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The English Language Experiences of North Korean Refugees in South Korean Universities

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North Korean refugees often struggle to adapt to the ultracompetitive educational environment of South Korea, and many have difficulties learning the English language. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn more about the English language experiences of North Korean refugee students in South Korean universities. The 15 participants in this study were North Korean refugees in their twenties who have lived in South Korea for at least 3 years. An initial study examined the educational experiences of North Korean refugees during premigration (in North Korea), transmigration (on the new underground railroad), and postmigration (in South Korea). In the initial study, four types of data were collected including a demographic questionnaire, a timeline of major life experiences, standardized interviews, and journal entry responses. The original study did not focus on English language experiences in South Korea, but many participants elaborated on this concept. A follow-up study using standardized, open-ended interviews was conducted to focus more on the English language experiences of the participants. Results indicate that the participants have experienced immense challenges with the English language, especially in terms of preparing for the Test of English for International Communication. Practical implications and participant recommendations are also provided.

[North Korean refugees/North Korean defectors/phenomenology/language learning motivation/refugee education]

I. INTRODUCTION

The present study examines the English language experiences of North Korean refugees studying at South Korean universities. There are over 30,000 North Korean

refugees living in South Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2016). The South Korean government is developing more initiatives to help North Korean refugees better assimilate into society (Yi, 2016). Nevertheless, North Korean refugees are plagued with numerous challenges and problems related to education, culture, ideological differences (E. Park & O. Kim, 2014), health (S. Chung & Seo, 2007; H. H. Kim et al., 2011), and employment (Bidet, 2009). A major obstacle that many North Korean refugees face in South Korea is the use of the English language, especially in the education system. In North Korea, English does not play an important role in society and is not emphasized in the school curriculum. In addition, widespread poverty and economic problems in North Korea have resulted in poor school attendance (S. A. Kim et al., 2012). Even if the students do study English, if they are missing school regularly this may inhibit their ability to understand and use the language. English has a major impact on South Korean society and the education system which often pushes students to begin studying the language at an early age. In addition, many students in South Korea attend private academies to improve their English communication skills.

North Korean refugees are ill prepared to adapt to the ultra-competitive education system of South Korea that often stresses the importance of English. Many North Korean refugees in South Korea lack basic knowledge of the English language which makes it difficult to understand classes that are taught partially or entirely in English. Furthermore, many North Korean refugees take a leave of absence or drop out from university due to problems related to English (Hong, 2010; Lartigue, 2016). The purpose of this study is to gain more insight into the English language experiences of North Korean refugees studying at universities in South Korea. Although studies have been conducted on the English language experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea, it is important to add more qualitative data to the body of research. Administrators and educators can also learn more about the English language challenges that North Korean refugees face through detailed stories of their experiences. They can adapt current policies and curriculum and develop better educational strategies in the future. North Korean refugees are expected to achieve the same levels of English proficiency in university as their South Korean peers, but they lack fundamental, practical English knowledge that their peers have developed over the years in the South Korean education system.

This study uses a transcendental phenomenological design because it is important to give the participants a voice and to learn about their shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This research is rooted in an initial study which examined the general educational experiences of North Korean refugees especially in light of their exposure to Juche, militarism, and human rights. The original study focused on the educational experiences of North Korean refugees during premigration (as citizens of North

Korea), transmigration (as refugees/escapees on the new underground railroad), and postmigration (as refugees/citizens in South Korea). The purpose of the original study was not related to the English language experiences of North Korean refugees, but many of the participants discussed this. The researcher decided that it was important to gain more insight into the refugees' English language experiences in South Korea since many of them had expanded on this. Data from the original study was combined with data from a follow-up study which sought to learn more about the refugees' English language experiences in South Korea. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do North Korean refugees describe their English language experiences in South Korea?
2. What English language challenges have North Korean refugees had in South Korean universities?
3. What changes can be made to improve English education for North Korean refugees in South Korea?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. English Education in North Korea

In North Korea, Russian was the most common foreign language taught until the fall of the Soviet Union, and then English began to pass it in terms of popularity (Lee, 2007). Following World War II, English was used for a few years in the curriculum, but it was removed until 1964 when the government wanted to learn more scientific and technical information in English to be able to compete with South Korea (J. J. Song, 2002). Since then, English has been taught in North Korea, but lessons generally focus on ideology (Eum, 2015; J. J. Song, 2002). In 2015, the North Korean government stated that it would begin to increase English language classes in North Korea; although English education has more priority now, the focus is still on learning about the Kim family and propaganda (Eum, 2015).

The purpose of English education in North Korea is to promote communist ideology and adoration for the ruling Kim family, and there is often a militaristic tone in English lessons (E. Park & Shin, 2016). Kim Il Sung stated that learning English would lead to a greater chance of victory if North Korea were ever to go to war with its enemy, the United States (J. J. Song, 2002). Students have learned various militaristic expressions including "drop your weapons," "hands up," and "surrender or

you will die" (J. J. Song, 2002). The nationalistic ideology, Juche, is also emphasized in the English curriculum (J. J. Song, 2002). English education in North Korea is severely deficient, and there are not enough textbooks and class materials (H. Kim, 2012). There is a high demand for English textbooks in North Korea, but there are not enough which has led to some students transcribing books by hand (M. J. Kang, 2013). Furthermore, English education in North Korea is primarily limited to the classroom, and textbooks do not include references to international topics or foreign culture (J. J. Song, 2002). English lessons in North Korean often lack practicality and highlight the Kim family, propaganda, and militaristic themes. In a globalized world in which practical English language knowledge is critical, North Korea is severely behind and is lacking in useful English curriculum and language programs. In addition, North Korea is one of the most hermetic countries in the world. The vast majority of North Korean people are not exposed to foreigners, and the Internet is off-limits to the populace. Consequently, North Korean citizens lack opportunities to use English in practical ways.

