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The influence of CEFR in South Korea's 2022 National English Curriculum: A focus on grammar

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Abstract

While the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages was originally developed for the European context, its influence has extended to other regions. The present paper highlights this growing influence by reporting on revisions to grammar in South Korea's National English Curriculum based on CEFR criteria and the related CEFR-based *English Grammar Profile* resource. Specifically focusing on Appendix 4 of the 2015 curriculum, which consists of example sentences of language forms for communication (e.g. *Kate is from London*), the revising process based on CEFR and the English Grammar Profile involved two steps: 1) adding grammatical categories for the example sentences, and 2) reorganizing the school level where the grammatical categories are recommended to be taught. The resulting changes were implemented in the 2022 Korean National English Curriculum, which began being applied nationwide to English education in 2024.

Introduction

English has a prominent role in South Korea, including in education, where English has been a mandatory subject since 1997 (Park 2009) and is currently taught at both primary and secondary levels. Approaches to teaching and assessing English have generated considerable controversy in Korean society (e.g. Shin and Cho 2020), leading to numerous curricular changes and reform efforts (Shin and Lee 2019). Along these lines, documenting and investigating changes in English education as seen in textbooks (e.g. Shim 1999), assessment (e.g. Goto Butler et al. 2020), and curriculum documents (e.g. Oh and Johnson 2017) can provide an interesting perspective on the evolving orientation to English and English education in South Korea.

When a language is taught using varying curricula across different settings, it becomes challenging to compare and align the different language courses and assessments. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) was formulated to tackle the problems of *coherence* and *transparency* to make feasible the relatability of language courses and assessments in Europe. After development and piloting in the 1990s, the CEFR was officially published in 2001 and is now accessible in over 20 languages (Council of Europe 2001). The influence of CEFR has grown, expanding beyond Europe to other regions of the world, including East Asia.

The present study illustrates a practical application of CEFR for English curriculum revision and highlights CEFR's growing influence in English education in South Korea by providing a behind-the-scenes account of efforts to revise the grammar portion of South Korea's 2015 National English Curriculum (NEC). The first and third authors of this study were directly involved in the revision process, with the first author assisting with the analysis of the curriculum materials and the EGP and the third author overseeing the full revision of the grammar portion. The resulting revisions were implemented in the 2022 Korean National English Curriculum, which began being applied nationwide to English education in 2024.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the English Grammar Profile (EGP)

The CEFR provides a standardised framework for the learning, teaching, and assessment of foreign languages, with six proficiency levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2) represented vertically, and skill categories (reception, interaction, production, and mediation) represented horizontally. Within ten years of its introduction, the CEFR emerged as the predominant language proficiency framework globally, influencing language policies, curricula, and assessments worldwide (Figueras 2012). This has led countries outside of Europe, such as Japan and Vietnam, to adopt (or adapt) CEFR when seeking to enhance

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Table 1. An example of the EGP resource for '*FORM: COMBINING TWO ADJECTIVES WITH "AND"*' (English Grammar Profile n.d.)

Supercategory	Subcategory	Level	Can-do Statement	Example
ADJECTIVES	combining	A1	Can use 'and' to join a limited range of common adjectives.	The teachers are very nice and friendly

the coherence and transparency in language curricula and assessment (See Lee et al. 2022, for further information).

There has been emerging consensus in Korea, too, regarding the need to develop a more coherent, unified approach to English teaching, learning, and assessment (Oh and Johnson 2017), with CEFR commonly referred to as a suitable framework to guide such efforts (Lee and Shin 2019). As a result, it has been used as one of the bases for revising the Korean National English Curriculum (NEC) in 2022, predominantly affecting its achievement standard description (Joo et al. 2022). The present study focuses on the Appendix 4 section of the 2022 Korean NEC that consists of example sentences of language forms for communication (e.g. *Kate is from London*). The example sentences are organised according to school levels at which they are recommended to be taught, thereby informing national textbooks and curricular documents as well as classroom activities at the school level. The Appendix 4 section of language forms for communication was revised from the 2015 Korean NEC based in large part on alignment with CEFR.

To carry out the revision, we drew on the CEFR-based *English Grammar Profile* (EGP). The EGP is a sub-project of *English Profile*, an effort led by Cambridge University Press and Assessment that aimed to empirically describe the English capabilities of learners at different CEFR levels from a linguistic perspective through the creation and analysis of a large learner corpus (O'Keeffe and Mark 2017). According to O'Keeffe and Mark, the EGP focused on profiling learner competence in grammar for each distinct CEFR level based on what learners 'can-do' in terms of the application of grammatical elements with specific forms and/or usages. For example, the can-do statement '*USE: Can use the past perfect simple to talk about a time before another time in the past*' is linked to the B1 level, where it was observed in productions from B1-level and above learners (e.g. '*Actually I'd arranged an appointment with my doctor before calling you*', O'Keefe and Mark 2017, 476). The EGP is available on the web as a resource for educators and researchers.

