

Beyond Learning English: North Korean Refugee College Students' Reflective Process on English Education*

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Abstract

English is one of the major factors that impede the success of North Korean refugees' adaptation to South Korea in terms of pursuing college education and getting a job. This article attempts to illustrate North Korean refugee college students' hopes and anxieties about learning English through a reflective process. To examine comprehensive qualitative data about their perceptions toward English education, North Korean refugee college students were invited to English classes in private institutes in South Korea. After experiencing English classes for six months, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-four students ranging in age from twenty-one to forty-eight. Based on Gibbs' reflective process framework that promotes meta-thinking about their own learning experience, the refugees' reflections on English education were categorized into the following themes: education and meaning of life, importance of post-caring, determinants of motivation for class attendance, and ambivalent view on English education. Suggestions are made from the findings regarding North Korean refugee college students' hopes and anxieties about education in Korea and future English programs.

Keywords: North Korean Refugee College Students, English Education, Reflection, Reflective Process

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1. Introduction

According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, the number of North Korean refugees¹⁾ in South Korea was only 947 in 1998 and reached 30,805 in 2017. Recent patterns of North Korean refuge show an increase in family-level entry to South Korea, where over 40% of all North Korean refugees are in their teens and twenties.

Young North Korean refugees face many stumbling blocks to adaptation in South Korean society. One of them is English. For example, the South Korean government supports North Korean refugees' college education up until age thirty-five and many of young North Korean refugees enter college. However, they experience difficulties of "maladjustment, different pedagogy of South Korean education and isolation from South Korean peers" (Kim and Jang 2007, 21). One major reason for these difficulties is a lack of competency in English that is required for college education as discussed in Lee (2017).

North Korean refugees often have difficulty communicating when English is used in every day interactions in South Korea. Although they study and work with South Koreans, their status and emotions testify to the fact that they are still people from North Korea who are frustrated because of their lack of English skills. Understanding this frustration heard from their actual voices is important because it could a stepping stone to "unification which involves integration at the societal level" (Lankov 2006, 106).

This article examines the hopes and anxieties that North Korean refugee college students experience through a six-month English program in private institutes. Their experience was surprising, exciting, and puzzling, and varied by their motivation to learn English and readiness for the class. In order to let them think

1) We use the term "North Korean refugee" rather than "North Korean defector" because most North Korean people entering South Korea have become less like political defectors and more like refugees motivated by economic and social reasons (Lankov 2015). Although they become South Korean citizen legally when they enter South Korea, they had been a refugee in a third country outside North Korea before coming to South Korea. We emphasize their motives for defection and previous status in other countries by using the term "North Korean refugee." However, we admit that there exists an important debate in Korean Studies regarding the term "refugee" rather than "defector" or "migrant." Chung (2008) and Shin et al. (2016) examine the complexity of their identities with historical, geographical, legal, and political perspectives.

out their unfamiliar experience of English learning, we walked through the ups and downs of their feelings and thoughts through stages of a reflective process.

2. Purpose of the Study

The majority of refugee research focuses on the border-crossing experience, how horrible life in North Korea was, how helpless they were in China, and how missionaries saved them (Moon et al. 2000; Lim 2001; Lankov 2004). Although the story has a happy ending, they often feel humiliation and sadness after storytelling time (Chung 2008). In this study, rather than focusing on the testimony of their past, we focus on real problems they face every day in South Korea. Shared were hopes and anxieties, loneliness and feeling of acceptance, joy of learning and frustration, and suspiciousness and trustworthiness they experience when they struggle to learn how to live a normal South Korean life through English education. Although their legal status states that they are South Korean, they have a long way to go until they earn their “cultural citizenship” (Chung 2008, 4). However, it is never clear how one should go about this journey. The purpose of this project was to assist North Korean refugee college students adapt to South Korea by equipping them with proper tools and qualifications. The specific goal of the project is to help them gain a higher English test score, which is a major hurdle to employment in Korea. Based on this English education program for North Korean refugee college students, we examine how North Korean refugee college students reflect on the program.