2. English Education in South Korea

English language teaching began in Korea (then unified Korea) for interpreters and diplomats in the late 19th century (Shin, 2007). English has been the dominant foreign language in South Korea since the end of World War II when U.S. forces occupied South Korea and Japanese colonialism ended. However, its prominence began to increase more in the late 1980s when the Asian Games and Olympics were hosted (J-K. Park, 2009). In more recent years, the desire to compete internationally in the era of globalization also fueled an intense interest in learning English (J-K. Park, 2009).

English education plays a tremendous role in South Korean society. The South Korean language uses many words from other languages, especially English words which are not used in North Korea (B. H. Chung, 2009; Yoo, 2012). Many foreigners including native English speakers reside in South Korea, and there are also numerous tourists who visit the country. The South Korean education system is ultra-competitive, and the people invest heavily in English language tutoring and classes. English is a very important language internationally, so it is vital for students to learn English to be able to communicate with people around the world. According to the Korean National Curriculum Information Center (2007), "The ability to communicate in English will act as an important bridge connecting different countries, and will be the driving force in developing our country, forming trust among various countries and cultures" (para. 2). English education begins in primary school and continues through university (M. O. Kim & Jaffe, 2010; Ness & Lin, 2013). Some kindergartens operate only in English,

and learning English is very important at a young age (M. O. Kim & Jaffe, 2010). Some wealthier families even send their children to English speaking countries to gain more exposure to the language (Breen, 1998; H.-W. Kim, 2005). The English language plays a significant role in South Korea which is an economic and technological leader of the world. Moreover, English is critical in the job market. Roh's (2014) study on South Korean students' views of English education revealed that English proficiency is considered critical in obtaining a rewarding career. Many employers require candidates who are proficient in English and have high TOEIC scores. There is intense pressure in South Korea for children and young adults to excel in English.

3. English Language Challenges of North Korean Refugees

The English language is a major obstacle that North Korean refugees must overcome if they want to excel in South Korean universities that have English prerequisites needed for graduation. A survey of 475 North Korean refugee undergraduate students in Seoul showed that 40% temporarily or permanently stopped their university schooling; furthermore, the dropout rate of North Korean refugees was 6.3 times higher than that of South Korean university students (Hong, 2010). Many want to take a leave of absence to study English, and they struggle to compete with their South Korean counterparts (Lartigue, 2016). There are special admissions procedures for North Korean refugees who want to attend South Korean universities which makes the process much less competitive in comparison to the experience of their South Korean peers. Nonetheless, they still face many challenges during university and struggle to fulfill the requirements needed for graduation.

Several studies have examined the English language experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea. Choi (2014) found that North Korean refugees were not prepared for university education; moreover, there was a major gap between the English language knowledge of North Korean refugees and South Korean students. The North Korean refugee students struggled with English reading because of deficiencies in grammar and vocabulary. They also had difficulties listening to native English instructors. H. Kim (2012) studied the English language experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea and found that less than half of the participants had studied English in North Korea. In addition, they struggled to understand the English used in their classes in South Korea. Choe (2016) examined the effects of pre-service English teachers' tutoring on the English language of North Korean refugee university students and found that they experienced myriad challenges in learning English. Yoo (2012) also found that North Korean refugees struggle with English in South Korea. They could not understand English words and basic sentences used by professors in

South Korean universities. The learning needs of North Korean refugees are often not met in the South Korean education system (Cho, 2010). North Korean refugees experience many trials and tribulations while trying to adapt to the ultracompetitive education system in South Korean universities. Additionally, English is a serious challenge for North Korean refugees who often severely lag behind South Korean students.

4. English Language Motivation

It is critical for refugees to be motivated to want to learn the target language, and it may be essential for them to learn the language to be able to adapt to society. Although English is not the primary language of South Korea, it still plays a vital role in society. North Korean refugees need to be motivated to learn the English language, especially considering its dominance in the South Korean job market and education system. For learners to improve their language proficiency, motivation is essential (Elmeroth, 2003; C-E. Kim). In a qualitative study, Elmeroth (2003) examined the factors that impacted refugees' ability to learn Swedish while adapting to society; motivation was described as a significant factor among refugees learning the new language. According to Gardner (1985), motivation can be defined as a "combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language" (p. 10). Learners have different motivations for wanting to learn another language. For some, there may be a personal interest in learning the language that may be intrinsically motivated, and for others the desire to learn another language may be rooted in extrinsic motivation such as wanting to be more competitive in school or the job market.

