



Long-Term Outcomes of High-Stakes English Test Preparation on Test-Taker Identity*

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ABSTRACT

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As the use of high-stakes English tests grows world widely, people have interest in how to attain good test results within a short time. However, little is known about the long-term outcomes of preparation on test-taker identity. This study aims to report a case of the long-term impacts of high-stakes English test preparation on adult learners, especially those who return to English study after leaving mainstream education. It focuses on how these test-takers prepare for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic exam to study abroad and how this process relates to their identity formation. Data consist of participants-interviews, documentation, field notes and research journal for six-months during the participants' test preparation. The data analysis process followed Bryman's (2004) qualitative analysis procedures. The study revealed a process of high-stakes outcomes involved in identity formation, showing how a potentially successful adult-learner becomes isolated and finally a dropout from test preparation: (1) life investment and professional identity; (2) English speaking and ashamed identity; (3) financial burden and unemployed identity; (4) student-alienation and test-score identity; (5) temptation and test preparation dropout. The findings suggest that test preparation may include not only acquiring methods for raising a score but also a process of forming test-taker identity. Also, students, instructors, policymakers, and other stakeholders should be informed of the long-term outcomes of high-stakes English test preparation, considering the issue of test-taker alienation.

KEYWORDS

high-stakes English test, test preparation, long-term outcomes, test-taker identity, IELTS

1. Introduction

As English has been used worldwide, English tests have been high-stakes to make life-defining effects on individuals such as university entrance, graduation exams or employment (Yung and Hajar 2023). As South Korea's education and job-market systems rely on English language tests (Shim and Park 2008), many Korean students prepare for English tests like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Test of English for International Communication Speaking (TOEIC Speaking), or the Oral Proficiency Interview-computer (OPIc). It is true that gaining high scores of English tests ensures social success in South Korea.

In addition, the use of these tests has led to a rapidly growing test preparation industry, including English private tutoring in South Korea, where the Korean term *hagwons* (private cram schools) are a common way to achieve a high score on English tests (Kim 2010, Kim 2021). *Hagwons* are private English cram schools that offer tutoring and coaching programmes to prepare students in order to achieve higher scores on tests (Kim 2010, Kim 2021). In particular, *Hagwons* have advertised that they would raise a score in the shortest time, providing intensive test preparation programs by the Korean term *Star-Gangsas* (well-known instructors), and using the Korean term *Siheom-Hugi* (successful enrolled test-takers' preparation stories of how to achieve a target score).

However, this social phenomenon has been problematic, leading to a distorted or overly intense English test-preparation culture in South Korea (Kim 2022). Learners heavily trust *hagwons*, including *Star-Gangsas* and *Siheom-Hugi* from cram schools, spending their time, money and effort on *hagwon*-preparation until receiving a target test score, which could last for several months or even more than a year. In particular, adult-learners, who return to English study after leaving mainstream education, make a life defining choice such as giving up their full-time jobs only for preparation. They spend all that time and money on test preparation with wide-reaching consequences for their confidence and personal finances instead of actually studying English.

A problem is that we do not know about impacts of long-term preparation on a learner, those who need to support themselves financially, including what happens in the long-term preparation, why and how they prepare for tests, or if there are any significant changes occurred in their identity formation in different contexts such as homes, workplaces or cram schools as the potentially challenging process. Compared to stories of test-takers who are enrolled at cram schools, attain good test results and succeed in their endeavours such as *Siheom-Hugi* from test preparation companies, little is known about those of test-takers who leave their jobs to focus on cram school-preparation but do not reach their target test scores.

Although the use of high-stakes English tests has grown rapidly, research on test preparation tends to focus on efficiency of test preparation methods from classroom settings regarding what test preparation practices are taught, which practices are useful for raising test scores, how test-takers or teachers perceive their test preparation practices, and how tests impact teaching and learning (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons 1996, Allen 2016, Cheng 1997, Green 2007, Kim 2021). It is not well researched on aspects of long-term preparation at private tutoring for students from a test-taker identity perspective, such as what a test taker learns from a whole process of test preparation or how a test taker views oneself in the experiences. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a process of learning is deeply involved in identity formation. That is, learning is not simply about gaining knowledge and skills. Rather, it may be a process of becoming or shaping a particular kind of person through participation in social practices or activities within specific contexts (Wenger 1998). From this perspective, test preparation may involve not only acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for the test, but also the formation of identity. Especially for students who need to support themselves financially, test preparation may be a desperate process of striving to achieve target scores, which can lead to distress and even engagement in specific practices such as cheating (Fulcher 2010).

Against this background, this study aims to investigate long-term impacts of high-stakes English test preparation on adult test-taker identity, focusing on how and why they give up their jobs, how they prepare for the test at the cram school, and how they are changed by the long-term preparation, and exploring how they construct their identities in different places such as home, work and cram schools. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1. Why and how do Korean adult learners start to prepare for the IELTS, in relation to identity formation?