Table 1 illustrates an example of the EGP resource for the grammatical element '*FORM: COMBINING TWO ADJECTIVES WITH "AND"*' listed together with its grammatical supercategory, subcategory, CEFR level, and 'can-do' statement (English Grammar Profile n.d.). Additionally, in the Example column, users can access real learner examples from the learner corpus, providing empirical evidence of how these forms are used in learner language. For further details, the full resource is available online at https://www.englishprofile.org/english-grammar-profile/egp-online.

The 2015 Korean NEC

Implemented in South Korea since 1997, the National Common Basic Curriculum mandates an eight-year English education program from 3rd grade of elementary school to 10th grade of high school, followed by elective English courses for 11th and 12th graders. In the 2015 Korean NEC, grammatical elements recommended for teaching in elementary, middle, and high schools were listed in a reference titled *Language Forms for Communication* (Ministry of Education of Korea 2015). These grammatical elements inform national-level textbooks and curricular documents as well as classroom activities at the school level.

The present article is focused on this reference, found in Appendix 4 of the 2015 Korean NEC, which consisted of example sentences of language forms for communication (e.g. *Kate is from London*). There are 350 example sentences grouped under 40 unlabelled supercategories. Table 2 provides an excerpt from Appendix 4 (see Ministry of Education of Korea 2015, 189 for the full list of example sentences). The first column lists example sentences corresponding to each supercategory, while the second, third, and fourth columns indicate the required school level of instruction. In this system, the numbers represent grammatical supercategories, which are used to categorize related grammatical structures based on shared features, such as tense. Note that the specific category is not explicitly mentioned, only the number assigned to each supercategory. For instance, 'He **walks** to school every day' in grammatical supercategory 7 illustrated a grammatical form to be taught at the elementary school level and 'She **will be coming** soon' in grammatical supercategory 8 was to be taught at the high school level.

Changes made from 2015 to 2022 on grammar components of the NEC

The 2022 update to the Korean National English Curriculum (NEC) involved a comprehensive revision of the grammar components, which was part of a larger effort to carry out a research-based revision of the 2015 Korean NEC (Joo et al. 2022). While Joo et al. (2022) features a high-level summary of changes made in the 2022 Korean NEC's Appendix 4 pertaining to grammar, the present article provides a detailed account of the procedure and basis for revising the grammar portion of the curriculum based on the CEFR and EGP. The revision process involved two distinct steps: 1) providing specific, descriptive grammatical categories for the example sentences, and 2) rearranging the school levels (elementary, middle, and high school) recommended for teaching elements of grammatical forms and associated example sentences to be aligned with CEFR levels listed in the EGP.

As seen in Table 2, supercategories of the 2015 Korean NEC featured example sentences labeled only with numbers, like 7 and 8, which likely made it difficult for language educators to pinpoint the grammatical elements that the sentences are trying to depict. Thus, our first step was to provide descriptive labels for the grammatical features highlighted in each supercategory. Usefully, the online EGP resource (Table 1)

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Table 2. An excerpt of Appendix 4 section of the 2015 Korean NEC (Ministry of Education of Korea 2015, 189)

	School level		
Example sentences	Elementary	Middle	High
7. He **walks** to school every day.	•		
We **(usually) meet** after lunch.	•		
We **played** soccer yesterday.	•		
She **is going to visit** her grandparents next week.	•		
I **will visit** America next year.	•		
8. He **is sleeping** now.	•		
I **was studying** when John called me.		•	
She **will be coming** soon.			•
I'**m thinking** about the problem.		•	
He's **being** very rude.			•
We **are hoping** you will be with us.			•

Table 3. A revised excerpt of Appendix 4 section of the 2015 Korean NEC (Ministry of Education of Korea 2015, 189)

		School level		
	Example sentences	Elementary	Middle	High
7. Tenses	He **walks** to school every day.	•		
	We **(usually) meet** after lunch.	•		
	We **played** soccer yesterday.	•		
	She **is going to visit** her grandparents next week.	•		
	I **will visit** America next year.	•		
8. Progressives	He **is sleeping** now.	•		
	I **was studying** when John called me.		•	
	She **will be coming** soon.			•
	I'**m think-ing** about the problem.		•	
	He's **being** very rude.			•
	We **are hop-ing** you will be with us.			•

provides grammatical supercategories and subcategories for grammatical elements. Therefore, we added labels for grammatical elements associated with the clusters of example sentences in the Appendix 4 section of the 2015 Korean NEC as Table 3 below, in line with the structure of EGP.