Motivation plays a critical role in the learner's interest in a subject (Gardner, 2000). Gardner (1985) discussed two types of motivation which include integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation refers to the use of language to communicate for enjoyment using the target language, whereas instrumental motivation refers to the interest in learning another language for employment, a promotion, or to earn a better grade in a class or on a test. Regardless of whether language learning is pursued for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons, motivation to learn the language is critical. According to Knowles (1975), "People who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners), learn things better than do people who sit passively at the feet of teachers (reactive learners). Proactive learners enter into learning more purposefully and with great motivation" (p. 14). Knowles (1975) also stated that motivated learners tend to remember what they learned for a longer period of time. North Korean refugees may have differing reasons for studying English, but regardless of why they study English, motivation plays an

important role in language development and can help fuel persistence. North Korean refugees can experience various setbacks as they learn English though. Motivation can increase through academic success; however, failures and problems related to language acquisition can lead to decreased motivation (McLaughlin, 1987). Although North Korean refugees may be very motivated to learn English, they face numerous barriers in comparison to their South Korean peers which can inhibit motivation.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Researcher Background

The researcher is a native English speaker from the United States who has traveled to North Korea and worked with charity organizations to assist North Korean refugees in South Korea and on the modern underground railroad. The researcher has also taught North Korean refugees in university classes in South Korea, tutored North Korean refugees, and developed English education programs to help improve their language skills. The researcher became interested in learning more about the educational experiences of North Korean refugees as a result of her classroom teaching experiences. In a university English communication class in South Korea, she had one student who could not speak basic English sentences, and his speaking skills were noticeably lower than the other students in the class. The student was hesitant to speak to the instructor. Through an assigned group presentation on different countries of the world, the instructor discovered that the student was from North Korea. As a result of this experience, the instructor strove to learn more about the educational background of North Korean refugees. She met more North Korean refugees at the university that she was working at as well as at other nearby universities. The researcher still has ongoing communication with members of the North Korean refugee population in South Korea.

2. Participants

The original study consisted of 15 participants. The participants were North Korean refugees in their twenties. The participants had attended at least 1 semester of English speaking or conversation classes at a college or university or at least 6 months of an English program or tutoring sessions. Purposive, criterion, and snowball sampling were used to obtain participants. The participants were all university students living in South Korea. The follow-up study included nine of the participants from the original

study. Some of the original participants were busy with personal obligations and university related programs. Participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identities. The initial study was conducted in December of 2013 to February of 2014. The follow-up study was conducted in January and February of 2015. The follow-up study, with nine of the original participants, used standardized, open-ended interviews. These interview questions are provided in the appendix. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form in Korean.

It was vital to establish rapport with the participants. Since the researcher already knew some of the participants (Cheol Su, Min Sik, Su Jung, and Yoon Cheol), they seemed comfortable and open to sharing information. However, the participants who did not know the researcher personally seemed a little more apprehensive to discuss specific details about their experiences. The pilot study began with Cheol Su whom the researcher had already known for several years. Snowball sampling was used to find other potential participants. Cheol Su recommended two other participants. The researcher asked participants if they knew anyone else who would be interested in participating. A recruitment letter was emailed or sent through other electronic means to potential participants with details about the study. The researcher did not struggle to find participants who met the basic requirements of the study, but some did not want to be involved in a lengthy qualitative study, and many were busy preparing for university. There may have also been a fear to share personal details that could potentially be exposed. Some North Korean refugees may be hesitant to provide demographic information or to state their opinions about critical issues (G. H. Song, 2012). Additionally, some believe that they are being watched by the National Intelligence Service in South Korea and therefore do not want to be involved in research studies (G. H. Song, 2012).

Profiles have been developed to provide characteristic and demographic information about each participant. Data is based on the participants' responses from the initial study. University status was confirmed in the latter study conducted in 2015.

1. Cheol Su: He is the pilot participant and is from Hamgyeongbukdo. He left North Korea in 2005. He is in his late twenties and only attended school (elementary) for 2 years in North Korea. His transmigration route included China and Mongolia. The transmigration period was 7 months. He is majoring in economics at a South Korean university. He enjoys church activities, spending time with friends, driving, and works as a volunteer church secretary.

2. Hee Cheol: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his late twenties. He left North Korea in 2008. His only education in North Korea was during

elementary school, and he could not attend on a regular basis. His transmigration route included China and Thailand. He did not identify other transit country/countries. The transmigration period was 1 year. He is majoring in Chinese at a South Korean university. He does not have enough time to participate in activities and clubs. He enjoys playing sports when he has time.

3. Hyeon Su: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his early twenties. He left North Korea in 2006. He attended elementary school in North Korea for 4 years. That is the only education that he obtained in North Korea. His transmigration route included China, Laos, and Thailand. The transmigration period lasted 7 months. He is majoring in Korean language and literature at a South Korean university. In his free time, he plays on a soccer team and likes to exercise and watch television.

4. Kyoung Hee: She is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in her early twenties. She did not indicate the year that she left North Korea. In North Korea, she attended elementary school for 4 years, middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years, and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. Her transmigration route included China, Laos, and Thailand. Her transmigration period was 2 years. She is majoring in Chinese at a South Korean university and enjoys reading and participating in Bible study in her free time.

5. Kyu Hyeon: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his early twenties. He left North Korea in 2001. He attended elementary school in North Korea but could not go to school regularly. His transmigration route included China and Mongolia. He attended a school (with false documentation) for ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship in China, but he did not indicate the length of time. His transmigration period was 6 years. He is majoring in Chinese at a South Korean university. He does not belong to any clubs or organizations. He enjoys playing basketball in his free time.

6. Min Sik: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his late twenties. He did not indicate the year that he left North Korea. He went to elementary school in North Korea but did not attend school regularly. His transmigration route included China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. While in China, he attended school for 2 years through false documentation. He did not indicate the length of his transmigration period. He is majoring in Korean language and culture at

a South Korean university. He does not belong to any clubs or organizations and enjoys spending time with friends.

