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# Hagwons, Future Careers in TESL? A Qualitative Study about the Career Choices of the Multiple Year Private School English Teachers in South Korea

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**Hagwons, Future Careers in TESL? A Qualitative Study about the Career  
Choices of the Multiple Year Private School English  
Teachers in South Korea**

by

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A Thesis

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### **Abstract**

Few research studies have been published in the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) research literature concerning the work environment and career paths for Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in private schools or academies in South Korea. Termed in Korean as “hagwons” these schools, unlike the publicly funded program English Program in Korea (EPIK), operate with profit as their primary goal. Hagwons involve several work place risks, such as contract violations, conflicts with Korean employers and staff, and exhaustingly long teaching hours.

Although at times a difficult work environment, some have spent several years teaching English in a hagwon, and a few have pursued more certified TESL careers. The current research primarily documents the personal and professional experiences of hagwon NESTs who have taught in that system for two years or more, and asks what type(s) of experiences support a continued or discontinued career in TESL.

Qualitative results from 15 demographic surveys and open question interviews indicated that the majority of these teachers discontinued their TESL career after their experiences. Instead, participants either entered other careers within the field of education, or discovered different career goals as a result of their individual experiences. All 15 participants viewed living and working in South Korea as valuable for financial gain, cultural immersion, establishment of close interpersonal relationships, or as a time of self-reflection after graduating from university and before pursuing a career path.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

An article featured in *Time* magazine concerning the educational ideology of South Korea stated that “in 2010, 74% of all students were engaged in some kind of private after-school instruction, at an average cost of \$2,600 per student for the year (Ripley, 2011). This private after-school instruction takes place in an academy, or what is termed in Korean, a *hagwon*. Unlike their public school counter-part, the English Program in Korea (EPIK), which places native English speaking teachers (NESTs) into teaching positions throughout the public school system, most hagwons operate with profit as their primary goal (Griffith, 2010; Hudson, 2009; Ripley, 2013).

A perusal through one of the most often used ESL teaching job boards, Dave’s ESL Café (2016), showcases a seemingly endless scroll down of attractive and readily available hagwon positions. The recruitment site gone2Korea.com, just one of the many private recruiting agencies in South Korea hired by and acting on behalf of hagwon owners, claims that there are about 12,000 NESTs teaching in thousands of private schools all over Korea (2014).

A scant list of requirements is necessary to become a hagwon NEST; just a four year degree, native English speaking ability, and citizenship from one of the English speaking countries of the world (Carless, 2006; EPIK, 2016; Gone2Korea, 2014). This, coupled with a list of promises by recruiters such as paying off college debt, gaining valuable teaching experience, learning another culture, and affordable travel lure many first time NESTs into this interesting and potentially frustrating area of unconventional Teaching English as a

Second Language (TESL) abroad (Park English, 2006; TeachAwayInc, 2015; Dave's ESL Café, 2016; Footprints Recruiting, 2016).

Although these promises may be fulfilled while teaching in a hagwon, few first time teachers realize the many potential drawbacks both professionally and personally to this type of work. The discussion forums on davesesl.com are often used by past and current hagwon teachers to post warnings and complaints about various schools. Such warnings should be taken with a grain of salt, as disputes about contracts, work ethic, and educational ideologies could be due to cultural misunderstandings, and ignorance of the business first motive of a hagwon. However, some are valid.

The site for the United States Embassy in Korea describes hagwons in a more impartial manner than that of an online anonymous complaint board. The description of downsides to this work environment are; hagwon bankruptcy leading to loss of employment, contract violations concerning nationalized benefits like health care and pension, withholding or deducting pay, employers unlawfully holding teachers' passports, the inability to quit or transfer jobs without on average six months notice, poor or unsafe living arrangements, employer and/or employee bullying, parental threats or bribes to teachers, and age, race, and gender discrimination (Embassy of the United States, Seoul, Korea, 2015).

Even if these situations never occur during a teacher's contracted year with a hagwon, the nature of the work alone is daunting enough to make some engage in what the teaching expat community in Korea has termed a "midnight run". Sometimes a literal midnight excursion to the airport, a "run" or "dash" is executed in order to quit and return home before the six month standard leave time (Expat, 2009; Griffith, 2015). Long, uninterrupted teaching



hours in a 12-hour work day, a 6-day-a-week work schedule, little to no teacher training nor time for lesson planning, inadequate/invalid student placement tests, coming to terms with the business first angle which results in lies to parents in order to retain enrollment, limited resources, micromanaging, distrust from Korean colleagues, and an inability to handle student behavior issues force many to quit. If teachers do not quit before the contracted year is out, then they at least never return for a second or third year. The researcher speaks from experience, having witnessed a teacher turn-over rate equal to a “midnight run” every 4 months during a 2-year consecutive contract with one hagwon.

**Explanation of the research focus and purpose.** Although difficult for one reason or another, teaching in a hagwon is certainly of great value to many, if not to spur a more certified and pedagogically aware career in TESL, then to mark as valuable personal and professional experiences for other career paths. The primary goal of this current research is to report the experiences of hagwon teachers, and fill a void in the literature concerning the many alternative routes toward a teaching career. It is important to understand just how difficult and rewarding this experience can be, and that it can be a useful training ground to build resiliency, flexibility, and a willingness to take calculated risks for the sake of personal and professional advancement. Such an examination of this particular teaching community should be added to the body of TESL research, for those 12,000 NESTs employed in hagwons may result in an influx of new and unusually experienced individuals hoping to enter TESL graduate and/or teacher certification programs in their home countries. The second purpose of this research is to delve into the qualitative data of personal and professional stories through an open question interview collection system, and discover some commonalities, either

among the type of person, the type of experience, or a combination there-of, which results in a certified career in TESL.

**Main research questions.** After the data has been collected and analyzed for common themes, and possible connections are established between experiences and future teaching/other careers, the main overall research questions to answer are as follows:

1. What personal experiences, living as a K-12 private (hagwon) English teacher in South Korea for two years or more, support a continued or discontinued career in TESL?
2. What professional experiences, working in the K-12 private (hagwon) English schools in South Korea for two years or more, support a continued or discontinued career in TESL?

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

Extensive research on the topic of cultural awareness and sensitivity is a primary point to explore in order to understand the experiences of hagwon teachers, or anyone teaching abroad in a culturally and linguistically immersive setting. A review of the literature yielded limited research specifically addressing the multiple-year hagwon teacher, defined here as anyone who has completed two, year-long contracts or more, and their career pursuits. However, there is a plethora of data found in online discussion forums and recruitment websites about the experience from other past and present expat teachers in South Korea.

The experience of student teachers' practicum abroad, and government funded programs such as EPIK have been discussed as part of a wide spectrum of ways to begin a teaching career. Other non-traditional experiences include the Peace Corp, and other volunteer based teaching opportunities within the construct of a "gap year" or break between education and current career endeavors (CIEE, 2015; Griffith, 2015). Additionally, the motivation to continue or discontinue a career in education will be examined through the lens of traditionally trained pre-service and experienced certified teachers.

These topics of culture, more information about the EPIK and hagwon work environments, other government/collegiate operated programs, volunteer based teaching opportunities, and teaching motivation will be reported. All create a base for understanding the hagwon teaching environment, what it is like for NESTs to live and work in a culture where English is not the dominant language, and how those experiences may transform themselves into a TESL career path.

## Understanding Culture

According to Wang and Lin (2013), if a teacher is to have a successful experience they should ideally develop the “language awareness, skills, and cultural competence [needed] in order to remove communication barriers and bridge the teacher-student cultural rift” (p. 13). Culture is defined here through a sociolinguistic perspective, as “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members...such knowledge is socially acquired...culture therefore is the know-how that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living” (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 10). Such knowledge is sometimes acquired by hagwon teachers through a perusal of travel guide books.

*Culture shock: A survival guide to customs and etiquette, Korea* (Vegdahl & Hur, 2008) is one particular book that presents the typical short list of information found in most guides; a brief history outline, festivals, food, traditional clothing, popular culture, and a simple introduction to the language and levels of politeness. However this guide, unlike most pocket book travel companions, delves slightly into what it could mean culturally to work in Korea as an English teacher. They have stated that although respected in Korean culture traditionally, “teachers at [hagwons], while still valued, are not conferred with as much respect” (Vegdahl & Hur, 2008, p. 218). The guide also provides valuable information about how a contract is viewed in Korean work culture. That is particularly important to be aware of before accepting a teaching contract with a hagwon, as contract disputes between NESTs and hagwon employers can occur repeatedly throughout the contracted year. They have claimed that “a [written] contract is not as important as the interpersonal [and verbal] relationship between the two parties” (Vegdahl & Hur, 2008, p. 210). Therefore what is written and signed

to in a contract, may be verbally disputed or revoked at any time based on the relationship which evolves over the course of the NEST's year with that hagwon.

