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**Epik or Hagwon? Career Choice in South Korea: The Experiences and Occupational  
Decisions of NESTs in Public Schools vs. English Academies.**

by

Mohammammad Panahi

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

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English: Teaching English as a Second Language

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Thesis Committee:  
James Robinson, Chairperson  
Kim Choonkyong  
Mark Love

## Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences, opinions, and levels of job satisfaction of South Korean public school NESTs (native English-speaking teachers) vs. *hagwon* teachers (a Romanized term from the Korea term denoting English academies). By investigating the effects that workplace settings have had on the experiences of various English teachers in Korea, I was able to determine that public school teachers were more likely to have preferable personal and professional experiences. Additionally, individuals that accumulated work experience from both work settings were more likely to stay in the profession of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Almost none of the participants viewed either EPIK or *hagwons* as viable options for long-term career opportunities. The experiences were recorded and observed through ethnographic interviewing of 15 participants who had TESOL experience in South Korea. The data also revealed the intricacies of each type of work setting, possibly elaborating as to why the findings were so. 15 individuals were interviewed; while 5 such participants worked at public schools, the balance consisted of 5 that have worked at *hagwons*, and 5 that have worked at both of these types of institutions. Job satisfaction was heavily varied, depending on the individual, the place of employment did not have a significant impact on contentment of the participants. Both *hagwon* and public school teachers had worries and experiences with job security, though *hagwons* carried a worse but not necessarily true reputation. Only 3 out of the 15 participants stated that it was possible to make a long-term career out of TESOL positions in Korean *hagwons* and public schools. 9 out of 15 individuals indicated that they would pursue a future in TESOL pedagogy.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

South Korea is among the best countries to be an English teacher; in fact, some go as far as to say it is a place where teachers can “live like kings” (Exley, 2013). I cannot say I necessarily agree that the salary of foreign teachers in South Korea reflects a very high standard of living, but it certainly does attract a decent number of expatriates who relocate to South Korea either on a temporary or permanent basis to teach English. Although this is a decline of almost 50% from the previous 5 years, the Korea Herald stated that, by 2016, there were still 4,962 native English teachers in South Korea public schools (Ock, 2016).

Typically, NESTs who work at public schools are hired through the English Program in Korea, which is otherwise known as “EPIK”. Modernseoul.org tells us that there were a total of 14,533 E-2 visa holders as of 2015 (2016). According to the Embassy of the Republic of Korea to the Commonwealth of Australia website, an E-2 visa is defined as “Foreign Language Instructor” visa (“Embassy,” n.d.). If we subtract roughly 5,000 from that number, we are left with approximately 10,000 other individuals that are also in South Korea to teach their native language of English. What sets apart the nearly 10,000 people from these 5,000 individuals is that they work at Korean *hagwons*, which are after-school language academies. *Hagwons* came about as a result South Korea’s rapid acceleration into globalization. A craze and obsession for learning the English language came about, even unto the extent that \$15.8 billion is spent annually on a national level just on learning English alone (Park, 2009)! This has created a rather lucrative and financially attractive market for foreigners, whose eligibility to legitimately teach English as a foreign language on Korean soil originates from their citizenship of one of seven official English-speaking nations in order to take advantage of this phenomenon. The English-speaking nationals employed in Korea come from the USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.



Like any other work industry, there are ups and downs for the English market in South Korea. Sometimes supply and demand affect the *hagwon* businesses, while governmental and economic decisions affect the public school sector. Compared with *hagwons*, the public school positions in Korea are quickly diminishing, because the national policy seems to have shifted from preference for English education to funding other facets of their education. To further compound the ordeal, the general levels of demand has decreased as well, according to the Korea Herald (2016). Despite all of this, the Korea Herald even pointed out that parents are focusing more on private education (*hagwons*) as a means to provide their children with English proficiency.

The researcher of this study worked for Korean public schools through the EPIK program for a period of 1 year. When the time came to sign contracts for the second year of employment, the researcher and dozens of others in the Chungbuk province were notified that the province would not renewing contracts for the spring of 2015, due to provincial budget cuts. Many of the researcher's peers were forced to leave Korea, despite their hopes of wanting to stay for a second round. However, those who were determined enough toughed it out and managed to find employment at private after-school English academies. These individuals took a risk by deciding to continue teaching but working for private businesses rather than public schools. Though the aim of *hagwons* appears to be the same as public school English education, the logistics of the two are quite different. In her thesis on *hagwons*, Meagan Henry was quick to point out the "potential drawbacks" of *hagwon* teachers, both professionally and personally (2016). Henry points out some horror stories and struggles that her participants recalled during their *hagwon* employment, as well as reasons for staying and enjoying their positions. In this study, we will hear from participants that

worked at either-or and underwent both negative and positive experiences throughout their sojourn and courses of employment.

Throughout the few years of living and working in South Korea, the researcher observed many NESTs coming and leaving. It would be interesting to note what motivates a teacher to stay in Korea for more than 1 year and, most importantly, what makes a person want to stay or leave the profession of TESOL. Does working at a *hagwon* or public school have a determinant or influential effect on the decision-making process undertaken on the part of NESTs who move to Korea, particularly in terms of their long-term goals? If so, what is about *hagwons* or EPIK that changes the perception of individuals? What factors are involved in how individuals teaching in South Korea recall having pleasant or unpleasant jobs? For example, if public school teachers mention mostly negative experiences, are we to reasonably believe that the system itself fundamentally flawed or is it individual schools of which the system is collectively composed that have problems? The analysis of qualitative data in the form of ethnographic interviews will help to understand the experiences of NESTs in Korea: a country that is a pivotal starting point for many in the TESOL industry. The researcher would like to explore and understand which type of NESTs are more satisfied with their jobs, and why that is so. This will hopefully help individuals considering Korea as a place of employment after university graduation to gain a greater insight into the merit and alternate perils of such a choice, which is also beneficial to those who wish to move there as a means of continuing their already-existing TESOL careers. In this study, we will hear about the different perceptions of the TESOL profession through the lens of the two major types of native English teachers residing in South Korea. There is plenty of academic research on the topic of NESTs in South Korea and elsewhere in Asia; a niche area of critical research development is even spurning at present focusing specifically on EPIK and *hagwons*.

However, this study is unique in the sense that it will focus on *comparing the two industries through interviewing and intricate experiences*.

By the time they were interviewed, some of the participants of this study had already gone on to leave South Korea, but had decided to pursue a Master's or PhD in teaching English. It would be notable to attempt to investigate what motivated these individuals to pursue a future in teaching to begin with, despite the potential drawbacks of the job. For the individuals that were residing in Korea and considered it a second home, could they possibly make their teaching position a long-term career with the overall view of settling in Korea and embracing the nation, culture and educational system on the same level as one would embrace one's home?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction: English Language Acquisition in South Korea

This thesis will focus on the lives, motivations, satisfaction levels, and experiences of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors living in South Korea. Like many countries, South Koreans have been trying to expedite their endeavors of globalization through the means of making it uncompromisingly mandatory for their children to learn English. This “craze” as one author calls it, comes with a naïve assumption that anyone can master the English language as long as enough time and money is put into it (Park, 2009). According to a study done by Samsung, Koreans spend almost \$16 billion annually on learning English (Park, 2009). The English Program in Korea (EPIK) employs native English speaking teachers from seven different English-speaking nations to come and teach Korean scholars who form a critical part of the collective national youth membership in public schools (EPIK, 2013). These are typically elementary-, middle-, and high schools that employ non-Koreans to move to Korea and work as in-class English instructors, often alongside a Korean teacher. However, recent decisions reached by education authorities have resulted in EPIK cutting down on high school positions and focusing more on younger learners.

The more common way to learn English is to send your children off to competitive cram schools or English academies, which are more commonly referred to by Korean citizens and foreigners alike as *hagwons*. Usually, students also attend these after-school academies in order to help increase their test scores, with the ultimate goal of bettering their chances in entering the even more competitive and prestigious universities that almost all Korean “tiger moms” push their children to enter (Exley, 2013). Though author Stephen Exley likes to make the analogy that English teachers in South Korea live like kings (with high wages and decent standards of living), the real experiences of guest English teachers (GETs) in Korea

can be vastly different (2013). The main obvious difference between EPIK and *hagwons* is that the ultimate goal of *hagwons* is to generate revenue and not necessarily to provide a well-grounded, balanced and holistic form of education to its stakeholders as an over-arching objective. Therefore, the differences in the experiences of the people that *hagwons* and public schools employ can also be significantly different. *Hagwons* are for-profit privately ran businesses who run under the premise of English education, whereas public school English education focuses on immersing young learners into becoming firmly acquainted with a functional and practical knowledge of the English language and its implicit cultural aspects, endeavoring alternatively to make a meaningful experience out of it rather than having to focus on making money.

### **Why English?**

Why does the South Korean government invest so much into English education, and why are Korean parents so willing to sacrifice large sums of their income for their children to be educated by NESTs? Seventy-nine percent of Korean public school students go on to college or university at some point in their lives, however, in order to do this, they must take the College Scholastic Ability Test (Moodie & Nam, 2016). Korean students already consider their senior year of high school to be a “year of hell”, which ends in the ultimate showdown of exams, namely the CSAT college entrance exam. This infamous exam is undertaken by hundreds of thousands of students nationwide on an annual basis, representing the culmination of an entire high school career of excruciatingly stressful studying (Lee, 2011). This is not just a high stakes game for soon-to-be graduates. Rather, it is so revered in Korea that it is considered even a tense day for Korean society as a whole, so much so that stock markets open an hour later than in accordance with their usual trading hours and public transportation is provided in greater supply and efficiency to ensure that the students make it

to their respective venues on time. Moodie and Nam make a valid point by mentioning that English is almost 20% of the 8 hour long CSAT, therefore playing a crucial role in Korean pedagogy and their education system (2016). According to Lee, this is the “make or break” moment for Korean youth (2011). It determines which universities they can enter, a critical decision in an immensely competitive nation in which four out of five high school students will advance to higher education as a statistical given. According to the Ministry of Education, 75% of the Korean student population also takes part in after-school private language academies (*hagwons*) or weekend private education (Lee, 2011). The importance of this exam and the fact that 20% of it is rooted in English acquisition has resulted in multiple national curriculum changes by the Korean government. Moodie and Nam point out that the MOE (Ministry of Education) have made some important changes in Korean education, such as changing the onset of English education from middle school to the third grade of elementary school, and classes being split in appropriated levels of English ability (2016). By acknowledging that differentiating classrooms and tailoring EFL instruction leads to meeting individual needs, the Korean government took a massive leap towards effective pedagogic reform.

### **Unique Qualities of NESTs**

Michael Alpaugh (2015) makes a very interesting analysis of NESTs in Korea by outlining the unique qualities and facets of the Korean EFL teaching profession. Alpaugh claims that there are five major factors that set Korean NESTs apart from other foreign language teachers or educators in general. Reporting such facts may seem redundant at first, but if we look closely, Alpaugh is actually helping us to understand how the distinct quality of NESTs help shape the EFL education of Korea and the profession around them. Bear in mind that these do not necessarily only apply to NESTs in South Korea. According to

Alpaugh, the fact that language teachers in Korea are using a medium that their target students do not understand (the English language) is quite unique in the teaching profession (2015). Neither *hagwon* teachers nor public school NESTs are required to speak English. In fact, in the researcher's experience, most don't at all. In the teaching realm, this can naturally create unperceived problems in which the instructor and his or her students are unable to effectively communicate with one another for the specific purposes of pedagogy, instruction and explanation, not to mention the conveying of mutual opinions. Many *hagwons* even have policies that prohibit or discourage the use of Korean language in the classroom, even when the teacher is fluent or able to converse in it (Alpaugh, 2015). This is why most often Korean teachers are hired to teach grammar and reading, so that they can use their L1 (native language) in the classroom setting, even if they are capable and trained to teach English. Is this a logical tactic or is it hurting Korean students? One researcher concludes that it is "not justified theoretically or practically" (Alpaugh, 2015). Being able to use the native language of the students in the classroom may alleviate anxiety, especially in a country like South Korea in which code-switching is common (Liu, Ahn, Baek, & Han, 2004). Liu et al. (2004) in fact argued that the native language should be used when it can enhance the learning experience by helping students understand key concepts or vocabulary, checking comprehension, and of course when trying to teach abstract words or concepts. The list of benefits is quite exhaustive regarding the benefits of using L1 in the classroom, and even common sense informs most language teachers that oftentimes comprehending the target language is too difficult or takes too much time when you lack the right words to convey your message. Thus, the question beckons as to why the English-only method thriving in Korea and benefiting thousands of NESTs. That is because, in the past 20 years, the Korean Ministry of Education has asked schools to use more and more English in the classroom

compared to the way it was before, in which lessons were conducted almost exclusively in Korean with the objective of teaching English concepts and introducing English vocabulary and grammar through such a methodology (Liu et al., 2004). Though it is understandable that the practice of using too much Korean in English classes would receive criticism, Liu et al. has argued that sole use of English leads to slower acquisition of language and in fact can obstruct the learning process altogether as opposed to bolstering it (2004).

Another unique and notable trait of foreign language teaching is that it necessitates group interaction and teamwork in order for it to be effective. This is especially true in a country like South Korea, a nation that is largely composed of a conformist and homogenous culture, in which students are oftentimes hesitant to answer questions without being called upon. NESTs may misinterpret this cultural norm as being reserved, shy or as a manifestation of antisocial behavior (Alpaugh, 2015). Such cultural misunderstandings take time and social awareness for NESTs to understand, and necessitate adjust their teaching strategies to. Research by Mitchel and Lee (2003) supports the notion that an effective NEST must be able to differentiate between the ‘equal treatment’ pedagogical philosophy observed and heralded in Western classroom when viewed in comparison to the “collectivist” Asian doctrine. Once this is understood, a language instructor ought to be able to identify the various student roles and know how group responsibility is a deep-rooted Korean ethos (2003).