Research Question 2. How does long-term test preparation affect their identities in various contexts such as cram schools, home and work?

Research Question 3. Why and how do they cease IELTS preparation, in relation to identity formation?

2. Literature Review

2.1 High-Stakes English Test Preparation

High-stakes English tests have influenced individuals, education system, society and policies. The results of tests have been used as access to educational or vocational opportunities. If a test-taker fails to achieve a required score, they would not have access to the chances. Therefore, people find quick and easy preparation to achieve a target score. That is, high-stakes English tests always go with test preparation (Fulcher 2010).

Due to the results-based and goal-oriented nature of tests, test preparation has been researched from two perspectives: types and outcomes of preparation on test scores and test validity (Dimova 2005, p. 14). Types of preparation refers to all kinds of methods, practices or activities in teaching and learning for the purpose of achieving a target test score, such as teaching or practising different test items and testwiseness including test-taking skills that may inflate scores without reflecting language competence, motivating students, and acquiring information and techniques (Bachman 1990, Haladyna and Downing 2004). Anastasi (1981) suggested three types of preparation: familiarity with test-items, focused test-taking skills, and improvement of actual abilities. The first involves practice sessions designed to familiarize test takers with the format of the exam and question types. The second consists of intensive coaching programs that focus on repeated drills and test-taking skills for achieving the highest possible scores. The third aims at developing broader cognitive skills, focusing on improving actual abilities and learning skills covered by the test. Popham (1991) also identified two types of test preparation. The first aims at familiarizing test takers with test items for improving test-takers' competence and the second emphasizes only test-taking strategies for raising test scores.

Regarding outcomes of preparation, test preparation has been researched within washback studies which investigate how tests affect teaching and learning in the classroom settings (Alderson and Wall 1993, Andrews et al. 2002, Cheng 1997, Wall and Horak 2011). For example, Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 127) found in their study in Sri Lanka that the exam had almost no effect on how teachers taught English. They suggested this might be because teachers did not know the best ways to prepare their students for the test. Their study showed that "the exam itself does not and cannot determine how teachers teach" (p. 127). Similarly, Cheng (1997) studied how changes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination affected teaching in Hong Kong high schools. Although teachers used activities like discussions and role plays related to the test, the exam did not change their teaching methods. Andrews et al. (2002) also studied a new oral English test for secondary schools in Hong Kong.

They found the test helped improve students' speaking to some extent, but students focused too much on memorizing answers and getting used to the test format. They concluded that test effects on teaching and learning are indirect and hard to predict. Wall and Horak (2011) observed that after the new TOEFL test was introduced, some teachers in Eastern and Central Europe increased speaking practice, but the changes were not the same for all teachers. As Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996, p. 296) said, "the existence of a test by itself does not guarantee washback, either positive or negative." Instead, washback depends on the type of test preparation and teaching methods used (Andrews et al., 2002). This means that the way preparation is taught can influence learning outcomes on tests. Washback research has demonstrated how crucial test preparation is for both teaching and learning. However, the washback research tends to limit test preparation as classroom activities or test taking skills which teachers instruct in the classroom settings, focusing on how and what test preparation practices are taught in test preparation classes.

Recent language test preparation studies have explored learners' views and experiences on test preparation, especially examining different types of preparation in more high-stakes contexts, such as cram schools, coaching programmes, private institutions, or test preparation companies (Allen 2016, Kim 2010, Kim 2021, Lin 2020, Cheng et al. 2011, Green 2007, Xie and Andrews 2013). For example, Kim (2021) investigated how Korean college students prepared for the TOEFL iBT writing section at *hagwons*. The results show that the test-takers focused on practising test-taking skills taught by cram school instructors, and achieved their target scores within a short time frame. However, previous research on test preparation tends to focus on the effectiveness of classroom practice on test scores and/or language ability rather than on the impact of test preparation on a test-taker's life.

2.2 High-Stakes Outcomes on a Test-Taker

The term 'high-stakes outcomes' was used by Fulcher (2011, p. 2) to introduce and summarise what leads IELTS test-takers to cheat on tests. Examples of high-stakes outcomes of test preparation on a test-taker include life-changing choices, financial investment, frustration, and depression, which can tempt students to cheat (Fulcher 2011, p. 2). Fulcher (2015) elucidates the concept of high-stakes outcomes according to three Ms: Meritocracy, material success, and motivation. That is, tests have been used to introduce meritocracy to societies throughout history, making it possible for individuals to satisfy their desires for their material success. For example, IELTS test scores have been used to define test-takers' access to educational, employment, and immigration opportunities (Green 2007). Test scores create opportunities for people to improve their lives and become more successful (IELTS 2025). For this reason, test-takers spend time, energy, and money to achieve a target test score within a short period (Fulcher 2011). They search for effective methods of preparation and take preparation programmes and actual tests until receiving a target test score. However, receiving unexpectedly low test results can place test-takers under greater pressure to prepare, leading to financial and emotional stress. Further challenges, such as changes in immigration rules or test misuse, can intensify students' frustration and depression. In response, students may attempt to cheat on the test (Fulcher 2011).

