

Test Review: Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) Speaking Exam

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1. Introduction

From 2009 to 2021, the number of foreigners learning Korean as a second or additional language in U.S. universities grew by nearly 240% (MacDonald, 2023). Although much of this interest has been attributed to the success of the *Hallyu*, or ‘Korean Wave,’ which has swept much of the world, an increasing number of L2 learners of Korean are pursuing advanced Korean language education for various academic or professional purposes. In turn, demand for standardized assessments to measure one’s achieved Korean fluency has also risen sharply. Since 2020, over 1.3 million people have taken the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) exam, and in 2023, 20% of foreigners living in South Korea received an official Korean proficiency score through TOPIK (S. Lee, 2024; KOSTAT, 2023). Given the popularity of this assessment, the South Korean government has worked to incorporate a broader range of assessment methods and modes in the TOPIK, which has historically only included paper-based reading, listening, and writing assessments. Notably, recent developments include the Internet-based TOPIK (IBT), a digital counterpart to the traditional paper-based TOPIK (PBT), and the TOPIK Speaking exam. Given that both the IBT and TOPIK Speaking exam were first piloted in 2021 and introduced officially to the public in November of 2022 (SMIT, 2022), relatively few in-depth investigations of these assessments have been conducted in comparison to the extensive body of literature surrounding the long-standing PBT. Thus, this paper aims to specifically target the TOPIK Speaking exam by consolidating what information is currently available regarding this assessment, critically evaluating this test’s strengths and weaknesses, and calling for further empirical research on the reliability and validity of this exam in comparison to other well-established standardized speaking proficiency assessments.

2. Test context and purpose

The TOPIK Speaking exam is a recent addition to the suite of official Korean proficiency assessments administered by the National Institute of International Education (NIIED), a subdivision of the South Korean government’s Ministry of Education. First introduced in 1997, the TOPIK stands as the

only official standardized test of Korean proficiency for foreigners administered by the Korean government, and has previously included only reading, listening, and writing assessments (Stony Brook University, 2019). According to the official TOPIK website (*Test schedule*, 2025), while the PBT is administered in dozens of countries six times a year, sessions for the TOPIK Speaking exam are held only three times a year, generally in March, June, and October. These dates align with scheduled dates of the IBT, suggesting that the two tests can either be taken together, or the TOPIK Speaking exam can be taken separately as its own assessment.

The official TOPIK website (*Instructions by test type*, 2025) states that the TOPIK Speaking exam was created primarily for “foreigners or overseas Koreans that do not speak Korean as their first language.” However, native speakers of Korean are permitted to take the TOPIK, as a level 6 (highest level) on the PBT has historically been required for those pursuing a Korean language teaching certification (NIKL, 2011). Whether or not a level 6 on the TOPIK Speaking exam is included in this requirement remains unknown, as no updated information could be found following the debut of the TOPIK Speaking exam in 2022. The official TOPIK website also suggests a variety of “applications” for the TOPIK Speaking exam, such as “selection of Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) scholarship students, admission to domestic universities and selection of scholarship students for foreigners and overseas Koreans, selection and performance evaluation of job seekers at Korean companies (inquire by institution), [and] application for issuance of residence visas (inquire by institution).” However, some cursory research revealed very few concrete examples of the TOPIK Speaking exam being applied as described above, indicating that very few institutions actually require the submission of TOPIK Speaking exam scores as of the writing of this article. At best, some universities in South Korea now appear to accept TOPIK Speaking scores as a valid alternative to previously required PBT scores (Hanyang University, 2024), and a TOPIK Speaking score of four or higher can be used to supplement one’s application for the highly competitive GKS scholarship (Ajou University, 2023). Following the completion of the test, scores are released approximately one month after the test date and are valid for two years before applicants must retake the assessment.

3. Test length and administration

Currently, the TOPIK Speaking exam is considered a subsection of the Internet-based TOPIK, and thus is administered via Internet-connected computers at dedicated language testing centers. While 13 countries plan to host Internet-based reading, listening, and writing TOPIK exams in 2025, TOPIK Speaking exams can only be taken in South Korea as of the writing of this paper (T. Lee, 2024). Currently, 38 universities in South Korea act as testing locations across the country, with at least one testing center available in every province and province-level special city (*Testing locations*, 2025). Test-takers speak into a headset fitted with a microphone, which allows participants to privately hear each test item and provide a spoken response, which is recorded automatically for grading at a later time. The test has six sections, with each section requiring responses between 30–80 seconds; the total time to complete the TOPIK Speaking exam is approximately 30 minutes.

