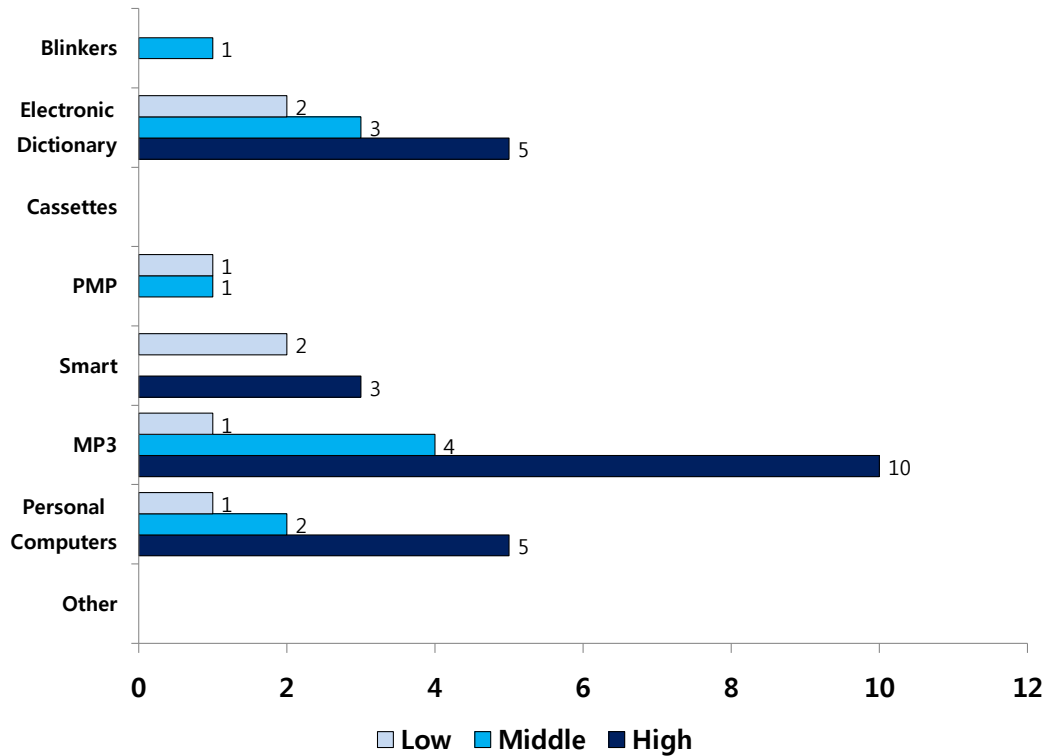


Figure 4. IT devices for learning English

4.4. Potential of social network services

Learning English via social networking services (SNSs) is not yet common, and thus it currently cannot be determined what kinds of SNSs may provide the best support. However, SNSs have been shown to be useful in diverse areas, and so we believe that their potential is undeniable. When asked about their intention to use SNSs for learning English (Figure 5), the majority of participants (30 of 51; 58.5%) gave a neutral response. We believe that this is partly because SNS models supporting CALL are not clear enough, and thus, the students could not render a decision in this case. In addition, 10 participants (19.6%) showed no willingness to use SNSs.

However, we also asked participants a hypothetical question to further assess the potential use of SNSs: what do you feel would be the advantages of using an SNS? The results are shown in Figure 6. Most participants (31 of 51; 60.8%) indicated that gaining easy access to learning materials would be the biggest advantage of using an SNS. The students also believed that an SNS would facilitate community learning; once such a community were established, they would have more opportunities to contact other community members to share information as they attempted to learn English together. Two students believed that online VOD lectures would be possible using an SNS.