A total of 40 supercategories were provided for the 350 example sentences (see Ministry of Education of Korea 2022, 291 for the full list of example sentences with grammatical supercategories added). We initially tried to provide both grammatical supercategories and subcategories in line with the EGP, but not all sentences had both supercategories and clearly identifiable subcategories. For example, the sentence ***Mathematics is*** *my favorite subject* has only a supercategory (nouns), but no subcategory (*mathematics* is just a noun that ends with an *-s*). Therefore, we only provided supercategories for the clusters of example sentences, referring to the EGP and three grammar books for English teachers to come up with suitable labels: Aarts et al. (2014), Carter and McCarthy (2006), and Celce–Murcia and Larsen–Freeman (1999).

For the second step of reorganizing the school level of instruction, we matched the 350 example sentences in Appendix 4 with grammatical elements in the EGP, focusing on CEFR level classifications. Table 4 provides some examples. The left three columns contain the original numbered supercategory, example sentences, and school level of instruction of the 2015 Korean NEC, and the right five columns pertain to the grammatical supercategory, grammatical subcategory, grammatical form, 'can-do' statements, and finally the CEFR level of the form in the EGP.

The matching process of example sentences in the 2015 Korean NEC with grammatical elements in the EGP revealed the following: 1) the example sentences for elementary school instruction predominantly fell within the A1 and A2 levels, 2) those for middle school instruction mostly fell within the A2 and B1 levels, and 3) those for high school instruction ranged from B1 to C2 levels. The distribution of example sentences according to CEFR levels in the 2015 Korean NEC, organised by intended school level of instruction and aligned with grammatical elements in the EGP, is illustrated in Figure 1 below. The NA category pertains to examples sentences that could not be directly matched with the grammatical elements in the EGP; a total of 56 sentences from the 2015 Korean NEC could not be matched with any specific grammar element (structure) described in the EGP (Middle School $n = 33$, High School $n = 23$).

Based on the analysis of example sentences in the 2015 Korean NEC, their corresponding grammatical components from the EGP and associated CEFR levels, we changed the school level of five example sentences that were identified as deviating from expectations (i.e. a sentence for which the

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Table 4. The matching procedure of the Appendix 4 section of the 2015 Korean NEC and the grammatical elements in the EGP (Ministry of Education of Korea 2015, 189; EGP n.d.)

Number (2015 Korean NEC)	Example sentences (2015 Korean NEC)	School level (2015 Korean NEC)	Supercategory (EGP)	Subcategory (EGP)	Grammatical form (EGP)	Can-do statement (EGP)	Level (EGP)
7	He **walks** to school every day.	Elementary	Present	Present simple	USE: HABITS AND GENERAL FACTS	Can use the present simple to talk about repeated events or habits, and general facts.	A1
	We **(usually) meet** after lunch.	Elementary	Present	Present simple	USE: HABITS AND GENERAL FACTS	Can use the present simple to talk about repeated events or habits, and general facts.	A1
	We **played** soccer yesterday.	Elementary	Past	Past simple	FORM: AFFIRMATIVE	Can use the affirmative form with an increasing range of verbs.	A2
	She **is going to visit** her grandparents next week.	Elementary	Future	Future with 'be going to'	FORM: AFFIRMATIVE	Can use the affirmative form.	A2
	I will visit America next year.	Elementary	Future	Future with 'will' and 'shall'	FORM: AFFIRMATIVE 'WILL'	Can use the affirmative forms 'will' and ''ll'.	A1
8	He **is sleeping** now.	Elementary	Present	Present continuous	USE: EVENTS IN PROGRESS	Can use the present continuous with a limited range of verbs to talk about situations and events in progress.	A1
	I was studying when John called me.	Middle	Past	Past continuous	USE: EVENTS IN PROGRESS	Can use the past continuous to talk about actions and states in progress around a particular time in the past.	A2
	She **will be coming** soon.	High	Future	Future continuous	USE: FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS	Can use the future continuous with 'will' to talk about an event or action in progress at a specified time in the future.	A2
	I'm thinking about the problem.	Middle	Present	Present continuous	USE: TEMPORARY SITUATIONS	Can use the present continuous with a wide range of verbs to talk about temporary situations.	B1
	He's **being** very rude.	High	Present	Present continuous	FORM/USE: WITH ADVERBS OF INDEFINITE FREQUENCY	Can use the present continuous with an increasing range of adverbs of indefinite frequency, often to talk about surprising or undesirable situations or events.	B2
	We **are hoping** you will be with us.	High	Present	Present continuous	USE: POLITENESS	Can use the present continuous with verbs that are not usually used in this form to make statements and requests sound less direct.	C2