Thirdly, Alpaugh mentions that one of the peculiar downsides of being an EFL instructor is that they teach communication skills rather than actual solid facts, unlike science or math teachers. Teachers who work abroad - especially in remote or rural settings - have difficulty keeping abreast with the latest trends and developments in their respective fields, leading to a stagnation of skills (2015). When you lack the opportunity to utilize and engage the skill that you are trained in, your knowledge can become stunted. This brings us to



Alpaugh's fourth point, which is that EFL teachers often feel detached from the rest of the teaching world, because of the lack of similar colleagues in their work setting. This is especially true in South Korea because NESTs are often teaching in isolated situations, without the company of other coworkers who teach the same subject. According to Alpaugh, most *hagwons* employ less than five NESTs, with many employing only one (2015). One researcher boldly mentions that in *hagwons* and public schools alike, "white" native English speakers are more of a "trophy-case" to be strutted as a symbol of prestige, such a symbol for some reason becoming associated with the face or image of the English language in South Korean society (DeChamplain, 2017). This unusual circumstance has to do with the historical and national context of Korea in regards to the rest of the developed world. Could it be that the presence of American troops and Western influence since the Korean War has seeded distorted ideas of the English language and English speakers in the minds of Korean citizens?

Employers of NESTs in Korea are also notorious for lacking on-the-job training, and in fact often throw their employees into the "deep end" as many describe it. In fact, DeChamplain believes that most *hagwon* as well as public school English instructors in South Korea have no training or experience in teaching or specifically in TESOL (2017). She goes as far as to say that the majority of NESTs in Korea are there because of their white skin or ethnicity, and that being a native speaker of English is simply a status that has been perceived as an accomplishment in South Korean language education (DeChamplain, 2017). Is it really merely our race that helps us to gain international prestige and secure reputable decent paying jobs around Asia? Some may think that it is the reason why EPIK and *hagwons* are willing to pay such attractive wages for recent graduates to move to the Korean peninsula and become English teachers. The skills and motivation that one requires to be serious in the occupation may come along later—or never at all, as the case may be, depending on the person and their

goals and aspirations in the TESOL industry. DeChamplain also states that *hagwons* and Korean public schools have very high turnover rates, being replaced as often as on an annual or biannual basis with fresh untrained NESTs (2017). This high turnover rate naturally leads to conflicting and inconsistent modes of teaching that can naturally have negative effects on students. This may be why we hear about many problems between NESTs and their Korean counterparts, the co-teachers and the nonnative English-speaking teachers in Korea; DeChamplain agrees with this notion (2017).

Finally, we come to Alpaugh's fifth and last point, which a crucial and insightful inference that students at Korean *hagwons* and public schools have little to no opportunity to actually use and practice their English skills outside of the classroom (2015). Learning a foreign language logically requires exposure and opportunities for learners to speak it outside of the classroom setting. While it can validly be asserted that language use inside of a *hagwon* or public school can act as a stimulus for many students, the requirement of non-scholastic activities as well as real-life implications are not to be neglected or relinquished (Alpaugh, 2015). Real-world applicable encounters are necessary for students in order to justify the vast amounts of effort that are being put forth into Korean TESOL pedagogy, We claim that programs such as EPIK are here to bridge that gap between East and West and that the point of investing in NESTs is to help students practice authentic communication in English, but Alpaugh argues that most of the actual interaction that goes on between NESTs and Korean students "is not necessarily authentic" (2015).

### **EPIK versus Hagwon**

The researcher has worked at various different *hagwons* and public schools, and though we cannot rely on his personal experience as a basis for sufficient context for any general claim, there are obviously a great deal of differences between them that extend much

further than the confinements of a focalized narrative. The structure, goals, atmosphere, curriculum, and layout of the two kinds of institutions are potentially and in actuality largely different from one another. *Hagwons* and public schools can be different in terms of class size, working conditions, compensation, and employee benefits. The assertion here is not intent on ascertaining which is superior in quality or purpose; the highlighting of pros and cons exist in both settings is a more pertinent inquiry to be brought to the fore in this regard. Due to the nature of the business, *hagwons* have much smaller classes and more in-depth teaching, which allows for more personal gain and one-on-one instruction. In her research, Meagan Henry pointed out that the US Embassy in Korea Public warns its citizens to be wary of *hagwons* because of the potential for going bankrupt, or frequent contract violations on behalf of *hagwon* employers (2016). Public schools are government-run organizations, so the risks of being employed by one are naturally and understandably considerably less. Public schools tend to have a more disciplined atmosphere, as well as having a Korean co-teacher available for translation and assistance. However, later on in this research paper, we will hear about the many drawbacks that co-teachers carry as well. The work hours are the biggest noticeable difference for employees; public school teachers tend to work the standard 9-5 while *hagwons* have the leverage to make it mandatory for their staff members to work during the evenings, with usual working hours ranging between 1-10 pm. The consistency for length of stay in Korea among NESTs seems to vary. Some settle down and decide to stay here (usually because of marriage with a local) while others leave once they pay off their college debts or become too homesick.

Even EPIK itself goes as far as to make a gut punch to the Korean English academy/*hagwon* industry; on their own website under the Job Description/Job Security tab, they claim that, with EPIK, your job is secure and you will always be paid on time and in full,

“unlike some private academies” (EPIK, 2013). Although in the same category, we see a false claim that states EPIK teachers will never be released from their contracts due to budget or institutional problems. This is simply untrue, and clearly made to ease the worries of potential NESTs who have heard of actual budget cuts and government financial problems. The researcher himself experienced such a thing. Alpaugh’s research states that in 2014 the EPIK program went through hefty budget cuts and began to phase out teachers in provinces outside of Seoul (2015). De Champlain refers to another incident in which EPIK underwent budget cuts in 2012. However, during this time period, Seoul itself was affected to the point that middle school and high school foreign teachers were being let go in the following year (2017). Despite EPIK’s claims of stable and trustworthy employment, we see that the facts are evident to the contrary. The glamorized secure government employment rhetoric that we see deployed on EPIK’s website may simply be the politics of competing public vs. private industries. Although, we must not ignore the obvious lack of job security that *hagwons* are notorious for. Referring to *hagwons*, Alpaugh (2015) stated, “However, the lack of salary increases, job security, and freedom to work has left me jaded” (p. 33). There is no guarantee that a teaching job in Korea will be safe and secure, whether your boss is the government or an individual. There can always be problems with bad living situations, co-teachers who are hard to get along with, or trouble getting paid. Even EPIK jobs have been known to be unstable, due to government financial cuts and political policy changes (South Korean, 2016). South Korean immigration statistics show that from 2012 to 2015 there has been a significant reduction of teachers with E-2 teaching visas, and this is mostly among EPIK teachers (South, 2016). One would assume that, in that case, *hagwons* are the safer of the two in terms of job security, but that is only provided that there is a sustained and uncompromising demand for English. There may come a time in the Korean educational system that there are

enough Korean teachers with adequate English abilities, causing the government to not want to bring in any more generously paid foreign nationals as NESTs.

### **EPIK: A Rundown**

The English Program in Korea is a response to globalization and strong demand for English language acquisition. It was and is for many, a government-provided alternative for teaching the Korean youth English, in comparison with the private sector that includes hagwons or private tutoring. This program is sponsored by the Korean government, and employs Native speakers as teachers for Korean elementary and middle schools (Jeon, 2009). EPIK was launched in 1995 by the Korean Ministry of Education (EPIK, 2013). Their main goal and philosophy is to improve the English language abilities of both Korean students and teachers, as well as developing a culture exchange between Korea and other countries, since Korea is notably a mostly homogenous country with a great of potential due to its rapid globalization and economic growth. On the EPIK website, they also state that their intentions are to introduce new teaching methods to the Korean education system by employing trustworthy and passionate native English speakers as teachers (2013). EPIK's form of greeting their potential employees and describing their program is very heartwarming and appears to be sincere. Not much is even required of a native English speaker to apply for the EPIK program, besides an education in English from 7<sup>th</sup> grade to university level from one of the 7 designated English-speaking countries (EPIK, 2013). A specific teaching credential is not required, though EPIK recommends having a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate.

In the EPIK program, NESTs usually teach alongside a Korean co-teacher. A co-teacher's job is mainly to assist with the management, planning, and discipline of the classroom. One EPIK teacher expressed his discontent and feelings of being generally

unwelcome, stating that co-teachers did not actually have time to plan classes together. Conversely, they blatantly mentioned to him that he was an outsider due to the fact that his employment is relatively short-termed compared to their years of dedication to the education system (Jeon, 2009). The NEST expressed that there was a great deal of animosity in his work environment, and an unappreciative, “no thanks” atmosphere prevalent in the workplace (Jeon, 2009). In fact, Mihyon Jeon pointed out more than once that the intended notion of team teaching that is a key part of the EPIK program, is not enforced at all (2009). This can either lead to job dissatisfaction, or give teachers a feeling of independence and pedagogical autonomy.

Many EPIK teachers seem to move to Korea for the financial incentives, as EPIK pays anywhere from \$1,800 to approximately \$2,400 monthly (EPIK, 2013). According to Jeon (2009), an American EPIK teacher expressed her opinion on teaching at public schools by saying, “They pay me \$2,000 a month...But we’re here as performing monkeys...Two grand for that? You’re kidding. I love my job. It’s brilliant. I love my job. It’s a nice, great country” (p. 238). Another teacher expressed a similar sentiment unto the effect that, even though he taught at a *hagwon*, “I decided to teach in South Korea because of its unique culture and fact that the pay is relatively high, you’re able to save a lot of money and there’s a lot to do in the country” (Exley, 2013). In terms of salary, according to [eslboard.com](http://eslboard.com), *hagwons* and EPIK are pretty similar, yet some *hagwons* offer greater remuneration levels, which is an incentive for some to teach at *hagwons* instead (Teach English, 2017). Considering that *hagwons* are private schools with different sets of owners, their conditions and benefits may vastly differ from one another.

The typical working hours for an EPIK teacher is the standard daytime hours for most public schools. One particular case given as an example were office hours of 8:30AM-

4:30PM. EPIK contracts are usually 40 total office hours, but typically not more than 22 classes a week, each class being 40 minutes long (Teach English, 2017). Esboard.com mentions a particular case in which the teacher had an average of 30 students per class (2017), though this can vary greatly depending on the school and region. The researcher taught in a rural area with some classes no more than 3-4 students, as well as in a metropolitan area with a class size of around 25 children. Teachers need time to unwind, and EPIK generally provides 18-21 days of paid vacation, as well as national and school holidays (Teach English, 2017). While students and some Korean staff may have the summer and winter periods off, EPIK teachers generally have to teach an English camp during that time. Winter or summer English camps are typically themed intensive English courses that are mandatory for public school teachers, but voluntary for students who wish to focus more on English during what would normally be their break periods. Due to the class-office hour ratio, EPIK teachers also have quite a bit of free time, which is commonly referred to as “desk-warming”. Later on, some participants will describe their anguish over this issue.

There is also a close sense of community and camaraderie in EPIK, mostly because the teachers go through an orientation week, which allows for networking and socializing with other teachers in their provincial area. Moving abroad to live and work can be a challenging experience for many, but EPIK attempts to give its teachers a strong network of resources and peers to rely on in times of homesickness and uncertainty. Often the most reliable and helpful person in an EPIK teacher’s first experiences in Korea is her/his co-teacher. NESTs are assigned with an official co-teacher whose duties are to help with their initial living situations, as well as any ongoing issues and concerns (Teach English, 2017). Co-teachers often help with setting up bank accounts, signing up for a phone contract, paying utilities, and other necessary administrative tasks to be accomplished when settling in to a

new work and living environment. In terms of the students, one teacher on [eslboard.com](http://eslboard.com) mentions that public school students are often in mixed levels, and have a tendency to have lower English levels than *hagwon* students (Teach English, 2017). They also apparently have less of an incentive to learn, and are therefore likely to be less motivated and more difficult to teach. This makes logical sense considering that students at *hagwons* are essentially paying customers, unlike public school students who are forced to take English courses taught by NESTs regardless of whether they want to or not.

### **Hagwons: A Rundown**

Working at a *hagwon* involves more independence and room for personal choice and preference over factors pertaining to job location, age range of students, and salary. Though [Eslboard](http://Eslboard.com) points out that that *hagwons* are potentially riskier than EPIK jobs, and that many ESL (English as a Second Language) forums are ripe with personal accounts of *hagwon* bankruptcy (Teach English, 2017). When a *hagwon* goes bankrupt or closes abruptly for whichever reason, it causes the teacher to lose his/her job and forces them to leave the country or find employment elsewhere unless they can change their visa status by means of gaining alternative employment or becoming full-time students, amongst other more difficult considerations to remain on Korean soil. There is also the risk of contract violations, horrible housing conditions, and even late payment or the complete failure to render remuneration altogether! These are typical risks associated with working with any private enterprise, which are not confined to just Korean private English academies but which are quite endemic to *hagwons*. Young inexperienced individuals run the risk of such things happening they decide to move to another country for employment, especially when the employer is a private business with little to lose and little transparency. A private business may also be likely to take advantage of NESTs on teaching visas because of their inability to stand up for their



contractually-bonded work rights, whether it is because of linguistic ineptitude or insufficient personal confidence and feelings of helplessness. Due to the high number of American citizens teaching English in South Korea, the website for the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Korea has a section titled “Teaching in Korea” in which they clearly mention that many NESTs have contract disputes and problems with their employers (Teaching in Korea, n.d). The page informs readers that contracts in Korea are a “rough working agreement” rather than a solid written-in-stone declaration, and that deviations from contract premises are culturally acceptable because Koreans view contracts as being flexible and subject to further negotiation. One thing we can try and deduce from what the United States government has been able to conclude, is that quite possibly many problems that NESTs in Korea face may be a lack of understanding of Korean culture and work ethic, rather than an actual intentional breach of contract or act of employee exploitation. Understandably, though, there are also individual private business owners whom have ulterior and grim motives who will gladly shirk their contractual responsibilities and run afoul of the law at the expense of NESTs under their employ, provided that they can slip under the legal radar undetected.