3. Mode of Inquiry

This study was conducted via in-depth interviews of twenty-four North Korean refugee college students ranging in age from twenty-one to forty-eight. The interviews were conducted by two youth psychology professionals. The nature of the interviews was much different than government-conducted surveys as they were

done on a personal level during the hour-long interview sessions rather than in an anonymous self-reported survey. We took advantage of the interviewers' professional level of intervention using a reflective process for North Korean refugee students through dialogue and narratives. It was more about 'reflection-in-action' since the interviews focused on the development of critical thinking skills about what is happening now in their life. Although the interviewees often went the route of 'reflecting-on-action' as a process of looking back on their defecting incidents, they tried to make sense of what happened and create new perspectives for future reference (Schon 1991). A reflective process fundamentally aims to help the North Korean refugee students learn from their experience by describing, evaluating, analyzing, and making plans for a more successful future.

Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle is a popular model for reflective process. The six stages of reflection entail Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan (Figure 1).



<Figure 1> Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Graham Gibbs published his Reflective Cycle in his 1998 book *Learning by Doing*. Gibbs' reflective cycle helps reflect on one's incidents effectively to

eventually learn from one's experience. Gibbs' model was developed from David Kolb's four-stage experiential learning cycle (1984). This model was adopted for the interview because it aims to explore situations especially when they find they do not go well. The model helps participants make sense of situations with references for future plans.

"To reflect" is from the Latin term *reflectere* which means 'to bend back.' To consider, to think quietly and calmly, to cogitate, to come to remember or realize, and to express a thought or opinion resulting from reflection are the meanings of "reflect." Since the process involves not only to realize but also to express thoughts and opinions, it begins with simple description, and moves to expression of feelings, evaluation of the situation, analysis of the event, acknowledgement of what to do or not to do, and planning what to do or not to do.

<Table 1> Gibb's Reflective Cycle cited in Dye (2011)

Reflective Stage	What to reflect?	How to reflect?
Description	Explain what you are reflecting on.	What happened?
Feelings	Discuss your feelings and thoughts about the experience.	What were you thinking or feeling?
Evaluation	Discuss how well you think things went.	What was good/bad about the situation?
Analysis	Analyze what might have helped or hindered the event.	What sense can you make of situation?
Conclusion	Acknowledge whether you could have done anything else, what you have learned from the experience, and consider whether you could have responded in a different way.	What else could you have done?
Action Plan	Plan what you need to know and do to improve for next time.	If the situation arose again, what would you do?

The purpose of using this methodology is not to trace the memory of North Korean refugee students' stories about adaptation in South Korea. The reflective process was used as a method to listen to their enculturation stories which are unorganized and fragmented by nature. Therefore, by reflecting on what happened and what is happening through dialogue, North Korean refugee students eventually make sense of their idiosyncratic experience of learning English in South Korea

and learn what to choose to act on in their next step. As an effort to make sense of their stories, we took the approach of narrative-based methods in analyzing the refugees' reflective stories, combined with Boje's (2001) antenarrative analysis. Boje imposed 'antenarrative' a double meaning—before and bet. A narrative is something narrated. Story is ante (before and bet) to narrative; therefore, narrative is post-story. Analysis of narrative combined with antenarrative can be, according to Boje, "more multi-voiced methodology" with "fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and improper storytelling" (Boje 2001). With hope that the participants would acknowledge their fragmented stories as a narrative to make sense of what happened at the end of their reflections, we combined reflective process and narrative analysis as the analytical method in this study.

To explore complex phenomena of North Korean refugee college students' English education experience, we adopted a qualitative methodology. Since the aim of this study was an in-depth understanding about North Korean refugee students' anxieties and hopes, we chose qualitative methodology to identify the participants' perspectives about their own experience and reported the findings with their constructive viewpoints (Speziale et al. 2011). In order to analyze particular life stories of North Korean refugee students, a thematic analysis was used to group the findings. The thematic analysis helped to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data of narrative material of North Korean refugee students' life stories (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79).

