



North Korean defectors must overcome big challenge once free: Learn English

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SEOUL — After escaping a brutal life working up to 15 hours a day in a North Korean coal mine, Sharon Jang found that her lack of English skills kept her from acclimating to life in South Korea.

“When I came here (in 2011), I realized English was really important for adjusting,” said Jang, 27. “I wanted to study nursing but it was so difficult because so many of the terms were in English.”

For many of the more than 30,000 North Korean defectors who have arrived in South Korea, English quickly emerges as a vital necessity, especially among students.

While North Korean defectors are given preferential admission to universities, they often find themselves falling behind because many classes use English-language textbooks and teaching materials. Most South Korean students study English for several years before attending college, but those from the North are almost never exposed to the language back home.

A 2016 study from the government-run Korea Development Institute found almost a third of defectors enrolled in universities wanted to suspend their studies because of English difficulties.

Even the language difference between South and North Korean is exacerbated by English. The two countries speak the same Korean language, but after being separated for almost 70 years, the influx of English terms into the South — known as “Konglish” — leaves many from the North baffled.

Another 2014 poll by South Korea’s Unification Ministry found that more than 40% of defectors picked communication problems from the use of foreign languages as the biggest difficulty in assimilation. It has had a major impact on their lives and career prospects: an estimated 35% of refugees are unemployed, while 80% work in menial jobs.

For Jang, help has come through a Seoul-based non-profit called Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR). Founded in 2013 by an American educational policy analyst, Casey Lartigue, and

South Korean researcher, Lee Eun Koo, TNKR pairs North Korean refugees with volunteer English tutors for free language lessons.

The group's founders met at a conference on North Korean human rights and began discussing ideas for how to help defectors. Both had already come to the realization that English was a need that wasn't being adequately addressed.

"Escaping is the first battle for refugees," said Lartigue. "Then they have to adjust to a world that uses English."

Since the group's founding, more than 325 North Korean refugees have studied with over 700 volunteer teachers.

Lartigue, who was formerly a policy analyst and school choice advocate at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington D.C., said the program doesn't force North Koreans to address the past. Volunteers are specifically instructed not to ask about the student's experiences and backgrounds.

"We have the motto 'Look forward, not back,'" he said. "This program can be a kind of escape. Here they can just come and study, and get away from the past."

Lartigue's co-founder Eun Koo, formerly a researcher at the government-run Korean Educational Development Institute, said she has seen the benefits of the flexible, student-led approach.

"Even though I agreed with the concept of the government's mission, I always found things were slowed down with bureaucracy," she said. "We can really help directly. I've gotten so much great feedback from refugees. They love it and they have more responsibility for the classes."

Most students find TNKR by word of mouth in the refugee community, and dozens are currently on the program's waiting list. Jang Jin Sung, one of the most prominent North Korean defectors in the country, and author of the book *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee: A Look Inside North Korea* said the buzz about the program inspired him to come check it out.

"Over the last few years, I had heard so much about TNKR from refugees that I finally looked them up and went to meet them," said Jin Sung, who had been a high-level propaganda officer back in North Korea. He ended up joining the Board of Directors, calling the group "the best model for helping refugees practically and productively."

While most North Koreans simply want to learn English, a few are motivated to share their stories with the rest of the world. The TNKR program also offers one-on-one tutoring in public speaking and hosts refugee speaking contests. Three former students have already published books in English on their experiences, including Park Yeon Mi, who wrote *In Order to Live* and has become a global activist for North Korean rights.

Jang also hopes to write a book and has been practicing a speech that describes her own harrowing escape from a city called Hoeryong near the Chinese border.

As the granddaughter of a South Korean prisoner of war, Jang was forced to work in the Aoji coal mine as a kind of hereditary punishment. The work was dangerous, exhausting and grim,

leaving Jang covered in coal dust every day. The only time she wore a skirt instead of work clothes, she says, was at a weekly “self-criticism” session, meant to foster loyalty to the communist dictatorship.

With the help of her mother, who had defected years earlier, Jang was able to pay a broker to help her cross into China in 2011, where she began a treacherous journey that led through Laos and Thailand before finally reaching safety in South Korea.

Despite her struggles to assimilate into a new culture in Seoul, Jang has managed to build what she calls an “ordinary” life. She is married to another North Korean refugee and has two young daughters.

“I have a normal life that I couldn't have expected in North Korea,” she said. “I’m not exceptional but I can enjoy my life, my family. I want to share my story to give hope to others, not just in North Korea but in South Korea and even around the world. No matter what the difficulties — if I can do it, you can too.”