Although valuable and important in order to understand conflicts which may arise, such as issues with contract violations and conflicts with collaborating NESTs, and Korean employers or teachers, the information provided in most travel guides typically presents Korean culture in a "check list" manner (Lange & Paige, 2003). Such a view of culture, as a list of differences, may actually breed racism through misunderstanding, insensitivity, and a lack of deeper cultural awareness, not only of the "other" but of a NEST's own cultural background.

Another method that first year teachers may use to gain insight into the culture, as well as the day to day living and teaching experience, is to peruse through Dave's ESL Café (2016), the online source for many hagwon jobs. There are several forums with postings by other supposedly "more experienced" expat teachers on everything from how to go through the visa process, how to switch jobs in-between contracts, how to undertake a "midnight run", dealing with culture shock, and even the shock of returning home and being faced with the dreaded "what now" scenario.

However, few postings are recent. Most start in 2003, do not have any other more current postings, and therefore would not necessarily reflect the truth of the ever fluctuating hagwon market. Although one post, asking for advice on how to deal with the shock of such a different work environment, could be what some teachers' experience any time during their teaching year(s).

This teacher posted:

I've been here for about 4 months, I have a fairly open mind, I've traveled in Asia before, but I've had some bad luck since I've been here, the type where people keep saying to me, it's ok if you go home, I would have long ago if I were you. My first hagwon went out of business, and in a panic I signed with [another school], which is not great either. I'm pretty homesick, but I'm not a quitter...I came here to pay off loans and for the experience, but...I'm pretty unhappy only because the Korean teachers are so petty and malicious. (Anonymous, 2003)

Other postings in these forums are not nearly as dire. There are a few advocates posting in favor of hagwon work culture, stating that it allows teachers more freedom in the classroom to design their own lessons, the potential for more money, and the small class sizes make the trial and error period of inexperienced teaching more manageable (Hudson, 2009; Park English, 2006; Sterling, 2016).

### **EPIK versus Hagwon**

Before moving on to other discussions about experiences and cultural understanding, more should be stated about the EPIK program and how it differs from that of a hagwon. Many have touted through their online blogs and through Dave's ESL Café, that EPIK is a better professional experience than a hagwon. TeachAwayInc (2015) claims that the pay can go up to 2.7 million won a month depending on years of prior teaching experience, certifications, and education. EPIK, like most hagwons, provides free housing, round trip airfare, national health insurance and pension plans, and an additional months pay upon successful completion of a year contract. It is also claimed that there is more room for advancement, and there are five weeks of paid vacation, unlike most hagwons where only 2 weeks are offered (EPIK, 2016). Additionally, the issues stated before with hagwons, such as contract violations, withholding or deducting pay, and school foreclosure, do not occur within

EPIK (Griffith, 2010). The main differences between the two experiences, based on blog postings and school reviews on recruitment websites and ESL job forums, appears to be classroom environment and teacher interaction.

Within EPIK, one teaches with a Korean co-teacher, who may occasionally be present in the classroom assisting the NEST with the class. However, some NESTs have complained that their co-teachers are rarely in the classroom. Sometimes there is a lack of communication between teachers about the lesson plan or classroom schedule, and NESTs feel little responsibility for the lessons being taught (Footprints Recruiting, 2015; Gone2Korea, 2014; Sterling, 2016). The class sizes in EPIK are much larger, with up to 40 students per class in some schools, whereas in a hagwon it is possible to have classes no larger than 15 students (CIEE, 2015).

With a smaller class, and no directly involved Korean co-teacher, rather a Korean colleague who interacts with the students' parents on behalf of the NEST, may teach half of an English class or their own Korean, Art, or Music classes, NESTs have far more control over how to teach the material. Except, they do not have more control over curriculum. This is already pre-set and not expected to be deviated from, even by a page, for this is essentially the education package being sold to the parents, not the NEST's chosen approach to teach that curriculum to the students (Sterling, 2016).

Another large difference is the number of other NESTs, who will essentially be potential friendships. In a hagwon such as Korea POLY School (KPS), Chungdahm English (CDI), Sogang Language Program (SLP), or Avalon, all large private school chains found throughout Korea, it is possible to work with up to 20 other NESTs (Gone2Korea, 2014).

Most EPIK placements are singular positions. This, coupled with the larger availability of hagwon job positions, and the smaller class sizes, seem to be the primary reasons for why teachers choose hagwons over EPIK, when EPIK appears to be a more stable financial and professional work environment. As to which is better, it truly depends on the person and the experience. If one enjoys the control and freedom of small class sizes and a large NEST collaborative teaching environment, then hagwons are preferable. However one must also understand the level of risk involved, as previously discussed, with that teaching route as well.

### **Experiences in EPIK and Understanding Educational Ideology**

Lacking a deeper cultural awareness, not understanding of how hagwon businesses and EPIK are operated, and lacking knowledge of differing education ideology are possibly the most detrimental to the experience of NESTs in hagwons. The potential effects of these misunderstandings have been reported within the EPIK program. Culture clashes between NESTs and Korean co-teachers concerning differences in educational ideology, work load allotment, and disciplinary measures have occurred (Carless, 2006). The lack of self-knowledge too, impacts these clashes and was felt by pre-service teachers participating in a short term practicum in Korea.

There they stated the misconceptions held before the start of their program; such as the assumption that their students would be more respectful, more excited to learn, or somehow “easier” to teach than students in the United States (Oh & Nussli, 2014). However, one participant in this study, “Melissa”, learned from her experiences, and Oh and Nussli (2014) discovered that she was able to reflect on a situation that she, as a white middle-class female, may never have had to experience in the United States; that of being the minority.



They stated:

Throughout her cultural diary, Melissa describes her recurring experiences of what it means to be different than the majority. The experience helps her to empathize with the challenges that ELLs experience in the United States. [She stated], ‘we found this place called Caffee Bene and we assumed that it was a coffee shop. When we went in, people literally just stopped in their tracks and stared at us for a good five minutes. It was one of the most uncomfortable things I’ve ever experienced’. (Oh & Nussli, 2014, p. 7)

Understanding the cultural connotations of education and work ideology is particularly important for teachers in a hagwon context, where teaching may begin as soon as one disembarks from the plane. Such ideological differences may include; teacher versus learner centered instruction, differing historical and religious contexts of education, view of the teacher as unquestioned expert not educational guide, emphasis on memorization versus analytical skill, and collaborative versus individualistic endeavor (Hudson, 2009; Slethaug, 2007).

In addition to understanding these ideologies, one must also realize the political and economic nature of education in South Korea. NESTs may enter a hagwon without knowledge of the “currently widespread examination-driven educational culture in Asian countries...[where] it is generally believed that the greater the information retained, or tasks performed, the greater their achievement” (Hudson, 2009, p. 5). Such a socio-political reality is one of the main causes for hagwon existence, as a means of capitalizing on this test-driven competition where English is often the perceived key for education and work advancement (Ripley, 2013).

Understanding the high role that education, especially English language education, plays in South Korea was made clear to a group of pre-service teachers conducting their

student teacher practicum in Korea through Northeastern Illinois University's Student Teachers and Korean Experience (STAKE) program. The program started in "2009...[and] over sixty students have participated since its inception. After completing their five month internship in South Korea, many interns signed up to teach [with] EPIK" (Landerholm & Chacko, 2013, p. 7). During their time in the program these students realized that English language teaching begins in the public school system as early as third grade, with a few schools starting as early as Kindergarten, and that a large number of their students also attended several private academies after school (Landerholm & Chacko, 2013).

### **Culture Shock and Self-Reflection**

Coming to terms with the difference in these deeper levels of culture; the work, education, and socio-political constructs which impact daily living, may occur while experiencing culture shock. Oh and Nussli (2014) claim this happens in four stages; incubation, where one is excited about the new experiences, crisis, where the experiences move from exciting to being criticized, recovery stage, and the "acceptance" stage. Some teachers within the hagwon system may find themselves stuck in the crisis stage. That stuck in crisis mode mentality was experienced by a teacher who conducted a year-long self-reported research study concerning his interactions with other NESTs in China.

He claimed that the gatherings of expat teachers took on "a strange competition: who knew the most Chinese, who had been there the longest, who had had the most crazy/exotic/authentic experiences...it was obvious that [for] many of these teachers their most important goals were to squeeze as much out of China and to have as much fun as possible in one year before beginning their 'real lives' back in the States" (Grimes, 2010, p.

33). He concludes with the sentiment that teaching is never a part time endeavor, and that to truly gain anything from the experience of teaching abroad one must “know how to acquire knowledge about themselves and how they interact with other people in the world” (Grimes, 2010, p. 38).