4. Demographic Data and Settings

A total of forty-eight North Korean refugee college students ranging in age from twenty-one to forty-eight were randomly selected to enroll in a six-month non-credit English program to help them improve their English competency in the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). The program offered English classes three times a week from November 2014 to April 2015. The first two months focused on drilling basic skills of English grammar and conversation. The next four months focused on preparation for the TOEIC. A semi-structured

interview was conducted with twenty-four of the forty-eight participants afterwards in order to draw on their reflective process on the English education program. The average interview time was an hour-and-a-half for each person. Interview questions asked them to describe the class in general along with their feelings and responses. Next, they evaluated the effectiveness of the class, such as how helpful the lessons were. For reflective analysis, students were led to discuss their thoughts on the program and how to improve English education for North Korean refugee college students.

5. Findings

Based on North Korean refugee students' reflection process via interviews, we found four themes: 1) education and the meaning of life, 2) importance of post-caring, 3) determinants of motivation for class attendance, and 4) ambivalent view on English education. Each theme was summarized by Gibbs' reflective cycle which includes six stages of reflection—description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Among these stages, action plan summed up anything that they want to know and do to improve in a similar event. Since action plans contain various suggestions that we can consider when planning a similar program, we will discuss their implications later.

a) Education and Meaning of Life

During the interview, the researchers and interviewees openly shared reasons for low attendance and high drop-out rates. It was acknowledged that in order to promote participants' attendance, both short-term and long-term goals of the program should be shared with the participants. It was recognized that drop-out or low attendance is the result of the participants' lack of understanding towards learning English. The short-term objective can be easily shared since they are aware that English test scores are needed as a part of a job requirement. The long-term objective is relatively difficult to achieve because it varies depending

on each refugee's personal motivation for defecting. It involves far more complicated motivations than reasons for defecting and purposes of living in Korea.

One refugee student reflected on reasons for drop-out. "I think it's because they do not know why they study. The meaning for studying... that is what is missing." Then, for a moment, he was puzzled by why he risked all the dangers and continued to talk about his personal observation.

Well, it is this... When I closely look at the North Korean refugees in South Korea, I mean they are all North Koreans, right? You know what the dilemma is? When they crossed borders... from north to south... there must be a differentiated life goal they pursue. But... let's say they lived only for survival in North Korea and if it's the same in the South, what is the meaning for risking all the dangers to come to the South?

He boldly imposed far more significant meaning than just living for bread. He had a certain goal in mind although he could not clearly explain what it was, but certainly, it was more than just living for bread. He developed insight into what he had desperately pursued during his college years.

I finally got this motivation... I would say, this insight. So when I became a college student, I told one professor about what I really want to do during my college years. "Professor, I know that others come to college to study but I have different goal. It is to change my personality." I mean I had such a clear goal. Why? It's because I found South Koreans are so different from us North Koreans.

This was the one thing that helped him make sense of everything. It finally made sense why the TOEIC score is important and why he needed to invest time and effort to study English. It was that one thing that enabled him to connect with what he does now in going to a private institute to study English. Since he had this one purpose, he could set goals, including taking extra English classes. Although he had clear goals, he confronted difficulties in reality. The first instance was at his first job.

I worked at an insurance company and had wonderful colleagues. I met wonderful people and that helped me a lot. I mean I learned a lot from them. In the meantime, I realized that I am not yet ready to settle in this society. Then, I decided to go to college so that I could move to a different job. Then, again at the college I found myself so different from others especially when I faced conflicts with them. Problem-solving skills were so different. I could not control my temper.

He asked himself, “What is the problem and what are the differences? You know we all grew up in different ecological systems. For example, trees in high altitude have pointed leaves and trees in low altitude have wide leaves. They can survive with wide leaves. I mean they have different survival skills.”