Online records of official mock TOPIK Speaking exams suggest that the test consists of six parts, which increase in difficulty from simple comprehension tasks to the use of higher-order thinking skills. Mock testing materials indicate that the exam opens with a “practice” screen where participants can listen to a sample test question, adjust output volume, and test the microphone by recording and replaying a brief response (Easy TOPIK, 2021). The exam then progresses automatically through each level of the test, with each section following a *question–preparation–response* format. As described on the TOPIK website (*Question types*, 2025), the first two questions gauge basic conversational skills: Question 1 requires the test-taker to listen and respond to a simple prompt related to everyday activities, while Question 2 involves the participant taking on the role implied in an illustrated image familiar to daily life, such as giving directions to a taxi driver. Questions 3 and 4 assess narrative and comprehension skills: Question 3 presents a series of images for the test-taker to compose a story, and Question 4 asks the test-taker to quickly understand and adapt to the context of a dialogue and provide an appropriate closing response for one of the characters. The final two questions relate to critical analysis and opinion expression: Question 5 is designed to evaluate the test-taker’s ability to support their opinion by critically interpreting a provided graph or figure, and Question 6 requires the fluent expression of an in-depth

opinion related to a complex social issue. Table 1 summarizes the six questions of the TOPIK Speaking exam. As the test progresses and difficulty increases, test-takers are also given more time to prepare their answers and are expected to give longer responses.

Table 1 *Summary of question types and preparation time.*

Question	Question type	Prep time	Response time
1	Listen to and answer a simple question	20 sec	30 sec
2	Ask and answer in a familiar social situation	30 sec	40 sec
3	See a series of scenes and create a story	40 sec	60 sec
4	Listen to a dialogue and answer the question	40 sec	60 sec
5	Explain the material and provide a critical analysis	70 sec	80 sec
6	Express opinion on the given topic	70 sec	80 sec

4. Scores

The TOPIK Speaking exam uses a score report similar to that of the PBT and IBT, although the grading criteria are specific to the assessment of oral Korean abilities. Test-takers receive a score out of 200 points, which determines their proficiency level across six grades (plus an additional level, 0 or “fail,” which is given to students who receive fewer than 20 points and thus cannot be assigned a proficiency level) (Table 2).

Table 2 *TOPIK Speaking exam numerical scoring system.*

Levels	Fail 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Scale Score Range (points)	0~19	20~49	50~89	90~109	110~129	130~159	160~200

Table 3 shows that TOPIK evaluators appear to consider the test-taker’s creativity, accuracy, and fluency while rating, as three official “evaluation factors” are specified: “Content and Task Performance,” “Language Command,” and “Pronunciation and Delivery” (*Instructions by test type*, 2025). More

specifically, test-takers are evaluated on the response content and appropriateness, number and severity of mistakes, application of diverse vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and command of natural pronunciation, intonation, and speed. The higher-difficulty sections (levels three to six) also focus on the speaker's ability to logically construct an organized response regarding abstract concepts and culturally specific social issues (Table 4).

Table 3 *General grading criteria.*

Evaluation factor	Description — Did the speaker...
Content and task performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Express themselves appropriately for the given topic? - Faithfully perform the given task? - Produce dialogue that flowed in an organized and coherent manner?
Language command	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use appropriate language considering the context of the dialogue? - Use rich and diverse vocabulary and expressions? - Use their vocabulary and expressions in an accurate way?
Pronunciation and delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Produce comprehensible speech (satisfactory pronunciation and intonation?) - Speak at a natural pace?

Table 4 *Specified grading criteria.*

Grade Level	Description — The individual...
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is able to speak logically and persuasively regarding social issues and abstract topics. - rarely makes any mistakes and can freely vary his/her vocabulary and syntax (sentence structures) according to the context of the dialog. - sounds natural in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and speed and thus boasts excellent delivery.
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is able to speak relatively logically and coherently regarding social issues and some abstract topics. - occasionally makes mistakes but is capable of using various words and expressions according to the context of the dialog. - in most cases, sounds natural in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and speed and thus boasts good delivery.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is able to speak in a concrete and organized way regarding some social issues. - makes mistakes from time to time but is capable of using various words and expressions according to the context of the dialog in most cases. - sounds relatively natural in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and speed and thus has little trouble conveying what he/she wants to say.

