

## “The Conference Theme Really Resonated With Me”

**Dr. Eun Sung Park, Sogang University**

*One of the shiniest gems at Sogang University is the soft-spoken, mild-mannered professor in their English Department: Dr. Eun Sung Park. Beginning at an early age, her journeys have taken her to Bangladesh, India, both coasts of the U.S., the Far East, and to many locations in Southeast Asia. The roads she has traveled and the “way stations” in between mirror the essence of our conference theme: “Players on the World Stage: From EFL Classrooms to Global Lives.” The English Connection was recently fortunate to be able to interview this “traveler,” a featured speaker at our upcoming international conference. — Ed.*

**The English Connection (TEC):** First on the agenda is to thank you wholeheartedly for sharing your time to do this interview with us. We are quite grateful. Next is to ask you to share a bit of your background with us to better familiarize our readers with you and your work.



**Prof. Park:** Thank you for inviting me to do this interview for TEC. I am currently a professor in the English Department at Sogang University. I actually started out my teaching career at Sogang University as an English instructor in the General Education English Program after obtaining my MA in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University. I enjoyed teaching English so much that I wanted to make it a lifelong job. The only way to secure a permanent teaching position at the university level was to get a doctoral degree, so I went back to my alma mater in New York to pursue an EdD in applied linguistics. While working on my doctoral degree, I taught graduate courses in the TESOL/Applied Linguistics Programs, including teaching practicum and SLA courses.

After earning my doctorate, I started my first full-time teaching position in the MATESOL/TEFL Program at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in California (formerly known as the Monterey Institute of International Studies). I joined the English Literature and Linguistics Department at Sogang in 2009, where I currently teach SLA- and TESOL-related courses. As you can see, my professional career has always involved teaching languages or training language teachers. More recently, I’ve been focusing more on conducting research related to language learning and language use. I love all aspects of my job, and I am grateful to be doing what I love to do.

**TEC:** In no small way, I think of you as a manifestation of our conference theme – “Players on the World Stage: From EFL Classrooms to Global Lives” – as you have yourself gone from a Korean middle school English classroom to the world stage: completing your graduate work at a major U.S. university, teaching at the university level in New York City and in California, and you are an officer in the largest international ELT organization in this part of the world, Asia TEFL. How difficult, or easy, has it been for you to adjust to the numerous identities that you have had in different contexts

around the globe, including being a university professor in Korea?

**Prof. Park:** I have to agree that the conference theme really resonated with me. When I learned about this year’s theme, it instantly took me back to my fifth grade when my father was transferred to Dhaka, Bangladesh. My family moved there, and I was enrolled in a British school run by Catholic nuns. Not knowing a word of English, I was placed in what was called the “Special English Class,” an EFL class with students from different countries including Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, Hungary, Kuwait, and Poland, to name a few. I remember feeling quite insecure and even fearful the night before the first class. I asked my dad to teach me one English expression that I thought would be most useful: “I don’t know.” I would use the expression in response to any question directed at me, just to show that I wasn’t dumb or being rude, and that my inability to answer was due to not knowing the language.

More than a decade later, I found myself teaching English to immigrants in New York, and several years thereafter, I found myself teaching TESOL courses to Peace Corps fellows at Teachers College, where I first taught a course called TESOL Classroom Practices. This class had 28 Peace Corps volunteers who had returned from teaching English overseas, mostly in South America and Africa. Despite my initial apprehensions, teaching this all-American, yet incredibly diverse, group turned out to be both enjoyable and memorable. It was in this class that I discovered the joy of teaching a diverse, heterogeneous group of students, in which learning can be a two-way process where both the teacher and students benefit from each other. My experiences in Seoul, Dhaka, Kodaikanal (a small town in India, where I attended middle and high school), New York, and Monterey have shaped who I am today. These transnational experiences have provided me with a variety of resources that I can draw upon and incorporate in different teaching contexts. I believe these varied experiences have equipped me to adapt appropriately to the different teaching environments that I have encountered.

**TEC:** I also have both enjoyable and memorable experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer here in Korea back in the 1970s. I know that in recent years, you have done work with North Korean refugees and that you’ve done research on that work. Could you tell us how you got involved with this refugee work and the experiences that you have had through this association with them?

**Prof. Park:** Upon joining Sogang University, I was surprised to learn that there were North Korean refugee-background students in our student population. Many of these students struggled with English, and some spoke no English at all. Their difficulty with English is understandable since South Korean students receive at least ten years of English education prior

to college, compared to North Korean refugees who often experience disrupted education during the process of defection and resettlement. While serving as the director of the General Education English Program at my university, I had a chance to work with some of these students, learning about their unique experiences and challenges. Since then, I've been keen on learning more about the growing population of minority students at our school. Deepening our understanding of these students' backgrounds and experiences is essential in designing English programs that are tailored to their language-learning needs.

