**Adapting IELTS Examinations: Video Call Speaking Tests in South Korea’s COVID-19 Era**

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This case study examines how IELTS Speaking examiners in South Korea adapted to the transition from face-to-face examining to online video examining in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It uses activity theory to identify key activity systems within the transition and to identify contradictions and tensions in the process. Analysis suggests that the three main activity systems involved in the delivery of video call IELTS tests are impacted in three ways: through the implementation of new and unfamiliar technology, through strain placed on administrative test staff, and through insufficient training and onboarding of examiners. The paper ends with a call to arms to test professionals and organizations to embrace Engeström’s (2001) concept of expansive transformation as IELTS testing continues its move online.

***Keywords*:** IELTS, online assessment, ELT assessment, IELTS Speaking test, COVID-19

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled test organizations, universities, and colleges to rapidly adopt online evaluation methods as traditional face-to-face testing declined. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), a globally recognized English proficiency test, was not immune from this disruption, and IELTS management was forced to seek alternatives for conducting tests while minimizing person-to-person contact (Bruce & Clark, 2023). Consequently, the swift development and implementation of video call speaking (VCS) IELTS took place in 2021 (Clark et al., 2021) with the primary objective of enhancing accessibility to the IELTS Speaking test for individuals residing in situations where face-to-face testing was not possible (H. Lee et al., 2021). This study investigates how IELTS Speaking examiners in the South Korean context navigated the transition from in-person examining to VCS during and after this period of upheaval.

**Background**

## **The IELTS VCS Test**

Both in-person and VCS IELTS Speaking tests consist of a 13- to 14-minute interview divided into three sections. Candidates receive a score ranging from 1 to 9. Higher scores indicate greater proficiency in English, which is judged on their fluency, coherence, language, and pronunciation.

VCS IELTS Speaking is administered remotely via video call, with the examiner located at home and the candidate in a dedicated test center. Invigilators guide candidates to the designated computer terminal and provide them with headphones, signaling the start of the test.

Currently, in South Korea, examiners administer two distinct and iterative versions of in-centre VCS IELTS: VCS Flexi, conducted through Zoom, and VCS Full, which employs specialized software designated by IELTS. Additionally, a third version, IELTS Online, allows candidates to take the test from home, providing an alternative for test-takers in specific countries.

## **Existing Research**

To date there has been little research into video call speaking assessment. As late as 2017, “no research into the use of this mode [video call] on a par with the standard face-to-face mode in a high-stakes test context” existed (Nakatsuhara et al., 2017, p. 16). Since then, much of the research on video call speaking assessment has been conducted by IELTS commissioned researchers (H. Lee et al., 2021; Nakatsuhara et al., 2017; and others) as IELTS maintains a synchronous, interactive human examiner as opposed to utilizing AI grading as other tests often do. Findings indicate that test-takers are generally satisfied with VCS IELTS and that examiners are pleased with the fact that few modifications were made to the paper-based face-to-face version of the speaking test during its transition to VCS mode. Ockey and Neiriz (2021) conducted a review of the reliability, validity, and practicality of five forms of technology-mediated oral assessment, concluding video call speaking assessment to be the fairest of the assessment modes studied. The present study aims to contribute to the existing literature by presenting some examiners’ viewpoints on oral video call assessment.

**Research Question**

This research was guided by the following research question:

RQ: How have IELTS examiners in Korea adapted to online VCS examinations, and what obstacles have they encountered?

In this study, the number of participants was limited to three, which is believed to be broadly sufficient in that it provides a snapshot of the experiences of VCS IELTS examiners in the South Korean context.

# Theoretical Framework

Activity theory was chosen to analyze examiners’ experiences of transitioning to online VCS testing because it allows consideration of the entire contextual framework in which technology is utilized (Miles, 2020). Developed by scholars, including Vygotsky (1978), Leontiev (1978), and Engeström (1987, 1999, 2001), activity theory utilizes work activities, conceptualized as “activity systems,” as the fundamental unit of analysis. This approach explains how interconnected elements within an activity system interact to achieve their goal. According to Hasan (1998), the primary components of an activity system include the subject (the individual under study), the object (the intended activity), and the artifact (the mediating device used by the subject to attain the activity’s objective). Communities or stakeholders, system rules, and the distribution of labor among stakeholders further mediate the object and outcome. (See Figure 1 for Engeström’s (1987) visual representation of an activity system.)