The above concepts of high-stakes outcomes (Fulcher 2011, 2015) help us to understand how test-takers face challenges and are changed by a process of test preparation. While previous research on test preparation tends to limit test preparation as classroom practices or test-taking skills to achieve a target test score, Fulcher (2011, 2015) broadens the areas of test preparation, providing a more in depth understanding of a learning process in test preparation, considering what leads learners to cheat on tests. Furthermore, the notion of high-stakes outcomes makes it possible to explore the relationship between test preparation and test-taker identity. This approach is further supported by Wenger's (1998, p. 96) argument that learning is closely linked to the formation of identity.

2.3 Test-Taker Identity

There seems to be less research on ‘test-taker identity’ in the field of language testing. It may be because the nature of identity has difficulty in clearly defining, operationalising, and analysing individuals’ behaviours (Eccles 2009). Rather, various concepts of identity are defined in social sciences such as psychology, social psychology, sociology, education and language studies (Lave and Wenger 1991). In particular, in education, research on learner identity has been discussed regarding links between identity and learning practice because learning is involved in forming an identity (Wenger 1998, p. 96). Similarly, test preparation may be a learning process, which is not only to practice but also to construct an identity. From this view, this section introduces definitions of identity in the literature, focusing on learning contexts where identity formation is involved, including life-changing choices, learning practice, and student alienation.

According to Erikson (1963, 1968), identity develops through close connections between individuals and historical, cultural, and social contexts. Identity formation has also been discussed as the construction of individual and social meaning through the relationship between one’s sense of self and society (Flum and Kaplan 2012). This concept of identity formation allows us to understand individuals in learning contexts (Flum and Kaplan 2012). According to Flum and Kaplan (2012), identity formation provides insight into how adult-learners acquire and develop knowledge, skills, and beliefs in classroom settings.

For example, in the context of a life-changing choice, such as making a high-stakes educational or vocational decision, individuals explore their possibilities based on goals, values and beliefs and then commit to their decisions, shaping their identities (Eccles 2009, Marcia 1966). According to Eccles (2009), two identities act in making life-defining choices: One is based on self-views about relevant skills, tasks or activities to achieve a goal. The other one is based on self-views related to a goal, such as what one would like to be. Based on their identity sets, individuals expect success and construct their identities regarding relevant skills, tasks, and activities (Eccles 2009).

Learning practice also involves becoming a particular kind of person (Lave and Wenger 1991). According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice comprise people who work, learn, and share skills, knowledge, beliefs, and values in their communities. The components of a community of practice are as follows: Community, meaning, practice, and identity. First, a community is a group of people who interact and share as members of a distinct group. A community also has three features: Membership, negotiation, and shared practices. Second, meaning and practice are ‘the dynamic relation of living in the world’ and ‘doing’, respectively (Wenger 1998, p. 47). Practising allows us to experience what we are doing, give meaning, negotiate, and share practices, thus developing who we are and belonging to a community (Wenger 1998). Ultimately, Wenger (1998, p. 96) defines that identity is shaped by how we participate in different communities and how we express who we are within those groups. It includes the memberships we hold, the learning progress including what we have learned in the past and what we plan to learn in the future, and the way we integrate our various roles and experiences into one identity. It also involves negotiating our sense of belonging both within local groups and larger social or cultural contexts, including how we adopt and display different ways of thinking and behaving in these settings.

Finally, student alienation involves identity formation through learning practice over time. According to Seeman (1959), alienation is an individual’s state of conflict or discrepancy between their goal, belief, and expected outcome, which is associated with depression, frustration, and disappointment. Previous education research has investigated how students are influenced by their learning experiences or contexts (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014). Barnhardt and Ginns (2014) interpret student alienation using three types of alienation in Seeman’s (1959) model: Powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement. For example, powerlessness is a state of being unable to

reach a desired level of academic achievement. Meaninglessness is a state of being unable to predict one's academic outcomes. Self-estrangement is a state of losing motivation about academic activities or required practices. As students experience inconsistencies among their goals, values, and beliefs within their academic settings, they may encounter conflicts between who they are, wish to be, or ought to be (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014). Ultimately, they may become isolated and depressed by engaging in academic practices (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014).