7. Min Su: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his early twenties. He left North Korea in 2007. In North Korea, he attended elementary school for 4 years. This is the only education that he received in North Korea. His transmigration route included China and Thailand. He did not indicate other transit country/countries. His transmigration period was 4 months. He is majoring in social education at a South Korean university and has participated in several activities for North Korean refugees. He also likes studying Chinese. He does not belong to any clubs or organizations but likes watching basketball and soccer in his free time.

8. Seon Young: She did not state her hometown or province in North Korea. She left North Korea in 2009. She is in her late twenties. In North Korea, she attended elementary school for 4 years, middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years, and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. Her transmigration route included China and Thailand. Her transmigration period was 4 years and 4 months. She did not mention other transit country/countries. She is majoring in Korean language. She does not belong to any clubs or organizations and enjoys traveling.

9. Seong Cheol: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his early twenties. He left North Korea in 2004. He attended elementary school for 3 years in North Korea. This is the only education that he received in North Korea. His transmigration route included China, Vietnam, and Laos. His transmigration period was 2 years and 6 months. He is majoring in physical therapy at a South Korean university. He participated in a cultural exchange program with students from different countries in Asia as a group leader. The program involved discussing art and culture of their countries. He does not belong to any clubs or activities and enjoys playing soccer and taking pictures.

10. Su Jung: She is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in her late twenties. She left North Korea in 2008. In North Korea, she attended elementary school for 4 years, middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years, and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. She took flute lessons when she lived in North Korea, but she said the flute was very old, and the teacher was not an expert on the instrument. Her transmigration route

included China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Her transmigration period lasted 1 year and 6 months. She is studying management at a South Korean university. She has taken a variety of academic, language, career, and vocational training classes. She is involved in church activities and participates in Bible study. In her free time, she enjoys studying English and wants to travel more. She has traveled to the United States, Canada, and England.

11. Yoon Cheol: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his late twenties. He left North Korea in 2003. In North Korea, he attended elementary school for about 2 years, middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years, and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. His transmigration route included China, Laos, and Thailand. The transmigration period was 2 months. He is majoring in social welfare at a South Korean university and is a member of a social welfare club. In his free time he enjoys playing ping pong and soccer.

12. Yoon Hee: She is from Ryanggangdo and is in her early twenties. She left North Korea in 2003. She attended elementary school for 4 years in North Korea. This is the only education that she received in North Korea. Her transmigration route included China and Thailand. She attended school in China for 4 years through false documentation. She did not identify other transit country/countries. Her transmigration period was 5 years. She is majoring in Chinese at a South Korean university and belongs to a Chinese study group for North Korean refugees. She likes reading in her free time.

13. Yoon Su: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his late twenties. He did not indicate which year he left North Korea. He attended elementary school for 4 years in North Korea. He also attended middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. His transmigration route included China, Laos, and Thailand. His transmigration period was 4 years. He is majoring in Korean language at a South Korean university. He belongs to a prayer group and likes playing sports in his free time.

14. Young Cheol: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his late twenties. In North Korea, he attended elementary school for 4 years, middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years, and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. He stated that he skipped many classes in

middle school because it was a period of economic suffering in North Korea. He wanted to go to university, but he could not since one of his ancestors was a pastor in Pyongyang. His transmigration route included China and Thailand. He did not identify other country/countries on the transit route. His transmigration period was 3 months. He is majoring in electronic engineering at a South Korean university. He enjoys photography, reading books, and listening to music. He also likes fixing things and belongs to a Christian group for North Korean refugees.

15. Young Su: He is from Hamgyeongbukdo and is in his early twenties. In North Korea, he attended elementary school for 4 years, middle school (lower middle school in North Korea) for 3 years, and high school (upper middle school in North Korea) for 3 years. His transmigration route included China, Laos, and Thailand. His transmigration period was 3 months. He is majoring in management at a South Korean university and does not belong to any clubs or organizations. He likes traveling and hiking in his free time.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to data collection and analysis, the researcher used the epoche process (Moustakas, 1994) to reflect on and examine biases or opinions that could alter the research process. According to Moustakas (1994), "*Epoche* is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things" (p. 33). Through reflection, the researcher examined how her views and beliefs could influence the research process. The researcher is an American citizen, and her views of North Korea and North Korean people may be biased. According to Myers (2011), understanding North Korea from a Western or South Korean mindset can be problematic as well. She also has done extensive volunteer work with North Korean refugees and is sympathetic toward their plight. It is important to gain insight into the experiences of North Korean refugees through their voices and stories and to not let personal biases impact the research process. Data was collected in Korean. A trustworthy Korean-American translator/interpreter was used during the research process. The translator/interpreter majored in North Korean studies and educational pedagogy in university. The translator/interpreter had also completed research ethics training in the United States. In addition, he participated in humanitarian and educational projects to assist North Korean refugees. His knowledge and experience related to North Korea were invaluable throughout the research process.