**Figure 1. Illustration of Activity System** (Engeström, 1987)

A diagram of a pyramid with Great Pyramid of Giza in the background

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Activity systems exist only in conjunction with other systems, which form relationships with the central activity system and exert an influence on it (K. Lee, et al., 2021). Contradiction is a central concept in activity theory, alluding to the structural tensions and conflicts that develop cumulatively within or between system elements (Engeström, 2001). Contradictions are essential in engendering change and causing the activity to evolve to a higher level of function. Four levels of contradiction exist:

1. Primary contradictions are fundamental contradictions within the main activity of the activity system itself.

2. Secondary contradictions arise between different elements of the system such as its subject and tools used.

3. Tertiary contradictions arise between previous and new versions of the activity.

4. Quaternary contradictions emerge when separate activity systems contradict each other.

Murphy and Rodriguez (2013) see activity theory as a tool that can allow us to grasp the integration of technology into teaching and learning and the complex changes it engenders. Engeström (2001) elucidated that when an activity system incorporates new technologies, relationships within the system become strained, leading to “expansive learning,” essentially a collective effort to improve the system. This process involves stages of questioning, analyzing, modeling, examining, implementing, reflecting, and consolidating. By analyzing activity systems involved in the process of delivering VCS IELTS in South Korea, the present study hopes to uncover tensions leading to expansive learning.

# Method and Participants

While Yin (2002, as cited in Yazan, 2015) suggested that researchers utilize up to six sources of evidence, the scope of this case study is limited to two data sources: interviews and IELTS published research reports.

Three IELTS examiners from the South Korean IELTS examiner network (see Table 1) who have either fully transitioned to online VCS examining or do online VCS examining in addition to their face-to-face examining duties took part in hour-long interviews (see Appendix A for interview questions and sample examiner answers). All three anonymized examiners stated that VCS allows them the flexibility and additional income to do both VCS and face-to-face examining when desired and to avoid travel to test centers.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1. Participant Information: Demographics, IELTS Experience** | | | | | | | | |
| **Examiner** | **Age** | **Sex** | **Country** | **Length of Time in Korea**  **(Years)** | **Length of Time Examining IELTS**  **(Years)** | **Still Conduct In-Person IELTS?**  **(Years)** | **How Long Doing VCS Exams?**  **(Years)** | **Which VCS Version Do You Do?** |
| Examiner 1 | 34 | M | UK/New Zealand | 10 | 7 | Yes | 2 | Flexi |
| Examiner 2 | 49 | M | UK | 12 | 5 | No | 2 | Flexi, Full, Online |
| Examiner 3 | 38 | M | UK | 8 | 4 | Yes | 1 | Flexi, Full |

To gain broader insight into the development of VCS IELTS and wider perspective on examiners’ views and opinions regarding the VCS speaking test, research reports commissioned and published by IELTS were also examined.

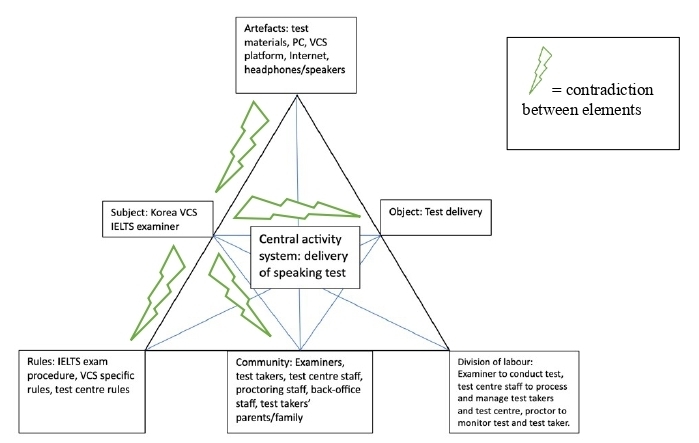
The interview data underwent analysis using a deductive approach based on the principles and theoretical propositions of activity theory. These propositions were employed to guide the examination of data (Pearse, 2019). A central activity system of speaking test delivery was identified, considered to be the main aim or “object” of the IELTS VCS speaking test from an examiners’ point of view. Neighboring activity systems of test administration and examiner training and onboarding were also identified, which were felt to strongly influence the key central activity.