The above concepts of identity formation help us to understand how test-takers behave, feel, and struggle with themselves in contexts of life-changing decisions, such as high-stakes test preparation. In particular, this study draws on Wenger's (1998) identity in practice, Barnhardt and Ginns' (2014) student alienation, and Fulcher's (2011, 2015) high-stakes outcomes to understand test-taker identity in the context of test preparation. However, understanding test-taker identity in test preparation may require clearly defining, operationalising, and analysing test-takers' behaviours that reflect aspects of identity formation. Despite the limitations of studies on 'identity', such research draws attention to essential questions of high-stakes test use by providing a more accurate account of the challenges and changes test-takers experience during long-term preparation.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

In this study, the interview data of two Korean adults were drawn from a larger research project, which distinguished high-stakes English speaking test preparation into groups based on data collected through interviews, observations, documents, and field notes. The two participants in this study were purposefully selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research focus. First, both participants were Korean adults who returned to private-English study after completing their formal education. Although private test preparation is widely available in South Korea, access to settings of private tutoring has been extremely limited due to their tight security. It is true that gaining access to individual test takers in such environments has been challenging in research of test preparation. Second, both participants were preparing for the high-stakes English test like the IELTS exam with the goal of pursuing postgraduate study abroad for professional development. Third, they had made significant life changes to engage in full-time preparation—leaving their previous jobs to focus solely on the test preparation. Finally, their preparation spanned a considerable period, ranging from six months to nearly a year, which is the very significant long-term test preparation. Table 1 shows their profiles.

Table 1. Demographic Information and Test Prep Type

Name	Gender	Age	Status	Type of test prep
Suk	Male	32	University Graduate	-Cram school -Self-study -Cram school
Sunny	Female	28	University Graduate	-Group study -Online program

Two Korean adults who were preparing for the IELTS for postgraduate programme admission, including one male and one female. Participants provided informed consent, and their real names are not used in this paper. Suk was 32 years old. He had worked at a USA-based global company for more than 7 years after completing university

and was an experienced manager with a high salary. However, he worried about his English-speaking skills because high English proficiency was required in his workplace. He also realised that fluent English communication and more professional knowledge of marketing would ensure his success in the workplace. Therefore, he planned to study in a master's program in the UK. Though he studied at an English language programme when he was a university student, he had never studied abroad. He prepared for the test for six months as a full-time test-taker.

Sunny was 28 years old. She had been a teacher with a part-time position at a special education school for over 3 years after graduating from university and was preparing for a teachers' exam to obtain a full-time teaching job at a public school. However, she failed the exam several times and began to consider other career options. After consideration, she wanted to be a lecturer in her field and set a goal of studying in a postgraduate programme in Australia. She had little experience studying English and prepared for 11 months as a full-time test-taker.

3.2 Data Collection

In this study, data consist of participants-interviews, documentation, field notes and research journal for six-months during the participants' test preparation. Semi-structured interviews took place every two weeks in Korea. For example, participants were asked to answer questions about basic information about their age, educational or occupational background, and their preparation experiences related to their targeted test. It was intended to elicit their personal experiences and stories about test preparation. This was done to find out; why they select test preparation, what test-takers are doing in their everyday routines, what difficulties they experience, how they interpret their test preparation including how they see themselves during this process, and what changes they experience as they keep preparing for the test. Once an interview was completed, its audio recording was transcribed. For follow-up interviews, unclear or interesting comments from participants were highlighted. During the follow-up interviews, comments made by participants in prior interviews were clarified. A series of interviews were then conducted until each participant completed their test preparation. Each interview lasted more than 30 minutes on average. Field notes were also kept during the interviews, serving as a reflective journal.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed Bryman's (2004) qualitative analysis procedures. Transcribed interviews were and organized into individual Word documents for each participant. Initial analysis involved repeated readings of the transcripts, with important words, phrases, and sentences marked in relation to the research question. Individual-level analysis was conducted to identify unique features of each participant's test preparation experience. Subsequently, Fulcher's (2011, 2015) high-stakes outcomes of the IETLS, Wenger's (1998) identity in practice, and Barnhardt and Ginns' (2014) student alienation were employed to interpret changes of the participants' preparation processes according to time order and places. Key words were underlined and then used for making codes. The codes were then grouped based on interconnections. Then, relevant research was reviewed based on key themes. Codes were developed according to the research question. Last, data were coded into the revised codes. For example, each participant's data were categorised into a code, 'Identity formation', including codes according to time order, 'Before test prep' and 'After prep'. Then, data were also categorised into codes according to places, 'Workplace', 'Cram school' and 'Home'. Under each code, data were further coded as 'Life-changing choice', including two sub-codes, 'self-view of ability' and 'self-view of a goal'; 'learning practice', including five sub-codes, 'Daily life', 'Membership', 'Participation', 'Practices' and 'Identity'; 'Alienation' including three sub-codes, 'Powerless', 'Meaningless' and 'Self-estrangement'. Then, they were compared and reduced in number to

make pattern codes. Then, codes of each participant were categorized thematically based on the research question: what impact does the long-term English test preparation have on a test-taker identity? Through this analysis, it was able to identify how and why they left their jobs, how they prepared for the test at the cram school, and how they were changed over the time in terms of identity formation. In particular, it was possible to identify negative aspects of long-term test preparation for students who need to support themselves financially. The results presented narratives of two individual participants into high-stakes outcomes related to identity formation.

4. Findings

This section presents narratives of two individual participants, Suk and Sunny, identifying long-term impacts of high-stakes English test preparation on test-taker identity formation.

