

Teaching English to North Korean Refugees at Banseok School in South Korea: An Interview with Amanda DeCesaro

Alzo David-West
Aichi Prefectural University
Nagakute, Aichi, Japan

Amanda DeCesaro
Chongshin University
Dongjak-gu, Seoul, South Korea

Abstract

This interview addresses teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to young-adult North Korean refugees at Banseok School (*Pansŏk Hakkyo*) in Seoul. A Christian institution supported by Sarang Church (*Sarang ūi Kyohoe*), the school offers education, mentorship, and volunteer services in preparation for university admission in South Korea and for the anticipated reunification of the two Koreas. Amanda DeCesaro discusses her volunteer conversation class and methods, student learning needs and social hierarchies, emotions in the language classroom, attitudes toward English, interactions with other learners, and how educators should knowledgeably and compassionately engage North Korean refugee students. The interview was conducted electronically by Alzo David-West.

Key words: classroom interaction, EFL, hierarchies, North Korean students, South Korea

1. Background

Alzo David-West (AD): How did you come to teach English to North Korean refugees at Banseok School?

Amanda DeCesaro (ADC): Over the past few years, I have developed an awareness of North Korea and a heart to see justice for the North Korean people. Not many individuals will find themselves able to serve the people inside their country; however, there are many ways to help North Korean refugees here in South Korea. I was first introduced to Banseok School in 2012, when I volunteered for an English camp.¹ Banseok School is an openly Christian school run by Sarang Church in Seoul. The motivation is not conversion but to serve refugee students by following Jesus' model of unconditional love. After the camp, I was compelled to start

¹ Banseok School is supported by the Church of Love (*Sarang ūi Kyohoe*) in Seoul. See "*Pansŏk Hakkyo*" [Rock School], *Pukhan Sarang ūi Sŏnkyubu* [Mission for North Korean Love], <http://lovenk.sarang.org/sub02/sub03.asp> (accessed May 14, 2016). *Pansŏk* refers to the apostle Peter, whom Jesus told would be the rock upon which he would build his church (Matthew 16:18).

volunteering weekly. Because I was so drawn by the vision of the school to meet the needs of North Korean young adults in their new home in South Korea, I dedicated myself to teach English and to build impactful interpersonal relationships. The Banseok School mission is to mentor these students, to help them adjust to a new environment, to train and prepare them for university, and, hopefully, to aid in the reunification of the two Koreas one day. Sarang Church also offers interested students at Banseok School opportunities for Bible study, faith leadership, and worship services.

AD: What objectives and expectations do you set for your language classes?

ADC: Students in my classes should be able to use the target language and have a strong understanding of when and why to use a particular speaking strategy. I expect the students to use English with their classmates and practice outside of class. I hold the high expectation that these students will not only have English-language abilities that will suffice academically but also allow them to excel in communication socially, so that these once-isolated people can become active participants as global citizens.

AD: How many classroom hours of English do your North Korean students receive?

ADC: Banseok School offers about five class hours of English. Each class has a different emphasis. South Korean staff teach grammar, reading, writing, and some listening. My volunteer hours are focused on speaking and communication skills. This semester [spring 2016], the students are separated into levels A to D. Each level has its own two-hour class every Tuesday and Thursday. There is a one-hour English conversation class every Wednesday, which I volunteer for, and another one-hour class every Monday. The one-hour classes are aimed at having the students practice speaking. The leveled classes are similar to the South Korean education curriculum, which primarily focuses on grammar and vocabulary building.

AD: Do you use content-based, grammar-based, or task-based teaching methods?²

ADC: With the strong tendency in South Korea toward grammar-based materials and testing, I find my lessons following the grammar-based teaching method. However, I have tried to introduce task-based teaching to help motivate my students.

² Content-based teaching addresses the target language in the context of a school subject; grammar-based teaching focuses on analyzing and memorizing language structures; and task-based teaching develops language skills through meaningful, real-world activities.

2. Students

AD: What are the North Korean students' language levels, needs, interests, and goals?