Four types of data were collected in the original study including a demographic questionnaire, a timeline of major life experiences, standardized interviews, and journal entry responses. The research was carried out using Skype primarily, Facebook, email, and KakaoTalk which is a popular South Korean cellphone messenger program. The researcher did not initially plan to use Facebook, but several participants were recommended through Facebook. The researcher lived in Washington. Most of the participants lived in the Seoul-Metropolitan region of South Korea. The interviews were carried out using Skype. The demographic questionnaire, the timeline instructions, and journal writing instructions and topics were sent through email. The participants emailed the forms and activities to the researcher once they had been completed. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007). The researcher expected that the number of participants would be in the range of 10 to 25. It is recommended to have between five and 25 participants in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The demographic questionnaire included 24 questions related to gender, birth year, educational background and experiences, locations of residency, time spent in different locations, hobbies, interests, military experience, marital status, religion, community activities, and social involvement. Although various data was collected, the researcher thought it would be best to only include partial data regarding these responses so that the identity of the participants is not revealed. All of the demographic questionnaires were completed in Korean except for one completed in English by a participant who was an advanced English speaker. All of the participants completed the demographic questionnaire, but some left several questions blank.

The instructions for the timeline of major life experiences were emailed to participants upon receiving the demographic questionnaire results. The participants included primary life events and major educational experiences during premigration (in North Korea), transmigration (in China or other countries on the new underground railroad), and postmigration (in South Korea). Five participants did not want to create a timeline because they were afraid of exposing too much information. Some of the participants though included numerous details about their experiences and major events in their lives.

Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted to maintain consistency during the interview process. According to Patton (1990), “By controlling and standardizing the open-ended interview the evaluator obtains data that are systematic and thorough for each respondent” (p. 134). Interview questions were constructed by examining the literature and contacting friends and former colleagues who are knowledgeable about North Korean refugees. Questions about education and life in South Korea were asked first, followed by questions about the transmigration and

premigration periods, and finally the future. The questions related to educational experiences in relation to Juche, militarism, and human rights violations. The interviews were carried out using Skype. The interviews took place between 4 am to 7 am PST and 10 pm to 12 am PST. A few were conducted between 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. PST. None of the interviews were rescheduled. However, a few participants were late. Establishing rapport can be somewhat difficult online, but the researcher was able to learn more about the lives of the participants. Probing was used to gain more insight if responses were unclear or needed additional details (Patton, 1990). The researcher strove to limit interviews to 1 hour, but some took about 1 hour and 10 minutes, and the shortest was about 50 minutes. The researcher worked with the interpreter to take field notes during the interviews. All of the participants were interviewed. Due to the complex nature of some of the questions, the participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions a few days before the interview.

Journal entry instructions and questions were provided to participants during the interview. Participants completed eight journal entries. All of the participants completed the journal entries. These responses related to educational experiences in North Korea, on the new underground railroad, and in South Korea. All of the entries were written in Korean, but a few comments were written in English. Participants were given 2 weeks to complete the journal entries, but most completed them that day or within a few days. Some responses were vague, and others included ample details.

Standardized, open-ended interviews were also used in the follow-up study. The researcher wanted to collect other types of data, including written data, but she knew the participants were busy and had invested a significant amount of time in the initial study. She was also aware that many North Korean refugees are often requested to participate in research studies and did not want to burden or annoy them. The interview questions were based on a review of the literature as well as English related comments that emerged in the initial study. The interview questions are included in the appendix. Interviews were carried out using Skype. The interviews took place between 5 am to 9 am PST and 10 pm to 1 am PST. The average interview was about 45 minutes. Some lasted about 1 hour, and the shortest was about 30 minutes. The same interpreter was used for the follow-up study, and the procedures of the initial interview were followed. A field journal was also used during the interviews to take notes. Since the follow-up study was more focused on a specific topic, English language experiences in South Korea, the participants seemed more quick to respond. The participants were also told about the purpose of the study before the interviews and probably thought about their English language experiences beforehand.

Data was first translated into English. If there was inconsistent or unclear data, the researcher inquired about this. Data analysis procedures centered on

phenomenological analysis which involves "putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said" (Patton, 1990, p. 246). Common themes related to English language experiences in South Korea were coded and analyzed from the initial and follow-up study. The initial study used both qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti) and traditional coding methods. Through the software program, the researcher was able to isolate 15 major themes. English language experience responses primarily emerged through the following four themes: general life: postmigration, adaptation: postmigration, recommendations: postmigration, and miscellaneous. However, some responses related to English were made in reference to the premigration period. The researcher created posters that included primary themes and then wrote out statements and ideas related to the themes on the posters. She also used a data analysis form to narrow down themes and then examined demographic questionnaires and timelines, followed by the interview responses and journal entries. The data was cross-checked to ensure consistency.

In the follow-up study, traditional coding methods were used to find significant statements and key themes related to the participants' English language experiences from data collected in both studies. Posters were created that included predominant themes that emerged, and a data analysis form was used as well. In addition, a field journal was kept during the initial and follow-up studies in which the researcher recorded her thoughts, new ideas that had emerged, and included other possible biases or opinions that could skew the research process. During the data analysis process, the researcher reflected on her beliefs and biases. She also consulted knowledgeable colleagues who could provide input about the research process. In addition, she communicated with the translator/interpreter during the data analysis process since he is knowledgeable about North Korean refugees. Triangulation was also to maintain consistency during the research process. Trustworthy peers who are well-informed about North Korean refugees assisted with reviews, a Korean-American friend checked translations, and member checking was used.