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is able to speak in a relatively concrete manner regarding familiar social issues. - makes mistakes from time to time but is relatively capable of using somewhat various words and expressions according to the context of the dialog in most cases. - sounds slightly unnatural in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and/or speed but does not have a major problem conveying what he/she wants to say.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is able to ask and answer questions about everyday topics in frequently encountered situations. - has limited command of the language, is unable to use words, etc. that are appropriate for the situation at times, and often makes mistakes. - sounds unnatural in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and/or speed and has somewhat of a problem conveying what he/she wants to say.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is able to provide simple answers to questions about family, everyday topics. - has extremely limited command of the language and often makes mistakes. - sounds very unnatural in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and/or speed and has a problem conveying what he/she wants to say.

Responses given during TOPIK Speaking exams are digitally recorded and provided to trained human raters following the completion of the test. The number of raters used to determine each score is unknown. Specific criteria or scales used by raters to assign scores remain undisclosed by NIIED, and it is difficult to determine whether the TOPIK Speaking exam utilizes a holistic grading approach or an analytical evaluation process. Information provided on the official TOPIK website suggests that a rather subjective set of criteria is considered when assigning the test-taker's holistic proficiency level, as described in Table 4. However, Jang's (2022, as cited in Yang & Bae, 2023) dissertation related to the TOPIK Speaking exam provides a shockingly specific grading scale without citing any outside sources (see Figure 1); if this scoring system reflects reality, it is possible that the TOPIK Speaking exam employs a more analytical evaluation system with detailed scoring criteria. Following in the footsteps of other popular standardized language proficiency tests like TOEFL, the NIIED (2022, as cited in Yang, 2023) announced its intention to begin pursuing AI-powered automatic grading technologies in the coming years for its Internet-based TOPIK, which is likely to include the TOPIK Speaking exam.

Figure 1 Jang's (2022) original TOPIK Speaking grading scale, as cited in Yang (2023).

숙달도	문항	평가 요소			총점
		내용 및 과제 수행	언어사용	발화전달력	
초급	1	0, 1, 2, 3	0, 1, 2, 3	0, 1, 2, 3	9
	2	0, 1, 2, 3	0, 1, 2, 3	0, 1, 2, 3	9
중급	3	0, 1, 2, 3, 4	0, 1, 2, 3, 4	0, 1, 2, 3, 4	12
	4	0, 1, 2, 3, 4	0, 1, 2, 3, 4	0, 1, 2, 3, 4	12
고급	5	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	15
	6	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	15
총점					72

5. Author and publisher information

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<https://www.topik.go.kr/>; <http://www.niied.go.kr/>.

6. Price

As mentioned above, TOPIK Speaking exams are administered separately from PBT or IBT exams and are currently only available in South Korea. The exam is priced at KRW ₩80,000 (approximately USD \$55.87 as of February 2025.)

7. Appraisals: Support

Practicality and convenience

The format and administration process of the TOPIK Speaking exam suggest multiple practical and financial benefits. As the administration style of the TOPIK Speaking exam appears to be modeled

after the in-person, group-administered format of the TOEIC English assessments popular in South Korea, praises for the convenient and cost-effective nature of the TOEIC can be applied to the exam focused on here (see Nicholson, 2015). At only 30 minutes in length, timetables supplied by the TOPIK website indicate that the check-in, setup, and assessment can be completed within the hour. The in-person format of this assessment also means that participants do not have to download and navigate third-party software on their personal device, provide their own adequate microphone, or set up extra cameras for reliable proctoring. Any technical issues experienced during the exam can also be immediately addressed by on-site proctors.

Comparability with traditional TOPIK

Another strength of the TOPIK Speaking exam is its scoring system, which follows the same six-level progression already well established by the paper-based TOPIK. Thus, participants, employers, and officials who are familiar with the levels associated with the PBT can easily interpret and apply the scores provided for the TOPIK Speaking exam. While some have attempted to compare the TOPIK grading system to the six levels presented by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (see Won, 2016), no empirical studies have demonstrated a correlation between the two regarding test-takers' actual language proficiency. Therefore, the six-level grading system may make it difficult for those unfamiliar with the TOPIK to interpret the results, and in fact may lead to misguided attempts to apply more widespread frameworks such as CEFR. However, of course, this is a long-standing problem that applies not only to the TOPIK Speaking exam but also the PBT and IBT.