**Results**

## **Delivery of the Speaking Test**

Figure 2 depicts the central activity system in this context, the delivery of the actual speaking test. It orients us to the major participants and elements in the system and how they interact to create contradictions that mediate the principal object of test delivery.

**Figure 2. Central Activity System: Speaking Test Delivery**



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### **Artifacts**

The VCS examination requires various tools, such as a stable internet connection, functional hardware, and a reliable examination platform, to work harmoniously. However, issues including connectivity problems, platform crashes, and interruptions caused by computer updates have significantly affected examiner delivery of the IELTS Speaking exam, according to one examiner,

I had 20 candidates in Bangladesh, for example, and it took them over two hours to register; timings were thrown off, Zoom kept breaking down. [Examiner 2]

Interview data emphasized the impact of technology on examiners’ experiences, particularly the subpar sound reproduction caused by poor connection or faulty headphones. Another examiner highlighted difficulties in clearly discerning candidates' pronunciation due to echoing on the connection:

There is a technical issue … to do with the noise. Suddenly, I am unable to hear them, they are unable to hear me…. [Examiner 3]

Supporting this observation, the IELTS research literature indicated that examiners, in their open-ended questionnaire responses, suggested that sound quality had an effect on the ratings they gave (H. Lee et al., 2021).

Technology-related problems can be viewed as secondary contradictions within the primary activity system of delivering the speaking examination, emerging as tensions or issues between the primary activity’s subject and the mediating tools within the activity system.

### **Effect on Rapport with Candidate**

Examiner 1 suggested that VCS testing made the process of conducting the test more impersonal. He implied that the lack of personal contact and warmth engendered by VCS testing as compared to face-to-face testing may create a different test-day experience for both examiner and candidate:

Being online feels more, kind of … sterile as opposed to like face-to-face, where you have a little bit more of a dialogue with the candidate. [Examiner 1]

H. Lee et al. (2021) supported these findings by outlining the fact that examiners in their study “wanted a brief linguistic turn before the actual tests began in order to build rapport with the test-taker … the VC mode does not allow for that” (p. 18).

It could be suggested that the changes to test procedure and thus examiner–candidate rapport brought about by the VCS version of the examination are primary contradictions, which directly affect the professional practice of the individual examiners.

### **Invigilators**

A secondary conflict arose between the examiners and the invigilators, those responsible for organizing candidates, ensuring systems and technology are working correctly, and test security. Interview data suggest that examiners believed that the execution of test-day protocol, such as the steps mentioned above, was markedly different between test centers and depended on the level of training the test-day staff and invigilators had been provided with:

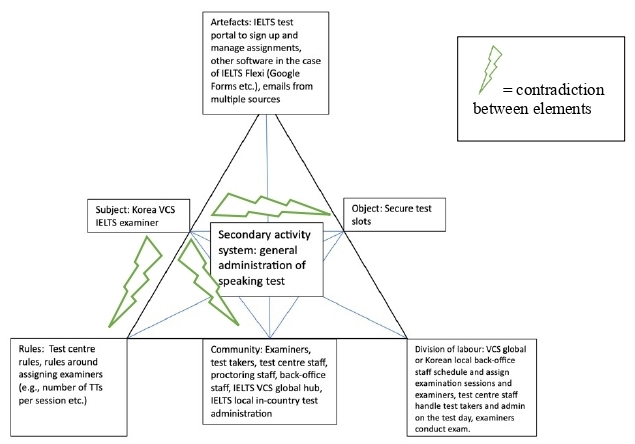
You can tell a difference in how the invigilators interact with the candidates. So sometimes the invigilator will kind of just, you know, pass them the headset and walk off … whereas other invigilators will go in and … make sure it’s on the head properly…. Presumably, they do have a protocol for that. But obviously, it’s difficult to make sure that everybody’s following it. [Examiner 3]

A number of tensions and contradictions appear in this activity system – between examiners and the tools they are compelled to use, the way that VCS affects procedure and thus examiner–candidate rapport, and between the division of labor within the activity – in regard to test-day support staff, who appear to lack consistent training or whose application of test practice procedures varies from test center to test center.

## **IELTS VCS Administration**

Figure 3 depicts the secondary, neighboring activity system of test administration, including registering and designating candidates for test dates prior to scheduling examiners for test-day sessions. This is done by administration staff either centrally or at the British Council offices in Seoul.