IV. RESULTS

In the original study, 12 of the 15 participants discussed their English language experiences in South Korea. In the follow-up study, all nine participants discussed their English language experiences and challenges in South Korea. The original study asked no questions about English language experiences or challenges in South Korea even though many responses about these topics were provided, whereas the follow-up

study focused on English language experiences. All but two of the 9 participants in the follow-up study learned English in North Korea; however, they mentioned that the lessons were very impractical and did not prepare them for the English language challenges of South Korea.

1. General English Language Challenges in South Korean Society

Participants emphasized the struggles that they have faced trying to learn English in South Korea. Several mentioned that they needed to learn English just to be able to understand basic conversations in South Korea which often use Konglish or borrowed words from the English language. They provided several examples which highlight the importance of English. Some of these English words include but are not limited to stress, turn, ice cream, juice, chicken, hamburger, sale, and shampoo. Konglish words include but are not limited to eye shopping (window shopping), wellbeing food (healthy/organic food), handphone (cellphone), pension (motel), service (free/"on the house"), handle (steering wheel), and jelly (gummy candy). In addition, the English word order is different from Korean which can be confusing to learn. English is also found on many billboards and signs. It is also frequently used in television, movies, commercials, and the radio. Many products use the English language for labeling and advertisements. Clothing also sometimes includes English phrases, and tags are sometimes written in English. Foreign movies and television shows from native English speaking countries are also very popular. Many technological, medical, and scientific words also come from the English language, and English is often needed to navigate the Internet and communicate with other people around the world.

One participant, Kyu Hyeon emphasized how difficult it is to study English. He remarked, "South Korean students study English when they are in primary school. I cannot catch up with them. English can be found in many parts of society here even though this is Korea." He also mentioned feeling like he was in another world since things are so different in South Korea. Hee Cheol stressed that English education is pushed too much in South Korea. He said, "It is unfair because South Korean people start learning English when they are young. Some North Korean refugees never studied English. So many things include English in Korea, and we can even see English signs all around us." He also mentioned that many companies have English advertisements, and English signs are common in grocery stores and shopping plazas. Young Cheol said, "The importance of English is too high. People think English is very important. I want to study something, but I must know English even if the subject does not relate to English." He expanded on this more and stated that English is very critical in the job market. He added, "I lack many of the job skills that South Korean

people have, but what makes it worse is that I know I will have a hard time getting a job because English is so important." English is incredibly important in South Korean society and is evident in many facets of everyday life. North Korean refugees are often shocked by the impact of English on South Korean society, and they face many obstacles trying to learn the language.

2. Challenges of English, TOEIC, and Competitiveness in University

English proficiency and a minimum TOEIC score (universities and departments have different standards) are often required for graduation from university. This score requirement may seem out of reach to many North Korean refugees. Some university classes are taught completely or partially in English even if they are not language courses. Furthermore, textbooks and curriculum often include English. Some textbooks are written in English and the level of vocabulary may be more geared toward native English speaker students. University students are often required to take English classes that are taught by native English speakers who may not be able to communicate with students in Korean which can present a major problem for North Korean students who are taking the classes. Exchange programs are also very popular in South Korea, and many students go to English-speaking countries to help improve their language proficiency. Without financial sponsorship, this is nearly impossible for most North Korean refugee students.

Participants expanded on the challenges that they have faced trying to improve their English in university. They mentioned that some of their major classes are taught in English which is very difficult because the terminology and information presented in the Korean version of the classes can also be very difficult. Trying to learn academic information with advanced vocabulary in another language is incredibly challenging. Seon Young stated, "I have to take English language courses. I have had speaking, grammar, reading, writing, and other classes to help improve my English. I am sure that I was the lowest student in the classes." She also stated that she thought her professors were curious about why she could not understand the lessons and activities in the class. Some of her professors found out that she is a North Korean refugee though, and they were more understanding and offered extra help. She was very grateful for the assistance that she received. She also mentioned, "I do not understand though why many major classes that are not even connected to English are taught in English. It is not necessary. It is also not fair to South Korean students who are not good at English." She seemed very firm in her response and also said, "I know that maybe we need to talk about some English words or examples in English, but the entire classes should not be conducted in English." Participants also noted the

struggles that they have had in classes taught by native English speakers who are not proficient in Korean. Several mentioned that they could not ask questions that they had about the class because they lacked the vocabulary needed or they were embarrassed to talk to the professors because of their low English level. Students need to take English language courses in university; moreover, some academic classes and electives are also taught in English which can be a huge burden for North Korean refugees and even some South Korean students.

An emphasis was especially placed on the TOEIC examination. Kyung Hee has had English tutoring and often studies for the TOEIC exam but still has a lot of problems. She said, “I really worry that my TOEIC score will not be high enough. Even if I am good at my major and other things, it means nothing if my English scores are low.” She also stated that she spends many hours studying general English and preparing for the TOEIC exam each week. In addition, she feels that she is depriving herself of other useful knowledge in the Korean language because she spends so much time studying English. She stated, “Actually I think I spend too much time studying English and preparing for the TOEIC exam, but what can I do? I do not have other options if I want to have a good job here. English is so important.” She also said that some North Korean refugees have prospered through English. Her final remark was “I know that learning English is so important for my future, but it is very time consuming, and I do not think TOEIC knowledge is helpful at all for my future career goals.” Cheol Su is in his final year of university, but he will not be able to graduate because his TOEIC score is not high enough. He will take 1 to 2 years off to prepare for the TOEIC exam. He said, “If I did not do my best, I could accept my TOEIC problem, but I tried very hard.” He seemed very distraught about his circumstances but felt as if he invested so much of his time in learning English and even had tutoring with native English speakers. The participants provided numerous examples of their English language and TOEIC challenges in university.