The interviewee said he did not regret spending years studying rather than going out into the job market. “If I had gotten job to earn money now, I would never have this kind of perspective.” He thanked the program for providing him another step to move forward. “I tried to focus on what really interested me and that led me here.” He may be a rare case, but this suggests that rushing the adaptation process and getting a job may not be the best strategy.

Gibbs’ Reflective Process: Interviewees first described reasons for low attendance. Feelings of frustration for not being able to make a connection between short-term and long-term goals were shared. Refugees’ average dream of survival was evaluated, which was used to analyze their failure of class attendance. It was concluded that hurrying to get a job is not the best strategy. The action plan is to encourage refugees to think of the whole purpose of defection and setting a higher goal than just trying to survive.

b) Importance of Post-caring

The interviewee shared the urgency of post-management. Although they were admitted to college because of their North Korean refugee special case, most of them had a difficult time fulfilling the curriculum requirements: “I have been in the college four to five years but no one ever contacted me about how I was doing. Of course, it might be a personal problem but no one ever called me or texted

me. The monetary aid from government is like pouring water into a broken jar.”

English, for example, is not the exception. This female student said she knew she needed to start taking classes to improve her English, but tuition, textbooks, and other costs were a burden for her. Both in terms of finances and time, it was a tough task to carry on for her. She had no idea where to go to find information about English programs. She suggested that post-caring is more important than providing resettlement money: “Giving money is important but post-caring is more critical. In all the programs I participated, I found the post-caring was a problem. “Just eat this!” wouldn’t work for us. I think it might be better to spare some money for post-caring. That will help us to move forward with more post-caring services.”

Her evaluation of the program extended to the South Korean government’s social welfare policy.

From the beneficiary’s point of view, I would say the welfare policy should be tuned to the need of the beneficiaries. Yes, it needs some kind of tuning. The validity of the welfare plan should be tuned based on the reality of NK refugees. I guess the point is that there should be differences between welfare for South Koreans and North Korean refugees. I guess that was the limitation.

The interviewee again emphasized the importance of post-care for North Korean refugee students because they are desperate to know what to do next with the resettlement money they received.

Gibbs’ Reflective Process: Interviewees described examples of failure due to difficulties in meeting college requirements. Feelings of isolation and loneliness were shared to express being left alone with monetary support. This was described as ‘pouring water into a broken jar.’ Analysis was made on the ineffectiveness of giving resettlement money without post-caring. It was concluded that some of the funds should be allocated for follow-up management and post-caring. The action plan is for a liaison to be selected from successful refugees to act as a bridge

between North Korean students and administrators.

c) Determinants of Motivation for Class Attendance

The first idiosyncratic experience of being in English class was the way the instructor communicated with the students. Being respected and the friendly atmosphere made them feel motivated to learn. Although the instructors and staff did their best to create a classroom with an inviting environment, the North Korean refugee students often felt lost about how to study. The first two months were allocated to learn the basics of English, where the instruction was very engaging. When it came to the TOEIC lectures, the students felt they needed more guidelines and assistance: “I sometimes asked the teaching assistants to send us more detailed information about each lesson. And what really helped us was teaching assistants’ greetings like, ‘How are you?’ or ‘It is difficult, right?’ Or, recognizing each student by calling his or her name. We would respond like ‘Yeah, it’s so difficult making a living.’ Then, we laugh together.”

Students recalled they had a hard time attending classes due to the overwhelming amount of school work. However, they tried their best not to miss any classes: “So, it’s not the difficulties of the English classes that determine the attendance rate. When we hear like, ‘Wow, it’s such a tough schedule, right?’ we would come to the class whatever our situation was.”

They were appreciative of the way the instructors empathized about their struggles and acknowledged their hardships. For the first two months, the teaching assistants actively cared about the students. They sent text messages to the students when they were late and often gave quizzes so students could review the class material in time. After those first two months, students felt they lost motivation.

