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NK refugees fighting English

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By Casey Lartigue Jr.

Sogang University professor Park Eun-sung's speech last Saturday about the challenges North Korean refugees face in learning English was so good that I searched for conference organizers so I could sign up to speak at a future conference.



Park's speech on Oct. 15 at the 24th annual international Korea Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages conference addressed many questions I have encountered in helping North Korean refugees learn English. The only thing missing from her speech ("Catering to North Korean students' English-learning needs: Who What and How?") was the "How?" I take it as a challenge to fill up that blank slide.

Based on government data as well as first-hand information she has collected on 31 North Korean refugees studying at Sogang University, Park provided a general demographic sketch of North Korean refugee students and discussed problems they typically face.

Almost 30,000 North Korean refugees have escaped to South Korea, with more than half of them being in the 20-39 age range. Escaping is only the first battle, as they face discrimination and adjustment problems socially and difficulties adjusting to school life here.

Twenty-eight percent drop out and another 44 percent take leaves of absence. The most common reasons: Socialization challenges, financial difficulties, lack of computer skills, lack of support and English. According to a report by the Korea Development Institute, 33 percent of refugees dropping out cited English as a major factor.

Many have taken leaves of absence in order to focus on English, citing stress and the inability to catch up. English is a barrier for many refugees, with many classes now being taught in English at South Korean universities and companies using it as a job qualification. It has been estimated that 35 percent of North Korean refugee adults are unemployed, 80 percent of them are working in menial jobs, and the suicide rate is even higher than that of native South Koreans.

The South Korean President recently encouraged North Korean refugees to escape to freedom, but based on the challenges of those who have already escaped, it might seem like a trap. Their lack of basic knowledge, background, self-confidence, motivation and demoralization add up to bad grades,

dropouts and leaves of absence. As one refugee has been quoted as saying, "Here, I feel like a one-year-old."

What kind of support, asked Park at her KOTESOL speech, could be provided to help North Korean refugee students with their English learning needs? The reality is that there is not a one-size-fits-all policy that can fit the variety of refugees who are already here. Many refugees ask: If South Korea can't digest the handful of refugees who have already escaped on their own, how can it be prepared for millions coming here after possible reunification?

Park analyzes the situation well, but as an academic, she has so far been more focused on the "who" and "what" rather than the "how?" That's not a knock against her, no one really knows. Anyone who knows "how" would have already announced it or set up an NGO to make it happen.

As I begin to ponder this question more deeply, I do have some initial thoughts. One, some of what is being done must be undone. For example, the standards must be raised for North Korean refugee students applying to and studying at universities.

Many of the top universities waive academic requirements for refugees. Applicants must pass token barriers, such as an interview, but are not always required to submit standardized test scores.

According to different sources, once they are accepted, NK refugee students graduate at the bottom of their classes, if they graduate at all. Plus, there is often "affirmative grading" to allow them to pass. Companies that know this are unlikely to want to hire prospective employees who have been accepted with lower academic application standards, passed through with generous grading and finish at the bottom.

Two, it must be made easier for NK refugee students to transfer after doing quality school work rather than having standards waived. They should be able to catch up or demonstrate in a competitive academic setting that they can keep up. While they may be attracted to prestigious universities with higher rankings, they may learn that they are better off at lower-tier universities matching their abilities.

Three, more of us need to get involved rather than remaining by-standers. My own NGO has been researching how to have a "Homework Helpers" project so that volunteer English teachers could help refugees understand their assignments.

Those are my initial thoughts. A year from now, when KOTESOL is having its 25th annual conference, I hope to be able to fill in some details missing from Park Eun-sung's "how" slide.

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