Hagwons are similar with EPIK in regards to work hours because teachers can expect 22-24 classes a week. However, the actual office hours may be much less or worse than EPIK’s standard 8-hour days (Teaching in Korea, n.d). Typically, *hagwon* teachers work afternoons and evenings, because the children that come to these institutions have to wait until they finish school. Schedules and classes can change frequently, and whether or not you get a break is up to your boss and employer. Some *hagwon* teachers even work on Saturdays or holidays, because the institutions they work for are businesses that is forced to operate outside of school hours to sustain themselves financially. One of the benefits of teaching at *hagwons* can be that the class sizes are typically very small. In fact, they can be a third of the

size of public school classes (Teaching in Korea, n.d). There is also much less lesson planning and curriculum development, due to the fact that most often the books and lessons have already been laid out and decided by the employer. In *hagwons*, oftentimes the focus is on specific target learning, such as preparing for specific tests or improving writing abilities, with the implication that teachers often have to stick to the textbooks and not mediate much from the lesson plans. For many teachers, one of the noticeable downsides of *hagwons* is the vacation days, which is typically 10 days a year (usually split in half during the summer and winter). Most often, the employer gets to decide when teachers take their vacations. Another notable difference is that there is a smaller sense of community at *hagwons*. Though *hagwon* employees may have 1 or more foreign coworkers, unlike EPIK, meeting and socializing with other expatriates requires efforts of their own, without any sort of helpful orientation of lasting network of peers. *Hagwons* usually do not have an EPIK-style orientation period. Oftentimes, *hagwon* NESTs complain that there is also nobody designated in helping them out with the basics of life abroad, such as the co-teachers that EPIK provides its foreign teachers. Though it comes to the students themselves, *hagwon* teachers will typically notice that their students are at a higher level of English than those that solely attend public schools, and their range can vary anywhere from beginner phonics to advanced (Teaching in Korea, n.d). The parents of these children are paying for them to attend the classes, and therefore accelerated learning is expected and the motivation may be more intrinsic or, at the very least, the students are more focused.

### **ESL Forums**

The famous ESL forum that many teachers refer to in order to find employment or discuss their concerns and questions about work conditions, namely Dave's ESL Café, has a lot to offer in terms of information posted about the dichotomy of EPIK vs. *hagwon*. On the

forums, one teacher mentioned that the biggest factor that kept him/her employed at *hagwons* for a long period of time was the fact that the typical *hagwon* workday rarely starts before 2:00 PM (Public schools, 2003). On the other hand, one teacher ranked the types of teaching positions in Korea according to their own personal opinion, and it was as follows: #1-good university job, #2-public school job, #3-bad university job, #4-hagwon. Another member posted humorously in response, by stating that that selling one's non-vital organs and 'shoe-shining' is preferential to working at *hagwons*. The idea that *hagwon* jobs are not the most attractive and preferential positions for TESOL instructors seems to be a common theme on Dave's ESL Café. It could have to do with the instability of the job, the longer work hours, or quite possibly that the specific personal experiences of the people on the forums happened to be disappointing. One blogger posted a more in-depth explanation of the disadvantage of *hagwon* employment by mentioning that, when parents are essentially funding your paycheck, then you can be reprimanded for any perceived mistakes (Public schools, 2003). However, it must be remembered that this self-same individual mentioned that he now works at a *hagwon*, having worked at public schools previously. His reason for not going back to public schools was that his Korean counterparts (the staff and co-teachers) were very "traditionally Korean", and that made it difficult to maintain good relations with them. In response to the person who jokingly mentioned that he would rather sell his bodily organs than work at a *hagwon*, a *hagwon* instructor mentioned that he prefers his position as a private school because he doesn't have to teach a class of "40 students" and that he is well-paid, well treated, and supported. It makes sense that there would be such contrasting and contradictory information regarding *hagwons*, since there are thousands of them scattered around Korea and each one is operated differently, as is any other private business. Another noteworthy comment that draws a more theoretical line highlighting the difference between

the two is when a teacher wrote that he/she finds public school education more rewarding because it is not tied in with money. When education becomes monetized, some facets of it are naturally sacrificed. Despite some of the unsavory opinions towards *hagwons* that many seem to express on forums, the majority of TESOL teachers in South Korea are employed at such institutions nonetheless.

### **Co-teaching**

One of the notable features of teaching in Korean public schools is that EPIK promises on its website that there will be a Korean co-teacher in each school. Their job essentially is to oversee or assist the foreign teacher (EPIK, 2013). What exactly is their job? According to EPIK that person is a licensed Korean school teacher who is able to fluently speak English, and his or her role is to consult, direct, and cooperate with the NEST in any matter related to school-work. They are even there to help with any issues that the foreign teacher may have at home or in regards to settling and living comfortably in South Korea. Professionally, their main role is to assist in lesson-planning and to conduct classes with the NEST. The co-teacher is also there to assist in carrying out administrative duties or preparation for school events and communication between the school's administration and the NEST (EPIK, 2013). David Carless mentions in this research that some Korean co-teachers job requirements go even beyond what is normally expected (2006). According to Carless (2006) some NESTs report that their Korean counterpart's job was to "help engender a happy off-work situation for the visiting foreigner" (p. 341). Carless mentions that there is a significantly higher amount of research done about Japan's JET program than Korea's EPIK. JET was founded in 1987, whereas EPIK was founded in 1996, and they too engage in co-teaching or "team-teaching" as they refer to it. Carless seems to focus more on the positives of co-teaching; he concludes that teaching between a NEST and a non-NEST helps to draw

upon the strengths of both individuals. However, he portrays some of the difficulties and challenges of the phenomenon, backed up with two decades of research done on the JET program.

Even after all these years, Japanese educators mention that there are considerable fundamental difficulties in co-teaching; particularly the task of finding suitable roles for each individual involved. Co-teaching can create high levels of anxiety for the Japanese English teachers, and lots of uncertainty for the NESTs involved, which can lead to confusion on the part of the students (Carless, 2006). Not everyone can be on the same page, and this will inevitably lead to some levels of disorganization and doubt in regards to respective roles in the classroom environment. As Carless mentions, there needs to be co-training between NESTs and Japanese- or Korean co-teachers. One of the main reasons for troublesome co-teaching is that programs like Korea's EPIK and Japan's JET lack proper TESOL

training and don't require much experience as a prerequisite (Carless, 2006). There is also the issue of individuals being paired up with very different background and teaching abilities. NESTs often tend to be very unfamiliar with the host culture as well as having lack of understanding the native language of their coworkers. EPIK and JET do not provide sufficient training or support in terms of team-teaching, nor do they provide any choice as to whether a person wants to team teach or whom they would like to partner up with (Carless, 2006). In principal, it is a wonderful and idealistically optimistic idea, but that is not how things always fall into place. How realistic are these expectations and how often do they work out the way it is so glamorously portrayed by EPIK? Carless' research (2006) shows us that because of the vast amounts of untrained and inexperienced NESTs, they often require an unreasonable amount of assistance and professional guidance. As previously stated, in these programs there is no choice as to who a person partners up with, nor do they have the right to

request to work on their own. Many educators simply prefer to work alone and have their lessons and classrooms kept as a sacred and private sanctuary between themselves and their pupils. At one point, Slovenia adopted a NEST hiring program and paired them up with Slovenian counterparts; co-teaching was introduced as one of the cornerstones of the program. However, NESTs ended up preferring to work by themselves because it provided them with more flexibility and freedom (Carless, 2006). Imagine being paired up with an unenthusiastic or uncooperative individual and being forced to lesson plan and teach together - it can easily end up being a potential nightmare! Carless (2006) points out the one of the most likely issues that may cause problems is cultural clashes between NESTs and non-NESTs. For example, Korean teachers have expressed that they felt NESTs “lacked sufficient respect for well-established Korean practices” (Carless, 2006, p. 344).

Role uncertainty seems to be a common theme and problem in co-teaching. Research by Porter and Tanghe (2016) suggests that uncertain roles as co-teachers and NESTs caused stress and confusion for students. Though the participants in the study were adults in a Master’s course near Seoul, it is still valid and applies well to youth-oriented programs such as EPIK. One of the aims of Porter and Tanghe was to study whether English pedagogy in Korea “paves the way for Western dominance, gradually driving everyone to admire and desire a foreign culture . . . leading to the erosion of Korea’s identity and independence” (Porter & Tanghe, 2016, p. 769). Porter and Tanghe address these wild accusations not to dispute or legitimize them, but rather to give us a backdrop for the ‘English Fever’ phenomenon in Korea that has created a thriving atmosphere for the TESOL market. Porter and Tanghe’s research wishes to show readers the realities that Korean English teachers endure in their daily existence. In their research, participants expressed through journal entries that they felt uncomfortable with the presence of having two teachers in a classroom.

The researchers themselves expressed concerns that their co-teaching would often interfere with one another's teaching roles, and disputes would come up in regards to conflicting pedagogical approaches or activities not being related to what the other instructor taught (Porter & Tanghe, 2016). As the researchers put it, in that type of setting instructors are forced to identify entirely different identities to their own natural teaching style, if they wish to get along and work harmoniously in a professional setting. It creates pressure for the non-native English teacher to try to subtly negotiate and reinforce their role as an expert in their job. The mere idea of pairing a nonnative English teacher with a NEST may complicate Korean dynamics due to the fact that there exists an idealized notion of an English educator as a "white" native English speaker. Though on the other hand, this dynamic may also be a very good and healthy addition to rather misguided and jaded Korean mindsets because it breaks the false conceptions of white English dominance. It must be stated that the researchers noted that there are many positive and encouraging outcomes of co-teaching as well that are worthy of consideration when making an informed assessment of the merit of instilling co-teachers in classroom. They mentioned that taking different roles and identities in the classroom brought about different dimensions to classroom discussions; it allowed for conversations to take place that otherwise may not have been as entertaining or easy to do in a single-teacher setting (Porter & Tanghe, 2016). Despite students mentioning in their journals that they were confused or uncomfortable about the teaching roles, they also indicated that co-teaching gave the class a more collaborative and engaging spirit. Altering classroom dynamics is not necessarily a bad move, but it must be done with care, training, and awareness of the impact that it is making.

From the perspective of potentially professional and polished non-native co-teachers, it may be quite challenging to deal with egocentric foreigners that some deem to be overpaid

and underqualified. Taiwanese researchers describe the story of a crude and unbecoming South-African NEST who dared to say the following statements: “Teaching this stuff is so boring” or “I hate teaching phonics”, in the presence of her students and Taiwanese co-teacher (Chen & Cheng, 2010). Amy’s co-teacher, Li-ying, undoubtedly felt annoyed at her counterpart’s negative attitude, and was even forced to take over the role of teaching phonics due to her impotence. Just as we heard many negative stories from NESTs regarding their co-teachers, one can imagine an equal number of horror stories told on the other side of the fence. The researchers went on to interview yet another South African who was experiencing hardships and bouts of prejudice at her school, as she would define it; she went by the name “Ivy”. Yet when one of her Taiwanese co-teachers was interviewed, we see a more realistic and rational side of the story. According to Chen and Cheng’s (2010) interview of Pei-lin, the teacher, she had the following to say about her coworker: “I think Ivy probably senses some hostility toward her when she first came to the school. She is an introverted person. I think if you keep cringing on the corner, other people will not approach you.”

A different study focused on co-teaching in Japan, mentions that their pool of participants consisted of Japanese teachers of English who were mainly in their 40s and 50s, while the majority of Assistant Language Teachers, mostly NESTs in the JET program, were in their 20s (Igawa, 2019). Likely due to their age, the Japanese co-teachers also had much more teaching experience, nearly 19 years compared with an average of approximately 3 for the NESTs. Interestingly, the NEST co-teachers have more of an initiative in team teaching exercises according to both groups of participants, however both groups also agree that the Japanese co-teachers dominate the classroom when it comes to student control and class management. These figures help us better understand and getting a better picture of the possible friction and resentment between some NESTs and local co-teachers.



## **Explanation of Research Focus and Purpose**

I wish to study through the means of ethnographic interviews the lives and experiences of public school teachers and private academy NESTs. What keeps some individuals in South Korea for so long, and what causes many to leave after just a year or two? Who is happier with their jobs and lives as expatriates in South Korea: *hagwon* or public school NESTs? Is it possible to make a career out of TESOL jobs in EPIK or *hagwons*? Meagan Henry speaks of the risk involved in working for a *hagwon*, such as the possibility of bankruptcy (stemming purely from the fact that they are privately owned businesses after all) withholding of pay and passports, false deductions of pension and insurance, or even issues of gender, race, and age discrimination of the part of employers or parents (2016).

This study hopes to focus not just on *hagwons* but on EPIK as well, and to take an honest and unbiased look at the motivations, experiences, and objectives of NESTs in South Korea, in order to be able to possibly provide advice and guidance for future educators considering the Korean peninsula as a possible job opportunity. This study builds on Meagan Henry's research, and aims to focus on a more group of participants, educators in both fields, even individuals that taught in both workplaces.

Overall the number of English teachers in South Korea is decreasing and this may be because the national demand is decreasing. Institutional changes are constantly being put into place by the government that affect the lives of public school NESTs. Removal of some nation-wide tests as well as significant reduction in student population leads to a natural reduction in the demand for NESTs. What does this mean for Korea's future and for the future of expats hoping to secure positions in TESOL, as they embark on the uncertain path, like thousands before them?

### Chapter 3: Methodology

A qualitative approach was used for this methodology section development. Through ethnographic interviews I was able to explain the overall differences and similarities of being employed by EPIK or *hagwons*, as well as their personal experiences and perspectives of living life in Korea. The idea for this research came from the researcher's personal experiences in EPIK as well as *hagwons*, and engagement with other NESTs in Korea. Throughout the few years of employment in Korean schools, many peers and acquaintances of the researcher expressed negative and tough experiences in the teaching industry, as well as many fellow expatriates who enjoyed their lives and jobs and were staying in Korea for the foreseeable future. These encounters took place in the form of personal conversations, which led to the idea of ethnographically interviews being engaged in with similar individuals who would be willing to express their concerns and experiences. The various themes in this essay emerged fluidly, from the data, as the interviews and results were analyzed.