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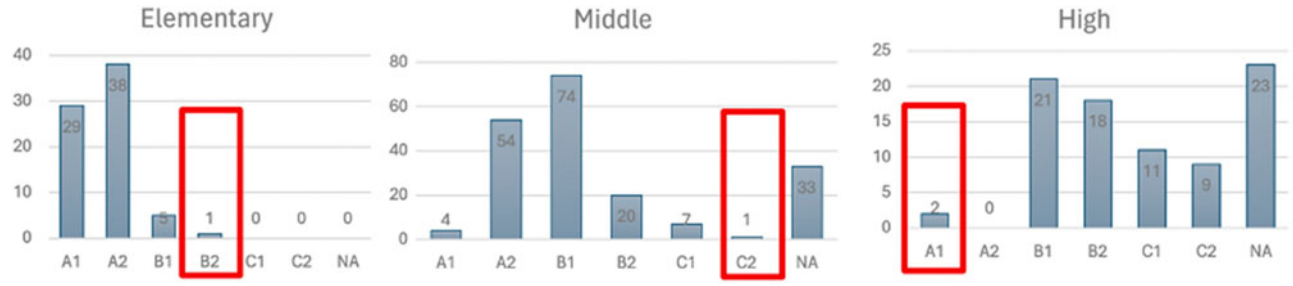


Figure 1. Example sentences in the 2015 Korean NEC identified as outliers when aligned with grammatical elements in the EGP.

grammatical element was too elementary or too advanced for an instructional level). Since the example sentences in the 2015 Korean NEC provide input, whereas the EGP is derived from learner-*produced* data, we approached the reorganization of school-level for instruction conservatively. This is because we recognised that grammatical elements slightly above the learners' current competence level in production could still serve as comprehensible input for language learners (Krashen 1982). Figure 1 presents the distribution and count of example sentences that were reassigned to a different school level due to being identified as outliers in their CEFR-level distribution when aligned with grammatical elements in the EGP. Red boxes have been included to highlight sentences which were deemed to be incommensurate with the school level.

For the elementary school level, one example sentence was identified as the outlier because it is classified as a B2 element in the EGP. That is, the example sentence '**Playing baseball** is fun', listed in the 2015 Korean NEC to be taught at the elementary school level was identified in the EGP as the criterial feature of B2 level learners with the 'can-do' statement of '*Can use the "-ing" form of verbs as nouns in subject position*'. Therefore, the sentence was releveled to the middle school level in the 2022 Korean NEC.

At the middle school level, one example sentence was identified as an outlier because it was identified as a C2 element from the EGP. The example sentence '**It** was Justin **who/that** told me the truth' was designated for middle school instruction in the 2015 Korean NEC but was identified in the EGP as a feature typical of learners at the C2 level. The associated 'can-do' statement for this sentence structure in the EGP was '*Can use "It" + "be" + noun + "that" clause for focus*'. Therefore, we releveled the sentence so that it is recommended to be taught at the high school level in the 2022 Korean NEC. In doing so, we releveled the related example sentence of '**It** was by train **that** we traveled to London' together with the sentence, which can be identified as the "'*It*" + "*be*" + *prepositional phrase* + "*that*" *clause for focus*'. Although it could not be directly matched with the grammatical element in the EGP with the 'can-do' statement of '*Can use "It" + "be" + noun + "that" clause for focus*' and thus was classified as NA level, we considered the example sentence to be highly related and thus releveled the two sentences together to the high school instruction in the 2022 Korean NEC.

Finally, at the high school level, two example sentences were identified as outliers because they were identified as A1 level structures according to the EGP. The first example sentence was 'She **will be coming** soon', which was matched with the EGP 'can-do' statement of '*Can use the future continuous with "will" to talk about an event or action in progress at a specified time in the future*'. The second example sentence was 'Yellow tomatoes are **less sour** than red ones', which was matched with the EGP 'can-do' statement of '*Can form irregular comparative adjectives*'. The two sentences were both listed in the EGP as the grammatical element characteristic of A1 level learners. Therefore, the sentences were releveled to the middle school level of instruction in the 2022 Korean NEC.

Conclusion

This article outlined the rationale and procedure behind the revision of the Korean NEC's grammar reference, demonstrating how the CEFR and related resources (i.e. EGP) can be used in curriculum development. The changes have already been implemented and can be found in the Appendix 4 section of the 2022 Korean NEC (Ministry of Education of Korea 2022, 291) and began to be applied nationwide in 2024. It is hoped that these efforts, which provided useful grammatical labels and more appropriate sequencing with respect to the development of communicative competence, will yield improvements to teaching and learning of English in Korean schools, though any benefits remain to be documented empirically. More broadly, South Korea's use of CEFR and the EGP in curriculum revision efforts constitutes yet another example of CEFR's reach beyond Europe (see Lee et al. 2022). It also suggests that South Korea has both an international orientation to English education and continued openness to external norms for the English language, this time drawing on developmental norms of external origin.

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