



Revisiting EPS TOPIK: Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Challenges for Migrant Workers in South Korea

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ABSTRACT: International labor migration has become a global phenomenon driven by the demand for better job opportunities and interconnected labor markets. South Korea, as a major destination for migrant workers, requires proficiency in the Korean language as part of its Employment Permit System Test of Proficiency in Korean (EPS TOPIK). While the program aims to ensure effective workplace communication, the study reveals significant gaps in the relevance of online learning materials to the actual needs of migrant workers. Many materials lack contextual and cultural elements essential for navigating workplace interactions and social integration in Korea. This research focuses on analyzing the relevance of EPS TOPIK's online materials to the specific communication needs of migrant workers and assessing the integration of Korean cultural elements in the learning process. Using a qualitative approach through case studies and in-depth interviews, the study examines the experiences of migrant workers and evaluates the adequacy of online materials. The findings aim to provide recommendations for developing more contextual and culturally embedded learning resources to enhance the linguistic and cultural competence of migrant workers. This is expected to improve their workplace adaptability and support their integration into South Korean work environments.

KEYWORDS: EPS TOPIK, International Labor, Korean Language, Korean Culture.

INTRODUCTION

International labor migration has become a growing global phenomenon in recent decades, driven by the need for better job opportunities and interconnected labor markets. South Korea, as one of the main destination countries for migrant workers, offers various job opportunities in the manufacturing, construction, and service sectors. However, the success of migrant workers in adapting to a new work environment in Korea depends not only on technical skills but also on language proficiency and cultural understanding. To address this need, the Employment Permit System Test of Proficiency in Korean (EPS TOPIK) program was designed to assess Korean language ability as a mandatory requirement for every prospective migrant worker.

With the advancement of technology, the EPS TOPIK learning method has shifted from the conventional format to a more flexible and accessible online platform (Lamberi et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2024; Yaumi et al., 2023; Rahman & Widyastuti, 2023). While this offers many benefits, online learning also presents unique challenges, particularly regarding the quality and relevance of the teaching materials. Many participants feel that the materials provided tend to be too generic and do not reflect the real-life situations they face in the workplace. Moreover, the cultural aspects that are crucial for communication in Korea are often overlooked in the online learning materials, reducing the effectiveness of the program. Language learning plays a crucial role in supporting international labor mobility, especially for migrant workers planning to work in South Korea.

The EPS TOPIK program serves as a key requirement to ensure that prospective workers have adequate Korean language skills to communicate effectively in the workplace. With the advancement of technology, EPS TOPIK learning is now largely conducted online, providing ease of access for learners (Haneul, 2024; Anggawirya et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2019; Youngsun et al., 2024). However, this has also introduced several challenges, especially regarding the relevance of the teaching materials to the specific needs of migrant workers in the workplace and the lack of integration of cultural elements into the learning process. One of the main issues is the limitation of contextual materials, where many teaching resources are designed in a general manner and do not fully meet communication needs in the workplace (Kim et al., 2022; Weda et al.,



2022; Junaid et al., 2024).

As a result, migrant workers often struggle to apply what they have learned in real-life situations, such as understanding instructions from supervisors, communicating with colleagues, or handling emergency situations. Furthermore, the lack of integration of Korean cultural elements presents a significant challenge, as language proficiency encompasses not only grammar and vocabulary but also an understanding of workplace culture and social norms. Online learning often fails to provide an authentic cultural experience, leading to a lack of understanding of essential aspects, such as communication etiquette with supervisors, how to express complaints politely, or social customs in the workplace.