When it became our own, you know we are all in the same level so no one knew the right answer. Group study did not help at all. Maybe we could put our questions together and send them to the instructor, but we still needed a kind of a group leader capable of doing that. It was a bit stressful but I still liked studying with similar level students.

Some class members wanted to observe and learn how South Korean students study and desired peer learning. “None of us got the right answer because we were all the same, very low level in English.” When thinking about the whole purpose of the program, adaptation to the South, some thought the class should be integrated with South Korean students to learn from the way they study and their academic culture. Opinions were divided.

Gibbs’ Reflective Process: Interviewees described difficulties they faced in lecture classes when it came to the TOEIC sessions. Feelings of being lost in the class were shared. Without more assistance or guidelines, they could not follow up. The conclusion is that students would have attended classes despite difficulties with the class content if caring was provided by the instructor and staff. The action plan is to request more mentoring and peer learning opportunities.

d) Ambivalent View on English Education

English education in Korea is very instrumental and externally motivated. It is a must-have tool to get into a better school and get a better job. Children begin learning English at the very young age of two or three. English, however, for North Korean students it is perceived, first, as a mandatory skill needed for school and a job, and for some, as a whole new world that they want to explore: “I got a lot of stress from English class last semester. So, I decided to learn English for whatever cost it might take. I was taking an important major course at school this semester so I was a bit worried but I did not stop going to the English classes.”

Another student needed the TOEIC score as a pre-requisite for a tax accountant exam.

It took 10 years to get here. Now I have two kids and have some licenses. The exam requires at least TOEIC score of 700 so I applied to this program. I often went to the office to ask for course materials. If it’s not distributed before the class, I had a hard time following the class. Anyway, my husband was so surprised at my progress. I only knew ABCD before but now I can make sentences! I feel I can learn English like this from now on, step-by-step.

If not for a job requirement, some had genuine interest in learning English: “I think the program needs to be divided into two. The other class should be for those who want to learn about the world of English. I felt there’s some conflict when we had group studies. I was so desperate for higher score, but some did not care about it at all.”

One student had a far different goal for learning English. It was somewhat related to his life goals.

I would listen to lecture videos in English for hours. And I dream of myself being like them. You know the South is an open society, so I can watch those videos as much as I want to. Understanding those lectures of invited speakers without translation looked so cool. Since then, I aspired to be like them. I go to the central library very often to read books of those famous people and watch videos about them.

An instrumental approach to English education is prevalent in South Korea. English is an instrument to success, and success for North Korean refugee students means living like average South Korean people. While English education is a stairway to higher level living for South Korean students, for North Korean students, English is more than a tool for surviving. Through English, they dream about a whole different life. They are attracted to learning about different cultures in an English speaking society. For some, their meaning of life is reset and inspired by English itself.

Gibbs’ Reflective Process: Interviewees described the cost and effort they put into learning English. Feelings of stress and aspiration were shared. Evaluation was made about different outcomes, such as learning basic skills in English and learning the TOEIC. Their analysis was ambivalent in that some liked to learn about the world of English while others wanted to just focus on test preparation. The conclusion is that two different study groups could be proposed depending on the objective. The action plan is to offer two programs, one for test preparation and the other for learning English.

6. Discussion

a) Reflection on the Antenarratives of North Korean Refugees

As shown in the interview data, the defection stories were fragmented and North Korean refugee students sometimes tried to make sense of what they were saying as they told their stories. With a lack of knowledge about what capitalistic Korean society looks like, North Korean refugee students struggle making sense of what their life and surroundings should look like, often resetting the whole purpose of their escape from the North. More often, they assigned meanings to their experiences as they told their stories. Hence, the interviewers asked a few broad open-ended questions rather than a list of detailed questions. Unstructured interviews naturally count on unstructured stories, which we call many “antenarratives.” As the interviews went on, the interviewees created meta-narratives, when needed, to make sense of their stories. The fragmented, non-linear stories are what they experienced as novice South Koreans. When reflection was encouraged, they tried to make sense of their situations.