Positive washback

After decades of the PBT dominating the standardized Korean language assessment scene, the introduction of a large-scale Korean speaking assessment may produce positive effects in language classrooms as learners are faced with a new need to improve their spontaneous speaking skills. Recent studies have found that the introduction of the TOPIK Speaking exam has heightened many students'

anxieties surrounding this novel test form. Anxiety in language learning is a deeply studied topic and comes in a variety of forms, many of which may be detrimental to a student's learning process; however, it has been argued that "a certain amount of tension can have a positive effect and even facilitate learning" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This facilitating effect is visible in Wei's (2023) investigation of 100 Chinese university students' perceptions of the TOPIK Speaking exam. Students were found to be most anxious about a lack of TOPIK Speaking-focused classes and opportunities to practice speaking Korean at school, indicating a heightened awareness of the detriment of neglecting speaking as an important pillar of language learning. One student expressed their newfound desire to improve their Korean speaking skills in the interview portion of the study: "My pronunciation is not great and there are few opportunities to practice speaking, so *I want to practice*, but I don't know what I will have to say" (p. 101). This sentiment reflects a growing recognition of the importance of speaking practice in Korean language education thanks to (at least in part) the introduction of the TOPIK Speaking exam.

8. Appraisals: Questions and concerns

Negative washback

Over the course of the writing of this paper, multiple concerns have emerged regarding the validity of the TOPIK Speaking exam, particularly in terms of its washback, overgeneralized constructs, reliability, fairness, and justice. Currently, the majority of information about the TOPIK Speaking exam available online is related to study techniques and material; thus, while some positive washback due to the introduction of the TOPIK Speaking exam has been noted, effects of negative washback are also visible. Many investigations of washback effects on teaching in classrooms due to large-scale English proficiency assessments such as TOEIC have revealed that instructors have a strong tendency to "teach to the test" at the expense of improving actual communicative English speaking skills, especially in East Asian private-school contexts. For example, Ahn (2022) showed that the majority (68%) of South Korean English teachers in private cram schools focused on teaching language skills that were likely to be on the TOEIC, while excluding content unrelated to the TOEIC. In addition, it is common for English teachers to

spend a significant amount of class time on simulating the test through mock exams and teaching test-taking strategies that are not directly related to improving English speaking skills (Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011).

These indicators of negative washback are visible upon the investigation of recently developed TOPIK Speaking exam textbooks. For example, the table of contents of the popular *COOL TOPIK: Speaking* textbook (Cho et al., 2022) indicates that 7 out of the 9 sections focus at least in part on Type 2 test preparation strategies, which are strategies unrelated to the test constructs themselves (Messick, 1982). While there are sections dedicated to increasing awareness of discourse structure ('core speaking structures' and 'speaking strategies'), expanding one's vocabulary and syntactic knowledge ('core expressions'), and improving pronunciation ('speaking clinic'), more chapters appear to focus on improving test familiarity and time management strategies ('question type introduction and analysis,' 'practical speaking strategies,' 'example questions,' 'notes for passing,' 'dualization of beginner/intermediate-advanced answers,' and 'mock exams'). This degree of focus on highly specific test-taking strategies and sample questions makes for easy teachability in the classroom, and likely played a part in how quickly these textbooks were written and published following the announcement of the TOPIK Speaking exam. However, learners hoping to improve their Korean speaking skills using only these study materials may see little change in their actual communicative oral proficiency, especially for those living internationally with limited access to everyday Korean exposure and practice opportunities.

Unspecified evaluation and reliability in scoring

It can be suggested that the validity of the TOPIK Speaking exam is undermined by the overly vague, unspecified nature of the criteria used to evaluate test-takers' proficiencies. Validity in its simplest sense is concerned with "whether the test measures what it is intended to measure" (Hughes, 2003, as cited in Nicholson, 2015, p. 223), and this is partly represented in the way constructs are described and measured. In the case of the TOPIK Speaking exam, it is difficult to imagine a more simplistic set of constructs to measure general language proficiency than the criteria described above in Tables 3 and 4.

Given that other holistic scoring systems have been sharply criticized in the past for their lack of detail and inauthenticity, such as the OPI and OPIc's *Guidelines* (see Liskin-Gasparro, 2003), it may be appropriate to turn this critical eye to the TOPIK Speaking exam as well.

As pointed out by Isbell and Winke (2019), the ambiguity of test constructs is especially relevant when considering the uses and consequences of the TOPIK Speaking exam as important aspects of the test's validity. As described above, future uses of TOPIK Speaking exam scores may expand beyond the academic realm into one's acceptance into a company, earning of a teaching or medical license, issuance of a visa, and/or acceptance as a naturalized citizen of South Korea. In such high-stakes and specified scenarios, the overly broad, generalized constructs of spoken Korean ability presented by the NIIED could lead to an inappropriate degree of subjectivity and irrelevance on the part of the rater's evaluation—and thus, invalid assessment results that are not appropriate for the purposes they were made to fulfill. In addition, because the NIIED provides no data to the public regarding their rater training process, the number of raters grading each exam, and the scoring rubric used, the reliability of TOPIK Speaking exam scores cannot be defended. Until the NIIED releases information regarding its raters and official scoring system (ideally built upon a more structured analytic rubric such as that shown in Figure 1), this criticism remains a significant area of concern worthy of further investigation.