In the cutthroat educational environment of South Korea, English language learning is also very competitive. Participants described the South Korean education system as very competitive and also highlighted competitiveness in terms of English education. Several mentioned that South Korean students spend excessive hours at private academies and with private tutors to increase their English language skills. Some go abroad as well in order to experience English immersion. Participants stated that even though they try very hard to catch up with their South Korean peers, it is almost impossible because of the English educational gap. Even though most of the participants studied English in North Korea, they mentioned that it was not practical since the lessons primarily focused on the leaders and propaganda. Hyeon Su said that no matter how hard he tries, it will never be good enough for South Korean standards.

He knows that South Korean students work very hard, but in university, North Korean refugees have to work much harder to just pass their classes. He also said that "English is just too difficult. South Korean students have been studying for most of their lives, and they are exposed to English throughout South Korean society. There are also so many native English teachers in the schools here. We did not have that in North Korea." Min Sik said, "I could not learn a lot when I was in North Korea, so I do not have basic knowledge, but I am expected to know what South Korean people know at the same age. That includes advanced English" North Korean refugees must adapt to this competitive lifestyle that they are not accustomed to. Min Sik also added that even South Korean students complain about the competitiveness of the education system. Cheol Su said, "The situation around me was not very easy. I felt so much stress from studying. I was being pushed. People looked at me in a very strange way. I hate that feeling." Yoon Su said that although English is taught in North Korea it is taught in a very different way and focuses on the leaders. This style of English does not really have any usefulness in South Korea. The participants felt incredibly burdened by the intense competitiveness of the educational system which also extends to English education.

3. Participant Recommendations

Participants provided recommendations for how to improve the English education system for North Korean refugees in South Korea. Seon Young said that universities should have a more flexible policy for North Korean refugees. Trying to follow the same path as South Korean students with the same requirements is a tremendous burden. Cheol Su believes that there should be a different TOEIC exam standard for North Korean refugees because it is nearly impossible for them to achieve the same level as their South Korean peers. Su Jung stated that there are already many programs for North Korean refugees, but sometimes they are not a good match. She said, "For example, students have to go to school during the day time, but a tutoring program may only have free classes during the day time." Su Jung also thinks that she learned more than other North Korean people when she lived in North Korea and therefore her level is a little higher, but in South Korean tutoring programs all of the refugees are usually grouped together regardless of their level. Several participants stated that it is vital to have more English for job training and for academic purposes. Specialized English knowledge is very important in some university classes, and many refugees lack knowledge of basic conversational English. Furthermore, business English is becoming very common, and it is important to be able to communicate with people professionally. Two participants, Seon Young and Su Jung stated that North Korean

refugees should have more opportunities to study abroad to learn English, and domestic or international English internship programs would also be helpful. Su Jung said that there are actually enough English language programs available for North Korean refugees, but some of them do not know about them or how to access them. The participants would also like more opportunities to practice English especially with native English speakers.

V. DISCUSSION

Trying to adapt to an ultracompetitive educational environment is incredibly difficult for North Korean refugees. Furthermore, they must strive to attain the same level of proficiency as their South Korean counterparts who have extensive experience learning English. The participants discussed the myriad challenges that they have faced while trying to learn English in South Korea. Their responses are aligned with previous studies (Choe, 2016; Choi, 2014; H. Kim, 2012; Yoo, 2012) that highlighted English language challenges among North Korean refugees. Choi's (2014) study discussed the challenges that North Korean refugees have in university and the gap between North and South Korean students. This was also particularly evident in the present study since many participants discussed the educational gap even if interview questions did not ask about a gap specifically. Choi's (2014) study also revealed the problems that North Korean refugees had in classes taught by native English speakers which aligns with the results of this study. The participants felt intimidated or embarrassed by their English level, or they believed that they lacked the vocabulary needed to communicate with native English speaking professors. In H. Kim's (2012) study, more than half of the participants had not studied English in North Korea. In the present study, all but two of the nine participants (in the follow-up study) had studied English in North Korea. However, their lessons were described as impractical and focused on ideology. In addition, many of the participants in the present study could not attend school regularly in North Korea due to poverty and having to scavenge for food or find resources for their local schools and the military.

Motivation is a driving force in the language acquisition process. Like Elmeroth's (2003) study involving refugees in Sweden, motivation played an important role in the English language acquisition process for participants in this study. Although two participants discussed an intrinsic or instrumental desire to learn English, for most, the motivation to learn English is connected to the ultracompetitive environment in South Korea where English proficiency is often imperative in the education system and job market. This type of language learning motivation is referred to as instrumental

motivation (Gardner, 1985). North Korean refugees like their South Korean counterparts, need to be proficient in English to excel in university and have better prospects in the job market. English can also aid in getting promotions in some companies. They need to become actively engaged in the language learning process; moreover, if they are motivated to learn the language, they can retain the language for a longer period of time (Knowles, 1975). Furthermore, North Korean refugees need to learn English to be able to navigate South Korean society where English is used frequently in everyday life. The motivation to learn English may be rooted in a feeling of necessity. Learning English may not always be enjoyable or interesting if the refugees are solely instrumentally motivated, but many are pushed by the desire to thrive or at least have a comfortable lifestyle which may heavily depend on English proficiency. Financial security is very important since many still have family members living in the North who may want to escape one day, and the costs are a major burden for North Korean people who are often indebted to brokers. Finally, although North Korean refugees may face many challenges as they learn English, motivation can help push them to continue studying. However, failures related to language learning can lead to reduced motivation (McLaughlin, 1987). The participants expanded on the stresses and setbacks that they have had in relation to learning English. As a result of these challenges, their motivation to study English may have been negatively impacted.