When they made sound evaluation about what went well and what went wrong, it was a moment when they became critical about what they should have done or what they would have done. In their analysis, they picked out what helped or what hindered their learning, which was critical for future planning. In their conclusions, they acknowledged positive and negative experiences and were encouraged to think about whether they could have done something else or what could have been done differently. When they talked about a negative experience, they were encouraged to think about how to improve or how they could make sure it would not happen again. If it was about a positive experience, they were encouraged to think about what they could do to make sure this happens again.

The action plan for the theme of ‘education and meaning of life’ led the North Korean refugee students to think about the whole purpose of escape and sometimes helped to set a higher goal than just trying to survive. This was possible only when the North Korean refugee students had the ability to connect with what they learned in class and to bigger questions, such as the goal of escape or the meaning of

life. The action plan for ‘importance of post-caring’ led to a way governmental help should be allocated. They want the government to spare some funds for post-caring. A more detailed action plan contains hiring a liaison selected from successful North Korean refugees in South Korea to bridge the gap between North Korean refugee students and government administrators. The third theme concluded that motivation determinants reside not only in the quality of classes but also in the instructors’ and teaching assistants’ caring attitudes. The students generally needed more tutoring, assistance, and group studies. The last theme of an ‘ambivalent view on English education’ led to the conclusion that English can be more than just a score for a job requirement—it can even be an agent for changing someone’s life. Therefore, depending on the students’ goal, program planners need to consider an integrative approach to English education along with a short-term test-oriented instrumental approach to English.

b) Lack of Shared Goals

While the students expressed how welcoming and encouraging the class atmosphere overall was, from the instructors’ and staffs’ point of view, it was a tough job to ensure trust between them. Similar to what Kim and Jang (2007) defined as “mutual distrust” between South Koreans and North Korean refugees, the North Korean refugee students continuously expressed suspiciousness. Ambivalent views were found among students about the classes. For example, while the majority liked what and how instructors taught the class, others felt it was unnecessary to go through the basics of English. Some thought it was a waste of time to learn about English itself and, instead, focus on test skills, while others found themselves gaining enormous confidence from those classes.

The reflective process concluded that the students needed to understand both the short-term and long-term goals that can be achieved from the program. While the instrumental approach of getting a higher TOEIC score was set as a solid goal beforehand, it was not what all of the students expected to learn. It was surprising to find that a majority of the students had an integrative attitude toward learning English, such as to learn about English in order to know about the culture of

English speaking countries. The original goal of getting a higher score on the TOEIC only worked for those who had basic English knowledge and skills. Student readiness and different learning goals need to be discussed beforehand; however, the reflection process helped them define what their goal was and how it needed to be modified. Some felt the goal was achieved in that they learned how to study English, while others modified their goal from short-term to long-term as they became more familiar about the world of English from the program.

7. Conclusion

Like any other human being, North Korean refugee students search for the meaning of life while struggling to survive. A reflective process helped them think out what they experienced through their years as refugees and what that meant for them. The reflected themes were not limited to educational goals, but also included the purpose of border-crossing, ways of learning, curiosity about a new culture, and the meaning of life with the feelings of fear, anxiety, loneliness, and hope. As discovered through the process of reflection with antenarratives, the North Korean refugee students proclaimed their various agendas in their English class. They rejected to be defined or recognized by any political stance. Rather, they wanted to explore and construct their own educational goals. The discrepancy between the benefactor's goal and that of the beneficiary was identified through the reflective process. Unlike our assumptions, survival is not the only and most urgent goal for them anymore. They seek a meaningful life that can reward all the dangers they risked while crossing borders. Now, we as educators, scholars, and policy makers need to be reflective about what we have done to help them succeed.

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