**TEC:** The title of your featured session at KOTESOL 2024 is "Resilient Roots, Global Growth: Transnational Identities as Assets in the English Classroom," and I believe it is based on some of your work with North Korean refugees. Could you give us a verbal trailer of what you will be speaking on?

**Prof. Park:** Yes, I will be talking about the English-learning experiences of North Korean refugee-background students, specifically focusing on their English-learning experiences and challenges in different contexts. I will also address the importance of an asset-based pedagogy in teaching these students. In the past, refugee-background students have been stereotyped as "at risk" or "under-performing." This traditional perspective tends to focus on their limitations and deficits, which can construct an incomplete account about this population. I will share stories and experiences of North Korean refugee-background and other minority students who have transformed their unique backgrounds and identities into assets that they can use to their advantage. My recent publications focus on this topic, and I hope to underscore the significance of learners' transnational identities in the process of learning English as an additional language.

particularly reported a "clash of identities." However, these students are few in number and represent a distinct subset among North Korean defectors. Therefore, the issue of "clash of identities" is something that warrants empirical investigation.

**TEC:** You have been a member and officer of AsiaTEFL for quite some time. Please tell us about AsiaTEFL as an international organization and about your involvement in it.

**Prof. Park:** I served as the book series editor for AsiaTEFL from 2015 to 2017. I usually shy away from administrative roles – I'm simply not good at them – but the book series editor position was manageable, since it did not involve many meetings or too much administrative work (just a lot of email exchanges). Also, I enjoy attending AsiaTEFL conferences, since they are held in different cities across various parts of Asia, which makes it all the more exciting. Plus, they are usually held in the summer when things are less busy at school. I like to take my graduate students to AsiaTEFL conferences to present their work, as the environment is friendly and supportive, which is helpful for emerging scholars.

**TEC:** Will KOTESOL 2024 be the first KOTESOL conference that you will be participating in?

**Prof. Park:** Actually, the first academic conference I ever attended was a KOTESOL conference – the 1998 KOTESOL Conference held at Kyung Hee University. At that time, I was teaching part-time as an English instructor in the General Education English Program at Sogang University, and I attended the conference with some of my colleagues. My second attendance was at the 2016 KOTESOL Conference, where I presented as a representative of KATE, the Korea Association of Teachers of English. Most recently, I was a plenary speaker at the Seoul KOTESOL Conference in 2018. I have fond memories from all three conferences.

**TEC:** As we bring this interview to a close, is there anything else that you would like to convey to our readers?

**Prof. Park:** Yes, I'd like to share a bit about my latest project, which diverges from the type of research I have done in the past. Together with a colleague, I am in the process of putting together an edited volume entitled *BTS: K-pop Transcending Language and Communication*. As far as I know, it will be the first scholarly volume that explores languages of and about BTS, the global septet boy band. The chapters will examine various ways in which language is adapted, hybridized, and creatively resourced by BTS and ARMY, their most dedicated fandom. The volume will be published by Routledge, hopefully within this year. Fingers crossed!

Last, but not least, many thanks go to the staff at TEC for putting this together. Also, thanks in advance to the readers for taking the time to read this interview. I hope to see many of you at the conference and at my featured session.

**TEC:** Your upcoming BTS K-pop volume sounds quite interesting. And many thanks to you for making time to do this interesting interview for us; *The English Connection* is most grateful. Your journeys are quite the embodiment of our conference theme – from learning English to global life experiences. I am sure that many of our conference-goers, including myself, will be eager to sit in on your session at our international conference in April. Thank you.

**Interviewed by David Shaffer.**

## *"I want to keep my North Korean accent": Agency and identity in a North Korean defector's transnational experience of learning English*

▲ **Journal article on an English-learning North Korean, co-authored by Dr. Eun Sung Park.**

**TEC:** I'm curious as to how North Korean refugees might feel about the necessity of learning English, the mother tongue of some of North Korea's staunchest adversaries? Might they experience a clash of identities?

**Prof. Park:** That's an interesting question. Did you know that English is a required subject in North Korea? It's required because they believe it's important to understand the language of what they consider their "enemy," namely, the United States. Many North Korean students have reported that they once firmly believed in the political propaganda taught to them when they were young. However, upon arriving in South Korea, most of them quickly realized that they had been presented with a skewed worldview, a suspicion that some of them began to develop prior to their defection. Consequently, their attitude toward English changes drastically when they arrive in South Korea. They no longer view English as the language of the enemy but as valuable linguistic capital that can help them secure stable jobs and successfully integrate into the new society. The students that I have worked with have not