One of the biggest challenges in an ethnographic-based thesis was the mere act of putting it all in writing and knowing where to begin. One of the leading researchers in this field pointed out that the best way to learn how to write and transcribe ethnographic interviews is to read and brush up on other ethnographies (Spradley, 2016). One of the first phases of analyzing the data collected from the 15 participants was to identify and explore the culture of the TESOL community in Korea, this being part of the "translation process" which Spradley points out in his book (2016). As interviews were conducted, a pattern started to emerge from hagwon and EPIK teachers; certain sets of behaviors, norms, and lingo unfolded. Then came along the second task of Spradley's suggestions for ethnographic writing: communicating the cultural meanings for unfamiliar readers. This was done through extensive quotes and explanations. For example, when participants spoke of "having fun"

while employed at EPIK or the bores of attending *hweshiks* (staff dinners), Spradley's "meanings encoded in that culture" came to mind, because it must be analyzed in great detail in order to be properly understood (2016).

## **Participants**

Participants selected for this study were sought after primarily on social media platforms such as Facebook and WeChat. Former friends and colleagues that still resided in Korea or had moved since their employment as NESTS in Korean public schools or *hagwons* were contacted and interviewed. Other willing participants referred many participants to the researcher and, in order to establish ultimate credibility and objectivity, a sizable number of participants were ultimately interviewed for this study. Fifteen individuals signed and agreed with full knowledge of this study and its intentions. All participants were given informed consent forms (see Appendix A) prior to being interviewed, and informed that their completion of reading the form indicated that they are at least 18 years of age and agree to consent to participation in the study. An advert was placed on my Facebook account to solicit participants, and ultimately the majority of the participants voluntarily contacted me themselves. The following is the advert that I initially wrote:

Dear friends and acquaintances, I will soon be conducting research for my Master's in TESOL. The nature of it is teaching English in South Korea. I'll need to conduct easy but extensive (at time lengthy and very thorough) interviews using Skype and Facebook. I need 15 participants. If you're willing to help me with my research for my Master's, please private message me. Thank you.

This short and simple advert aided me tremendously in being able to find willing participants, and those who had responded to this advert gradually introduced the initially lacking individuals to me. Far too many people messaged me and expressed willingness to participate, but for the purposes of this study respondents needed to have certain and specific backgrounds of employment as NESTs in South Korea, so many had to be turned away. The

objective for this research was to conduct interviews with 5 NESTs that had worked (or were currently doing so) at Korean *hagwons*, 5 that had worked exclusively at public schools through the EPIK program, and another 5 that had experience working in both *hagwons* and public schools.

Fifteen participants were ethnographically interviewed, the specific composition being comprised of 12 men and 3 women. It is unfortunate that the number of men and women was not more equally balanced, but I predict it is because I am a male and my acquaintances from during my tenure in Korea were mostly other men as well. However, I do not believe that gender would significantly impact the results of this study, nor would it be cause for concern for any substantial bias. At the time of the discussions, 10 of the interviewees were residing in South Korea, while the other 5 were living and working China, Scotland, and the United States. During follow-ups conducted nearly a year later, another individual had left Korea and moved back to South Africa.

The participants could have only been citizens of seven specific countries, based on the requirements for eligibility of an E2 teaching visa. To reiterate and refresh our memories, these aforementioned countries are: The United States, South Africa, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Ireland (EPIK, 2013). Participants in this research were from 6 countries—all of the previously mentioned except for New Zealand. Five of the participants were from South Africa, 4 from the United States, 2 from Canada, 2 from Australia, 1 from Ireland, and 1 from the United Kingdom (see Table 1.1). All of the participants had at least a bachelor's degree from their home countries, which is another requirement for an E2 visa. The length of employment in South Korea varied among the participants, ranging from 2 to 18 years of continued employment in various capacities.

Table 1.1

*Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Nationality	City taught/lived in Korea	Years taught in EPIK/Hagwon
A	M	34	Australian	Boksu, Seoul	4.5 years-Hagwon
I	M	41	Canadian	Daegu, Daejeon, Gongju	18 years-Hagwon
C	M	27	South African	Daejeon	3 years-Hagwon
D	M	34	American	Daejeon	1 year-Hagwon
N	M	33	South African	Daejeon, Dangjin	2 years-Hagwon
K	M	34	South African	Jecheon	4 years-EPIK
G	M	26	American	Daejeon	3 years-EPIK
H	M	32	English	Daejeon, Jeju	4 years-EPIK
B	M	31	American	Eumsong, Chungju	2 years-EPIK
M	M	37	American	Chuncheon	1.5 years-EPIK
F	M	28	Canadian	Chungju, Seoul	1 year-EPIK 1 year-Hagwon
L	F	30	Australian	Jecheon, Seoul	4 years-EPIK 1 month-Hagwon
J	F	33	South African	Daegu, Gapyeong	1 year-Hagwon 6 years EPIK
E	M	33	Irish	Daejeon, Cheonan, Saejong	1 year-EPIK 7 years-Hagwons
O	F	31	South African	Eumsong, Icheon, Seoul	1 year EPIK 3 years Hagwon

**Materials**

This thesis focused on the experiences and perceptions of NESTs regarding their job satisfaction, future plans, and differences prevalent amongst work settings. In order to collect such vast qualitative data, ethnographic interviews for each of the individuals were conducted. Since the researcher was no longer living in South Korea at the time the interviews were conducted, they were primarily conducted through the aid of social media, E-mail, video conferencing, and telephone conversations. Ethnographic interviews involve extensive and immersive observation through one-on-one interviews. Normally for studies involving personal interviews, there would be a higher number of participants, but due to the time-consuming nature of ethnographic interviewing, 15 participants are sufficient to

constitute a well-informed sample survey given the fact that all participants selected possess adequate knowledge in their fields, thereby meeting the criteria of rigor and sufficient trustworthiness. The purpose of this study was to gain insightful information on the experiences of NESTs that work or have worked in differing occupational settings and lived as expatriates in South Korea. The qualitative nature of ethnographic interviews will be crucial in finding out about their personal reasons behind their reasoning for staying in or leaving the profession of TESOL. The interviews will also be a source of expressing the differences between teaching at public schools and teaching at *hagwons*, the means by which such comparisons being made stemming predominantly from the statements made between the three groups of respondents.

To add further impetus to the qualitative richness and ethnographic merit and approach of the data, open-ended responses were the means of soliciting most responses. This allowed for more in-depth descriptions and analysis of personal experiences and feelings as opposed to the sole reliance of ex post facto incident reporting devoid of an existential response on the part of teachers as people with integrity, opinions and feelings. Responses were given back mostly in the form of opinionated answers, and transcribed in the form of direct or paraphrased quotes. By looking at personal day-to-day experiences of teachers, the researcher was able to draw direct a relationship between overall employee morale and job satisfaction. Questions regarding the richness and rewarding nature of the job helped the researcher to gain a more in-depth and well-informed understanding of the rationale behind future job choices in TESOL, and as well as an impression of how to go about reasonably rating job satisfaction, despite the lack of quantitative data. Grand tour and general questions led their way to more comprehensive and detailed interview questions, which is ideal for ethnographic interviewing.

Since I do not wish to bring my own bias into the research, I believe a wide range of questions ultimately aiming for the same purpose will be ideal. The ultimate goal in regards to comparison of *hagwons* with public school jobs is to determine the alternate levels of contentment versus discontentment as well as the concomitant satisfaction-dissatisfaction fissure on different axes of their employees' reactions to their work experiences, whilst still striving to expressive data as qualitatively as possible. What exactly is job satisfaction and what does it determine? It can be defined as the extent of positive feelings or attitudes that a person has towards his or her job. Leaving your home country to move abroad and teach can be a daunting task for a person, so it is safe to assume that job satisfaction is a key element as a factor for wanting to stay in the business of TESOL—at least for those who intend on upholding such a decision in the long run.

Subjects did not fill out a survey or any sort of questionnaires. Keeping in line with the nature of ethnographic interviewing, questions were free flowing and extensive. Though an ethnographic interview guide (composed mainly as a set of questions that unfolded sequentially) was roughly followed with each participant, in order to ensure comparable results were obtained that could be recorded and corresponded (see Appendix B).

### **Procedures**

Interviews were administered through Facebook Messenger, Skype, WeChat, and any other social media platforms, and voices of the participants were recorded and transcribed with their express prior permission gained. Participants were notified beforehand and appointments were made for specific interview times. Most interviews took several hours, but finished on the same day that they started. The researcher also took notes during the interview, as well as using software that recorded the Skype video conference calls or their voices when other forms of technology were used, with permission of course. Initially, the

subjects were contacted via Facebook messenger or WeChat, but the majority of the interviews continued to be conducted through Skype video conferencing. Only audio was recorded and observed, no visual interaction was made or recorded. Follow up questions regarding opinions on job interest and career choice was conducted nearly a year later, using WeChat and Facebook Messenger. Once the data was all collected, anonymity was maintained by changing the names of participants to the corresponding alphabet code (A, B, C, etc.), all of whom were selected at random. Questionnaires can be distributed and sent back by means of electronic mail. All forms of identifiable personal information were edited and left out of the results and conclusion. When demographic information was presented, the researcher made it clear that it would be unidentifiable and anonymous, in order to avoid any sort of adverse reactions. Once all the data had been analyzed, transcribed, and reported to the thesis committee for its final board review for this thesis, they were erased or destroyed. All typed messages, E-mails, recordings, transcriptions, and notes were deleted from the researcher's computer, social media accounts, messenger chat records, and personal email account. During the period of this study, only the researcher had access to the contents and recordings of the research.



## Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

As the basis of this research was ethnographic in nature, the findings and results are scattered and mostly presented in the form of long and short quotes, as well as summaries and paraphrases. This is due to the fact that ethnographic studies are spontaneous, unrehearsed and unorthodox in most instances, depending largely on how they are conducted and written. Let us study the responses of the 15 participants by grouping them in terms of where they worked: *hagwon* teachers, public school teachers, and individuals who experienced both. Results will be shown with regard to the topic at hand as well as the various subjects that arose as ancillary yet considerable concerns nonetheless as the questions were being delved into to elicit responses. Though some questions that were asked to participants were different from others, we will focus on the main themes and ideas, and explore the significance of each response in regards to the hypothesis. However, before we dive into the matter of workplace comparisons, let us explore the culture of TESOL teachers in Korea, and the type of lives they live.

### Culture Overview

In all societies, we pursue success and happiness, the implication of which quite ordinarily involving leaving our comfort zones and settling down in unfamiliar places in the modern global economy and global village unto which we all belong to a greater or lesser degree. The lives of English teachers in South Korea vary by their naturally individual differences, yet there is also a culture that inevitably forms among them. Though originating from 6 various countries and most being unfamiliar with one another, the participants in this research shared many cultural similarities and nuances. Participant “B” stated that he loved the expat community. Initially, his social circle consisted of fellow EPIK teachers but, after the first year, it expanded to *hagwon* employees and even athletes (Interview, 3/30/18). The

term “expat” is a common theme amongst both EPIK and *hagwon* employees. 6 out of the 15 participants mentioned the word “expat” in their interviews, either as a self-contained term or by using alternate vocabulary items to describe the same social concept. Expat being a common shorthand version of the word “expatriate” which Merriam Webster simply defines as, “a person who lives in a foreign country” (Expatriate, 2019). Participant “H” mentioned that meeting expats through EPIK’s orientation program helped him a lot when it came time to settle in the island city of Jeju (Interview, 4/10/18). In most societies, people tend to flock to like-minded individuals in order to form cliques and social networks. It makes sense that the roughly 14,500 E-2 visa holders in a country of over 50 million would heavily rely on and associate with one another. The reliance on fellow expats for networking and socializing is so high that, in fact, none of the 15 participants mentioned having Korean friends in open-ended questions regarding their social life. Although it must be mentioned that five of the participants were in a serious relationship with a Korean national, most notably with 1 (H) being married and two (C, E) being engaged. Participant “H” alluded to the importance of having expat friends: “At EPIK, you’re usually the only foreigner, and you feel alienated if you don’t have a friendly group of staff. You stand out” (Interview, 4/10/18).

### **Initial Experiences**

Before moving on to in-depth analysis of EPIK vs. *hagwon* experiences, it is interesting to look at the thought process of each participant in terms of why and how they ended up teaching in South Korea, and to explore their demographics a bit further. Most participants mentioned that they heard about the idea of teaching English in Korea from a friend or relative. Participants “A”, “C”, “F”, “G”, “H”, “I”, “J”, “K”, “N”, and “O” had all decided to move to Korea because they had known a friend or relative who was or had at one point taught in Korea. The most veteran participant has taught at *hagwons* for 18 years;

participant “I”, had a particular unique and interesting story in regards to why he moved to Korea. “I” stated:

I came because of my father. He had gotten a job here, and invited me over. He had a friend, and I ended up working at that friend’s *hagwon* for about 2 years. And my father later on moved on to university jobs here in Korea. (Interview 4/15/18)

Social networks are a common way for many people in the world to find jobs and connections. It doesn’t always work out for everyone who believes and follows an acquaintance when it comes to making such a big life-changing decision; sometimes it results in negative experiences. Participant “N” said:

It was a recommendation from a fellow university friend, who came to live here. He said it’s very safe, very clean, people are friendly, the apartments are good, the work is quite easy, as a foreigner you can get very nice scholarships if you want to study. The only problem is a potential North Korean invasion, which sounds like a hoax anyway. He told me to try it out for a year, if you don’t like it, you can always go back. He stayed for 7 years. He worked at a university and said, be careful of *hagwons*, they’re shots. However, EPIK didn’t even grant me an interview. Time was running out and money was running dry I found a job at a *hagwon*, and I said I wanted to go...And it was a let-down from the very beginning. There were a few things that were not sugarcoated, but lots of incomplete information. (Interview, 4/14/18)

Word of mouth can also be a great way of discovering great job opportunities. Unlike participant “N”, participant “K” seemed to have received adequate information as to what to expect when arriving in Korea:

I had a friend who I studied with who came to Korea. She came a year ahead of me. My town is pretty small, and I got to know about EPIK because the community was quite small and there were probably 2 or 3 people who I knew personally that came to Korea to teach...My first experience with EPIK was actually pretty great. It was a lot more than what I expected. The food was great, and meeting new people was great. I think the program and the stuff we learned was really awesome. At the time, I thought that the information was quite valuable. We had introductory Korean classes and we got to ask questions that we were a bit unsure about, and the people were pretty open with their answers. (Interview, 4/3/18)

There were five participants who decided to embark upon a teaching job in Korea at the conclusion of their own research and discovery. Participant “D” decided to move to

Korea because his wife had found a teaching position at a university in Daejeon. “D” mentioned, “I was on Reddit, the Subreddit for TESOL, and slowly gathered an opinion on how you get a job in Korea” (Interview, 4/22/18).

