



***The Learning Curve* and South Korea: The Best Education?**

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Background

The *Learning Curve* are recent reports written and published by *Pearson* which according to their website, “*is part of a wide-ranging programme of quantitative and qualitative analysis*” that “*seeks to distill some of the major lessons on the links between education and skill development, retention and use*”

These lessons are meant to create a “*continuous dialogue among education ministers and top officials around the world about the evidence from international benchmarking and the implications for education reform.*”

- Pearson states that purpose of *The Learning Curve* is to “*open up what happens inside the ‘black box’ of education*” and provide “*lessons for developing countries*”.

South Korea is an important case study for stakeholder understanding so such states can be more clearly informed of the possible risks associated with *Pearson’s* advice.

The Learning Curve (Pearson and Economist)

Country	2014	2012
 SOUTH KOREA	1 [Rank 1]1.30	[Rank 2]1.23
 JAPAN	2 [Rank 2]1.03	[Rank 4]0.89
 SINGAPORE	2 [Rank 3]0.99	[Rank 5]0.84
 HONG KONG-CHINA	-1 [Rank 4]0.96	[Rank 3]0.90
 FINLAND	-4 [Rank 5]0.92	[Rank 1]1.26
 UNITED KINGDOM	0 [Rank 6]0.67	[Rank 6]0.60
 CANADA	3 [Rank 7]0.60	[Rank 10]0.54
 NETHERLANDS	-1 [Rank 8]0.58	[Rank 7]0.59
 IRELAND	2 [Rank 9]0.51	[Rank 11]0.53
 POLAND	4 [Rank 10]0.50	[Rank 14]0.43
 DENMARK	1 [Rank 11]0.46	[Rank 12]0.50
 GERMANY	3 [Rank 12]0.41	[Rank 15]0.41
 RUSSIA	7 [Rank 13]0.40	[Rank 20]0.26
 UNITED STATES	3 [Rank 14]0.39	[Rank 17]0.35

Hypothesis

This study simply worked to verify things understood by most South Korean educators, which *Pearson* does not address:

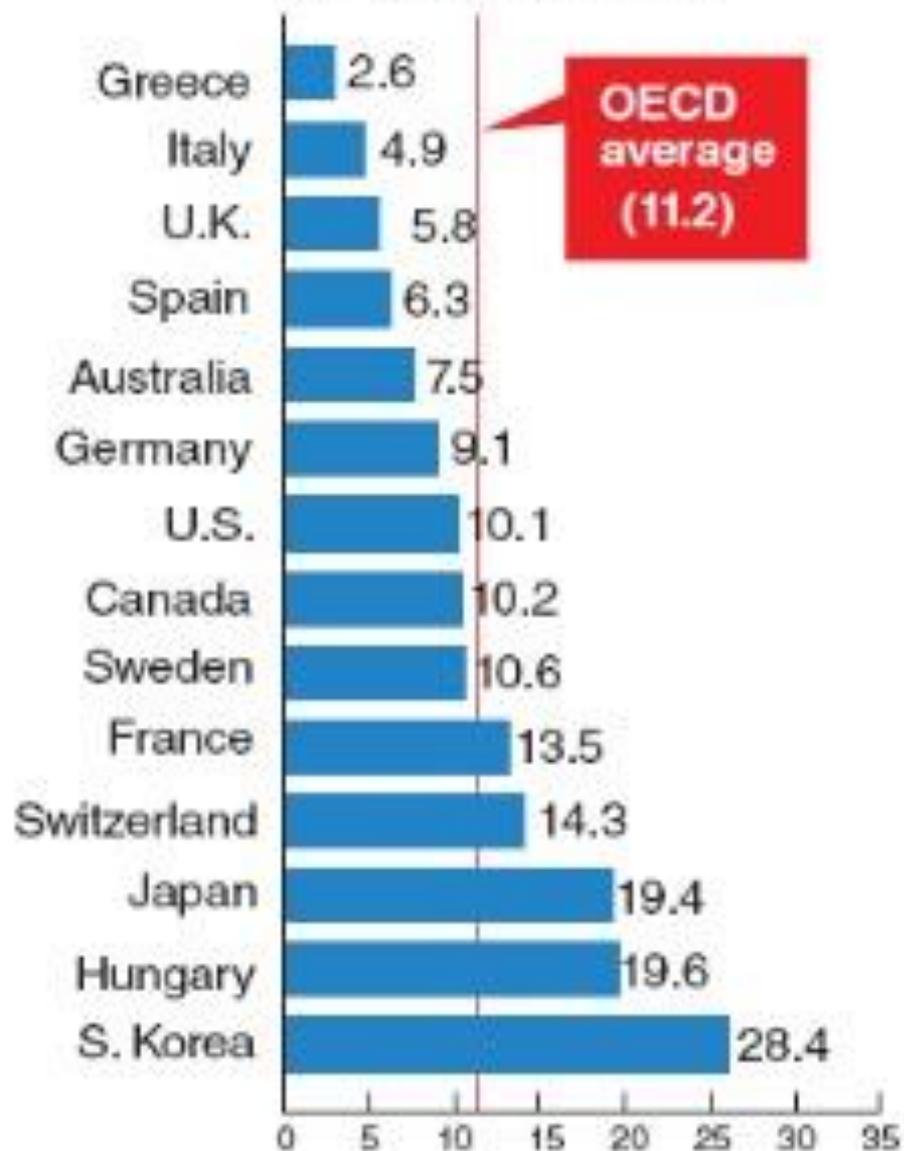
- 1) The South Korean education system is primarily a high pressure factory for generating test-taking machines.
- 2) As Pearson describes, South Korean children are/may be “number 1” and “the best” in terms of “achieving exam results demonstrating literacy in reading, mathematics and science.” However,
 - South Koreans also have lowest happiness among children in the developed world (OECD and WHO) for more than a decade.
 - They also enjoy the highest rates of suicide (ibid)