Attaining that knowledge of the self in relation to the world requires a combination of internal reflection, unbiased observation, and communication with individuals in the culture, as well as acquisition of the linguistic knowledge necessary for those interactions (Grimes, 2010; Lange & Paige, 2003). An English teacher in Spain wrote, “there are people who want to learn about how others live and take part, those who want to put a year out on their CV, and those who leave their homeland because they cannot live with their own” (Griffith, 2015, p. 8).

### **Pre-Service Teachers Experiences Abroad**

Some hagwon teachers explore and learn these deeper meanings of culture, take the guide book “check list” and online forum resources, and expand or revise that information for themselves through their varied experiences. This enables them to get out of that “crisis mode” and enjoy the positives the experience can offer. One such positive experience is what Bodycott and Walker (2000) refer to in their examinations of teachers in higher education in Hong Kong, as working through rather than against “cultural stress”. These teachers learned how “to cope with the challenges of living in a foreign culture and working in institutions that are very different from what they are accustomed” (Bodycott & Walker, 2000, p. 81). Some teachers may also transfer the experience into understanding how their ESL/EFL students may feel while in the cultural immersive setting of English speaking countries. Additionally,

“living these cross-cultural experiences highlighted and sensitized [them] to the fragility of [their] students, and the need to create teaching approaches that lessened feelings of learning frustration and language alienation (Bodycott & Walker, 2000, p. 83).

Rodriguez (2011) states that this idea of cross-cultural sensitivity can be accomplished through even short term pre-service teaching abroad programs. According to Lu and Soares (2014), “short-term student-teaching programs have increasingly grown in teacher education programs, [and] the goals are to provide the opportunity to improve pedagogical knowledge, develop global perspectives, and language proficiency by engaging in diverse settings” (p. 59). A pre-service study abroad to Mexico had students state that the experience changed their perceptions of culture, community, education, and the use of the students’ first language (L1) in the classroom (Pray & Marx, 2010).

DeVilliar and Jiang (2012) outline the intrinsic benefits of international pre-service teaching, which included a greater sense of a teacher’s self, and a new willingness to be flexible and take risks. They also state the development of unique skills such as; teaching as part of an interdisciplinary and multicultural team, creativity arising out of limited resources, transfer and adaptation of techniques and knowledge between differing classroom contexts, developing awareness of students’ cultural and L1 needs, and effective classroom management (DeVilliar & Jiang, 2012). Positive experiences like these, a deeper understanding of culture in relation to work and education, and an awareness of the self in relation to those elements, may all impact the decision of experienced hagwon teachers to continue to pursue higher goals in education.

### **Peace Corp, “Gap Year”, and Financial or Career Gain**

Teaching abroad may also take the alternative route of volunteering with organizations such as the Peace Corp or other types of short term programs termed “gap year” experiences. “The Peace Corp is a US government agency that sends more than 6,600 US citizens abroad every year to assist countries that have requested help” (Camenson, 2005, p. 105). Some who have chosen to teach through this organization may have challenging but worthwhile experiences similar to those of hagwon teachers. One volunteer remarked about the classroom dynamics he observed while in Russia that, “the teachers sit in the front of the classroom, open textbook in front of them. All the students have the same text open to the same pages, and they move through the activities one after another” (Burnley, 1997, p. 80).

The challenge, as well as the reward, lay in understanding this method of teaching and trying to incorporate some of what was used within his own educational background in order to better benefit the students. “I started to experiment with different approaches in different classes. Toward the end of the semester, I had begun to ‘find myself’ as an ESL teacher” (Burnley, 1997, p. 81). This experience led him to return home and further pursue a teaching career. Experiencing rewarding challenges was felt by a volunteer in Morocco whose “absolute satisfaction when teaching, when [she] had really helped [her] students understand something they hadn’t understood at all to begin with” motivated her to push through culture and language barriers to become a certified teacher (Streed, 1998, p. 388).

Volunteering with the Peace Corp can be what is termed a “gap year” experience. This used to typically apply to “young” people, as a year off overseas before the start of their undergraduate education in order to “find themselves”, expand their life experiences, and add

to their college applications. However, the “gap year” is now being applied to the late 20s to early 30s age group, a group of working adults who have experienced a “substantial economic shift during the past two decades” (Griffith, 2008, p. 30). The desire to teach in South Korea is not always initially fueled by a desire to teach and travel overseas, but as a gap-year means of either exploring a possible future career opportunity, or to attain relatively easy employment in order to save money and/or pay off student loan debt.

A blogger, Audrey Bergner, interviewed by [careerhack.net](http://careerhack.net) (2015) about the financial viability of teaching in South Korea, claimed that she “was able to pay off her student loan debts as a teacher in Korea by saving a whopping \$17,000 USD per year, on average” (Bergner, 2013). For her, the “gap year” was three years of paying off debt and gaining a new set of work skills which would allow her to stand out as an independent travel writer.

A gap year(s), doing something other than what was originally studied during a prospective teacher’s undergraduate degree, is valuable during this time of ever changing job markets. Griffith (2008) illustrates this by stating that “managing a career [independently] has become important [in an age where] downsizing is commonplace; final pension schemes are becoming a thing of the past...[and western society] stresses the importance of self-motivation, personal responsibility, and a willingness to take risks” (p. 30). Griffith (2015) stresses the importance of teaching English abroad as a way of differentiating oneself from the ever increasing crowd of a highly educated workforce, in addition to those desires of paying off debt, funding travel, and having a final adventure before settling into a career path.

### **Motives to Continue/Discontinue a Career in Education**

There may be several personal and professional experiences which motivate a hagwon teacher to go beyond just that of differentiating oneself in the workforce crowd. Instead they could result in an actively pursued teaching career. Such experiences can be both internal and external in nature, and have been reported by pre-service and certified teachers around the world. Heinz (2015) conducted an international study as to what influence the personal, professional, internal, and external motivating factors may have had on continuing or discontinuing a career in education. It is perhaps the closest representation of what is hoped to be discovered through this current research, but on a much larger scale.

The report titled, *Why choose teaching? An international review of empirical studies exploring student teachers' career motivations and levels of commitment to teaching*, reviewed “41 studies focusing on student teachers' career motivations in 23 countries across the globe” (Heinz, 2015, p. 261). These studies revealed the following: internal motivations of job satisfaction, creativity, and overall job enjoyment, extrinsic motivations of job status, pay rate, stability, and holidays, and the altruistic reason of a social responsibility to guide future generations (Heinz, 2015).

Another study concerning post-baccalaureate student teachers conducted by Bunn and Wake (2015) revealed that the most common reason for entering the profession was altruistic in nature. Teachers were “driven by the desire to make a difference or to improve the conditions of life for those they teach” (Bunn & Wake, 2015, p. 62). Two studies conducted by Altay Eren, researching the motivations of pre-service teachers in Turkey, showed that the dominant reasons for entering the profession were related to mostly internal factors; career

satisfaction, a sense of hope concerning the progress of students, and a high level of interest in the profession before beginning their careers (Eren, 2012; Eren, 2015).

Eren (2015) asserts that the level of interest is paramount to future career satisfaction and success, and “that prospective teachers with high interest in teaching planned to make more effort during their teaching and to persist more in the teaching profession” (p. 314). Interest in the profession itself may be relevant to the discussion of hagwon teachers. For some the interest was high before entering a hagwon position and remained so throughout the contract year, where they then engaged in pursuing more ESL teaching assignments. For others it is possible that the initial lack of interest in the teaching field, as well as other non-career oriented motivators to teach abroad, may impact future career decisions.

Internal factors are at play as well when deciding to leave the teaching profession, such as teachers’ disillusionment with the expectation versus the reality of teaching, and a disconnect between the teacher’s philosophy of education and that of the school’s (Eren, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). However, external factors appear to be more center stage when teachers leave the profession.

In a study concerning the caring nature involved in teaching, it was revealed by one interviewee that the private school where she was employed expected her to care for her students as a “show for the parents [that] they’re getting value for their money” (O’ Connor, 2008, p. 121). This disenchantment with the external teaching environment is an element that hagwon teachers may experience as well, especially the expectation to “show off” their abilities as a teacher for the perceived increase in profit through potential increase in enrollment.



Other external pressures to leave the teaching profession are the increased demands on curriculum and the decreased amount of time to accomplish goals, extreme discipline issues with students, negative social climate between teachers, parents, administrators, and staff, and decreased opportunities for advancement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In a study conducted by Struyven and Vanthournout (2014) concerning teacher dropout rates in Belgium, their “analyses identified five overarching motives for exit attrition: job satisfaction and relations with students, school management and support, workload, future prospects, and relations with parents” (p. 43).