4.1 Suk's Narrative of Test Preparation

4.1.1 Workplace: competent employee but 'an Idiot' in English

Suk, a 32-year-old single man, had worked for a USA-based international company for over 7 years after graduating from university. At his workplace, he was a competent employee but always felt his English-speaking skills were lacking.

Before starting the test preparation, I worked for an American international company for over 7 years after graduating from university, and I should have used English for communication in my workplace. I always felt fear in revealing my real self who lacks English speaking skills. My colleagues seemed to assess my English skills [as] higher than my actual skills. But I know what I am. So, I really tried not to reveal my actual skills. I pretend to speak well, but I am an idiot.

Suk felt that his English-speaking ability was that of 'an idiot'. He also feared that speaking English would reveal his low proficiency, making him sensitive to how people evaluated his English speaking. The higher his position at the company, the more he was required to communicate fluently in English. However, he "pretended to speak well" to hide his true lack of speaking skills.

Finally, he set a goal to study abroad for professional development. He believed that studying abroad would give him an opportunity to develop his English and, consequently, improve his career opportunities.

4.1.2 Cram school: from professional worker to unemployed test-taker

After setting the goal of studying abroad, Suk started to prepare for the test by taking a two-month-long weekend class at a cram school alongside his work. The cram school was well known for raising students' scores during test preparation. At that time, he was confident that test preparation would be successful if he could study at a highly recommended cram school. However, he realised that working and studying was difficult. Finally, he left his professional job to focus on test preparation.

For a long time, I planned to study abroad. When I left my job to focus on test preparation, some told me my choice was too risky because my position in the workplace was stable. But I really want to pursue my goal. I am also sure of being successful in test preparation if I study hard at a good cram school to raise [my] score.

At the cram school, he studied the IELTS for six months. His daily life as a full-time test-taker involved attending classes in the morning and studying in a library in the evening. However, he was not accustomed to focusing on preparation, which was a departure from his workplace life.

I am not used to prepar[ing] for the test as a full-time test-taker. I am easily tempted by my friends. When I worked in the past, I was used to going out for a drink with my colleagues or friends every night after work because it is a kind of opportunity to relax with my friends. Now I do not work anymore, but my friends always call me to go out for a drink. I try to focus on studying but am very used to hanging out with them. This temptation is not serious, but it is not easy to control it. I need to take time to [adapt to being] a test-taker.

In the quoted passage, Suk refers to himself as a ‘test-taker’, recognising the differences between this identity and his past identity in his workplace. He studied hard but still was used to his work life. Suk mentions being initially tempted to spend his free time with his friends but did not consider the temptation to be serious. However, he struggled to devote his focus to test preparation.

4.1.3 Home: alienation and shame

Approximately four to six months after starting test preparation, Suk faced financial pressure due to test preparation and test fees. The test preparation cost over KRW 500,000 a month (around GBP 286). However, his test results were lower than expected. His overall score was 5.0 (R/C 6.5, L/C 5.5, W/C 4.0, S/C 5.5), while his target score was 6.5. After the test, he stopped attending the cram school to avoid expensive tuition fees. He was also very confident about studying alone using the materials provided to him by the cram school. However, as test preparation continued, he repeatedly felt ashamed and guilty.

I get up at 8 am, have breakfast, and watch TV until noon. I cannot stop watching...so I try to leave my house to study. But I really feel sleepy and sleep until 6 pm. Even though I changed the location to a public study place, it does not make any changes. Eventually, this uncontrolled behaviour makes me feel a sense of guilt. This test preparation is really [making] me [feel] pressure[d].

When he left the cram school, he planned his daily schedule and tried to adhere to it. However, he had serious difficulty in time-management for self-study. Instead of studying, he stayed in his room, watching TV or surfing the Internet. Before leaving his job, these behaviours had become habitual before going to sleep after returning

from work. Especially troubling was that he still could not focus on test preparation despite his identity changing from worker to full-time test-taker. Despite his best efforts, he failed to control himself, viewing his habitual behaviour as ‘a kind of addiction’.

I still spend most of my time watching TV or surfing the Internet. When I am in my room, the only thing to do is to go on the Internet. It is a kind of addiction. I am afraid of myself. In my mind, I always think that I should work hard. But in reality, I do not work hard even though I have enough time to do so. Now I have no job and the only thing I should do is to study the test. But I am not used to studying alone in this isolated environment. Wherever I study, I am alone. I feel isolated from a normal life.

His isolated test preparation gradually influenced him, ‘shaking the very foundation of his identity’ and leading to humiliation. Test preparation also made him feel self-contempt, guilt, and uneasiness.