**Figure 3. Secondary Neighboring Activity System: Test Administration**



### **Emergency Correspondence**

The examiners interviewed for this study all expressed tensions between office scheduling procedures and their inclination and ability to administer the speaking test to candidates as part of the central activity system.

It was noted that at the beginning of the pandemic when VCS IELTS was in its infancy, there were numerous scheduling problems. Interview data show that the examiners had all received numerous daily emails requesting cover for emergency examination sessions where there were examiner shortages, an unexpected influx of candidates or a lack of communication between test centers. One examiner explained,

I have received innumerable emails multiple times per day … requesting urgent need for examiners for either standby or live testing. [Examiner 1]

### **Work–Life Balance**

Examiners felt that limited consideration was given to work–life balance in relation to fixed test scheduling. Examiner 3 expressed frustration regarding the presence of significant scheduling gaps, despite freeing up entire days for examinations:

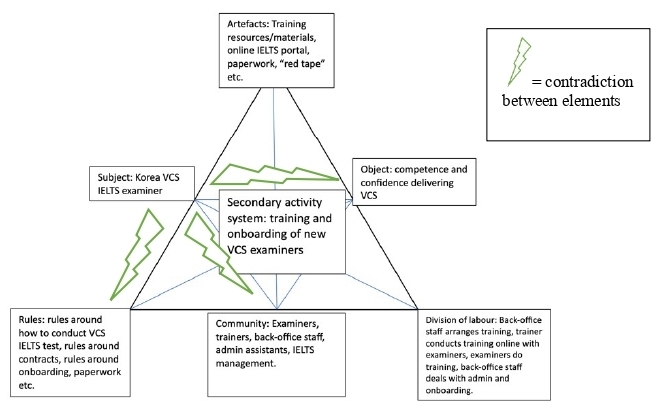
They altered the schedule numerous times and added that there would be significant gaps in your timetable…. [Examiner 3]

These issues have led to quaternary contradictions between the primary activity system and the secondary system of general test administration. Examiners believed that challenges in organizing and scheduling candidates in a timely and efficient manner had a detrimental effect on their professional practice, well-being, and the core activity of test delivery. Additionally, it diminished examiners’ perceptions of the IELTS organisation’s professionalism. While sympathetic to the challenges faced during the pandemic, examiners experienced instances where the organisation’s actions impeded their ability to conduct high-quality online examinations.

## **Training and Orientation of New VCS Examiners**

Figure 4 shows the final related, neighboring activity system of training and onboarding new examiners for VCS examining, which examiners felt was rushed, causing several contradictions.

**Figure 4. Secondary Neighboring Activity System: Training and Onboarding of New Examiners**



### **Training**

Two examiners stated that the training they received for VCS IELTS was not as comprehensive as it had been earlier in their careers.

A set of “VCS FAQs” communicated to examiners by VCS FAQs (Canada) (n.d.) provided significant directives on technology-related issues, such as ensuring stable internet and access to hardware such as cameras and microphones, but very little on how the VCS test might differ from the in-person test or what kind of training and orientation examiners might expect to undergo.

One examiner felt that the training he received was insufficient or inadequate for him to fulfill his new responsibilities as an IELTS VCS examiner:

The training and training materials themselves were very much a band-aid approach. They were, if I may say so, rough and ready. [Examiner 1]

This appears to run counter to assertions in the IELTS-funded research that, as examiners were already familiar with the internet and able to use video conferencing programs such as Zoom, “it can be assumed that they can transfer the knowledge and skills to the testing context with the support of a one-day training session” (H. Lee et al., 2021, p. 12).

Interview data would seem to suggest that, while one of the examiners interviewed indeed stated that the transition to VCS examining post-training was relatively smooth, others felt that more instruction, practice, and support would have been beneficial before real-time examining with live candidates began.

### **Orientation and Onboarding**

The interviews indicated that administrative issues meant that examiners’ applications to become certified VCS examiners were often held up in interminable administrative limbo. This was an unfortunate contradiction as IELTS required many examiners to quickly be certified and trained for their new online product, while the paperwork process to onboard willing examiners was slow. Examiner 1 recounted,

The onboarding process to become certified required … so much red tape just to even get on the system…. It was just so bureaucratic to even get your foot in the door. [Examiner 1]

**Discussion and Limitations**

This study of VCS IELTS examiners in the South Korean context uncovered a range of contradictions within and between related activity systems.