Becoming a certified teacher is not always the end result of Peace Corp, a “gap year”, pre-service student teaching abroad, or through EPIK and hagwon teaching experiences. Such experiences may actually lead one away from education as a career goal, or not stir an interest in it whatsoever. However, it may add different values to, or inspire other careers choices. The results and discussion section will reveal what specifically these participants in this study said motivated them to continue or discontinue a career in education, and more specifically TESL.

### **Chapter III: Method**

The idea for this thesis emerged from the researcher's engagement in many conversations with other hagwon teachers about "the next step" in their lives. At the start of the researcher's experience in South Korea, many fellow expat teachers had never traveled before and/or never taught in a classroom, making the hagwon their first exposure to TESL. Questions arose about careers, as well as if and when to return home. Since the idea originated from casual conversations, the method of data collection followed in a similar vein, through unstructured interviews, and stories of personal and professional experiences were collected.

**Emic perspective of the researcher.** The researcher had taught English immersion in the hagwon system for three years. The first year was in a small hagwon catering to middle and high school students, and two years were with one of the largest hagwon chains teaching students in grades K-6. The researcher had worked up to 45 teaching hours a week, and experienced culture shock and contract disputes. The motivation to continue a teaching career in TESL was due almost exclusively to personal experiences; a family history of teachers, an awareness of Korean culture from life-long Korean American friends of the family, positive student interactions and Korean and NEST friendships, travel, and the desired challenge of living abroad.

#### **Selection of Participants**

Since the researcher had an "emic" perspective into this expat community, an effort to avoid researcher bias was made through the process of randomly canvassing participants from

this community. An offer was made available to everyone through a global Facebook post on May 24, 2015 and presented prospective participants with the following question:

Considering names will not be used, and that the purpose of participation in this graduate research study concerns the experience of teaching in a hagwon and your career decisions, would you be willing to participate in a recorded interview and fill out a short survey?

Twenty participants responded positively. The researcher knew either personally, or through mutual relationships in the hagwon system all 20 participants, therefore it was important to engage in this random selection to avoid researcher bias.

### **Participants and Results of the Demographic Survey**

After potential participants viewed the informed consent form, 20 people signed and agreed to participate with full knowledge of the study, its intentions, and their rights within it (see Appendix A). Five participants did withdraw during the course of the study, and expressed that they did not wish to share stories from their past or present in such a directly quoted manner. All participants were made aware of the purpose and construct of this research, and assured that all identifying information, their names as well as the names of schools, employers, other teachers, and students, were kept confidential and not reported in the final data analysis and discussion.

Results from the demographic survey (see Appendix B) revealed that all 15 participants were NESTs; 1 was from Australia, 4 came from Canada, and 10 were from the United States. There were two men in this study, the rest were women. The average age of this group was 30 years old. In response to the race/ethnicity question, seven participants identified as Caucasian, one as African American, five as Korean American, one as Cambodian American, and one as Korean/Caucasian American. Broken down individually the

demographics of this participant group are listed alphabetically by the randomly selected letter code assigned to each (see Table 3.1):

“A” was 35 years old, female, Korean Australian, held a Bachelor of Science (BS) with certification in TESL at the time of the interview, and spent a total of 6 years as a hagwon teacher. “B” was 34, female, Korean American, held a BS, and also taught in a hagwon for 6 years. “C” was 31, female, Cambodian American, held a Bachelor of Arts (BA), and spent 2 years as a hagwon teacher. “D” was 29 years of age, female, identified as a Caucasian Canadian, held a Bachelor of Commerce degree, spent 2 years in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, and 2 years teaching in hagwons. “E” was 29, male, Korean American, held a BS in Psychology, and spent 2 years teaching in a hagwon. “F” was 30, female, Caucasian American, held a BA, and spent 3 years and 6 months teaching in hagwons.

“G” was 26, female, Korean/Caucasian American, held a BA, and taught in a hagwon for 2 years. “H” was 31, male, Caucasian American, held a BA and attained state K-12 teaching certification, and spent 4 years and 6 months teaching with multiple hagwons. “I” was 24, female, Korean Canadian, held a BA, and spent 2 years in a hagwon. “J” was 31, female, African American, held a BA in addition to TEFL and CELTA certification, and spent 2 years teaching in a hagwon. “K” was 31, female, Korean American, held a BA and a Master of Arts (MA) in Education (TESOL), and spent 4 years teaching in EPIK and 2 years in hagwons. “L” was 29, female, Caucasian American, held a BS and TEFL certification, and spent 2 years teaching in a hagwon.

“M” was 29, female, Caucasian American, held a BA, TEFL certification and K-12 ESL teaching licensure from her home state, and taught in a hagwon for 2 years and 6 months.

“N” was 33, female, Caucasian Canadian, held a BA and TESL certification, spent 5 years teaching in private schools in Asia and South America, and 2 years in the hagwon system.

“O” was 28, female, Caucasian Canadian, held a MA in Art History and CELTA certification, and spent 2 years in the EPIK program and 2 years with a hagwon.

The average number of years spent teaching before entering a hagwon position was 1 year and 15 weeks. Participant, “N”, had the most varied pre-hagwon teaching experiences, with 5 years spent in private schools in Asia and South America. A few taught in public schools; participants “B”, “K”, and “O” spent a year(s) in the EPIK program, while participant “D” spent 2 years in the public school program JET. The average number of years spent teaching in a hagwon was 2.83. Participant “A”, who was still employed with a hagwon at the time of the interview, had 6 years of experience, as well as “B”, who began teaching in South Korea with the intent to find her birth parents. However, the majority of participants (10) spent only 2 years in the hagwon system.

The highest level of education attained at the time of these interviews, was an MA in Education focusing on TESOL with K-12 certification by participant “K”. “O” possessed an MA in Art History with CELTA certification. In total, seven participants had TESL/TEFL/CELTA certification, and four were K-12 certified teachers at the time of the interviews.

The number of languages known or spoken to any degree of proficiency included; Portuguese, German, French, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Mandarin, and Cambodian/Khmer. Ten participants stated knowing Korean to some degree of proficiency, and of that only two

(A and K) claimed to possess a near-native level. One participant claimed to not have knowledge of a second language at all (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

*Results from the Demographic Survey*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Known Languages</b>	<b>Years in Hagwon/EPIK/JET</b>
A	35	F	Korean Australian	BS/TESL	Korean	6 years-Hagwon
B	34	F	Korean American	BS	None	6 years-Hagwon
C	31	F	Cambodian American	BA	Cambodian, Korean, Japanese	2 years-Hagwon
D	29	F	Caucasian Canadian	Bachelor of Commerce	Japanese	2 years-JET 2 years-Hagwon
E	29	M	Korean American	BS	Korean, French	2 years-Hagwon
F	30	F	Caucasian American	BA, Early Childhood Teaching Licensure	Spanish, Japanese	3.5 years-Hagwon
G	26	F	Korean/Caucasian American	BA	Korean	2 years-Hagwon
H	31	M	Caucasian American	BA, K-12 Teaching Licensure	German, Korean	4.5 years-Hagwon
I	24	F	Korean Canadian	BA	Korean, French	2 years-Hagwon
J	31	F	African American	BA, TEFL, CELTA	Korean, Spanish	2 years-Hagwon
K	31	F	Korean American	BA, MA in TESOL, K-12 teaching certification	Korean	4 years-EPIK 2 years-Hagwon
L	29	F	Caucasian American	BS, TEFL	Spanish	2 years-Hagwon
M	29	F	Caucasian American	BA, TEFL, K-12 ESL Teaching Certification	Spanish, Korean	2.5 years-Hagwon
N	33	F	Caucasian Canadian	BA, TESL	Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, French	5 years-Private Schools in Asia and South America 2 years-Hagwon
O	28	F	Caucasian Canadian	MA in Art History, CELTA	French, Korean	2 years-EPIK 2 years-Hagwon

M/F-Abbreviation for male or female, other abbreviations found in the body of the text.

## **Materials**

All survey and open interview questions were created by the researcher and were unique to this study. A demographic survey was employed and gathered data such as citizenship, race/ethnicity, gender, age, level of education attained, the number of years taught before, during, and after teaching in the hagwon system, and a short statement of their current career (see Appendix B). The open question interview consisted of nine questions concerning the experience of teaching in the hagwon system, and beliefs or thoughts about current and future career outcomes as a potential result of those experiences. An additional tenth follow-up question was employed a week after the completion of the interview (see Appendix C).

It was posed that insightful data on individual feelings, thoughts, and experiences would arise. It was also hoped that through these personal and professional stories, recurring themes would be identified in order to help make connections between the hagwon experience and current/future career choices in or out of TESL. Additional technological materials included the researcher's personal computer and camera recorder, Skype, Google Hangout, Facebook, and St. Cloud State email address.