It is shaking the very foundation of my identity. It is making me feel humiliated... For the first time, I have experienced humiliation and frustration with myself. When I worked for seven years, I was a competent person. But since I started test preparation, I feel terrible. Damn it! I have pride in my past work experience. But when it comes to test preparation, I am not self-disciplined. But I am in my thirties. That means that I am not a child. But my real self is not an adult. I know what I should do during this time, but I am like a child. I am used to working with people. But I have failed to manage my time and myself...I am very ashamed of myself and feel guilty.

Despite his negative experience, Suk took his third and final test and received an overall score of 6.0 (R/C 5.5, L/C 6.5, W/C 6.0, S/C 5.0), an improvement from his previous score of 5.5 (R/C 6.5, L/C 5.0, W/C 4.5, S/C 5.5). However, he had already decided to stop test preparation because of his ‘dreadful test preparation experience’. Instead, he planned to use his results to apply for a pre-sessional language course.

My test preparation was dreadful. I already got the second test results and could apply for a pre-sessional language course as an alternative option. During test preparation, I hated myself because I could not control myself...I do not want to have this dreadful experience again.

Suk’s narrative supports Fulcher’s (2011) ideas about the potential outcomes of high-stakes test preparation on test-takers, including life investment, financial burden, depression, and temptation. However, in this study, Suk’s temptation was not to cheat on the test. Rather, he was tempted by distractions, which prevented him from focusing on test preparation. In particular, he seemed to experience student alienation (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014), comprising powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement. That is, he suffered from a sense of being unable to achieve or predict the target score in his isolated life, losing motivation for preparation. Simultaneously,

he struggled with his past habits, which led to sustained self-hatred for being unable to exercise self-control, thus worsening his circumstances.

4.2 Sunny's Narrative of Test Preparation

4.2.1 Workplace: teaching part-time

Sunny was a 28-year-old woman. After university graduation, she taught as a teacher with a part-time position at a special education school for over 3 years. Due to her part-time position, she was keen to expand her career opportunities. Thus, she prepared for the teachers' exam to become a full-time teacher. However, she repeatedly failed the test. Thus, she sought to study abroad, which required improving her English. She believed that achieving her educational goal would ultimately improve her career opportunities.

I prepared for the teacher qualification exam but failed the test several times. I needed to change my goal because I am 28 years old. I do not want to spend my whole life [preparing] for the teacher qualification exam in order to be a full-time teacher in a public school. I want to get more opportunities through overseas study. I expect to get better jobs and to speak English well if I come back to Korea after studying abroad. Also, I could teach students in college.

Sunny's workplace was a critical context where she experienced a lack of membership due to her part-time status. She set a goal of studying abroad and strongly believed that overseas study would provide opportunities to improve her English skills and ultimately upgrade her position at work.

4.2.2 Cram school: a place of alienation

After setting the goal of studying abroad, Sunny began using an online program to learn basic English skills. Then, she searched for some IELTS cram schools around her hometown but found none. Thus, to fully focus on test preparation, she left her job and hometown and moved to Seoul to attend a cram school.

This test preparation is everything to my life. In order to prepare for the test, I left my job. I left my hometown and moved to Seoul. My friends said. . .that my choice of test preparation is challenging compared to their choices. Because they work and make money, they think that I am very different from them. But I believe that I [will] achieve my goal. This test preparation is more valuable than working.

Sunny was very motivated by the prospect of being admitted into a graduate program. However, her attitude changed approximately six months after starting test preparation, when she took her first test. The test results (overall score of 5.0: R/C 5.5, L/C 5, W/C 4.5, S/C 5) were lower than what she expected. With a target score of

6.5, she was upset with the test results and herself. She was particularly disheartened by her results on the speaking section of the test.

I think that speaking reveals who I am. So, whenever I practice English speaking with peers who speak better than [me], it seems to say to them, 'I am not good at speaking like you'. Apart from the speaking section, I do not need to show my real skills to peers. The pressure comes from the fact that I cannot hide myself when speaking to others. I really feel ashamed and frustrated with revealing myself as someone who does not speak well in front of people who do speak well. I do not want to make a fool of myself in front of my peers.

Compared to other language skills, she thought that speaking revealed her identity, that is, who she is. For example, before starting test preparation, she taught in a school and never experienced English-speaking practice. However, in test preparation, she was a newly enrolled learner.

Before starting the test preparation, I was a teacher. In front of students, I taught and helped them. I confidently talked to my students. Also, my major was not English and I had never spoken English with a peer before. This was my first time using English. I see myself as one who does not speak well. Even when I really want to express my ideas, I pause and do not use the proper words. I know what to say in Korean but fail to speak it in English fluently.

She began to practice with her peers for over one hour every day to reduce her anxiety about English speaking. They asked questions about the materials which the instructor provided in class and presented answers to the group. Despite studying hard to improve her English speaking, she scored lower on the speaking portion than she had expected. Gradually, she developed her identity in English speaking, being ashamed.

After approximately nine months of studying at cram school every day, she grew discouraged with test preparation. Test preparation also caused financial and emotional pressures, including living costs in Seoul as a full-time test-taker. She also experienced a complexity of alienation, as seen in her comment, 'I lost my way in the test preparation'.