This study is significant because the success of migrant workers in Korea is not solely determined by their language skills but also by their understanding of the Korean workplace culture. By analyzing the relevance of EPS TOPIK online materials to workplace communication needs, this research aims to identify gaps in the teaching materials and provide recommendations for improvement. Additionally, the study of the integration of cultural elements into EPS TOPIK online learning seeks to propose more comprehensive learning strategies so that migrant workers are not only able to communicate effectively but also understand and respect Korean workplace culture. The results of this research are expected to contribute significantly to the development of more contextual and culturally-based EPS TOPIK teaching materials, ultimately enhancing the competence of migrant workers in facing workplace challenges and supporting their integration into the work environment in South Korea more harmoniously.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Concept

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a key concept in the social and cultural learning theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky in 1934. ZPD refers to the gap between what an individual can achieve independently and what they can achieve with the help of someone more experienced, such as a teacher, peer, or mentor (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD focuses on the idea that effective learning occurs when an individual is in this zone, where they can perform a task with external support but are still unable to do it on their own without assistance. This concept is crucial in education as it provides guidance for teaching that focuses on individual needs, offering opportunities for learners to grow in a more contextual and relevant way.

In the context of migrant workers learning Korean for employment in South Korea, ZPD plays an essential role in determining how learning materials can be adapted to meet their needs. The EPS TOPIK program, which is a requirement for prospective migrant workers, needs to identify the boundaries of participants' ZPD and ensure that the teaching materials provide the appropriate level of challenge, both linguistically and culturally.

2. Disadvantages of Online Learning

Online learning has significant drawbacks related to the lack of social interaction (teacher-student and student-student) and emotional support, which can affect the overall learning experience quality. Garrison et al., (2000) in the concept of the Community of Inquiry explain that the limitations of social interaction in online learning can reduce the depth of concept understanding and worsen social isolation, as students miss out on opportunities for direct interaction with instructors and classmates. Social interactions established in face-to-face learning are essential to strengthen collaborative skills and communication, which are needed in many learning situations, especially in language and cultural learning, where active discussion and immediate feedback can accelerate understanding. Furthermore, Palloff and Pratt (2013) state that online learning cannot provide the same emotional support as in-person learning. Students often struggle or lose motivation when they do not receive the emotional encouragement or social support needed. In traditional learning environments, direct interaction with classmates or instructors helps students overcome learning challenges, providing a sense of belonging and security for learning. The absence of this support in online learning often becomes a barrier for students to stay motivated and achieve optimal learning outcomes.

3. The Lens of EPS TOPIK

EPS TOPIK (Employment Permit System Test of Proficiency in Korean) is a Korean language proficiency test designed for prospective migrant workers who wish to work in South Korea. This exam aims to ensure that migrant workers possess sufficient Korean language skills to communicate effectively in the workplace in Korea. According to Park et al.,



(2020), EPS TOPIK is important because it provides an objective evaluation standard of prospective migrant workers' language ability, which is considered crucial for facilitating their integration into the workplace and social life in South Korea. By taking this test, prospective migrant workers can acquire the basic knowledge necessary to interact in everyday situations, such as understanding instructions from supervisors, communicating with colleagues, and handling emergency situations.

Based on research by Abella (2011), EPS TOPIK also plays a vital role in improving the success of migrant workers' adaptation in South Korea. This test not only assesses technical language proficiency but also introduces aspects of Korean culture that are crucial for interpersonal communication in the workplace. Therefore, EPS TOPIK becomes an instrument that helps prospective migrant workers not only master the language but also understand the social norms and communication etiquette prevalent in Korea, enabling them to work more efficiently and reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of this research is to analyze the extent to which online EPS-TOPIK materials are relevant to the needs of migrant workers in Korea, particularly in the context of workplace communication, where effective language skills are crucial for daily interactions, task execution, and overall job performance. This study also seeks to examine the importance of integrating elements of Korean culture into online EPS-TOPIK learning, as cultural understanding plays a vital role in helping migrant workers adapt not only linguistically but also socially and professionally.