Participant “D” goes on to describe how, despite careful planning and research, ultimately false advertising of a *hagwon* job led to having a negative experience very early on, similar to Participant “N”:

Basically my wife got her job first, and it was in Daejeon, South Korea. So that limited my options. I went on Facebook and found a teaching in Daejeon Facebook group. I looked into a few posts and found a job that looked like it really suited what I wanted, because it was advertised as having a lot of opportunities for curriculum development, and it was decently well-paid and had flexibility. It was advertised as being 2pm-8pm 3 days a week, and 2pm-6pm 2 days a week. It was advertised to me that I would be working with mostly teenagers and adults...On my way to Korea I hurt my back. So when I arrived in Korea I needed to go straight to the hospital. We had absolutely no support when I arrived. I messaged the director of the *hagwon* to tell him I’m here, and I received a response telling me he thought I was arriving the next day. Which was really quite strange and a weird way to start off, because we had been talking for months about my arrival date. So I’m going to assume that he was simply lying. (Interview, 4/22/18)

Participant “C” was not picky about the particular details of his upcoming job in Korea. He recalled learning about teaching in Korea “through the grapevine” and then starting to look into it by researching online. Like many other participants, “C” found the specific position through an agent, referring to a recruitment agency. Participant “C” stated:

I just accepted the first one my agent made available to me. When she proposed Daejeon to me, because it was in the middle of the country, I said ‘Alright, why not’. I didn’t follow any South Africans. I didn’t decide to move to Daejeon because I knew there were other South Africans there as well. (4/13/18)

Participant “H” heard about EPIK from a younger brother’s friend who had previously worked in Korea. “H” had a choice between *hagwons*, EPIK, or working in JET, the Japanese equivalent of the EPIK program:

My brother’s friend worked in Korea, and I started looking at *hagwon* work, but then I was recommended to go through EPIK. I was originally looking at going to Japan, and I heard about the JET program, but I heard it very difficult to get on. I was

looking at *hagwons* because I heard it was easier, but then when I heard EPIK was a lot better and a more comfortable position; I thought it would be better for me to work at EPIK and work at a public school. I thought it would be better for me to go through EPIK and work at a public school as a government school, instead of a private business. (Interview, 4/10/18)

## Reputation

At the onset of many of the interviews, participants spoke about their thought process and main pivotal reason underpinning their ultimate decision between electing to take either an EPIK or a *hagwon* job. Just as previously explored, participants chose one over the other because of recommendations through friends and family, or through their own findings. Teaching English in the Korean private academy sector and public schools have their own unique record of reputation and stereotypes. Here, each participant let us know in their own words how they perceived or what they heard about EPIK and *hagwons*.

“A” worked at 2 *hagwons* for a period spanning 4.5 years in total, but is currently an instructor at a Chinese university. “A” moved to Korea at the young age of 22, after hearing about Korean job prospects from a friend in Sydney. “My friend was working in a *hagwon* and got me a job” (Interview, 4/18/18). Therefore, “A” did not give other options much of a thought since the position was acquired through the help of a friend. However, when asked about what he expected prior to moving to Korea, “A” mentioned: “I heard their expectations were pretty low. From what I understood, I was to just run through the material and focus more on having fun with the kids” (Interview, 4/18/18). When asked why he did not attempt to apply for the EPIK program, “A” responded:

I never considered doing EPIK or GEPIK. It seemed to me too strict. I never wanted to teach large classes of middle school or high school. *Hagwons* are casual and more laid back. However, I met university teachers and they got higher pay & more vacation, so I wanted to get a Master’s and work in one. (Interview, 4/18/18)

“A” finally left Korea with a Master’s in TESOL and continued on to work in Mexico, Thailand, Japan, and finally China. When asked about his overall opinion of working in Korea, “A” replied:

The decision to move there shaped my life. As an educator, more so it’s taught me what not to do. It taught me that I don’t want to work like a *hagwon*; I don’t want a set curriculum. I like empathy towards students and giving them their needs. *Hagwons* left a bad taste in my mouth. They want you to open your books and do your work, but students wanted to have fun with me, and I brought that with me to my university students. As an educator, I think having empathy for students is very different, and connecting with them at an individual and personal level is important. (Interview, 4/18/18)

Participant “B” taught for 2 years in two different cities, both through the EPIK program. When asked why he chose EPIK over *hagwons*, “B” stated, “EPIK seemed more stable. I read on the Secretary of State website that *hagwons* can be a hit or miss and possibly unstable. EPIK had a better reputation” (Interview, 3/30/18). When asked to describe EPIK briefly, “B” responded:

EPIK was fun, challenging, and enjoyable. They are very strict with their contracts in the sense that they will make you work all the classes mentioned in your contract. They will also throw in a lot of afterschool or special classes. (Interview, 3/30/18)

“B” had initially spoken about the stability of EPIK jobs. However, when asked if he considers EPIK jobs to be reliable or not, he responded:

Yes, but because it is funded by the government, it can affect job opportunities. After a year, my school laid me off because the middle schools were not receiving funding from the provincial government. So I was offered a contract at a high school in a different city, in the same province, due to allocation of spending. (Interview, 3/30/18)

Participant “C” has taught for 3 years and has been employed by two different *hagwons*. “C” spoke about taking the first job offered by a job recruiter and not looking into the intricacies of EPIK vs. *hagwon*. He did, however, have an opinion of public school teachers based on his own personal interactions with friends who taught at them:

Some EPIK teachers that teach at public schools think that they're better, because they think it's a "real" school, and not an academy. So they think that they are higher up. Yet I've also met down-to-earth people who don't think that, but from what I've heard, the people at EPIK don't really do much. I've spoken to a friend who tells me he just sits in his office and does nothing most of the day. He's desk-warming for ages. We have to mark summaries, upload scores; we are way busier than them - at least at my *hagwon*, the particular one that I am at now. (Interview, 4/13/18)

It must be noted that participants "B", "C", "E", "F", "G", "J", and "O" all mentioned the term "desk-warming", and only so in relation to their own public school jobs or when referring to EPIK as a comparison to their *hagwon* jobs. One Korean expat website humorously defines desk-warming as follows:

Desk-warming is a phenomenon, it seems, designed by the Korean government to strangle the foreign soul in a subtle but deadly manner over the course of their contracts. Desk warming ranges from as plainly ridiculous as having to, as the resident foreign teacher, spend weeks of both summer and winter vacation manning your desk while your students and co-teachers are on vacation, to as quietly silly as having to spend your post-teaching hours every day at school, regardless of whether or not you have anything teaching-related to do. ("How to," 2016)

Participant "D", after working just 1 year in Korea at a single *hagwon*, made a decision to not stay a second year, just a month into his employment. "D" and his wife decided to not stay a second year because of what he perceived to be stereotypical problems and negative experiences with *hagwon* employment. When asked why him and his wife decided against a second year in Korea, "D" responded:

The way that I was treated as an employee was the big first reason. In general, *hagwons* don't give enough holiday time. The way that my boss treated me and the lack of support for proper teaching were also pitfalls. We considered staying a second year, but decided against it. We were at a point in our lives where we wanted to move forward and didn't want to take the risk of staying in Korea in which we had lots of problems. We weighed the pros and cons and decided to move forward and onto the next place. (Interview, 4/22/18)

"D" went on to make an interesting in-depth analysis of his short *hagwon* stint, mentioning that he felt it "stunted my professional development because it was a baby-sitting job" (Interview, 4/22/18). "D had mentioned working for 2 years in Ecuador, at a job he truly

enjoyed. When asked why he preferred it to his Korean *hagwon* position, “D” explained the following:

While I was in Ecuador one of my jobs was part of the International House Teaching Network, which has hundreds of schools across the world. Which has lots of opportunities for professional development. I participated in a conference, and did a presentation for a teachers’ conference. Even here in Scotland, I’ve been flown down to London to participate in things that improve my quality of teaching. So elsewhere I’ve had opportunities to further my education, to make my resume look better, and to improve the quality of teaching I’m able to do. But being part of a *hagwon* in Korea, well my school wasn’t connected to any other schools at all. It was a completely private place, so there was no larger network of schools that we were a part of. There were no opportunities for professional development. I’ve never heard about, in Korea, there being any sort of network of people trying to better themselves professionally, despite there being so many *hagwons* and so many English teachers from abroad. (Interview, 4/22/18)

“E” has taught at 4 different *hagwons*, and once for EPIK, for a total of 8 years of teaching in Korea. “E” only taught at public schools in his first year in Korea; when asked why he didn’t continue to work at EPIK for a second year, “E” bluntly replied: “I didn’t get re-signed, (i.e., extended the opportunity of signing a second year’s contract by one’s employer). I put it down to the fucking asshole of a co-teacher” (Interview, 4/17/18). “E” was not the only participant that expressed hardships with Korean co-teacher’s in the EPIK program. Co-teaching is a common theme in public school pedagogy that will be discussed later in a greater extent. Participant “E” was asked if a good or bad co-teacher is the “make it or break it” deal for EPIK:

Yeah, I’d go along with that, completely. She told me on several occasions how much of a nuisance I was. What a drain I was on the resources of the school and her own, including time and so forth. So she just made everything that she had to do for me seem like a chore. Even though as I would come to learn, it was her job. Also, she was always criticizing my teaching, even though she never came to see a class. I spoke to my other co-teachers about it, they didn’t have a problem. It was a very uncomfortable experience from day one. There was no support or helping me with anything; and I know that’s pretty typical of EPIK, but she just didn’t make life easy for me anyway. (Interview, 4/17/18)



“E” was one of 5 participants that worked at both EPIK and *hagwons*, and therefore his unique perspective regarding the typical differences among the two were as noted:

You’re left more to yourself in a *hagwon*. You just do your teaching and go home. You’re not involved in politics. You don’t have to go out for *hweshiks* (staff dinners) with them all the time whereas, in public school, you’re forced into that. Even though you don’t want to go, or you feel unwanted, or you’re actively disliked, you still have to pretend you’re fine and go to dinners and everything. With EPIK I always felt I was always ignored; even the other English teachers didn’t try to talk to me! In *hagwons*, you don’t have to do the social aspect, but you go directly to your boss, which is much better. 3 out of 4 have been very nice. It is hard to compare, because at public schools you have a hierarchy in place. (Interview, 4/17/18)

Participant “F” taught at EPIK for 1 year, and worked for a *hagwon* for 1 year as well. He is the only participant that decided to leave the TESOL industry and spend the last 2 years building a business. “F” decided to move to Korea because his mother is of Korean heritage, and he also wanted to experience something new and unique after graduating from university. “B” first learned about EPIK and *hagwons* from his brother, who had taught in Korea before. After doing a bit of research, “F” decided that EPIK was the more suitable option for him. When asked about his initial experience with EPIK and his general opinions of the program, “F” replied:

It’s a good way to network with people, and then you have friends all over Korea. They basically hold your hand right to the door. I felt pretty much, totally, 100% secure the whole way through. Even when I got into my job, I felt like I had a safety harness on the whole time. (Interview, 4/18/18)

“F” went on to say that his experience with EPIK influenced him in wanting to start his business, a language exchange and tourism agency. When asked why so, “F” explained: “My greatest value here is being a native speaker; I have an F4 visa so I wanted to monetize it” (Interview 4/18/18). When asked to compare EPIK and *hagwons*, “F” metaphorically described EPIK as being “bigger, slower, fatter, and lazier”. “F” went on to explain his point by alluding to the fact that “*Hagwons* are leaner and more competitive because they are a private industry” (Interview 4/18/18). “F” went on to a few valid generalizations:

EPIK doesn't really know to do with you because, to be honest, in EPIK, I don't feel like I was doing very much teaching. I was teaching them about what it means to be a person from Canada, and showing them my life, and just interacting. EPIK recognizes that we are ambassadors from our country whereas, in the *hagwon*, I was definitely educating the students in English. (Interview, 4/18/18)

Participant "G" taught through EPIK for 3 years, and returned to his home country to continue teaching and pursue a Master's degree in TESOL. "G" actually had applied for the JET program, in hopes of teaching in Japanese public schools, but was rejected after the final interview. The idea of applying for a teaching position in Korea was introduced to "G" during his senior year in college, after coming in contact with many Korean classmates. Further research led "G" to blogs and YouTube videos that recommended EPIK, specifically. "G" explains his reasoning for choosing EPIK over *hagwons* after learning about some of the assumptions that are mentioned online:

I started learning about *hagwons* and everyone in the blogs said to not do *hagwons*, "the hours are crazy, you might get a bad Korean boss that will rip you off", or something like that. So EPIK seemed like the sanest choice. But I think I would have done a *hagwon* if I had gotten rejected from EPIK. (Interview, 4/20/18)

"G" also happened to make a statement very similar to "E" in regards to co-teachers in the EPIK program: "When they say that the co-teacher makes your experience, that's quite true." (Interview, 4/20/18).