2012 OECD 국가들의 어린이·청소년 주관적 행복지수



Suicide rates

(OECD per 100,000)



The Context

South Korea has ranked at the top among nations for spending on education for at least a decade (OECD).

The Learning Curve ranks South Korea as number one in the Global Index of Cognitive Skills:

PISA: Program for International Skills Assessment

TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (scores in Reading, Math and Science)

... and Educational Attainment (literacy and graduation rates).

However, the growing body of research also indicates that South Korean students nonetheless enjoy only a mediocre levels of English fluency.

The Study

The hypothesis created was to examine fluency and the second language education environment prior to university in South Korea as “not oriented toward fluency creation, but instead reinforces hierarchical and teacher-centered methods that primarily teach second language test-taking strategies.”

This study explored the South Korean case by surveying **127** domestic and **50** international students in South Korea.

Students self-reported their perceptions concerning the quality of education (language was the primary variable) at secondary and post-secondary levels.

The results for both groups demonstrate that classrooms are predominately teacher-centered, lecture-oriented, highly competitive, and exam focused

The results go on to indicate that these experiences often stifle motivation and increase performance anxiety. Anecdotal evidence further indicates that this is the norm at essentially every level and subject in the Korean educational system.

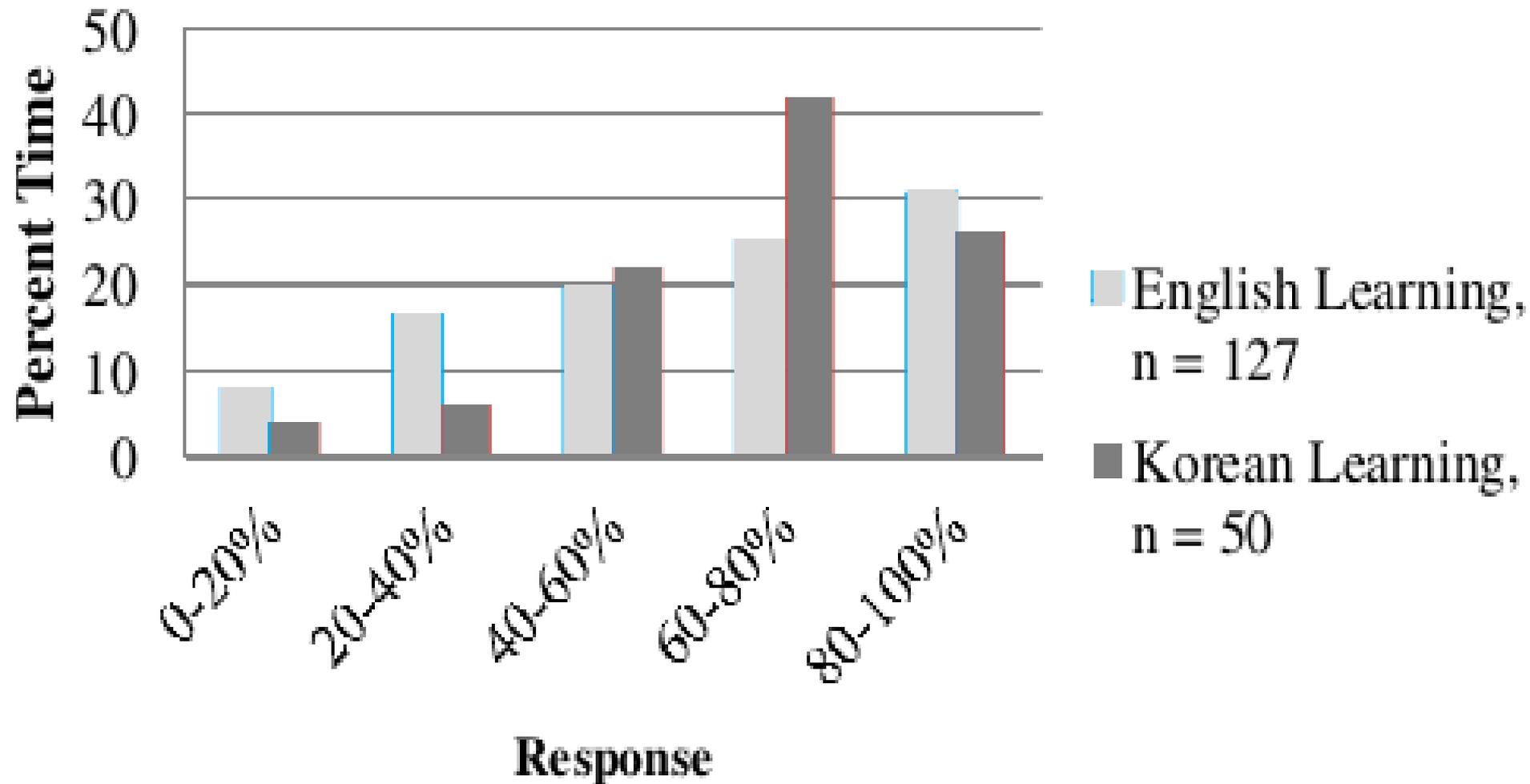
literature support sampling

There is an abundance of literature that support some central elements in acquiring language. Krashen provides several:

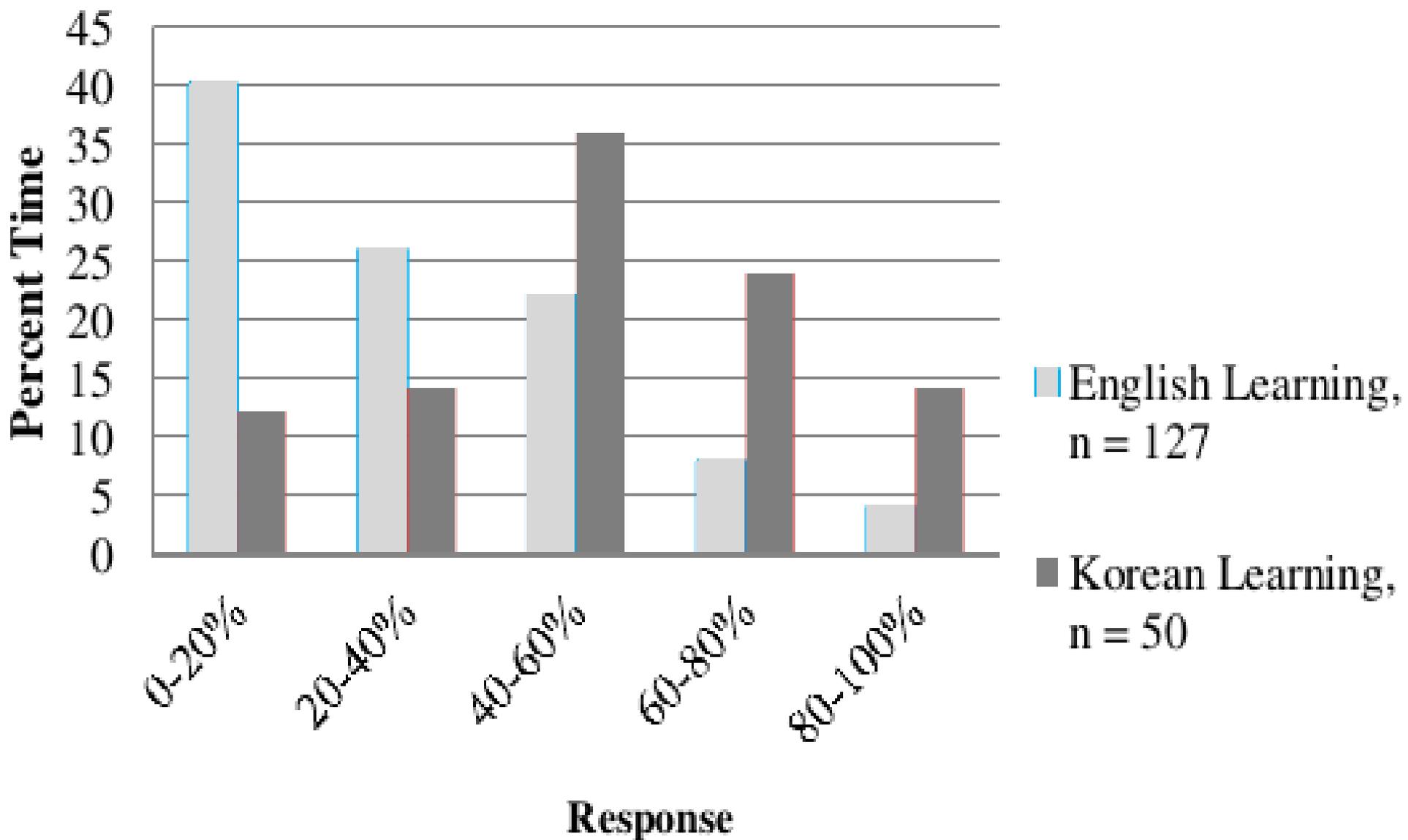
1. 'Acquisition' describes using language for real communication while 'learning' is simply knowing about a language.
2. Memorizing difficult forms when one cannot use the basics lowers fluency
3. Excessive teaching monitoring lowers confidence and fluency.
4. 'Affective filter', the barrier between learner and subject, is increased with anxiety, self-doubt, and boredom. This interferes with the processes of acquiring a second language.

Result: Education strategies in South Korean English and second language classrooms decrease fluency by acting against at least one, but usually all, of the aforementioned principles which causes a student's affective filter to increase.