ADC: Just like any of the South Korean students I've taught over the past four years, the North Korean students vary in level and present different needs. They are unique from each other and have distinct personalities and interests. Surprisingly, they have quite different goals, especially compared to South Korean students. I teach the highest skill level at Banseok School. Last year, I had three high-intermediate level students, and we communicated with great ease. This year, although it is the highest level, I often have to remind my class of four to seven students not to revert to speaking in Korean. Another difficulty my class faces this semester is that the students are a mixed-level group: from advanced-beginner to high-intermediate. Some students need to build vocabulary; some need confidence; while others need focus and motivation. Like most South Koreans, the North Korean students are most interested in their smartphones and romantic relationships. The most noticeable difference in their goals is that while many, like South Korean students, hope to attend university and get into a prestigious company, there are students who do not desire that and simply hope to start working.

AD: What language-learning difficulties do the North Korean refugee students exhibit?

ADC: The greatest hurdle for my students is discouragement. They seem to give up very easily. Even with a lot of encouragement on my part and their understanding of the importance of learning English, they tend to do what is most comfortable. Much to my surprise, each student has a very different accent and, therefore, exhibits different pronunciation difficulties. Another noticeable difficulty is application. Give them a vocabulary quiz on a list of a hundred words they've memorized, and they will pass easily, but then ask them to use a given word in a conversation, and they become speechless.

AD: How motivated are the students, and how do you help them overcome their limitations?

ADC: Because my English conversation class is optional and participants are not graded or tested, my students are not very motivated. I've discovered that the best way to motivate them as a group is to play speaking games like "Truth or Dare." However, the most effective way to get them to speak in English and to enjoy it is to take each student out individually for coffee or one of our favorites, bubble tea [sweet milk tea with tapioca balls]. Last year, a colleague of mine at Chongshin University volunteered at Banseok School with me, and we would often take

our students out for fun days, like going ice skating or to the amusement park. This was the turning point in our students' language abilities. It was as if we unleashed their hidden potential, and all it took was befriending them and spending extra time to allow them to use their accumulated stock of everyday English.

AD: *How do your North Korean students behave with you as an educator of English?*

ADC: My students are very polite and extremely loving. I get an astounding greeting every Wednesday morning as I walk into the classroom. Every student yells, "Amanda!" with excitement, and they offer me plenty of high-fives. After each class, no matter how poorly I think it went, they always thank me and say, "Good job." It is quite endearing actually.

3. Hierarchies

AD: *What explicit social hierarchies (age, class, education, gender) exist among your North Korean students?*

ADC: Honestly, there is very little evidence of explicit status hierarchies at Banseok School. The students do follow Korean tradition and call older students by the respective titles of *hyong* [older brother] or *õnni* [older sister], and they always address Korean teachers as *sõnsaengnim* [teacher] and use formal language when speaking to them; whereas they usually call native English-speaking teachers by their first names. Other than formal titles, there is nothing I have seen that shows a hierarchy. Banseok School students show a highly egalitarian love and care for one another and do not consider anyone better than another. They equally share their work and compassionately help each other. Also, they all have fun together like close friends.

AD: *How do the students use English based on the age distinctions among themselves?*

ADC: Occasionally, they will tell me about "Min-jun brother" or "Ha-ũn sister" [not the students' real names]. It is very cute to see them use direct translation like that. That is the only hierarchical English they use. I think they see English as a way to speak even more freely with each other. One of my more unique female students often says, "Hey, boy," when trying to get her male classmates' attention, regardless if they are older or younger.

AD: *What management challenges do implicit hierarchies create in the classroom?*³

³ Implicit hierarchies are social relationships in which devices of communication mask or hide power. See Basil

ADC: I have never had to deal with implicit hierarchy management challenges in my classes. It is very freeing actually, compared to teaching South Korean students. There have been a few occasions when my South Korean university students did not want or were afraid to partner with someone who was from a different major or class year. There is none of that at Banseok School. It is a beautiful family.

AD: When do ideological and political controversies arise in classroom interactions?

ADC: No controversies have ever arisen in class. We have even discussed North Korean and South Korean government a few times. Although there was some obvious pain when talking and thinking about family who are still in the North, my students are all in agreement that they just want their friends and family to be safe, healthy, and happy.

4. Emotions

AD: What range and types of emotions do the students display in the classroom?