## **Procedures**

The demographic survey was handed out to participants' private email accounts only, and returned to the researcher's St. Cloud State University email account before the interviews. Participants were given a maximum of a week to fill out and return the survey. After the return of the survey the interview was arranged over Skype or Google Hangout, and audio recorded through a camera. The researcher also took notes during the interview. Interviews had a time limit of 40 minutes each. One week after the interview the researcher

asked participants a tenth follow-up question over email if there was anything else that they wished to add about their statements concerning experience, perceptions, and career goals.

After the data had been collected, the names of the participants were changed to a corresponding letter code (A, B, C, etc.) selected at random. All identifying information such as the names of schools, students, other teachers, and employers were edited from the responses if presented in the data, in order to protect participants from any unforeseen negative backwash effects. After the data had been analyzed and reported to the thesis committee for the final board review, the original survey responses, the video recordings and notes from the interviews, and any/all copies of these materials made to the researcher's St. Cloud State email, personal computer hard drive, or camera were permanently erased or destroyed. Only the researcher, as stated and agreed to in the informed consent form, had access to the original recordings, notes, and surveys.

### **Analysis**

Results of the demographic survey data were presented in the methods section and provided detailed background information of all 15 participants, as well as introduced them by their corresponding letter code. The results of the interviews were qualitatively analyzed and presented in order of recurring themes in the personal and professional experiences, and the participants' current/future career choices. It was posed that the analysis would reveal common as well as unique experiences and how they impacted individual career choices. Overall it was hoped that an answer may arise, through the analysis, documentation, and presentation of such a specific TESL phenomena, as to what combination of experiences



supported a TESL career choice. It was also hoped that through the free dialogue there would be insightful stories to add to the research literature of the experience of teaching abroad.

## Chapter IV: Results

Results from the last question on the demographic survey (see Appendix B) will be reported first in order to present the current career choices of these participants, before delving into responses from the interview questions. Responses from the interviews will be arranged according to themes found throughout the participants' stories, and presented in sections according to personal experiences, professional experiences, views concerning the hagwon system, and lastly participant statements about their current and future career goals.

**Results from the last question on the demographic survey.** The last question on the demographic survey asked participants about their current career status (see Appendix B). The type of careers varied, both within and outside of the field of education. If divided into two broad categories; business or education, six were teaching professionals, and seven were in a business related field. As for the remaining two which did not fit into either category; "C" was a librarian assistant and "I" was in law school (see Table 4.1).

In the business field the careers were; employed with an investors group, business support officer for a non-profit, entrepreneur in a fashion design and retail business, project/information technology manager, gaming/e-sports business, and privately contracted chef. In the education field the stated careers were; certified third grade ESL teacher, certified K-12 ESL and Korean language teacher, ESL teacher currently pursuing K-12 state licensure, certified gifted and talented specialist teacher, substitute teacher with pre-K through third grade licensure, and uncertified hagwon teacher to adult students (see Table 4.1).

**Results in relation to personal experiences.** Results from interview questions one, two, and three, which covered personal stories of both teaching and living in South Korea (see

Appendix C), may have supported a career in TESL. There were eight stories about travel and wanting an adventure, both within and outside of Korea, before starting a career in their home countries. Participant “C” stated:

I saw teaching English not only as an opportunity for me to explore a field I was interested in pursuing at the time, but also something that I could do temporarily, earn decent money, and gain some work experience, while I take a break from school. (Interview, 1/26/16)

Participant “F” said, “I really wanted the chance to live abroad” (Interview, 1/12/16).

However, there were more sentiments (11) about having the chance to pay off student loan debt, and for some the choice to teach in South Korea was to attain employment during a time of economic down turn. “O” stated, “I graduated from my MA in 2010 with the recession in full swing” (Interview, 1/12/16). Participant “M” stated: “I graduated in 2008 at the hardest hit downturn of the recession with a degree in humanities. Needless to say I didn’t have many options” (Interview, 1/10/16). Participant “L” stated, “I had minor student loan debt [that] I wanted to pay off as fast as I could” (Interview, 1/3/16).

In all 15 interviews, statements about the friendships made in and out of the classroom were stated as extremely positive experiences. All seven participants who have moved toward careers in the education field, cited that the interpersonal experiences with their students led them in that career direction. Participant “M”, now a certified third grade ESL teacher in the United States stated:

I spent my days with children and became a teacher on the fly. Through them I learned what it was like growing up Korean. They taught me some of the language, but mostly they taught me that I was a teacher by nature (Interview, 1/10/16).

Participant “J”, who is currently pursuing ESL teaching licensure, stated “I built two great relationships with my former students that I absolutely cherish” (Interview, 12/29/15).

Participant “A” who is currently a hagwon teacher in her seventh year stated:

Language is life and culture. I suppose students get into a totally different [and] new world by learning English. I am so excited [when] my students encounter something new. As they learned how to better communicate in English and even little things like watching a movie without Korean subtitles, I watched them get very excited, which made me feel rewarded. (Interview, 2/1/16)

The personal relationships with other expat teachers, was cited in every single interview as a highlight of the overall experience. Participant “O” met her husband in Korea:

Many of my friends ended up in international relationships...I met some of my best friends in South Korea. I keep in touch with the friends I met there more than I do with the friends I had before I left [home]. I consider the people I met in Korea my adult friends. (Interview, 1/12/16)

Participant “N” stated, “I established a couple close friendships that I value to this day”

(Interview, 1/3/16). Participant “K” and “A” claimed that they enjoyed the chance to interact and establish friendships with people from other states and countries, when otherwise they would perhaps never have had the opportunity. “A” said:

I met many English teachers from different countries and we shared our various experiences with education, which helped me to think about different teaching methods and ways I could bring something different into the classroom. (Interview, 2/1/16)

Participant “H”, who was a hagwon teacher for four years and six months claimed:

One of the most valuable experiences I had in Korea was developing a strong group of friends, which kept me anchored there for years. Learning Korean and diving head first into Korean cuisine changed my perspective on what I thought I knew and loved about food and health. (Interview, 12/19/15)

In addition to the friendships made, the chance to experience new things culturally was also a positive highlight. In addition to “H’s” statement, participants “I”, “B”, “D”, and “C” stated that they enjoyed the food, unique fashions, and learning the language. Participant “C” said:

I was invited by one of the international students I had worked with when I was an English Conversation partner back in the states to spend Chuseok [a Korean holiday similar to Thanksgiving] with his family. It was such a cultural experience because not only was I able to witness and take part in one of the most important Korean holidays, but I also got to see the inside of a Korean home. (Interview, 1/26/16)

For participants “G”, “E”, and “B” the personal experience in South Korea was about more than travel, adventure, money, friendships, or a break between graduation from university and developing a career. All three are Korean Americans; who had either family in Korea (G), wanted to explore the culture of their ethnicity (E), or wanted to find their birth parents as a Korean adoptee (B). Participant “E” who wanted to explore the teaching profession as well as the culture told experiences of racism from Koreans:

After speaking with several Korean-Americans participating in various teaching and tutoring programs, it appeared a somewhat similar consensus was found in everyone’s experience. There seemed to be a strong feeling of dislike towards Koreans that were born in America. This wasn’t just within the academies or schools, but in general. It may be because there is an expectation outside of the schools that we should assimilate or at least try to be more adept to the Korean culture. (Interview, 1/27/16)

Participant “B” was born in South Korea and had hoped to find her birth family:

I wanted a true Korean cultural experience, which I got. I searched for my Korean family by going to my hometown and also by going on TV. I had to deal with not finding them, while having several Korean adopted friends also living in Korea find their families and reconnect. That was hard. (Interview, 1/25/16)

Four participants sighted illness and the expectation to still show up to work as a personal, rather than professional, difficulty of the hagwon work place.

For participant “N” a serious illness while in Korea led to a “midnight run”:

The pollution was very hard on my health. I ended up in the hospital with pneumonia and found that my roommates in the hospital treated me with more friendliness than my co-workers at the Korean school. (Interview, 1/3/16)

Table 4.1

*Career Paths*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Current Career</b>	<b>Career Goals</b>	<b>Initial/Developed Interest in Education Career</b>
A	Adult hagwon TESL	Continue, teach IELTS	Yes
B	Fashion design/business	Own fashion line	No
C	Library assistant	Archivist, be able to travel	No
D	Executive assistant in business	Unsure, wished to return to Japan, perhaps for business	Yes
E	IT project manager	Continue, rise within the field	Yes
F	Pre-K through 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade substitute teacher	Attain MA in Education, unsure where to work, or to continue in ESL	Yes
G	E-Sports business travel	Continue to do so	No
H	Gifted and talented teacher	Pursue Masters of Linguistics, teach in higher education	Yes
I	In law school	Become a lawyer, unsure what type	No
J	Pursuing TESL teaching license	Would like to own a language school and hire NNESTs	Yes
K	K-12 certified Bilingual Korean/English teacher	Work in higher TESL education	Yes
L	Manager of day programs for adults with developmental disabilities	Pursue Special Education K-12 certification	Yes
M	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Certified ESL teacher	Attain Ph.D. and teach TESL in higher education	Yes
N	Contracted Chef	Continue to do so	No
O	Manager of financing for non-profits	Continue to do so	No

**Results in relation to professional experiences.** The results from interview questions one, four, and five revealed similar professional stories across all 15 participant interviews. Ten participants did cite some positive experiences; learning to become flexible, increased creativity, the vast amount of freedom one had in the classroom as well as after work, becoming more confident at public speaking, developing better work skills like improvising, organization, and collaborating with people from diversified backgrounds, and learning a different cultural perspective about work and education. Participants “E”, “C” and “I” who are

all entering non-teaching related careers, stated that overall it was a valuable work experience.