Lecturing in Classrooms

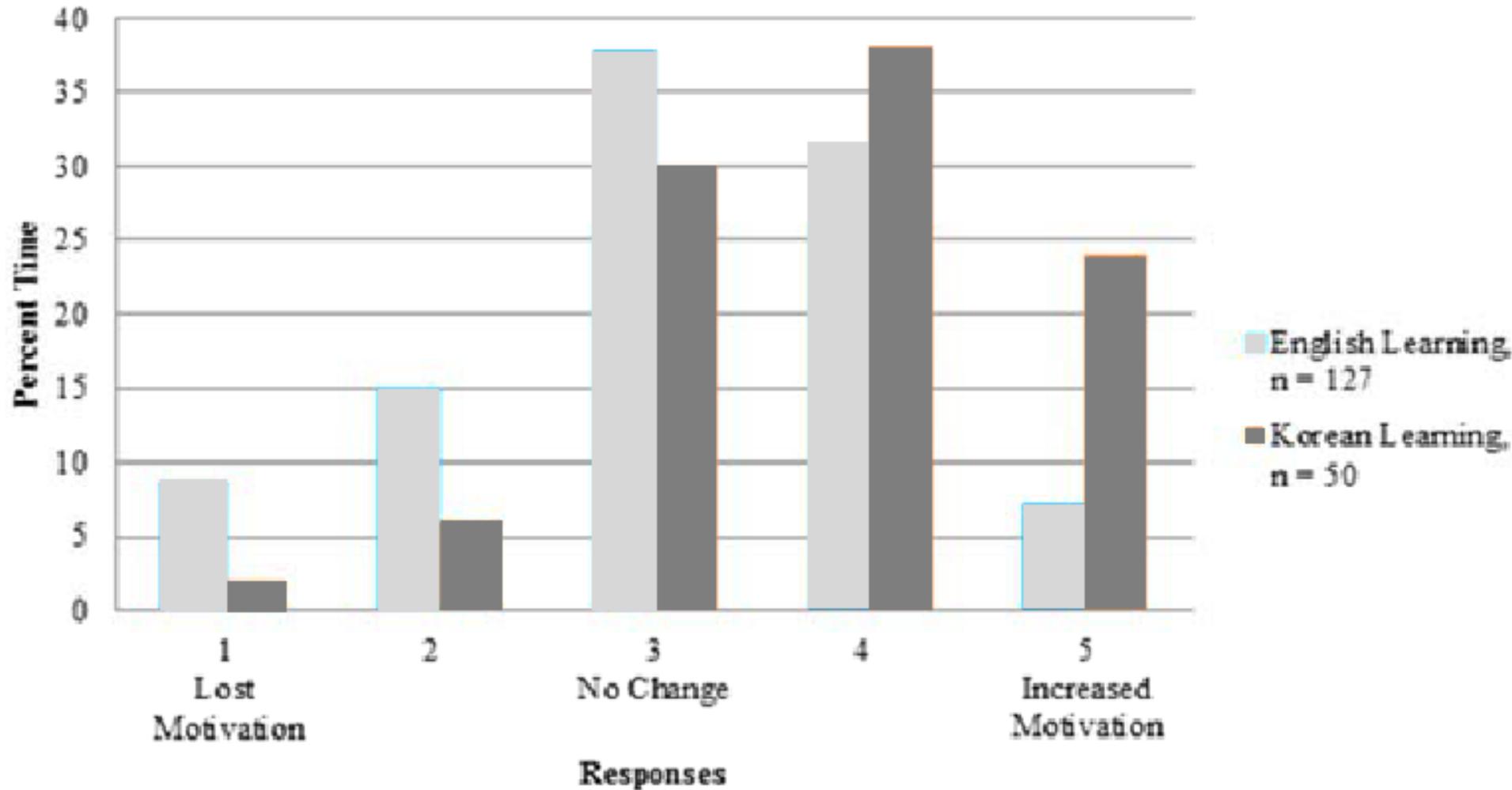


Amount of time student practice speaking



Select Findings

Increase in motivation level



Discussion

This study provided limited confirmation of the hypothesis. From the data, students self-report that the second language education environment prior to university in South Korea is primarily teacher's giving lectures to the students rather than students practicing speaking in the classroom. This sort of second language education does not result in an increase in student acquisition (fluency), but instead is focused on “learning” through passive activities such as reading and listening. In essence, many Korean students learn aspects of English like grammar and syntax, but they do not acquire a complete and functional use of the language itself. This supports the aspect of the hypothesis that states **1)** South Korea is not oriented toward fluency creation and **2)** it reinforces hierarchical and teacher-centered methods to teach a second language. The results were also that the Korean English learning environment is, for many, a unmotivating to demotivating experience. This means that affective filter is systematically heightened, which causes a further reduction in fluency.

Conclusion

In Pearson's 2013 Annual Report addressing "*responsible business*", the report states, "*Our purpose as a company is to help people all over the world make progress in their lives through learning.*" Yet their key issues are "*raising literacy levels; improving learning outcomes and contributing to competitiveness*"

Teachers, scholars, and policymakers that pay close attention to reports such as the *Learning Curve* should consider the limitations of such studies. South Korean children are indeed well educated, and excellent at taking tests. Yet the ability to apply one's knowledge is surely at least as important an indicator as a correct test answer.

Furthermore, correct answers do not create creative, competent and psychologically healthy citizens. If the goal is to determine what is "best" in education, then research must look at the whole child and student, not just the test-taker.