Technology played a dual role, enabling the delivery of remote speaking tests while also negatively affecting the practice, leading to changes in examiner performance and perceptions of the IELTS Speaking test. In response to the pandemic, training and onboarding had to be expedited, often in a seemingly improvised manner, utilizing unfamiliar programs and platforms for both examiners and trainers. Consequently, examiners experienced apprehension, feeling ill-prepared in some cases. Similarly, test venue staff faced similar limitations in terms of expedited training, resulting in a lack of standardization among test-day invigilators and proctors. Furthermore, pandemic responses disrupted the scheduling of examiners and test timetabling, impacting the central activity of test delivery. Collectively, these issues highlight a broader contradiction between the professional, high-stakes reputation and image of the IELTS test and the post-pandemic reality of examiner experiences on the ground.

While it is understandable that these disruptions occurred, given the emergency nature of the situation, tensions may also be attributed to the existence of two distinct versions of the VCS test (Flexi and Full) conducted on different systems. The emergency shift to VCS placed additional pressure on administrative staff to adapt to new systems and working methods and resulted in increased communication and crossover, creating more opportunities for examiner confusion.

The present study is not without limitations. In future research, the viewpoints of other stakeholders, such as administration staff, trainers, and proctors, could be considered to enrich the findings on offer. Further work could also be done on examiner response to VCS in other regions to assess if the contradictions uncovered here are geographically unique or all pervasive.

**Conclusion**

As suggested by Engeström (2001), for an activity system to progress and evolve, expansive learning must occur. This study of VCS IELTS examiners in the South Korean context, it is hoped, may play some small part in expansive transformation of the VCS IELTS speaking examination. While expansive transformation is generally an iterative process that unfolds over time, COVID-19 in many quarters engendered rapid, extensive, violent transformation without the usual collaboration that goes into enhancing the activity system. In the IELTS examination ecosystem, as in many industries, this created additional contradictions between those involved in the transformation processes. Kassim (2021) called for increased collaboration between researchers and language assessment practitioners, suggesting a dedicated platform for sharing first-hand experiences and technological solutions that instructors and assessment professionals can utilize. Such a platform may go some way to involving all stakeholders to ensure learning and improvement of VCS takes place efficiently and effectively.

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**Appendix A**

**Interview Questions and Sample Answers to Interview Questions**

**Interview Questions**

1. How old are you?

2. Which country do you come from?

3. How long have you been examining for IELTS (in Korea)?

5. Why did you decide to make the transition?

6. Was this an easy transition to make? Why/why not?

7. Did you find the VCS technology was easy to use?

8. Did switching to VCS change the way you examine at all?

9. In your opinion, is the VCS the same as the traditional face-to-face test? Does it produce the same outcomes? If not, why not?

10. How (if at all) has your personal well-being / mental health / physical health been impacted by changing to VCS from traditional face-to-face examining?

11. Do you have any suggestions on how you would improve delivery/implementation of the VCS IELTS video speaking test?

**Sample Answers to Interview Questions**

1. How old are you?

→ Thirty-eight years old.

2. Which country do you come from?

→ UK.

3. How long have you been examining for IELTS (in Korea)?

→ Just over four years. Just in Korea. Doing VCS for one year. Main center, now global hub. Started to get more experience, another string to bow, more income. Not easy to get experience doing other things in Korea. Emailed BC and got training.

4. When did you start to do VCS examining?

→ Started VCS one year ago.

5. Why did you decide to make the transition?

→ Was traveling a lot pre-Covid, averaging 8–10 candidates per session, 30 candidates per month on a good month – not enough. This drained away after Covid; then the chance to do VCS came along. Does weekends. Uses portal sign-up two weeks in advance minimum. Minimum four-hour slot. Week before he is assigned candidates. Finalized 24–48 hours before. Had gaps in schedule, so gave feedback to try and close these. Works fairly well.

6. Was this an easy transition to make? Why/why not?

→ Fairly easy switch. Training session in breakout rooms. Test that they were managing everything. VCS full-integrated system; VCS flexi (fiddly on Zoom, Google Forms). THIS WAS THE FIRST ONE... INDICATOR that they are phasing it out, IOC [IELTS On Computer], slight delay – factor this in. All candidates are in exam centers – can take from home soon!