Fairness and accessibility

Another area that remains to be addressed is the limited accessibility of the TOPIK Speaking exam, which is offered only three times a year in South Korean test centers. With 38 locations found in every province of the country, accessibility for those already residing in Korea is high; however, hopeful test-takers living internationally must travel to South Korea at their own expense to take the test in person. As described above, the TOPIK Speaking exam is currently being used by some Korean universities and scholarship applications looking to evaluate, admit, and determine financial support for international students. However, given that these students do not have access to the TOPIK Speaking exam in their home country, it is difficult to see how the present applications of the TOPIK Speaking exam as suggested

by the NIIED are fair and accessible for test-takers outside of South Korea. Given the recent release of this program and the rapid expansion of the IBT to 13 countries (T. Lee, 2024), the TOPIK Speaking exam appears to be quite scalable, and an expansion to high-demand countries in the upcoming years is necessary to resolve this issue.

The TOPIK Speaking exam also appears to fall victim to the same issues of discrimination and unfairness towards non-academic, low income test-takers that the PBT has long faced. As reported by K. Lee (2023), the NIIED has received endless complaints over the years from low-income foreign laborers in Korea that many of the questions on the PBT are confusingly worded and related to difficult concepts that they are unlikely to face in their daily lives. In addition, guided education towards improving one's Korean and test-taking skills are highly inaccessible for foreign workers due to the exorbitant prices of private schools, limited seats in free programs, and lack of time and resources to study on their own. When fairness and justice are considered in an assessment's validity, it is crucial that "items on a test [show] no systematic bias against any category or subgroup of test takers" (McNamara & Ryan, 2011, p. 163). However, multiple items on the TOPIK Speaking exam appear to fall into the same pattern of inauthentic, overly technical, and generally unfair practices of a poorly designed test. Specifically, Question 3 (spontaneously creating a story based on a sequence of pictures) is a highly complex narrative task (Robinson, 1995) that represents skills that are rarely, if ever, used in real life. Questions 5 and 6, on the other hand, require test takers to critically analyze a numerical graph and use "rich and diverse vocabulary" to describe "social issues and abstract topics." Again, these are two tasks unlikely to arise often in one's life, and are likely to present significant challenges to both native and non-native speakers of Korean with limited education or familiarity of the subjects.

Would a test-taker who was able to fluently speak about their opinions on baking bread at a factory for a living earn the same proficiency score as a young student discussing how their cancer research may one day impact the world? Currently, no answer to this question exists; however, the fact that some may be inclined to say "no" indicates a desperate need for further investigation of the fairness and reliability of the TOPIK Speaking exam.

9. Conclusion

Upon its introduction in 2022, the TOPIK Speaking exam answered the growing number of calls for a government-offered Korean oral proficiency assessment for non-native speakers of Korean both domestically and abroad. The NIIED suggests that the TOPIK Speaking exam may be used in the future for academic, professional, and governmental purposes, although upon further investigation, very few cases of this test being used in official contexts could be found. The TOPIK Speaking exam's streamlined six-question format and holistic scoring system make for a convenient and easily interpretable test that expands upon the paper-based TOPIK to encourage additional speaking practice in Korean language classrooms. However, as the TOPIK Speaking exam is still in its infancy, many areas of concern were found throughout this investigation that must be remedied before this assessment should be used for high-stakes purposes. Investigations of current TOPIK Speaking exam preparation materials show that the fixed, predictable nature of the test may encourage the prioritization of rote memorization and test-taking strategies over the active improvement of one's language skills. Additionally, the validity and reliability of the TOPIK Speaking exam were questioned on multiple fronts, including the assessment's overly generalized constructs and scoring system, lack of transparency on rater reliability, and blatant inaccessibility to international participants and domestic low-income laborers. For such a large assessment, the NIIED's lack of transparency regarding the inner workings of the TOPIK Speaking exam means that very little can be done to defend the test's validity at this time. However, because this exam is still in its early stages of development, there is no better time than now for its continued investigation and adjustment, and one can only hope that the NIIED will heed these calls and work to create a truly reliable, fair, and just Korean oral proficiency assessment for all.

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