However, the majority of the stories were not positive.

Issues with contract disputes, poor pay and living conditions were stated by “J” and “H”. Participants “O”, “H”, and “N” cited the lack of sick days as a contract flaw, for although promised in the contract, it was never delivered. Participant “H” stated: The hours are longer than necessary...the expectation that you will never take a sick day is absurd, and there is a prevailing belief in Korea that by simply being at work you are contributing thereby encouraging employees to sit at work for long hours doing next to nothing productive for the sole purpose of being seen at work to satisfy some irrelevant Confucian ideal of servitude to one’s employer. (Interview, 12/19/15)

The long work hours were cited by five other participants, in addition to “H”. “J” said that “morale is sometimes low because of the packed schedule and mandatory overtime” (Interview, 12/29/15). “L” stated, “I was cheap labor, working 10 or 11 hour days, five days a week” (Interview, 12/21/16). Participant “M” stated, “I had about 10, 40 minute, classes a day and two vacation weeks a year. I was crawling home by Friday” (Interview, 1/10/16).

The business end of hagwons, or rather what was termed by participant “J” as the “appearance of education”, resulted in the most often reported negative experiences.

Participant “J” said:

I had an issue with a class where a student would hit the other students and would say bad things to the students in Korean. Instead of the student being suspended from the school or someone at least talking to him, he was leveled up and moved to an advanced class. (Interview, 12/29/15)

Participant “M” stated:

A business minded school like a hagwon is a soulless form of teaching. Students have a set goal and one must not deviate from it. I would walk into a classroom with a set number of pages to teach. I taught what was on the allotted pages and then ended the class. I did this for every class as per the business framework. It was monotonous. (Interview, 1/10/16)

Participant “N” said that the hagwon made teachers as little more than babysitters:

Parents and Korean co-teachers were more concerned that the kids were happy and their work was completed but not necessarily learned. As long as the blanks on the pages were filled out the rest did not seem to matter. (Interview, 1/3/16)

Participant “D” expressed a similar experience stating:

The books were expected to get done in a certain way before a certain time period, but that was often made difficult due to schedule changes thrown at us last minute. It meant having [the students] copy the answers into their books. The school did not care if the students actually understood the topic they just wanted the book work done to show the parents. (Interview, 2/1/16)

Participant “F” said that her experience worsened after a change in management:

There was a huge focus on enhancing the product parents were buying. This led to ridiculous expectations for students in terms of writing; 300 word essays for students who could barely manage a short, coherent paragraph. The director thought this would enhance the education package being offered, but did nothing to help students learn. They were already overburdened with homework every day. (Interview, 1/12/16)

**Personal opinions of the career viability of hagwon teaching.** Question five of the interview asked the participants about their personal opinion of the hagwon industry as a professional career option within the field of TESL (see Appendix C). Ten participants stated they could not see hagwon teaching as a professional career choice due to the vast differences in how hagwons approach education as a selling package, the lack of upward mobility, and the lack of functional teacher development. The other five participants (A, C, G, H, and I) stated that it could be, if the concept was reworked in several areas; such as honoring contracts, allowing teachers more of a voice while designing and evaluating the curriculum, and focusing more on enhancing the quality of the education instead of a product to be sold to parents and students. Participants “I” and “C” enjoyed their time in a hagwon and stated that such a life-long career move could be possible give the right sort of person with the right mindset. “C” stated:



Since a hagwon is technically a business, I understand that the money is very important in whether or not the [school] stays in existence, so there is always going to be that fine line between education and business. I would say that working at a hagwon as a professional career option within the field of TESL will definitely have to depend on the individual. (Interview, 1/26/16)

However, participant “L”, who did not believe that this business model of education was a functional way to teach long term reflected:

I understand that the point of a business is to make money. However, parents send their children to a hagwon to learn a skill that will better their lives. The majority of the teachers that I’ve met teach because they genuinely care about children and their success, not the money that they receive to do the job. (Interview, 12/21/15)

**Goals and beliefs about the influence of experiences on career paths.** Interview questions six, seven, and eight all addressed career goals for the present, the near future, and the distant future. Question nine, supplemented by three participants who had something more to add in follow up question ten (see Appendix C), revealed more about how each participant felt their experiences living and teaching in Korea influenced their career paths. Here, listed participant by participant in their own words, is how they believe the personal and profession experiences contributed to a continued or discontinued career in TESL.

“A” is the only participant who is currently still a hagwon teacher. “A” wants to be able to teach the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Korean students take in order enter universities in the United States or Canada. “A” plans on owning a hagwon in the next ten to 20 years, and discovered through professional experiences “how to teach efficiently and I hope to grow within this industry” (Interview, 2/1/16).

Participant “B”, after six years teaching in a hagwon, has decided to follow a creative path based on experiences with Korean art and culture. “B” is currently a manager, stylist, and buyer of second hand clothing, and promotes a graphic art clothing line. “B” hopes to return

to Korea in order to start a fashion business but not to teach; “I loved being in Korea and miss it all the time. Korean fashion has inspired me and helped me understand the importance of a visually creative career” (Interview, 1/25/16).

Participant “C” is pursuing a Master of Library and Information Science and in the next 5 to 10 years hopes to be an archivist or records manager. Although teaching wasn’t something “C” desired as a career goal instead realized, “I do like traveling, which I hope to continue to do in the future within my personal and professional life” (Interview, 1/26/16).

Participant “D”, after 2 years in the JET program and two years in the hagwon industry, has no plans to pursue a teaching career. “D” is an executive assistant for an investors group and would like to stay for a few more years in this position. “D” stated for the next ten to 20 years, “I have no idea where I will be career-wise this far into the future” and that the negative experiences “have stopped me from pursuing a further career in education. My experiences with Japan have mostly been positive, and I would like to continue studying Japanese and working in a Japan-related job” (Interview, 2/1/16).

Participant “E” is in the information technology field and wishes to advance within it to become a senior project manager in the next ten years. “E” said that the Korean/Korean American racism and its negative effects in the hagwon workplace influenced a career move away from TESL:

When I originally signed up to teach English in Korea, I truly believed it would be a great opportunity to see if it was a career choice that I would be interested in. In some ways I accepted some of the culture, but it was still a large shock to me and I found it difficult. The positive and the negative helped carve a way for me and helped motivate me to become a better person and a better worker. (Interview, 1/27/16, Follow up, 2/4/16)

Participant “F” has attained state teaching certification in pre-K through third grade and is pursuing a Master of Education degree. “F” hopes to return to ESL teaching overseas, however also stated, “I’m not really sure at the moment where I want to be in five to ten years...I really enjoyed my time teaching in South Korea, my time over there showed me that I greatly enjoyed teaching younger kids” (Interview, 1/12/16).

Participant “G” is in the gaming and e-sports (online gaming) industry in the United States, and said that the experience in Korea allowed the chance to break into this field. “I got involved more in e-sports while in Korea because the scene is smaller there and it was easier to break into versus being in the US where it’s much larger” (Interview, 1/25/16; Follow up, 2/1/16). “G” plans on continuing with this career goal for the foreseeable future.

Participant “H” is a gifted and talented specialist with K-12 certification in the United States. “H” intends to pursue a Master of Linguistics, and would like to teach at the collegiate level in the next 10 years. “H” claimed that the experiences “had a great impact on my decisions regarding employment and future pursuits. Living and working abroad has given me a broadened perspective on the role and value of education” (Interview, 12/19/15).