I want to stop test preparation. But I need to get a higher score. That is why I could not stop but I am really fed up with test preparation. I also really feel like I'm being imprisoned in the cram school, but I am saying to myself that I should do it. Also, my peers in the cram school are leaving one by one as they finish their test preparation. So, I feel lonely when I'm at the school. I am studying alone.

As test preparation continued, her state of alienation intensified as she became 'fed up with the test preparation'

and felt ‘powerless’, like she was ‘in a prison’. Moreover, she felt like test preparation was decreasing the quality of her daily life. She invested her life in test preparation but lacked her desired results despite a heavy workload. Even worse, as her peers left the cram school, she suffered from a sense of isolation.

I just believed that I could get the required score if I followed the instructions of the cram school and worked harder and harder. I believed that I could do this when I started to prepare for the test. However, it was my mistake. During the test preparation, I realised that test preparation generally needs more than the basic English skills from the start. I did not consider that fact. I just set a goal [for] test preparation. I spent my life on test preparation, but I could not achieve the score I needed. I feel really sorry for myself (Author, XXXX).

As test preparation continued, Sunny became increasingly stressed and discouraged. On her second and final test, Sunny’s overall score was 5.5 (R/C 6, L/C 6, W/C 5, S/C 5). Compared to her previous score of 5.0 (R/C 5.5, L/C 5, W/C 4.5, S/C 5), her score improved by 0.5 points. However, her target score of 6.5 remained distant, so she stopped attending the cram school.

Researcher: Are you going to attend class in the cram school?

Sunny: No, Never. It is dreadful.

Researcher: What does that mean?

Sunny: Only that studying in the cram school is dreadful...I am fed up with being locked in the cram school preparing for the test.

Sunny returned to teaching but still wished to achieve her goal of attending graduate school. Although she continued test preparation by herself after work, she struggled to focus on studying. She also found that she was not a ‘test-taker’ but a ‘teacher’. She was satisfied with teaching students because it made her feel valuable. She realised that she desired to be a ‘competent teacher’. In the end, she abandoned test preparation to focus on teaching. She returned to preparing for the teacher qualification exam and passed the exam after studying for one year. She now teaches at a public school.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated Korean adults’ IELTS test preparation for studying abroad, identifying what high-stakes outcomes the test-takers faced during preparation from the perspective of identity formation. Based on the results, this study identified a process of high-stakes outcomes involved in identity formation as shown in Figure 1.

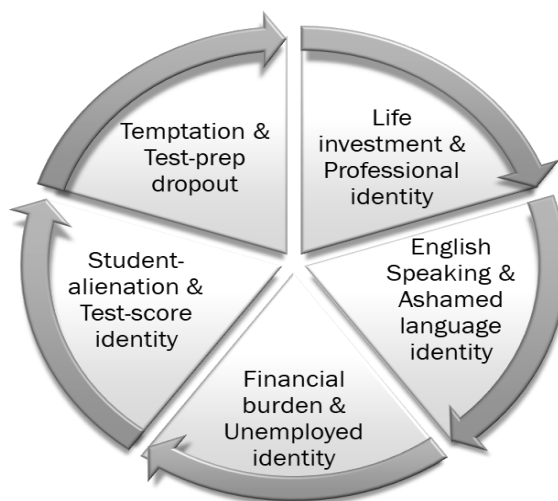


Figure 1. A Process of High-Stakes Outcomes in Test-Taker Identity

These are: (1) life investment and professional identity; (2) English speaking and self-shaming language identity; (3) financial burden and unemployed identity; (4) Student-alienation and test-score identity; (5) temptation and test-preparation dropout. The findings confirm that test preparation may not only include the necessary knowledge and skills for the test but also a learning process of identity formation in Wenger's (1998) study. In particular, the results support Fulcher (2011)'s high-stakes outcomes of IELTS on a test-taker in that pursuing test preparation was a life-changing choice that test-takers made to improve their prospects for success. However, this study raises questions regarding the links between the test preparation over time and identity formation, such as why and how test-takers start to prepare for a test, how they change during preparation, and why and how they cease preparation without achieving a target test score.

First, the test-takers' life investment is seen in their decision to transition from highly paid workers to voluntarily unemployed test-takers, which was the first life-changing decision they encountered during test preparation. This aspect is supported by Wenger's (1998) work-related identities in practice in that their life investment was a result of the identities they constructed at their workplaces. Suk's workplace was a critical context where he experienced the community of English practice for the first time. Sunny's workplace was a context where she experienced her position as a part-time teacher career rather than English practice. At their workplaces, they wished to start a new life to be a professional in their fields. They set goals of studying abroad and left their jobs to improve their life prospects. Their life investment can be explained in Fulcher's (2015) three Ms concepts including meritocracy, material success, and motivation. They strongly believed that overseas study would give them opportunities to improve their English skills and, consequently, their career prospects. They believed their goals would ultimately improve their income opportunities as a professional. They were motivated by the goals, which led them to start test preparation and even leave their jobs.