ADC: In general, my students are happy and excited to be together in class. They are often tired, which is common for the Korean student in general. There have been moments when the past has come up, so I have seen some students remember their former pain. It is very sad, but I am encouraged by how they comfort each other and how quickly the classroom returns to happiness. Because I have gotten really close to many of these students, I can read them fairly well. I know when they are upset or if something is bothering them. Their emotions can have an effect on the class but nothing that has been difficult to overcome. I have very rarely seen a student angry, and not once has anyone become uncontrollably upset.

AD: How do you adapt learning strategies to the students' emotional intelligence?⁴

ADC: Before I had a close relationship with my students, I could see that emotional intelligence was limited among an earlier group of Banseok School students. They remained closed-off and passive learners. I was extremely discouraged each week and didn't feel like I was making much of an impact on those students. After that generation of students graduated or moved away, I was introduced to one remarkable young man. His level of English was the

Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control: The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*, vol. 4 (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 65.

⁴ Emotional intelligence is the ability to reason with and use emotions to enhance thought. See John D. Mayer, "What Is Emotional Intelligence (EI)?" *Emotional Intelligence Information*, University of New Hampshire, http://www.unh.edu/emotional_intelligence/ei%20What%20is%20EI/ei%20definition.htm (accessed May 14, 2016).

highest we had experienced at Banseok School up to that point, and he enabled us to create the bridge that made the school what it is today. His past was shadowed in agonizing mystery, and it was he who tested my own emotional intelligence. I found myself adapting my teaching to how he was reacting emotionally. For example, if he was acting moodily, I would not avoid his emotions, which is something I had the habit of doing before. Instead, I would ask him about it. Being able to talk about his emotions not only helped him find a release or build his English ability; it also helped him learn more about himself. In my current class, we often discuss character and emotions. What is encouraging to me is to see students affirm each other. I do not have a specific learning strategy based on emotional intelligence, but I've learned that including emotions in each class topic has great value.

AD: When have your emotions obviously affected the North Korean students' emotions and vice versa?

ADC: When I bring any emotion other than happiness to Banseok School, the students perceive it as tiredness and a lack of focus. This definitely affects the way the students learn. They will be far less engaged during class and often spend a majority of the time chitchatting to each other in Korean. Whenever I gently remind them to speak English, the chitchat lasts for less than thirty seconds.

AD: Which emotions are most conducive to your language-teaching objectives?

ADC: That is quite noticeable when I am as active during class as I expect my students to be. Whenever I bring a positive attitude that the class will be successful – with a strong outwardly apparent desire that the students will achieve the objectives of the day – they follow through. If I am excited and show them that their improvement and participation give me happiness, then they try to focus more. However, they are aware that my joy is not based on their performance. They are amazing young adults, and they desire to please. They almost seem to care more about my emotions toward them than their own success in the class, which has made me realize how best to approach the material we are covering – with enthusiasm.

5. Attitudes Toward English

AD: What are the North Korean refugee students' attitudes toward English and speakers of English?

ADC: North Koreans have the same basic English-language anxiety as South Koreans

and often shy away from native speakers. However, my Banseok School students are more quickly won over to English than many of my South Korean students. In general, the North Korean refugee students have a very positive attitude toward English and are quite impressed by other Koreans who can speak English at any level of proficiency.

AD: Did the students learn English in North Korea, and how did they study and view the language there?

ADC: Many of them did not learn any English until leaving North Korea. I have had a few more educated students who were taught English as part of their general curriculum in secondary school. Reportedly, the learning materials were British texts or textbooks that focused on grammar, which is not to assume that all British materials use grammar-based approaches. I also had one student whose major was English, but most of his university days were spent farming or in the military. For those students with prior exposure to English in North Korea, they have told me their view of the language was neither positive nor negative, simply another subject to learn.

AD: How do the students compare their previous language-learning experiences with that at Banseok School?

ADC: Most of the students are relieved to be studying English in an environment with greater accessibility to learning materials. On the other hand, the students can also become overwhelmed by the wealth of information. They quickly feel the pressure South Korea puts on all students to learn English and score highly on English proficiency exams such as TOEIC. Sometimes the burden to succeed does hinder my students' ability to learn.