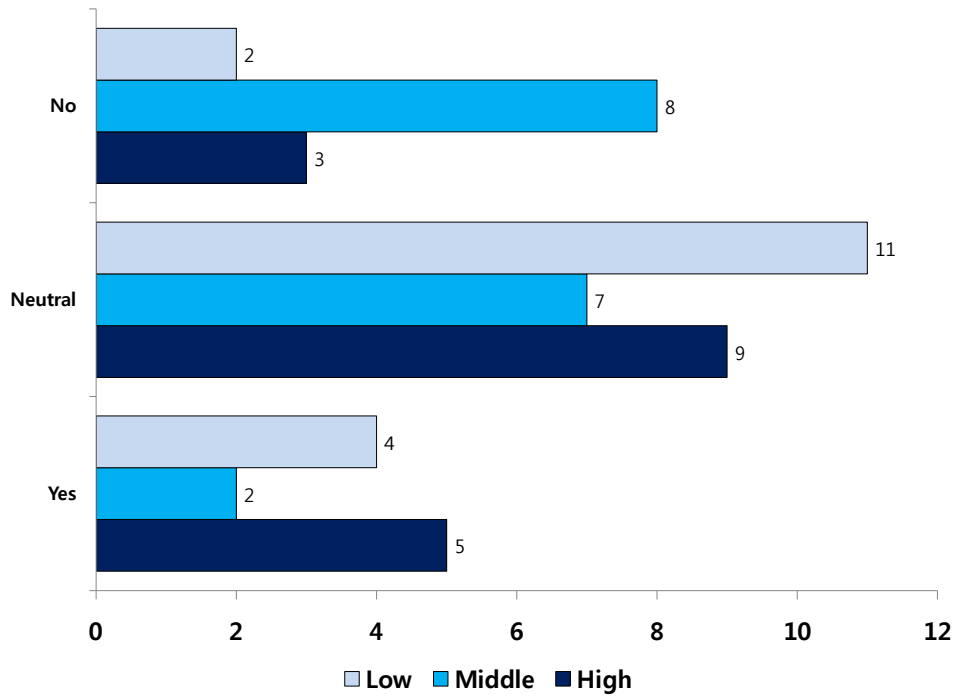


Figure 5. Intention to use an SNS for learning English

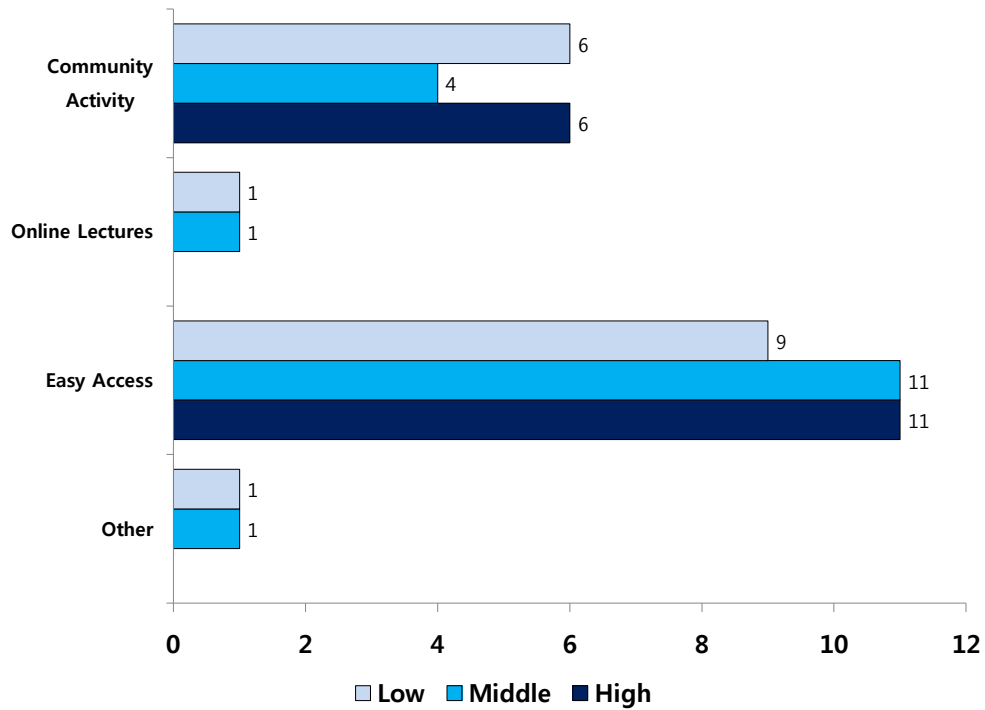


Figure 6. Student-cited advantages of using an SNS to learn English

5. Conclusion

We conducted two questionnaire studies on Korean university students to explore their attitudes toward and perceptions of learning English, in particular as it relates to preparing for the TOEIC. We found several interesting findings that provide a basis for future IT-based learning systems. Although further study is needed to uncover the detailed associations between English learning and IT usage, we believe that our results provide meaningful insight into actual English learning practices and IT usage. It is our hope that the findings of this study will facilitate better design for computer-assisted learning and optimize the efforts of nonnative speakers in learning the English language.

Acknowledgements

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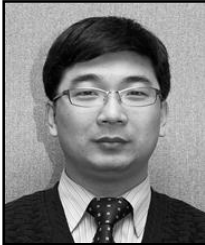
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