There is no quick or easy solution for addressing the English language challenges among North Korean refugee students. However, universities could consider creating re-entry programs that would make it easier for North Korean refugees who leave university and want to return. Having time off to study English more or providing intensive English language and TOEIC preparation courses may also be beneficial. Professors and administrators should also consider adapting curriculum or academic policies to better suit the needs of North Korean refugees. However, implementing policy or curriculum changes must be done very carefully because some animosity may develop among South Korean people who feel that North Korean refugees are receiving an unfair advantage. Universities can consider changing TOEIC score requirements for North Korean refugees or requiring proficiency in another language as a graduation prerequisite. Some North Korean refugees are fluent in Chinese since China is a major transit country on the new underground railroad. Many North Korean refugees even stay there indefinitely. In H. Kim's (2012) study half of the North Korean refugee students rated their Chinese proficiency as intermediate or higher, while only 6.7% rated their English proficiency as intermediate or higher.

There are many foreigners in South Korea, including native English speakers and other foreigners who are fluent in English, who are interested in North Korean issues and want to meet North Korean refugees. They can play a role as mentors and English

language teachers. Study abroad programs can also assist North Korean refugees who want to improve their English language skills. Universities, businesses, churches, or other organizations can sponsor North Korean refugees. Immersion may help the refugees learn English faster and more efficiently. They will also be exposed to the culture of English speaking countries. There are various programs in South Korea to assist North Korean refugees with English language problems. One example is People for Successful Corean Reunification (PScore) which provides English language tutoring programs for North Korean refugees. North Korean refugees are provided one-on-one tutoring with native English speakers (David-West & Suh, 2014). There are similar tutoring programs and other educational services available to North Korean refugees. Many North Korean refugees do not have the same resources and opportunities that their South Korean peers have; additionally, most do not have the money to be able to afford private academies that are common in South Korean society. Having ample and effective English tutoring programs that are free would be beneficial to North Korean refugees, but since many of them have classes or work during the day time, the tutoring sessions need to be offered in the evening or the weekend. It is vital to provide effective programs and resources for North Korean refugees to improve their English language skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study addressed the English language challenges of North Korean students studying at South Korean universities. The participants emphasized the challenges that they face with the English language in South Korea. In particular, they highlighted the problems that they have encountered while trying to prepare for the TOEIC examination. The participants also provided useful recommendations for ways to improve the English education system for North Korean refugees in South Korea. It is critical for South Korean educators and administrators to become more cognizant of the English challenges that North Korean refugees experience. Policy and curriculum changes may be needed to better address the learning needs of North Korean refugees. They need to be equipped with the resources and knowledge needed to succeed and graduate from university. Just granting admission to university is of very little value if the refugees are not able to thrive or at least make sufficient progress during their academic career in university. It is important for the South Korean education system to provide adequate assistance to North Korean refugees so that they can better assimilate and achieve academic success. Most North Korean refugees have not had a lot of

experience learning and using the English language, especially in comparison to their South Korean peers, which makes it important to create a more level playing field.

Although English is a major problem for North Korean refugees, they also need to overcome numerous barriers in South Korea. Many components of North Korean curriculum and class lessons are not useful in the South. Not only do North Korean refugees have to invest a significant amount of time learning English, they also have to learn and "unlearn" subjects such as history that are based on fallacies and distorted information in North Korea. Even though there are what appear to be insurmountable odds stacked against North Korean refugees, many learn to adapt well in South Korea and have had very successful careers. Some North Korean refugees have entered the spotlight internationally through English books or speeches about their life experiences. Learning English can be very challenging, but it also has the potential to be rewarding. Many North Korean refugees are driven by instrumental motivation to study English because it can pay off long-term in the job market.

The primary limitation of this study is that it included a small number of participants. In addition, most of the participants lived in the Seoul-Metropolitan region and all (one did not state her hometown) were from the northeastern region of North Korea. This study cannot be generalized to all North Korean refugees living in South Korea. Future research should specifically focus more on the TOEIC experiences of North Korean refugees since the TOEIC exam was often discussed among the participants. It would also be helpful to learn more about the perceptions and experiences of professors who teach North Korean refugees using English. Finally, it is critical to publish more research on North Korean refugees in the English language. Many South Korean researchers have examined the educational experiences of North Korean refugees, but most of the studies are only written in Korean.

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APPENDIX

Follow-up Study: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experiences using English in South Korea.
2. Tell me about your experiences using English in North Korea.
3. What challenges have you had using English in South Korea?
4. What challenges have you had using English in university in South Korea?

5. How is English used in your major classes in university in South Korea?
6. How would you describe your experiences learning English in these major classes?
7. How is English used in your elective classes in university in South Korea?
8. How would you describe your experiences learning English in these elective classes?
9. How would you describe your experiences in university EFL classes in South Korea?
10. Describe your TOEIC preparation experiences.
11. What recommendations do you have to improve English language learning for North Korean refugees in South Korea?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Levels: University, Adult

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