AD: Which varieties of world English do the North Korean refugee students prefer?

ADC: They unanimously agree that they prefer to learn American English. After arriving in South Korea through China and Thailand and receiving a South Korean passport, some of my students lived in and traveled to Canada and the United States, and that experience may have had some influence on their preference. The South Korean curricular leaning toward American English could also play an affecting role. Two of my previous students are now living in England, though.

6. Interactions with Other Learners

AD: *What sorts of interactions have your students at Banseok School had with other learners of English in South Korea?*

ADC: My current students do not interact much with other English-language learners. I do have a few students attending *hagwŏn* [private cram school] courses; however, those are mostly lecture-based courses. Two of my recently graduated students, who are now enrolled at the prestigious Hongik University and Yonsei University, have told me that the most difficult aspect of life after Banseok School is adapting to South Korean culture and making friends with other students who are not North Korean. As far as English goes, they are both at the top of their class because these two young men are very hardworking, diligent students who have learned to love English. They have said English class is one of their favorites since the language is foreign to everyone in the classroom, and in that way, all the learners can connect and help each other.

AD: *How have you introduced your North Korean refugee students and your South Korean EFL students?*

ADC: Only a handful of my South Korean EFL students have met my Banseok School students. A couple of my English education majors have been able to join my class and volunteer their time to put what they've learned into practice. Since I often spend time outside class with all my students, I am sometimes able to introduce South Koreans to North Koreans. Whenever this happens, I simply say my students' names and explain that they are my students. I never say a Banseok School student is a "North Korean refugee." In fact, saying that is very rude and actually hurtful to the North Korean students. So I simply stick to name-and-student and allow them to introduce themselves further.

AD: *Would you describe the nature of the students' classroom interaction and the activities they did?*

ADC: The students are very warmhearted and willing to participate. When the North Korean students interact with the South Korean student volunteers, the atmosphere is very respectful and relaxed. I think having this friendly and laid-back environment helps build the students' confidence and opens them up to making plenty of meaningful learning mistakes. The nature of our classroom activities are usually fluency based. My class is conversation focused. Therefore, we often learn target-language skills and then apply them in conversation-style activities, such as mingling or pair/group sharing.

AD: *What role does English play in relations between North Korean refugees and South Koreans?*

ADC: Currently, English plays a minor role in relations between North Korean refugees and South Koreans. However, I hope a bond can be formed when the two groups learn English together. It would be wonderful to see English learning and communication aid in the uniting of a people who have been separated for seventy years and who have become two very different societies. I firmly believe that English ability does and will play a huge role in the success of North Korean students in South Korea. I also think the degree of language attainment can reflect positively or negatively on the image North Koreans have among South Koreans. As an optimist, I would like to see South Koreans embrace their North Korean brothers and sisters, and perhaps English can be a tool to make that happen.

7. Advice

AD: *How sensitive should English educators be to the North Korean students' refugee status?*

ADC: I believe it is valuable to be aware of the history and current affairs of the two Koreas. North Korean refugees in South Korea quickly adapt to the technologies of the first-world country they now reside in and, therefore, stay informed about the North. If anyone wishes to come alongside any refugees, it is important to understand them as individuals and as a community. English educators must demonstrate a certain degree of sympathy that does not inhibit learning or allow for further hurt or fear, a sympathy that enables the teacher to teach above certain barriers. When I first began coming in contact with North Korean refugees, I encountered all sorts of stories and cautions. Since the students' English ability as well as their learning capacity were so minimal at the time, I had no way of hearing their side of the story. Not only was I just beginning to learn Korean, but the language in the North is a purer form of Korean that has not adapted or transformed like the Korean in the South. Thus, I tiptoed around the refugees, almost like they were fragile, in order to avoid hurting anyone. Once the bridge was made between the native English-speaking teachers and the North Korean students, my viewpoint drastically changed. I used to volunteer teach at Banseok School out of a sense of obligation for commitment. Now, I can't wait to see the students' beautiful smiling faces. So, yes, be sensitive, but do not forfeit real and meaningful relationships purely because of sensitivity. In my experience, the North Korean people are really forgiving and desire friendships

with those whom they may be able to share their culture and love of country, as well as the hurts and horror stories that accompanied them to their new home in South Korea.