7. Did you find the VCS technology was easy to use?

→ Fairly easy to use – initial learning curve. Not tech savvy but picked it up quickly. Regular tech issues – connection drops etc. Every couple of weeks tech problem. Sound suddenly drops out. Video freezes. Went through a phase of black screen – couldn't see candidate. Flexi assigned to one center for entire slot. If there was tech problem, whole session canceled and then examiner gets unpaid. Tech issue, then still get paid. Login and see list of times to start each test. Difference between VCS and IOC – click to choose frame Part 2 and 3. Click to start, then see invigilator, confirm candidate – go and get candidate. Each center may be slightly different.

8. Did switching to VCS change the way you examine at all?

→ Has made him a better examiner. Volume of candidates etc. Variety of candidates makes him better. Part 3 re-formulate prompts- made him better. Added instruction after part 2 to put paper and pencil- let it go if they play around with pencil. Candidate writing down question? Move microphone instruction needed to hear them, at start of test.

9. In your opinion, is the VCS the same as the traditional face-to-face test? Does it produce the same outcomes? If not, why not?

→ Yes, the same. Is the candidate used to speaking to a webcam? If a candidate has experience of Zoom for meetings etc., they would have an advantage. Students seem less nervous online, internet connection and sound can cause stress, hard to interrupt candidates because of delay. Some decisions are slightly different, but in general it’s comparable.

10. How (if at all) has your personal well-being/mental/physical health been impacted by changing to VCS from traditional face-to-face examining?

→ Not impaired. Free to choose a schedule. Big sessions are tough – not good for eyes in long sessions. Felt bad eyes after teaching online during the pandemic. Not many breaks – couple of 20 minute breaks. MAYBE 40 minute lunch. Posture OK. Easier not to travel – doesn't bother to travel to f2f sessions. Can see how many candidates LIKELY to get on VCS, so makes more sense. More flexible. Lack of travel good, doing a lot more good financially. Positive effects overall.

11. Do you have any suggestions on how you would improve delivery/implementation of the VCS IELTS video speaking test?

→ Only slight gripes. With scheduling. Too many breaks. Not a good use of time, I brought it up with my supervisor, and he said it was difficult to schedule people around the world. Try and iron out tech problems, but hard to do. Would be nice to make sure that all the test centers have decent equipment. Standardized test equipment. Invigilator interaction needs to be improved – more help from invigilators ensures a smoother, fairer test.

**Appendix B**

**Sample Interview Transcript**

**Speaker 1:** [00:02:02] And why? Can I just ask you why you decided to start doing in in the first place? For four years ago.

**Speaker 2:** [00:02:10] Um, I think it was just, you know, another. I just saw it as another string to my bow, I guess. Just something getting, getting experience, doing something else. Um, also, I quite like the idea of having some other, I mean other income on the side as well, on top of my job. Um, but yeah, just trying to, I find it... it’s not always easy in Korea. Maybe not as easy as in some other countries to get experience doing other things. And so, um, I think I just emailed the British Council just. And asked, you know, do you ever train examiners? And they got back and said, oh, well, actually, we need some examiners in Daegu coming up soon. Here’s the training schedule. If you’re interested, apply. And you know, that’s how it happened, right?

**Speaker 1:** [00:03:05] And do you I mean, that’s a weird question, but do you like it? I mean, do you enjoy it?

**Speaker 2:** [00:03:12] Sometimes I do, yeah. I mean, sometimes I really do enjoy it. I don’t know exactly when I would say I do and when I enjoy it less so. But, you know, sometimes... I sometimes I just feel in the mood, you know? But yeah, I do quite enjoy it, especially, I mean, the, um. Just being able to do everything from home. Yeah, yeah.

**Speaker 1:** [00:03:34] Yeah. When? Yeah. I mean, when did you start... start? You said one year ago, right? What?

**Speaker 2:** [00:03:42] Yeah, that’s right. About a year ago.

**Speaker 1:** [00:03:47] Uh, okay. And why did you decide to make the trip? Because you said you don’t do any face-to-face now. Is that right?

**Speaker 2:** [00:03:58] Um. I haven’t done for a long time. Um. So pre-Covid, I’d say Daegu had 1 or 2 sessions a month, and I’d often get the opportunity to go somewhere else in Korea, so I could go to Gwangju is a common center, Busan and Jeju, so. Pre-Covid. I was getting maybe 2 or 3 sessions a month and probably averaging, you know, 8 to 10 candidates per session. So the workload for a month was, you know, maybe 30 candidates in a good month. And then they mentioned that they wanted to start training.