"H" taught at public schools for 4 years. Upon reflection, he picked EPIK over *hagwons* because he heard EPIK was harder to be accepted by and, furthermore, exceptionally more reliable, not to mention being safer and prone to less remuneration problems. Participant "J" said:

I was looking at *hagwons*, because I heard it was easier, but then when I heard EPIK was a lot better. I heard it would be a lot more comfortable position at a public school. I thought it would be better for me to go through EPIK and work at a public school, as a government job, instead of a private business. (Interview, 4/10/18)

Participant “I” had the longest teaching experience out of all of the participants—a total of 18 years—all of which were at *hagwons*. “I” described *hagwon* life as being “arrested development”, in the sense that it is apparently an easy job that does not require much planning. “I” even went as far as to say that teaching at *hagwons* is “not a real job because we go at it year by year” (Interview, 4/15/18). When asked to clarify, “I” stated:

In the grand scheme, most *hagwon* jobs are year by year. Every year you sign a new contract. Every year you get the visa. It’s year by year. No academy stays open forever, and no job is going to always stay the same. Students move on too. (Interview, 4/15/18)

After teaching at a *hagwon* for 1 year, “J” moved on to public schools for the remaining 6 years of her teaching career. “J” is the only participant whose public school experience is actually with the GEPIK (Gyeonggi English Program in Korea). In essence, for all intensive purposes, they are one in the same. GEPIK is simply for the province that surrounds the capital city of Seoul. “J” mentions that she moved to Daegu, Korea, through the help of an agency that would place South Africans in *hagwon* positions; she simply accepted the first job she was offered. After having worked at a *hagwon* for a year and public schools for 6, “J” expressed that public schools gave her more independence and autonomy:

My *hagwon* was easy to work at. No desk-warming, but obviously feels more like your boss owns you. I know I had a nice boss. But I wasn’t being an adult by myself; I didn’t pay my own bills, I didn’t have my own phone contract, everything was done by the *hagwon*. They just subtracted all my things and gave me at the end of the month. They really babied me. And at GEPIK public schools, you’re pretty much on your own. It’s more of a grown-up job compared to *hagwons*. (Interview, 4/25/18)

Despite the matters previously mentioned, “J” mentioned that she did not have any issues with her *hagwon* and that it was an easy job. When asked about whether EPIK or *hagwons* were more stable, “J” reflected:

I think you need to look at the school, and it depends on where you’re working, because they target big cities first, for government budget cuts. GEPIK and EPIK are more likely to cut budget on certain schools, such as high schools and middle schools. *Hagwons* can become bankrupt overnight and give you no notice. (Interview, 4/25/18)

“K” happened to know 3 other people from his small hometown in South Africa that had relocated to Korea to teach, all of whom had gotten EPIK jobs through job recruiting agencies. “K” taught for 4 years only through EPIK, and often expressed his satisfaction and gratefulness for the program:

I would never wish it upon any of my friends to teach at a *hagwon*. I would just tell them that if they don’t get into EPIK, then just try again next year. If you’re willing to risk it, then sure – by all means do it. I just get the general idea that EPIK teachers are the lucky ones. We have far more security than *hagwon* teachers do. For EPIK teachers, there’s a lot of red tape. We are protected, whereas *hagwon* teachers don’t have that level of protection. EPIK program is there to support teachers in crisis if need be. If you’re in a *hagwon*, you have to fight your own battles. (Interview, 4/3/18)

Participant “L” taught for 4 years with the public school system, and at the time of the interview had very recently switched over to a *hagwon*. “L” specifically sought a position with EPIK because she hoped to get hired in Seoul, whereas the *hagwon* jobs that she was offered were elsewhere. Also, “L” noted that EPIK was reputable, “I thought at the start I might as well just try and do the government one, because at least it would be more secure” (Interview, 4/8/18). However, we see that EPIK is not always as secure as people think, as “L” would learn: “I did EPIK for the year, but then when it came time to talk about re-contracting, that’s where all the controversy happened with government funding. Our Spring intake wasn’t allowed to re-sign” (Interview, 4/8/18). Therefore, “L” had to apply through EPIK all over again, in the hopes of being able to keep her job, or obtain something similar nearby; she, however, was rejected. After going through a different job recruiter, she was finally able to obtain another job at public schools, in the form of an English center that teaches public school students. After 3 more years of working for the government, “L” decided to finally make the move to Seoul and give *hagwons* a try. In response to the disorganization and bad management she experienced in the capacity of a public school teacher, she stated, “People think public school is better, but mismanagement & incompetent

people make things worse” (Interview, 4/8/18). “L” ended up being quite pleased with her

*hagwon*:

I’m very happy, substantially happy. The *hagwon* that I’m at now is really relaxed. There are 3 other native teachers there, and we all have our own homeroom kids. A husband and wife run it; the wife has very competent English. So anything I ask, she knows how to answer it. So great communication was in place there. It’s really care-free and relaxed, despite it being a *hagwon*. (Interview, 4/8/18)

“M” first moved to Korea in 2009 to teach for EPIK, using his Master’s degree to get a salary bonus. After 18 months of working at public schools, “M” left Korea and used his EPIK experience to land an ESL-teaching position at a New York university. Following a 5-year hiatus, “M” returned to work at a university in Korea. At the time of the interview, he had been working at universities and private high schools in China for approximately 2 years. “M” expressed how EPIK helped him to get to where he is now:

EPIK helped me a lot. I guess that was my first ESL job. Like I said, I taught writing and composition before, but I never taught ESL. I was just thrown into the deep end of the pool after the 1-week orientation. I always refer to EPIK and the middle school as the ‘front Lines of teaching’. (Interview, 4/11/18)

When asked what he perceived to be the major differences between his EPIK job and that of his *hagwon* counterparts, “M” replied:

*Hagwons* are, by definition, usually after school. That’s a big difference. It’s not that the two don’t mix, it’s just that it’s hard to because, when you’re teaching EPIK, you’re getting up at 7 or 8 in the morning. When you’re teaching *hagwon*, you’re getting up at 11 or 12, or even 1 or 2. What are the differences? I don’t know, because *hagwons* are very different from one another. Well, there could be a little less oversight, in some ways. But then, on the negative side, sometimes those *hagwons*, especially these days, will also be like: “Well, also, can you clean the bathrooms?” or something like that. They kind of try to take advantage of the teachers a little bit. *Hagwons* can be really pushy, and EPIK can only be pushy to an extent, because at the end of the day, it’s a government program. (Interview, 4/11/18)

Participant “N” found a *hagwon* teaching position through the same job recruiter as participant “C”. His peers in South Africa warned against working at *hagwons*; instead, they suggested universities and EPIK. After not being granted an interview with EPIK, “N”

decided to take a risk and move ahead with a *hagwon* post. “N” had a tough experience at a mismanaged *hagwon*, and after nearly a year “N” was fired because he had confronted his employers about their financial dishonesty. Despite this, “N” decided to return to Korea after a 3-month break, and once again work at a *hagwon*, although in a different province and in a slightly different capacity, extending himself to teach kindergarten students this time due to the increasing level in demands for such forms of employment. “I still have faith in the *hagwon* system, and wanted to prove that Avalon was just a bad egg” (Interview, 4/14/18). After describing many bad experiences at his first *hagwon*, “N” was asked if he believed *hagwons* are generally flawed:

Yes, they don’t abide by the contracts & they know how to get away with breaches by loopholes. *Hagwons* don’t ask ESL teachers what would you like in your career, what you want to achieve and how you would like to get there, and what can they do to help and progress. *Hagwon* relationships are like parent/child. There is a lollipop at the end, and that’s the salary. However, some are breaking away from it, and they are the exception. (Interview, 4/14/18)

However, “N” enjoys the position at his current kindergarten *hagwon*. There were no complaints about management or salary issues. “N” summed up the *hagwon*/EPIK paradigm quite effectively: “*Hagwons* have more selection of working and housing. At same time, the government system is a bit more reliable in terms of setting a stable job. It all depends on you” (Interview, 4/14/18).

“O” taught at EPIK for 1 year, and 3 three years at *hagwons*. She explained that her peers and recruiting agency recommended EPIK because it would be easier as a South African to get a job through them, rather than a *hagwon*. After doing a bit of self-research, “O” came across forums that also suggested EPIK, proceeding to state, “They recommended EPIK purely because of vacation days, and you’re more guaranteed with what you’re going to get whereas, when it comes to *hagwons*, you’re not always sure you’re going to get sufficient vacation time” (Interview, 4/12/18). After just a year, “O” was forced to give up

her position at EPIK due to federal budget cuts, just as participants “B”, “J”, and “L” also cited in their interviews. As a result, “O” quickly found employment at a kindergarten *hagwon*, where she enjoyed her “free reign” with the students. However, she would soon feel the wrath of the potential instability of *hagwons* as well when she faced an ordeal where she was hired without being informed that the *hagwon* was planning to close in the next month! Her disgruntled rebuttal sentiment read, “Why hire me when you know you’re going to close? Then gave me just 20 days’ notice!” (Interview, 4/12/18). Unfortunately, “O” seemed to undergo many negative experiences, before finally finding her current position at a quasi-public school as a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade homeroom teacher. When asked why she didn’t just reapply to work at EPIK, “O” stated the following:

I didn’t bother reapplying because I figured that EPIK was a sinking ship. Also, all my friends were staying in the Seoul area, and I knew if were to reapply through EPIK, I would get sent to some rural area. I wanted to be able to select where I wanted to go. Bear in mind that this decision was made before I knew how shit *hagwons* really were. (Interview, 4/12/18)

After having worked at a *hagwon* for 2 years that overworked her, “O” mentioned that *hagwon* life “leads to burnout”, due to long hours and short vacation periods (Interview, 4/12/18). Lastly, “O” mentioned that she had a problem with the entirety of the “*hagwon culture*”. When asked to clarify, “O” explained:

My biggest gripe is that you’re not an actual teacher. You’re just there to entertain the kids and do your little circus act. The same may be said of the EPIK program sometimes, but at least with EPIK you have your classroom and you feel a bit more like a teacher. (Interview, 4/12/18)

### **Career Viability**

Participants were asked whether or not they believe that the *hagwon*- or public school industries are viable options as a career or long-term employment. Twelve out of the 15 participants adamantly stated they did not believe that EPIK or *hagwon* jobs were suitable professional career options, tantamount to an outright dismissal of both in terms of eligibility

for consideration in this regard. The remaining three participants were vague with their “yes” responses, or stated that they could see their positions as a long-term option if certain conditions were met. None of the five exclusively *hagwon* participants responded yes to the answer. The three that responded “yes” were an EPIK teacher (G), and two individuals that taught at both *hagwons* and EPIK (E & J). The most pertinent reasons cited by participants that believed *hagwons* are not a practical long-term choice included a lack of job stability, wage stagnation, absence of upward mobility, and age discrimination. Despite having 18 years of experience in the *hagwon* industry, participant “I” made it very clear that he did not believe *hagwons* are a good idea for long-term employment due to the fact that the job is contingent on the yearly visa status of the teachers. “I” explained that “*hagwons* are year-by-year forms of employment, and so is the visa issued to legitimize such posts. You always need that visa. Making a long-term job depends on a visa” (Interview, 4/15/18). When asked about his opinion whether it is possible to make a career out of a *hagwon* or EPIK job, “I” painted a grim picture by stating the following:

*Hagwon?* No! It can only grow past a certain point. It’s wage-stagnant and there is no pay raise in most instances. It’s always the same and you will stay with the same school. There’s no stability in the *hagwon* industry. Even at public schools, teachers are actual teachers, but the English teachers are not real teachers. They’re just the help. They’re not in unions. They’re second-class citizens. Public school jobs can go a bit longer, but both are risky and there’s no long-term future. There’s no stability in *hagwons* because it’s a business, operating largely on a contract-by-contract or school-by-school basis. Your wage will not go up, so you switch and you start from the bottom. Public school jobs depend on the money as well and at the whim of the government and the education board. Often with EPIK, the school loves you for 3-4 years, but they can’t keep you even if they want to. (Interview, 4/15/18)

Participant “N” also agreed that *hagwon* teaching is not possible as a career:

As an ESL teacher, I personally don’t see it that way. It doesn’t matter how good of a teacher you are, particularly when it comes to a *hagwon* environment and how superficial and image-conscious Korea is, because you are naturally aging; it’s very difficult because they insist that younger is better. It’s paradoxical; this society respects the elderly, but when it comes to foreigners, the element of youth is considered superior. However, if you’re willing to get capital and start your own



*hagwon*, then it's very possible. But not alone, you will need a Korean managerial face alongside you. If you want to build a long-term future here, definitely try and get into something else besides teaching. (Interview, 4/14/18)

EPIK teachers expressed a similar sentiment. Participant "H" had comparable feelings to participant "I" in regards to the issue of job stability, even though the two worked in different fields. "H" had the following to say in regards to EPIK:

There's no permanency to EPIK because it's year-by-year. At any one point the government can cut the funds and next year you don't have the job. I need a more permanent position, but am rather searching for one that would output my ability for a practical term. I don't think that you can make a permanent career out of ESL teaching in Korea. In public schools, there's a cap. I think it's a good introduction to ESL. (Interview, 4/10/18)

Individuals that agreed or acknowledged that it is possible to make a career out of TESOL jobs in Korea were few and part in between. Participant "G" stated that "maybe" it is possible to make a career out of public school jobs in Korea "if you pursue a Master's or PhD and continue to teach abroad (Interview, 4/20/18). Ironically, "G" had decided to move back to the US and teach while pursuing a Master's degree after serving 3 years with EPIK. "E" was employed by a kindergarten/elementary *hagwon*, while simultaneously working on his Master's in TESOL as well. When asked if he believed it was possible to make a long-term career out of *hagwons* and EPIK, "E" replied:

You've got to do your dues in Korea so you can get what you deserve and find a good place. It's possible. The people who have comfortable jobs and are well established have been here 5 years or more, so that's what it takes. The people that are here for a long-term spell are usually married. (Interview, 4/17/18)

Similar to "E", "J" also worked at both *hagwons* and EPIK. "J" and "O" were coworkers at the same private school. However, the foreign teachers working at their school happened to be contracted through EPIK and GEPIK. "J" expressed that EPIK was "feasible" as a long-term career choice as long as the school was like hers: "a private school ran by a public school administration" (Interview, 4/25/18).

### Co-teaching: Ups and Downs

Many participants that worked at EPIK expressed difficulties with their co-teachers. It has been briefly discussed earlier, but let us further explore the personal experiences of hardships and troubles that some of the participants underwent. Despite the perks and benefits of public school employment, an uncooperative co-teacher was often referred to as a “make it or break it” point (I) or “the straw that broke the camel’s back (E). As “I” put it, “all it takes is one bad co-teacher” (Interview, 4/15/18).