By evaluating the practicality, contextual relevance, and cultural appropriateness of the existing materials, this research aims to identify potential gaps and areas for improvement. The findings are expected to contribute to the enhancement of EPS-TOPIK learning resources, ensuring that migrant workers are better equipped with both language proficiency and cultural competence, ultimately facilitating smoother integration into Korean society and the workplace.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study and in-depth interviews. The researcher selected a number of migrant workers who participated in the online EPS TOPIK program and collected data through semi-structured interviews to understand their experiences with the learning materials, as well as the challenges they face in the context of workplace communication in Korea. In addition, document analysis was used to assess the learning materials provided in the EPS TOPIK program, examine the extent to which elements of Korean culture are integrated, and evaluate the relevance of the materials to the needs of migrant workers. This approach will provide an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of online learning as well as the cultural understanding required in the context of work in South Korea.

The qualitative approach with case study and in-depth interviews used in this research aligns with the methods suggested by Creswell (2014), who states that qualitative research allows researchers to explore individuals' experiences in depth and understand the relevant social context.

RESULTS

In this section, the researcher outlines the interview questions posed to users of the EPS TOPIK online program regarding its effectiveness. These questions are designed to gather insights into how well the online materials meet the specific needs of migrant workers, particularly in terms of communication in the workplace. The focus is on understanding whether the current curriculum aligns with the real-world scenarios these workers face, as well as the integration of essential cultural elements that are crucial for adapting to the workplace environment in South Korea. The aim is to evaluate how effectively the program prepares participants for both language proficiency and cultural understanding, which are essential for successful communication in their professional settings.

Here are the 10 questions used by the researcher for interviews in this study:


Table 1: Questions for Interviews

No.	Questions
1	How has your experience been with the online EPS TOPIK program?
2	Is the learning material you studied relevant to the communication you engage in at your workplace in Korea?
3	To what extent has the EPS TOPIK program helped you understand instructions from your supervisor or communicate with colleagues in Korea?
4	What are the main difficulties you encounter when using the Korean language at your workplace, even after participating in the online EPS TOPIK program?
5	Do you feel that elements of Korean culture, such as work ethics and communication, are well taught in the online EPS TOPIK material?
6	What do you think is lacking in the online EPS TOPIK program concerning the cultural knowledge needed in the workplace?
7	To what extent has online learning provided you with sufficient experience for the real situations you face at work?
8	Does the online EPS TOPIK material provide you with a sufficient understanding of the social norms and work culture in South Korea?
9	What suggestions do you have to make the EPS TOPIK material more relevant to workplace communication needs for migrant workers?
10	In your opinion, what could be improved in the online EPS TOPIK learning format to make it more effective in preparing migrant workers for employment in Korea?

These questions aim to gain insight into the participants' experiences with the online EPS TOPIK material and the extent to which Korean language and culture elements support effective communication at the workplace. Analyzing the extent to which the online EPS TOPIK material is relevant to the communication needs of migrant workers in Korea, especially in the context of workplace communication. Examining the importance of integrating elements of Korean culture in online EPS TOPIK learning for migrant workers. The interview results are summarized as follows:

Table 2: Resume of the Questions

No.	Resume	Percentages
1.	The online EPS TOPIK material is relevant to the communication needed in the workplace in Korea.	20%
2.	The EPS TOPIK material helps in understanding instructions from supervisors at the workplace.	10%
3.	The online EPS TOPIK learning should include essential cultural elements necessary for working in South Korea.	25%
4.	The online EPS TOPIK materials are sufficient for communicating with coworkers in Korea.	15%
5.	The online EPS TOPIK materials need to include more real-life workplace scenario exercises.	30%

The aspect with the highest percentage is the need to include more real-life workplace scenario exercises in the online EPS TOPIK materials, which accounts for 30%. This indicates that many migrant workers feel that the current materials are still not relevant or practical enough to address the communication challenges they face in the real workplace in Korea. Real-life scenario exercises are considered important because they can help participants learn to understand and handle various situations they may encounter, such as responding to sudden instructions or managing conflicts at work. The high percentage highlights that practical experience is a primary need for migrant workers.