AD: What are the most positively affecting teacher attitudes with this group of students?

ADC: Love cannot be stressed enough. No matter what some professionals or experts may argue, in all my relational experiences nothing is greater than love. Love, of course, expresses itself in many ways. Some days, teachers need more patience, while on other days, they need more compassion. My students are quite intuitive, and there is no faking genuine care. As a mentor in various capacities for over ten years, I have noticed a correlation between my students' growth and my own personal growth. In the course of that time, I heard many people complain about not being able to love someone they were working with. I myself have been guilty of thinking love would just come on its own. I then realized love is a choice, and the more I chose it, the more it actually came naturally. My advice to any educator, especially to anyone interested in teaching North Korean refugees, is to think about a current student who is difficult to love, and practice with her or him. There is a lot of information available on this topic. I recommend learning more about it. Ministry-run schools such as Banseok School apply the ethic of Christ-like, or agapic, love in practical ways to show those being served that they are valued and important. Presently, Banseok School volunteers are helping graduating students write their self-introductions for university entrance interviews. By attending to each student's strengths, interests, and vision, we have been reinforcing the idea that each student is unique and precious.

Another teacher attitude that is extremely valuable for students is a state of constant humility. Think back to when you were a student, or perhaps, like me, you are currently trying to learn another language. What kinds of fears do you face as a student? Which emotions and frustrations occur out of the unavoidable discomfort of making mistakes or not achieving your goals? It can be exhausting to be constantly comparing yourself to others or to higher standards. In this kind of "in the other person's shoes" mindset, many educators have created highly successful learning environments.

AD: What topics and materials do you recommend for North Korean students of English in South Korea?

ADC: Finding topics for North Korean students has been one of the most challenging tasks in my teaching them. Because of their long-term isolation from much of the world, they are

still very unaware of many cultural topics. Though they are fast learners, I often get blank stares when I introduce an unfamiliar subject. But like I mentioned earlier, however, they love talking about relationships and family. Although talking about family can mean talking about losing loved ones or missing those still in North Korea, it is a topic they can all engage in on a deeper level. I currently use the *Touchstone* series from Cambridge University Press to focus my class, especially for speaking and communication skills. I recommend meeting with the students first and asking what their interests are and what they would like to learn. If they feel in charge of their own learning, they will become more motivated. If at all possible, also take students outside the classroom and expose them to real life. In my own opinion, it is a less controlled but more compelling “classroom.”

AD: *How can one engage the students in sustained, meaningful communication in English?*

ADC: Get to know the North Korean refugee students as people. If you show interest in them, they will reciprocate. Sharing experiences together also creates sustainability in communication. There are great advantages in doing special activities together. I have cheerfully asked my students to talk to South Korean service employees in English.⁵ Some of them have ordered coffee, and others have asked about trying on clothes – all in English. The employees look a bit startled at first, but most are very gracious, especially when they see me standing next to my students. Sometimes the service people are happy to practice their English in return. Small adventures like these create a giant impression on students, something they will be talking about for days, months, and years.

AD: *Thank you for your time.*

Alzo David-West (adavidwest@yahoo.com) is a lecturer at Aichi Prefectural University in Japan, a past associate editor of the North Korean Review, and an ABD in Philosophy, Art, and Social Thought at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. He is published in the areas of aesthetics, language, literature, philosophy, politics, and social psychology. His previous interviews with EFL educators have appeared in North Korean Review (2010) and English Today (2014).



⁵ South Koreans generally study English from third grade to the first year of university. The country ranks 27 out of 70 on the EF English Proficiency Index 2015, signifying moderate proficiency. See “EF EPI: EF English Proficiency Index,” *Education First*, <http://www.ef.edu/eipi> (accessed May 14, 2016).

Amanda DeCesaro (amanda.decesaro@gmail.com) is a lecturer at Chongshin University in Seoul, South Korea. She also teaches English conversation as a volunteer at Banseok School (Pansŏk Hakkyo), Seoul, which provides spiritual and educational support to North Korean young adults and prepares them for university in South Korea. She is a member of Korea TESOL and holds a B.S. from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and an SIT TESOL Certificate.