Participant “F” was one of the lucky EPIK teachers that did not recall any negative experiences with past co-teachers. In fact, he described them all as “first year teachers who were very hard working” (Interview, 4/17/18).

Participant “E” expressed that the sole reason he didn’t stay in EPIK for longer than the first year was an unpleasant co-teacher. “E” felt that not only was his co-teacher hateful towards him, but neglectful as well: “My main co-teacher never guided me even though it was my first year in Korea. There was no input from other co-teachers as well. Rather, all they did was judge me” (Interview, 4/17/18). Once “E” moved on to the *hagwon* environment, he still had co-teachers, but this time it was a positive experience: “I became closer to my Korean co-teachers than when I was in my middle school (EPIK), because we work closely with each other and we see each other every day. *Hagwons* are smaller operations so coworkers become closer” (Interview, 4/17/18).

Participant “K” was satisfied with his own co-teachers at EPIK, however he expressed discontent at how EPIK dealt with new hires and their unprepared approach towards co-teaching:

EPIK really sold a pipe dream to us, in the sense that it provided us with supposed support and great contacts. Let’s be honest: we never really dealt with situations in our orientation about how to deal with a difficult co-teacher. A lot of these new teachers wouldn’t quite know how to handle a situation where they had a difficult

relationship with a co-teacher. I've never had any problems with my own co-teachers because I'm very malleable, but I know some people don't adapt very well. There was never a strategy in place on how to cope with co-teachers. (Interview, 4/3/18)

We see that not all EPIK teachers had a negative experience with their co-teachers.

EPIK participants suggested that it was truly a hit-or-miss when it came co-teachers. "L" taught in the same city (Jecheon) as "K" during her first year of tenure at EPIK. In regards to co-teaching, "L" had the following to say:

I had 4 co-teachers who had good English, and they were mostly cooperative. Some co-teachers would leave my class as soon as I entered, and some would help a lot. They always made me feel welcome and kept me up-to-date. (Interview, 4/8/19).

The reputation of co-teachers precedes itself; even *hagwon* teachers are aware of the co-teaching struggles. Despite the obstacles faced at the first *hagwon* he worked at, Participant "N" stated because of the presence of co-teachers, he would not have worked at EPIK even if he had the choice. "N" was asked what he believes to be the best part of his kindergarten *hagwon* job:

Not having a co-teacher. They can use their scope and authority to make you do most of the work, and put all the responsibilities on you. They carry favor with the boss due to the fact that they are Korean. (Interview, 4/14/18).

### **Career Paths and the Influence of Experiences**

Participants were asked whether or not they wished to continue working in the TESOL or teaching industry in the near future. Naturally, their personal and professional experiences would influence their decisions. Follow-up questions were asked (see Table 2.1) in order to examine the following: (a) career goals in the distant future, (b) whether or not there was an initial interest in TESOL or education prior to moving to Korea, and (c) whether or not an interest in TESOL and education developed while working in Korea.

Nine of the participants responded that they would like to continue teaching or working in the education field in one way or another, while six participants said they would

not or had already left the teaching industry. Of the nine participants that stated they would like to continue teaching, four had taught in both EPIK and *hagwon*, 3 had taught in just *hagwons*, and two had taught at EPIK. Out of the 6 individuals that stated they would not like to continue teaching, three taught at EPIK, two taught exclusively at *hagwons*, and one individual taught at both types of institutions. Let us examine the individual responses and opinions from the participants in order to better understand how their encounters and circumstances possibly influenced their decision career decisions.

Let's take a look at the individual responses and opinions from the participants in order to better understand how their encounters and circumstances possibly influenced their career decisions. Participant "A" is currently teaching in China and enjoying his job at a university. "A" taught at *hagwons* in Korea and, even though he claimed that the lack of serious teaching in Korean *hagwons* "left a bad taste" in his mouth, he still expressed a desire to continue teaching: "I think I will partly stay in education forever, I don't want to go back to studying" (Interview, 4/18/18). As far as long-term goals, "A" stated that he has already achieved his goal of working at a university but looks forward to owning his own business one day. "A" mentioned having no interest in education prior to moving to Korea, but it did develop along the way while working in Korea (Interview, 4/18/18; Follow up, 3/8/19).

After years of working at EPIK, "B" cited the most compelling reasons for leaving the experience and all of its benefits behind being that he had successfully paid off his loans and had sick relatives who required him to return for assistance in their frailty and recovery. However, "B" mentioned that he would have remained in TESOL if obligations had not forced him to return, "but not in Korea. I would try a year or two in Thailand, or elsewhere. Korea's homogeneous society and attitude irritated me" (Interview, 3/30/18). A year later, "B" was asked about his long-term career goals, and he mentioned working

towards being a law enforcement officer and obtaining a law degree. “B” mentioned having no interest in teaching prior to moving to Korea, but indeed acquiring an interest in it while working in EPIK. “I enjoyed teaching very much, but in the States the salaries are too low for teachers” (Interview, 3/30/18; Follow up, 3/7/19).

“C” worked at *hagwons* for 3 years, and eagerly looked forward to going back to South Africa to pursue his original major of architecture. “C” made it clear that it was not his work environment that steered him away from teaching, “Nothing can keep me in the teaching field. I don’t hate it; I’m neutral. My true potential lies within architectural design” (Interview, 4/13/18). Although “C” did mention developing an interest in teaching while working at a *hagwon*, “Yes, I definitely developed interest while teaching. In my third year I was in a nice environment. I actually had fun teaching there” (Interview, 4/13/18; Follow up, 4/14/19).

“C” went into a *hagwon* job in Korea with very serious intentions in regards to EFL teaching, comprising of a CELTA teaching certificate and 2 years of experience teaching in South America. After 1 year of *hagwon* employment, “D” said the following: “I didn’t find the work in Korea rewarding. I don’t feel I developed professionally. Spending a year primarily babysitting, it stunted my professional development” (Interview, 4/22/18). Upon leaving South Korea, “D” continued to teach ESL in Scotland, but only for 6 months. Low wages and no guaranteed work forced “D” to change his work trajectory. His goal now is to become a “University Enterprise Services Director” and contribute to the improvement of the general human condition”, completely unrelated to teaching and ESL. “D” made it clear that working in Korea influenced this decision, “Frankly, my interest in ESL decreased while in Korea” (Interview, 4/22/18; Follow up, 3/7/19).

Participant “E” has experience in both industries, and is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in TESOL while working in a *hagwon*, and even aims to acquire a PhD in the field. However, “E” does not wish to continue teaching due to “prevailing attitudes in Korea, not because of the industry” (Interview, 4/17/18; Follow up, 3/8/19). “E” expressed wanting to get involved in social work after obtaining a PhD degree.

Participant “F” worked at EPIK and *hagwons*, and went on to start his own business. He mentioned that this was the plan all along, but that both industries helped influence his decision:

Both EPIK and the *hagwon* industry motivated me to start my own business, and each taught me valuable skills. My *hagwon* experience got me ready for the business aspect of it and EPIK got me ready for dealing with crowds and being independent in a foreign country. (Interview, 4/17/18)

“G” worked at public schools, and stated that, although he did not have an initial interest in teaching prior to working in Korea, he developed one in the meantime. Now, his wish is to finish his Master’s degree in TESOL, and “possibly get a PhD and continue to teach abroad for the foreseeable future, at international schools” (Interview, 4/20/18; Follow up, 3/12/19). “G” clarified that EPIK itself did not influence his decision to continue teaching, but rather that the few motivated students that he taught students did.

Participant “H” had no interest in teaching before moving to Korea, but his goal has now become to “teach permanently at a public school or a university as an English teacher” (Interview, 4/10/18; Follow up, 3/7/19). Like many other participants, “H” referred to EPIK as a “stepping stone”. When asked if he would like to stay in TESOL forever, “H” responded: “I would consider this my future job, but once it’s more secure and permanent. EPIK is a good introduction for ESL” (Interview, 4/10/18).

After almost two decades of teaching in Korean *hagwons*, “I” believes it is time to move on and teach in a different country. “I” had no interest in teaching English before

moving to Korea, but developed one along the way. Participant “I” states that he wants to finally leave Korea because he believes that things have gotten worse in the 18 years that he has been there. “It used to be like they were gambling on the teachers they hired, but now teachers are gambling on the jobs they take” (Interview, 4/15/18). “I” also went on to explain his cynicism towards the *hagwon* industry:

Initially, in the first few years, I developed some interest and did look at some materials. But once I settled into a groove and saw the *hagwon* industry and how it was pretty static, my interest in professional development waned. (Interview, 4/15/18; Follow up, 3/8/19)

Participant “J” was one of 2 participants who did not have a specific career goal in mind. “J” worked in both *hagwons* and public schools, and stated that she would continue to work at her job a few more years. Her job satisfaction was evident, “I love my jobs. I love teaching camps. At GEPIK, I’ve never had a manager breathing down my neck” (Interview, 4/25/18). “J” did not have an interest before moving to Korea, but stated that it developed along the way.

“K” explained that his Korean endeavor was nearing its end and that he would not be pursuing any future teaching jobs. This was not due to any sort of satisfaction after having worked at EPIK for 4 years, but rather the fact that his plan was “nearing its end” and him and his wife were simply ready to return to their home country and buy a house. “K” actually now wishes to study engineering; it seems that a drastic change was made in his goals:

I actually studied teaching with the goal of teaching in Korea, and yes I enjoyed my experience there. Contrary to my first two answers, teaching is no longer a career focus of mine. It is a job while I refocus on how to better something for myself career-wise that will see me into my old age. I want to look into studying electrical engineering. (Interview, 4/3/18; Follow up, 3/7/19)

Participant “L” enjoyed her position at her new *hagwon*, after some hardships with EPIK and GEPIK. “L” stated that she would continue teaching for the next couple of years, “as long as I can be at a decent institution” (Interview, 4/8/18). “L” stated that she was very

happy in her *hagwon* due to the fact that *hagwons* give more choice and opportunity over your quality of life - and that her apartment and location pleased her. When asked about her long-term career goal, “L” said: “I don’t have one” (Interview, 4/8/18; Follow up, 3/8/19).

“M” taught in EPIK public schools prior to teaching in a university there and, before he moved to Korea, he taught composition. Therefore, he was already interested in pedagogy prior to the move. After EPIK, “M” also continued to teach ESL/EFL in the US and China. I stated: “It’s fair to say that I developed an interest in teaching ESL while in Korea” (Interview, 4/11/18; Follow up, 3/8/19). However, “M” does not want to continue teaching, but rather wishes to pursue professional journalism and being able to support himself solely through writing and publishing. Along the way, he went on to grow dispassionate for teaching ESL, stating: “I doubt I will stay in ESL. The mechanics of language don’t interest me as much as the compositional aspects. It feels like endlessly teaching uninteresting topics” (Interview, 4/11/18).

Participant “N” acquired a TEFL certificate before moving to Korea in addition to two Bachelor’s degrees (one in Marketing through a commerce route and one in English Literature via a Liberal Arts route), as well as pursuing a Master’s in TESOL, while employed at a *hagwon*. “N” wishes to become an international English literature professor. “N” was the most dedicated participant when it came to TESOL:

Teaching here in Korea has definitely engendered my pedagogical and research interests. As an antecedent factor, I taught English as a second language to Chinese and Taiwanese students online before coming to Korea, which also furthered my ESL roots. (Interview, 4/14/18; Follow up, 3/8/19)

“N” went through a hurdle of difficulties at the first *hagwon* that he worked at, yet courageously never up on the TESOL industry:

I realized that the *hagwon* system is something people hate. They make people’s lives hell. The Labor Board takes too long to intervene. But it made know that I’m a good student and my number one motivation was studying ESL. (Interview, 4/14/18)



“O” had taught in both industries, and for now her long-term goal is to teach at international schools. “O” had experience in teaching before taking an EPIK job in Korea, and she expressed that her interest in teaching also grew along the way. However, she was not particularly fond of TESOL. “O” stated: “I like teaching, but not specifically ESL. I like traveling, so maybe ESL will have to do. It would have to be an international school” (Interview, 4/12/18). For participant “O”, traveling seemed to be the biggest motivating factor for putting up with the hardships of the *hagwon* industry and the instability of Korean public school systems.

Table 2.1

*Career Goals and Interest*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>EPIK/Hagwon/ Both</b>	<b>Career Goals</b>	<b>Initial Interest in ESL or Education</b>	<b>Developed interest in ESL or Education in Korea</b>
A	<i>Hagwon</i>	Continue to work in university & start a business	No	Yes
B	EPIK	Become a law enforcement officer & obtain law degree	No	Yes
C	<i>Hagwon</i>	Become an architect	No	Yes
D	<i>Hagwon</i>	University Enterprise Services Director	Yes	No
E	Both	Ph. D. in TESOL & social work	Yes	Yes
F	Both	Start a business	No	Yes
G	EPIK	Teach at an international school	No	Yes
H	EPIK	Teach ESL permanently at a public school or university	No	Yes
I	<i>Hagwon</i>	Continue with teaching ESL but leave Korea	No	Yes
J	Both	Continue with EPIK, doesn't have long-term goal	No	Yes
K	EPIK	Become an electrical engineer	Yes	Yes
L	Both	Continue with hagwon, doesn't have long-term goal	No	Yes
M	EPIK	Become a successful journalist	Yes	Yes
N	<i>Hagwon</i>	Become an international English literature professor	Yes	Yes
O	Both	Teach at an international school	Yes	Yes

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### Main Idea

The main focus of this study was to collect data in a genuinely and earnest manner, focusing on gleaning qualitative data via conducting in-depth interviews with 15 participants who had experience in the Korean private English academies (*hagwons*) and/or the public school system in Korea (EPIK) regarding their professional and personal experiences. Findings from the study show the job satisfaction of native English teachers are varied, depending on personal experience as well as the place of employment. The stereotypes surrounding *hagwons* and EPIK, the specific goal or career-choice, and prior interest in pedagogy, all affect the individual's perception of fulfillment for the job. This study aims to add to TESOL and pedagogical research literature, qualitative data analyses and descriptive findings regarding the TESOL industry of a country that many participants referred to as a "stepping-stone" for further English-teaching career paths. These experiences are worth noting, considering that in 2011 the Korean Ministry of Education hired a total 25,000 native English-speaking teachers, and South Korean households invested over \$18 billion in private education (*hagwons*) in 2013 (Lee, 2018). Many of these individuals go on to pursue TESOL as a permanent career path; 9 out of 15 of the participants in this study indicated a desire in pursuing teaching in the foreseeable future. The results of study hopefully help us to better understand the conditions and circumstances that influence the decision of NESTs to continue or discontinue a future in the TESOL industry. The Korean market is a baseline for many inexperienced and first-time TESOL educators. Therefore, it is imperative to look at the personal experiences of a sample of individuals and gain insight into the details of what is the premier favored option for those considering a future in the industry.