On the other hand, the aspect with the lowest percentage is the statement that EPS TOPIK materials help in understanding instructions from supervisors at the workplace, which only reached 10%. The low percentage may be due to the lack of focus on technical terminology or specific phrases used in certain sectors of employment. Additionally, cultural differences in the way instructions are given by Korean supervisors may present an additional challenge that is not adequately covered in the learning materials.

Other percentages, such as the relevance of the materials to workplace communication (20%) and the depth of the materials for communicating with coworkers (15%), show that while EPS TOPIK materials have benefits, their coverage and application are still seen as suboptimal. Meanwhile, the importance of integrating elements of Korean culture (25%) highlights the awareness of the need for cultural understanding in communication, particularly because Korean culture has many norms and work ethics that differ from the workers' home countries.

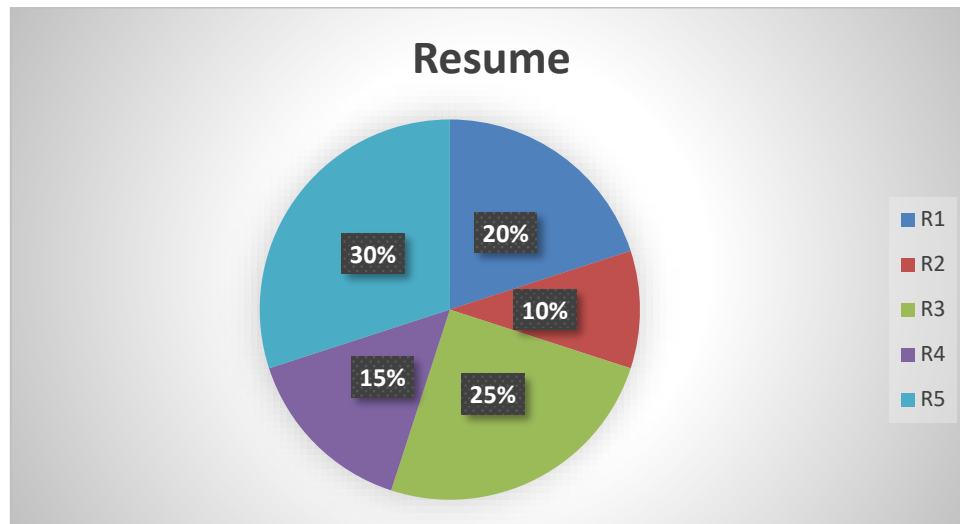


Figure 1: Resume of the Questions

This data shows that the online EPS TOPIK materials require improvements in contextual, cultural, and practical aspects to better support the needs of migrant workers. The aspect with the highest percentage, which is the need for real-life workplace scenario exercises, highlights the lack of relevance of the materials to the everyday communication challenges in Korea. The author's future expectation regarding these findings is that online EPS-TOPIK materials will be further improved to better align with the real needs of migrant workers. Therefore, enhancements in contextual, cultural, and practical aspects are necessary to make Korean language learning more effective and applicable in daily life.