Participant “I” is in law school and would like to build “a long and successful career as a lawyer” (Interview, 1/25/16). “I” stated:

I don’t think my experiences influenced my career goals at all, but contributed to my personal growth. I viewed it as more of a cool thing I got to do, it was a job that funded my ability to travel and see more of the world. (Interview, 1/25/16; follow up, 1/31/15)

“J” recently obtained CELTA certification and is pursuing teaching certification in the hopes that it will “make me more marketable for higher paying jobs overseas. I would like to have my own language school” (Interview, 12/29/15). “J” was dismayed at the way NESTs

were treated under the assumption that they should be able to teach well simply because they possessed English as their L1:

I was shocked and disappointed at the disservice that the students and parents receive from the public and private institutions in Korea. From reading about other teachers' experiences in other countries, it seems to be no different. I want to be a part of the cultural breakdown when it comes to all native speakers teaching their mother tongue. (Interview, 12/29/15)

“K” is currently a K-12 certified, bilingual Korean and English Language teacher.

“K” wishes to gain more work experience teaching adults, and hopes to become an English program developer in the near future. “K” said, “I was always passionate about teaching and all my teaching experiences influenced me to become a teacher in ESL” (Interview, 1/30/16).

Participant “L” is currently a quality assurance manager of day programs for adults with developmental disabilities in the United States. “L” intends to pursue teaching certification in Special Education in the next five years and to continue being an advocate for the developmentally disabled. “L” said that she knew she wanted to be a teacher and “preferably in an elementary setting. My experiences influenced my career goals [in that] I still want to be a teacher” (Interview, 12/21/15).

Participant “M” currently teaches third grade English language learners (ELLs) in a public school in the United States. In the next ten years “M” wishes to attain a Ph. D. and teach at the collegiate level. “M” said that overall her experiences “completely made a career goal for me. I never had one until Korea gave me one” (Interview, 1/10/16).

Participant “N”, after spending seven years total teaching in Asia and South America, has no further career goals in education. “N” is a contracted chef and for the near future hopes to continue to do so:

I believe my experiences with multiple schools and countries eventually led me away from the ESL industry. The hagwon system in Korea would not allow one to retire off of a Korean pension plan which is equal to one month's pay every year, and with currency exchanges moving back to your home country could potentially become very difficult. If I were to become involved in the ESL industry again, it would not be in the hagwon system. (Interview, 1/12/16; Follow up, 1/17/16)

“O” works in the non-profit industry and would like to continue to do so for the near future. “O” stated that although not continuing in TESL, “working abroad made me more confident in myself and my abilities” (Interview, 1/12/16).

## Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

**Main idea of the study.** The main core of this study, was to collect in hopefully a more reflective and honest manner than the discussion forums found on ESL job boards, the stories of personal and professional experience while living and working in South Korea. Here, adding to the TESL as well as education research literature; which has examined issues such as teacher motivation and cultural immersion while exploring opportunities abroad, is a qualitative study examining the career paths of those who have taught in the hagwon system for two years or more (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Bunn & Wake, 2015; Carless, 2006; Grimes, 2010). The experiences are worth documenting, for as previously mentioned, more than 12,000 NESTs are in Korea teaching in hagwons, and some of these individuals, if not entering the TESL profession may become certified teachers in other disciplines, or use their experiences to add strength and a unique skill set to other careers (Gone2Korea, 2014).

In addition, it was hoped that through documentation of such experiences an answer would arise to the two main research questions:

1. What personal experiences, living as a K-12 private (hagwon) English teacher in South Korea for two years or more, support a continued or discontinued career in TESL?
2. What professional experiences, working in the K-12 private (hagwon) English schools in South Korea for two years or more, support a continued or discontinued career in TESL?

**Summary of the findings.** The results on the personal end of the experiences showed several similar positive themes; traveling and adventure, paying off student loan debt,

establishing global friendships, enjoying the check list of Korean culture, exploring education as a possible career option, and taking a “gap year(s)” break after an undergraduate degree (Griffith, 2008; Lange & Paige, 2003; Vegdahl & Hur, 2008). They also revealed a few unique experiences, however not all of them positive; the desire to explore the country of one’s birth place/ethnic heritage, experienced (E) or witnessed (D and J) racism, serious illness leading to a midnight dash (N), finding a spouse (O), and discovering new personal strengths and skills that inspired further pursuit in the education field, or led to the discovery of other careers.

On the professional end of the stated experiences there were several unifying negative themes across all participants. Chief among them, contract violations and the business framework of the hagwons they worked for interfering with good teacher practices in the classroom. This led to the realization of the “appearance of education” in much the same vein as what was discovered in research done by O’Connor (2008) and Oh & Nussli (2014). However, other more positive professional experiences, like the development of deeper cultural awareness, understanding how their students’ felt while living in a different linguistically immersed setting, and gaining work skills such as strong ethics, calculated risk taking, creativity, flexibility, and multicultural/multidisciplinary teamwork also came into play while making career decisions. These realizations are similar to what was discovered through research with pre-service teachers studying abroad (Lu & Soares, 2014; Pray & Marx, 2010; Slethaug, 2007).

Overall, the positive personal experiences were stated by all participants as having a great impact on current and future career choices. In addition, the statements by all

participants that a hagwon is not a viable life-long career option unless changed in several areas, impacted their career choices as well. Some chose to remain in the hagwon business (A), or wished to continue with TESL in order to have a better language school of their own (J), and others abandoned the idea of teaching in a hagwon completely. In general, the participants did agree that the experience was worth having, which appears to follow with statements made by Griffith (2015); that it allows time for self-reflection, discovery, and the development of a unique skill set to add in one's favor in an increasingly competitive job market.

**Interpretation of the findings in relation to the main research questions.** In relation to the first research question, the personal experiences which seemed to support a continued career in TESL were; positive interactions and relationships with students, teachers, and parents, understanding and appreciating certain aspects of Korean culture, working through rather than against cultural stress, an initial interest in the education field before entering a hagwon, and the desire to make the hagwon system or private ESL sector better for future teachers and students.

Some of these positive experiences did not seem to support a career in TESL, however, they, in addition to discovering a joy for teaching children (F and M), helped others (H and L) discover other avenues of education. There were positive personal experiences which appear to have supported a discontinuation in the field of TESL or education. For participant "B" and "G", interactions with modern Korean culture and art inspired and allowed them access to their current careers (see Table 4.1).



The negative personal experiences which led a few to discontinue a career in TESL or education were experienced or witnessed racism, serious illness (N), and teaching burnout (N). For “E”, a Korean American, his experiences with direct racism from Korean hagwon employers, as well as what he witnessed other Korean Americans say happened to them while living in Korea, appears to be a key factor for not pursuing TESL further. Although participant “J”, who witnessed discrimination against NNESTs and was spurred to continue a career in TESL partly because of that experience, participant “D” stated that it was a partial factor to discontinue that career option. “D” upon witnessing racism from her Korean employer toward the native Chinese language speaking teacher said:

This school also employed a Chinese teacher who was expected to help pick students up every morning and teach extra classes in the afternoon, making their days run from 8:00am-6:30pm, and according to all of these teachers, these things were left unsaid until they had already accepted the job and were in Korea. One teacher quit after only a few months into her contract because the boss would yell at her about wanting to be treated like the [NESTs]. They lived in a dorm-like residence while the rest of us had our own apartments, and received half the pay we did, while being expected to help maintain the school, feed the students’ lunch, watch them during breaks, and prepare teaching material for their own classes. (Interview, 2/1/16)

In relation to the second research question, the positive professional experiences which appeared to contribute to a continued career in TESL or education was again the interpersonal relationships established between students, teachers, and parents. Positive professional experiences like the development of new skills, such as public speaking which led “I” to pursue law school, and becoming more confident in ones abilities such as “O” and her work with non-profits, appear to have influenced everyone in their chosen careers. All participants stated that the professional experiences contributed to new skills sets, which they have cultivated and used in all of their current professions not just the education field. In it

interesting to note that there is an almost even split between business and education related fields, however it is unclear if working in a business contributed to the career decisions of those entering business related fields.

The negative professional experiences have spurred a few like “A”, “J”, and “K” to continue in TESL in order to make hagwons better, however for those who have discontinued a career in TESL it was a large influence. The appearance of education, the contract violations, and disillusionment with the field, were key reasons to discontinue a career in TESL, as was the case for “B”, “D”, “E”, and “N”. For “A”, “K” and “L”, who knew before they entered a hagwon that they wanted to become teachers, the professional experiences seemed only to influence where, what age group, and in what field they wished to teach. For “H”, “J”, and “M” the negative professional experiences made them realize the importance of certified teaching, and intend or continue to be teachers.

The demographic factors, such as the number of years spent teaching before entering a hagwon, and the length of stay within a hagwon do not seem to unanimously support a continued or discontinued career in TESL. “A” spent six years with various hagwons and continues to teach in a hagwon. “B” and “N” who also have six years of experience do not intend to teach, and participants “D” and “O” who spent years in the EPIK and JET programs do not intend to be teachers. Other demographic features such as age, gender, educational background, or linguistic knowledge also did not present unanimous support across participants for a career in or out of TESL. For example participants “E” and “H” are both male however, one is a gifted and talent classroom teacher, and the other is in the IT field.