It was hoped that, through conducting ethnographic documentations of personal experiences, the following main research questions would be addressed:

1. What professional and personal experiences undergone whilst working as a private academy (*hagwon*) English teacher in South Korea would ultimately serve to influence a continued or discontinued career in teaching?
2. What professional and personal experiences gained while working as public school (EPIK) English teacher in South Korea influenced a continued or discontinued career in teaching?
3. What are the main differences between *hagwon* and public school employment, on both a professional- and personal level?
4. In which type of workplace is there more job satisfaction: *hagwons* or public schools?
5. Are *hagwons* and EPIK a viable long-term career option?

### **Summary of the Findings**

As far as the personal experiences of participants went, it showed that many individuals moved to Korea for similar reasons; influenced by stories of friends and acquaintances regarding promising jobs in South Korea, the prospect of traveling and venture, wanting to pursue further academic objectives, and continuing an existing interest in education and teaching stood out as the most common lures. Some of the experiences and rationale for leaving home were unique to a particular nationality; out of the five South Africans that were interviewed, three indicated that they left their home countries for reasons of economic instability and unemployment, which could also be supplemented by a need to reside in safer country as well, given how the crime rate of South Korea is far less than that endemic to South Africa (C, J, N).

When it came to the professional experiences of participants, there were a variety of parallel themes regarding negative work experiences. For many *hagwon* employees (or individuals that chose EPIK over *hagwons*), the instability of the private business sector was a worrying factor. Although four of the public school teachers (B, K, L, O) experienced job-stability difficulties as well, they were laid-off or had to change schools due to governmental allocation of spending. However, this still did not subtract from the general level of consensus and informed speculation across most participants that EPIK jobs were harder to get, more stable, had better benefits, and were overall far preferable to *hagwon* jobs. As one particular *hagwon* employee participant, namely “P”, “EPIK is the premier job, and I recommend it. Many EPIK teachers become full-fledged teachers in other countries” (Interview, 4/15/18). However, opinions are heavily varied in regards to this topic; 3 out of the 5 *hagwon*-only teachers preferred to keep their jobs and would not have switched to EPIK if given the choice (C, L, N). All three of these individuals mentioned that they believed EPIK teachers to have too much “desk-warming” (also referred to as aimless free time spent fulfilling office hours unproductively) and potentially dreadful experiences with co-teachers. As participant “F” put it, it’s a real “luck of the draw” when picking between *hagwons* and EPIK, and that “you’re comparing apples to oranges” (Interview, 4/17/18).

Overall personal experiences of participants were positive, considering 10 out of the 15 individuals were still residing in South Korea. A great deal of the participants stated that they stayed in Korea because of friendships and social connections, an abundance of fun recreational opportunities, decent salaries, and the opportunity to travel. “H” planned on staying in Korea for just 2 years, but that turned into 4 because:

Korea is a country that people have strong opinions about, both good and bad and, as a foreigner it’s a very easy country to live in if you’re in the public education system. There’s always somewhere to go and something to do. It’s very convenient.  
(Interview, 4/10/18)

*Hagwon* employees were no different. “A” mentioned staying for 3 years because “I met a lot of friends, and my best friend was living in the town nearby. They were also nice to me and gave me pay raises” (Interview, 4/18/18). According to Alpaugh, the top three reasons *hagwon* teachers stay in Korea are the money, the work hours, and the simple need for work (2015). *Hagwon* employees tend to work afternoon and evenings, rather than the daytime work of public school teachers. Some chose to remain in the *hagwon* industry because there was more freedom and less oversight from co-teachers and administrators; *hagwon* teachers mentioned having freedom of curriculum development yet not needing to conduct extensive, time-consuming lesson planning. For many it is an easy job that does not require much preparation and prerequisite knowledge. However, former *hagwon* teachers “A” and “D” both mentioned feeling like a “babysitter” while teaching children at *hagwons*. “O” compared *hagwon* teaching to a “circus act”. Only a single EPIK teacher made the baby-sitting analogy of teaching; “B” stated: “I felt like a glorified baby-sitter at times” (Interview, 4/30/18). Interestingly enough, 5 of the participants (C, E, F, G, H) mentioned that students actually learn more in *hagwons* than in public schools. The reasoning behind that possibly being that parents have to pay for *hagwon* attendance, therefore focusing and is emphasized more. Also, in public schools English is merely one of many subjects, while an English *hagwon*’s sole objective is English acquisition. For his Master’s thesis, participant “G” conducted a study and stated the following: “I did a survey in Daejeon of 800 students, and 75% said we learn more in *hagwon* when compared with public school” (Interview, 4/20/18).

Participants were asked if they believed it was possible to make a career or long-term employment out of *hagwons* or public schools. Only three (viz. E, G, J) out of the 15 participants stated it was possible, but even then they believed that such a possibility was only conditional and not an absolute or automatic given. “E” mentioned that good *hagwons*

or public schools could be found for long-term employment, but a person would have to pay their dues and search hard. “E” himself does not plan on staying in the *hagwon* industry permanently. “G” seemed unconfident in his response and stated that it is “maybe” possible to make EPIK a career, but only if you go on to obtain a Master’s or PhD degree. However, “G” left EPIK after 3 years in order to pursue a Master’s degree and find employment in international schools. Lastly, “J” mentioned that EPIK is a possible career route only if someone were to find employment at a school similar to her own, namely that of a private school managed by the public school program. Therefore, we see contradictory advice and opinions in regards to this matter, and it can be concluded that neither EPIK nor *hagwons* are a viable permanent career path without being supplemented by an external form of career development support. As participant “D” put it, “hagwons are a stepping stool for getting more qualified in teaching and ESL” (Interview, 4/22/18).

Although a low number of the participants could see English academies or Korean public schools as a viable long-term career, 9 out of 15 still stated that they would continue a future in academia, teaching, or TESOL. Out of these 9 individuals, 3 were those that only had *hagwon* experience, 2 only had EPIK experience, and the remaining 4 had worked at both. When looking at who was discouraged at teaching, 3 out of the 6 participants that did not want to pursue a future in teaching were EPIK-only teachers, 2 had only worked at *hagwons*, and the remaining individual had worked at both kinds of places. It is possibly to say that individuals who work at both EPIK and *hagwons* are more likely to continue in the teaching field. However, it is difficult and there is insufficient evidence to make a solid differentiation between EPIK and *hagwons* when trying to conclude which work environment encourages or discourages teachers in their career paths. As an individual who wished to continue working at her *hagwon* and had worked in both industries, “L” put it nicely:

“Comparing *hagwon* with EPIK is apples to oranges. It all depends on if you enjoy teaching kids and English. Both have their pros and cons” (Interview, 4/8/18). Perhaps the individuals that tough it out in South Korea and take the risk to switch between *hagwons* and public schools are the ones that are more determined to stick with the teaching industry.

### **Limitations**

The actual data collection of this study presented no problems. It was hoped that by interviewing 5 participants that worked at *hagwons*, 5 that worked at EPIK, and 5 that worked at both, there would be a larger variety of productive data to analyze and make assumptions and draw conclusions from. However, the challenge with doing so proved to provide too much of a variation in responses and data, which is ultimately disadvantageous and often impractical. Had there only been an equal split between *hagwon*-only and EPIK-only participants, conclusive inferences would have been more feasible. It was not difficult to find similarities and differences amongst the professional and personal experiences of *hagwon* and EPIK teachers. However, it was troublesome when it came to the issue of which work environment influenced career path decisions. For example, 9 versus 6 individuals stated that they would pursue a pedagogical career path. However, not only is the difference insubstantial, but it is also difficult to logically break it down. Due to the ethnographic nature of the interviews, personal experiences were more of an applicable source of data to make deductions from. This is why the results were broken down person-by-person, and presented in the form of numerous quotes and paraphrases. It was also hoped that there would be a more equal number of male and female participants, rather than 12 men and 3 women. Personal experiences and descriptors may have been more empirically diverse with a more heterogeneous pool of participants.

## **Future Research**

If allocated more time and resources, future research could incorporate other teaching positions in Korea, not just *hagwon* and EPIK NESTs. More research aimed at comparing nonnative English teachers or university English teachers with *hagwon* and EPIK educators could give us a more comprehensive and extensive interpretation of what it takes to continue in TESOL pedagogy, and the differences of life and work gratification.

The personal accounts of participants in this study could also be used in future studies regarding commonalities and distinctions between educational frameworks of other countries, extending further than just South Korea. It would also be interesting to explore more in depth the teachers who go back to Korea a second or third time (Such as participant “M”) after periods of unemployment or reexamination of choices in their home countries.



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## Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

### Consent to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study about the experiences and occupational decisions of Native-English speaking teachers in public schools vs. English academies in South Korea.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in interviews conducted through Skype and/or social media such as Facebook and telephone conversations.

Benefits of the research: A wider array of beneficial information regarding Native-English speaking teachers will be available to ESL/EFL instructors world-wide. Thousands of English teachers living in Korea and anyone considering employment there or elsewhere abroad may find interest in this data.

Risks and discomforts: I do not anticipate any possible potential risks associated with the research I plan on conducting. The nature of it and its results are and will be harmless in any way I can think of. There is a possibility that some individuals may be encouraged or discouraged from teaching ESL in South Korea, which will naturally have personal risk involved.

The interviews may be discomforting at times because of their length and extensiveness. I will give as many breaks as needed and allow for them to be conducted at different times, in order to avoid such discomforts.

Data collected will remain confidential. Data will be reported and presented in aggregate (group) form or with no more than two descriptors presented together. Responses will be kept strictly confidential; your name will not be disclosed nor will identified direct quotes be used. During the interview you may refuse to answer any questions. After the completion of the interviews, you will receive your transcribed interviews. At this point, if you wish to make expand responses or note omissions to the transcription, you may].

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Mohammad Panahi (mpanahi@stcloudstate.edu) or my advisor Dr. James Robinson (jrobinson@stcloudstate.edu) Results of the study can be requested from the researcher.

Your completion of the survey indicates that you are at least 18 years of age and your consent to participation in the study.

## **Appendix B: Ethnographic Interview Guide**

(These are examples and a general guideline of interview questions that I asked my participants. Further questions were conducted as the interviews progressed and responses became more complicated and in-depth).

### *Grand Tour questions:*

1. Could you describe a typical day in Korea at work?
2. Could you describe a typical day at a Korean public school?
3. Could you describe a typical day at a Korean English language academy?
4. What kinds of tasks or activities were difficult/rewarding/enjoyable for you?

### *Detail Through Questions:*

1. Could you tell me what happened from the moment you arrived on your first day in South Korea at your place of work?
2. Could you tell me what happened when you met your students and coworkers for first time?
3. Could you describe your weekly schedule/school calendar/work schedule?
4. If you got sick or had an accident, what would you do? Who would you contact if you needed assistance (with the language, etc.)?

### *Experience Questions:*

1. Could you tell me about some of your experiences?
2. Could you tell me how you made friends with other expats in Korea or at work?
3. Could you describe some activities you did with your students/co-workers?
4. Could you tell me about what you did on holidays/vacations while you were teaching in South Korea?
5. Could you tell me about what you did on weekends/in your free time?
6. Could you describe one of your most interesting experiences?
7. Could you describe one of your most challenging experiences and explain how you dealt with it?
8. What motivated you to stay longer in South Korea?
9. What motivated you to leave and stop teaching in South Korea?
10. What needed to be changed in order to make you want to stay longer and teach in South Korea?
11. What are some of the reasons you decided to stay longer than 1 year in South Korea?

(\*The following questions are for individuals who worked at both public schools and English academies).

12. In which work setting did you feel more at ease, EPIK (public schools) or hagwons (English academies)? Why?
13. Could you describe the biggest differences between EPIK and hagwon?

14. Do you feel that if you had continued your employment with EPIK rather than hagwons, you would have had a different experience in South Korea?
15. What are some of the benefits and pros of working at EPIK?
16. What are some of the benefits and pros of working at a hagwon?
17. Could you describe some of the cons of working at Korean public school?
18. Could you describe some of the cons of working at a hagwon?

*Misc. Questions:*

1. Could you tell me more about your friends during your experience in Korea? Was there a particular group of people you spent more time with?
2. What are some idioms or expressions you learned?
3. What did you and other expats discuss the most? What were your biggest troubles or concerns?
4. What changed about your personality and attitude after your teaching experiences?

## Appendix C: IRB Expedited Review Approval Signature Page



### Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

**Name:** Mohammad Panahi  
**Email:** mpanahi@stcloudstate.edu

## IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: **Expedited Review-1**

**Project Title:** Epik or Hagwon? Career Choice in South Korea

**Advisor:** James Robinson

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

-Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

**IRB Chair:**

Dr. Benjamin Witts  
Associate Professor- Applied Behavior Analysis  
Department of Community Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy

**IRB Institutional Official:**

Dr. Latha Ramakrishnan  
Interim Associate Provost for Research  
Dean of Graduate Studies

#### OFFICE USE ONLY

**SCSU IRB#** 1798 - 2283

**1st Year Approval Date:** 3/16/2018

**1st Year Expiration Date:** 3/15/2019

**Type:** Expedited Review-1

**2nd Year Approval Date:**

**2nd Year Expiration Date:**

**Today's Date:** 3/19/2018

**3rd Year Approval Date:**

**3rd Year Expiration Date:**