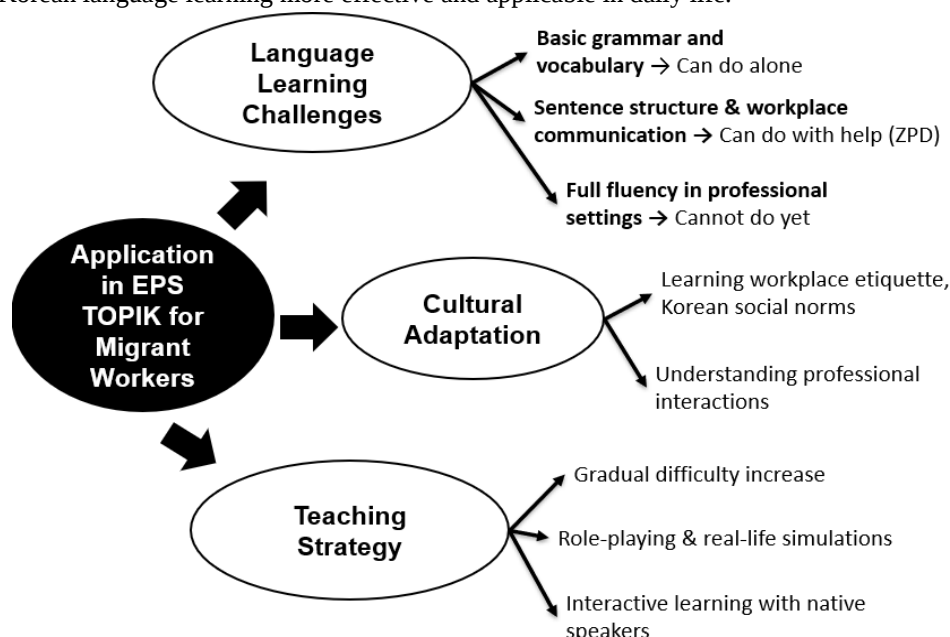


Figure 2. Application in EPS TOPIK for Migrant Workers



The diagram illustrates the application of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in the EPS TOPIK program for migrant workers learning Korean. It highlights three main components: Language Learning Challenges, Cultural Adaptation, and Teaching Strategy, all contributing to a structured and effective learning process. The first component, Language Learning Challenges, categorizes language acquisition into three levels. At the most basic level, learners can acquire grammar and vocabulary independently. However, sentence structure and workplace communication fall within the ZPD, meaning learners require guidance from teachers or peers to develop these skills. Meanwhile, achieving full fluency in professional settings remains beyond their current capabilities without further structured learning.

Beyond language proficiency, Cultural Adaptation is crucial for migrant workers, as learning the Korean language alone is insufficient for effective workplace integration. They need to understand workplace etiquette and Korean social norms, which are essential for professional interactions. This knowledge helps them communicate appropriately with colleagues and employers, ensuring a smoother transition into their new work environment. To support learning within the ZPD, the Teaching Strategy incorporates several methods. A gradual increase in difficulty ensures that learners progress at a manageable pace. Role-playing and real-life simulations provide practical experience in workplace communication, reinforcing both linguistic and cultural adaptation. Additionally, interactive learning with native speakers enhances real-world language use, making the learning experience more immersive and effective. By integrating these elements, the EPS TOPIK program ensures that migrant workers receive language instruction tailored to their needs. The application of ZPD allows for structured and contextual learning, helping learners bridge the gap between what they can do alone and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance.

Furthermore, since the highest percentage of need is for real-life workplace scenario exercises, it is hoped that future EPS-TOPIK materials will incorporate more workplace communication simulations. This will help prospective migrant workers better understand instructions, interact with colleagues, and adapt to Korea's work culture more effectively. To achieve these improvements, collaboration with experienced migrant workers, Korean companies, and language education experts is essential to ensure that the provided materials are truly relevant to the communication challenges faced in real work environments.

CONCLUSION

The increasing trend of international labor migration demands that prospective workers are prepared in various aspects, especially language skills and cultural understanding. South Korea, as one of the main destinations for migrant workers, mandates the EPS TOPIK program to ensure that potential workers have adequate Korean language competence. This program is designed to help migrant workers communicate effectively in the workplace, but research shows that the online learning materials in this program are still lacking in relevance to real communication needs in the work environment.

Moreover, the integration of Korean cultural elements in the EPS TOPIK learning is still limited, even though cultural understanding is crucial for supporting social and professional adaptation. Therefore, the development of more contextual and culture-based learning materials is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the program. This step will not only help migrant workers communicate better but also allow them to understand the social norms and work culture in Korea, enabling them to face workplace challenges more harmoniously. These improvements are expected to support migrant workers' successful integration into Korea's employment environment and contribute to reduce workplace communication barriers.

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