Only three of the Caucasian female participants become teachers (F, L, and M), where education has been typically predominantly Caucasian and female.

**Issues and limitations with the study.** There were no problems with the data collection itself, although it was hoped that up to 40 people would participate. Despite a small interview population it was not difficult to attain many stories. It was not hard to find commonalities between the experiences, however it was difficult to place a broad definitive connection between experience and career choice for all the participants. For example, several participants had an initial interest in TESL, however over the course of their years in Korea their view changed and other careers came to light for them. Therefore, it was not appropriate to label all instances of initial interest as leading to direct support for a TESL career. Instead, analysis of the experiences had to be broken down, participant by participant, and grouped according to recurring themes. It was also hoped that there would be more participants who were still teaching in the hagwon system. As it was only participant “A” was still within the hagwon system at the time of the interviews, and the rest had at least a year or more to reflect upon their experiences, perhaps skewing them in a more positive or more negative light than how they felt at the time of their occurrence.

**Suggestions for further research.** If given more time, more resources, and perhaps more research partners, it is suggested that more hagwon teachers currently in South Korea, teaching for their third, fourth, fifth year and so on, be interviewed and have their fresh and current experiences added to the literature of teaching abroad. These stories could also be used in relation to exploration of other topics such as emerging teacher identity, teaching motivation, and the teaching environment in South Korea. Currently studies concerning the

collaborative teaching environment in EPIK, such as Kopperud's (2015) graduate thesis titled; *An investigation into the impact of native English speakers on Korean English teachers*, are beginning to add more insight into the relationships formed between NESTs and NNESTs in South Korea, and examining that type of unconventional uncertified teacher training ground. Such a study concerning the relationships between these individuals, as well as their employers in the hagwon context, could be explored as well.

In addition to exploring more about the South Korean expat teaching environment, an interesting part of this study, that of the demographics of the participants as an actual representation of the changes in hiring practices could also be examined. More than half of the participants in this study are not Caucasian. The researcher knows personally several more non-Caucasian individuals that have or continue to teach in hagwons. In this study only one participant experienced direct racism (E). Other than what gone2Korea.com (2014) claimed as 12,000 NESTs living and teaching in hagwons, there are no reports on the racial demographics of those 12,000 people.

It would be interesting to research if the hiring practices of hagwons currently only look for native English level status, a four year degree, and citizenship from one of the English speaking countries of the world, rather than strictly one race. It could also be possible to examine how changes in the hagwon industry, resulting from economic and political changes in South Korea, impact the experience of teachers. A future trend toward hiring more certified teachers might also be occurring in order for hagwons to survive and hold their own against increasing demands for the public sector to provide more English language classes.

**Final thoughts.** The number of participants who have included TESL as part of their career aspirations was only four, and of that only two are currently certified ESL teachers in their home countries. For these 15 participants it was a combination of experiences which contributed to their current career paths. It may have been that the experience was needed in order to have time away from the familiar and routine, and to create or discover strengths such as organization, public speaking, assertiveness, creativity, flexibility, and increased cultural and linguistic knowledge. Overall the end result of such an experience, even if at times extremely negative, resulted in some sort of personal or professional gain for all these participants. Additionally some have learned how to have a strong work ethic, work as part of a diversified and interdisciplinary team, and navigate those negative situations with a certain degree of reflection and personal growth. It is important to note, that not a single participant has regretted their days as a hagwon teacher, and that everyone deemed it worthwhile. For those who may graduate soon from university, and need time to work out who they are, what they can do, and what they could be capable of, teaching in a hagwon might be the desired experience.

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### Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

You are being asked by the researcher, Meagan Henry, a graduate student with St. Cloud State University (SCSU), St. Cloud, Minnesota, to participate in a research study concerning hagwon (private school) teaching in South Korea and future careers. The nature of this research is to collect your personal and professional experiences, through an open interview with the researcher, teaching and living in South Korea. The two-fold purpose of the research is to gain insight into those experiences and the career choices you have/will make either within or outside of the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) profession. The information you provide in a written demographic survey and an open ended question interview will be made public in the form of a culminating graduate thesis published through SCSU, and will be available through their archives. The researcher will tell you when the thesis has passed through to publication and a copy will be given to you by the researcher free of charge.

*You may be directly quoted in the presentation of the final analysis of the information that you provide.* Since direct quotes may be used, do not share anything during the interview or survey questions which you would not feel comfortable having published. Your name will never be used anywhere in the thesis. It will be changed to a single letter code chosen at random that the researcher will keep confidential. In addition, all the names of schools, students, co-workers, and employers will be kept in confidence and will not be stated in the final presentation/publication of the thesis. All surveys, notes, and audio recordings of the interviews will be permanently deleted from the researcher's personal computer, SCSU email account, and recording device after the presentation/publication of the thesis to SCSU. The audio recordings of the interviews will never be shared and viewed only by the researcher while reporting/interpreting the information you provide.

*You have the right to refuse to participate at any time and you will not be penalized for your withdrawal or refusal.* You will be told how to fill out the survey questions and when to have an interview over Skype or Google Hangout by the researcher. If you have any questions at any time you may contact her at [mjhenry@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:mjhenry@stcloudstate.edu). You may also contact the researcher's academic/thesis advisor and committee head chair, Dr. Jim Robinson, at [jhrobinson@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jhrobinson@stcloudstate.edu), second thesis committee chair, Dr. Kim at [ckim@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ckim@stcloudstate.edu) and third thesis committee chair, Dr. Devers at [mcdevers@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:mcdevers@stcloudstate.edu).

Signing this consent form means that you understand the nature of the research, your role within it, who to contact, your right to refuse/withdraw your participation at any time, and that you are at least 18 years of age.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

**Appendix B: Demographic Survey**

Name: (To be changed to a number code)

Age:

Gender:

Country of Citizenship: (if possessing multiple citizenship, please list)

Race/Ethnicity: (may refuse to answer)

Highest level of education attained: (list any certifications you possess as well)

Number of months/years spent teaching BEFORE entering a hagwon position: (this includes any teaching in your home country, in another country, in the EPIC or JET programs)

Number of years/months spent teaching IN the hagwon system:

Languages you speak to any degree of proficiency: (please state proficiency level from novice, intermediate, high, advanced, and in what skill, reading, writing, listening, speaking)

Current Career Status:

### **Appendix C: Open Interview Questions**

- 1) What were/are some thoughts, feelings, beliefs that you have about teaching English?
- 2) What motivated you to teach overseas?
- 3) What were some of the personal experiences that you had while living in South Korea?
- 4) What were some of the professional experiences that you had while working in a hagwon(s) in South Korea?
- 5) What is your opinion about teaching in a business minded school like a hagwon, as a professional career option within the field of TESL?
- 6) What educational pursuits are/do you intend to take and why?
- 7) What are your career goals in the next one to five years?
- 8) What are your career goals in the next ten to 20 years?
- 9) How do you believe your experiences influenced your career goals?
- 10) Email follow up question: Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience, your career, or your thoughts about the TESL profession and the hagwon system's role within it?

## Appendix D: IRB Expedited Review Approval Signature Page



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND  
SPONSORED PROGRAMS  
ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY.

### Institutional Review Board (IRB)

*Administrative Services 210*  
*Website: [stcloudstate.edu/osp](http://stcloudstate.edu/osp) Email: [osp@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:osp@stcloudstate.edu)*  
*Phone: 320-308-4932*

**Name:** Meagan Henry  
**Address** 827 6th Ave. North  
St. Cloud, MN 56303 USA  
**Email:** mjhenry30@hotmail.com

### IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Expedited Review-1

**Project Title:** Hagwons, Future Careers in TESL? A Qualitative Study About the Career Choices of the Multiple Year Private School English Teachers in South Korea

**Advisor** Jim 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.

Good luck on your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 320-308-4932 or email [lidonnay@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:lidonnay@stcloudstate.edu). Use the SCSU IRB number listed on any forms submitted which relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the IRB.

**Institutional Review Board:**

Linda Donnay  
IRB Administrator  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

**St. Cloud State University:**

Marilyn Hart  
Interim Associate Provost for Research  
Dean of Graduate Studies

#### OFFICE USE ONLY

<b>SCSU IRB#</b> 1520 - 1891	<b>Type:</b> Expedited Review-1	<b>Today's Date:</b> 12/7/2015
<b>1st Year Approval Date:</b> 12/7/2015	<b>2nd Year Approval Date:</b>	<b>3rd Year Approval Date:</b>
<b>1st Year Expiration Date:</b> 12/6/2016	<b>2nd Year Expiration Date:</b>	<b>3rd Year Expiration Date:</b>