The test-takers' learning challenges in English-speaking practice at the cram school provide insights into the links between speaking and identity. When they practised with peers, they became anxious about revealing their lack of English proficiency. They simultaneously experienced their past identities formed at the workplace and their present identities at the cram school. They ultimately formed English-speaking identities characterised by self-shaming over the outcomes of test preparation. This aspect supports Wenger's (1998) identity in practice in

that their cram school was a critical context where they experienced the community of English practice. Through participating in English-speaking practice at the cram school, they began recognising the gap between their identities – a worker in the past and a test-taker in the present. Furthermore, this intense anxiety and shame represent the emotional stress support Fulcher's (2011) high-stakes outcomes, which can lead to frustration.

Test-takers faced financial and emotional pressures due to the high costs of preparation but low test scores, which indicates gaps between the test-takers' expected and actual outcomes regarding cram school and test results. As the test-takers became more discouraged by the reality of preparation, they gradually formed test-taker identities characterised by shame or guilty for their inability to raise their test scores. This financial strain and pressure align with the high-stakes outcomes described by Fulcher (2011), including financial investment, frustration, and depression.

Test-takers also faced increasing alienation, providing insight into the long-term impacts of preparation on test-taker identity. The more time test-takers invested in preparation, the greater their sense of alienation became, with one participant referring to their procrastinating behaviour as a sort of addiction. As their test preparation continued, they developed identities as isolated test-takers. This state of isolation and conflict supports Barnhardt and Ginns' (2014) student alienation: The inability to control time, such as Suk's struggle with habitual behaviour he called 'a kind of addiction', and his subsequent self-hatred for being unable to exercise self-control, reflects self-estrangement. Also, Suk suffered from a sense of being unable to achieve or predict the target score in his isolated life, reflecting meaninglessness. Sunny was 'imprisoned in the cram school', experiencing a high degree of powerlessness. This alienation process led them to develop negative self-views as isolated test-takers.

Finally, both test-takers experienced the temptation to stop preparation, which provides insight into why potentially successful test-takers abandon preparation before attaining their target test results. Unlike Fulcher's (2011) IELTS preparation, in this study, the test-takers' temptation was not to cheat on the test but to return to their normal life due to the intense student alienation (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014). That is, they could not achieve or predict the target score at their test preparation. They found that test preparation required studying alone and being isolated from others. Their inability to achieve or predict the target score at their test preparation reinforced their sense of alienation.

During their test preparation, they devoted most of their time to repeatedly practising test preparation activities. However, the places where they practised, including at cram school, home, or the library, made them feel alienated and isolated alienation (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014). Gradually, they developed negative self-views as full-time test-takers, blaming themselves and developing identities based on shame. Ultimately, both test-takers dropped out of test preparation.

This study's findings raise awareness of the importance of understanding the links between high-stakes outcomes in the long-term preparation and test-taker identity formation, considering isolation from test preparation. Test preparation companies advertise classes and instructors, presenting successful stories of enrolled test-takers who attain good test results within a short period. However, little is known about how many students abandon their desperate test preparation. Although there are a lot of international students who prepare for high-stakes English tests, but it seems to focus on how to raise a score such as test preparation methods, instructions, and test taking skills (Allen 2016, Kim 2010, Kim 2021, Lin 2020). However, the results of the study tell why and how possibly successful adults becomes alienated and finally give up their preparation, experiencing negative impacts on a sense of self.

In conclusion, this study provides long-term impacts of the high-stakes English test preparation, showing how potentially successful adult-learners become isolated and dropouts from test preparation with the narratives of Suk and Sunny. The findings indicate that the test-takers' high-stakes outcomes are involved in identity formation,

including a process of changes in contexts of test preparation. For the test-takers, test preparation not only served as a means for raising their scores but was also a process in which high-stakes outcomes had negative impacts on their identity formation, leading to self-shaming and alienation.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the number of participants analysed was quite small even though the study does not intend generalization in term of the nature of qualitative research. Second, the data were limited as the interview data was selected and analysed. Last, test-taker identity needs to be more clearly defined and analysed, reflecting test-takers' behaviours of identity formation. Despite these limitations, the implications of this study are to raise awareness of the reality of test preparation, the extraordinary investment and cost associated with the long-term pursuit of high-stakes outcomes as shown the narratives of Suk and Sunny in the study. This study also attempts to provide the information that high-stakes outcomes of the English test can affect test-taker identity. This may be a timely contribution, as we are witnessing more and more test-takers making extraordinary investments in global English tests such as IELTS in pursuit of their dreams, which often ultimately remain unfulfilled.

Future research is needed to investigate more cases of high-stakes outcomes in different educational contexts and to present a wider range of data for a deeper understanding of identity construction. It is also important to explore how test preparation costs influence test-taker identity across personal, emotional, social, and professional aspects.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: All