

Can I Teach Abroad? Motivations and Decision-Making Processes of Teachers to the International Locations

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, South Korea has become a popular education and teaching destination for native English teachers, international school teachers, and university lecturers. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the requirements, offshore teachers need to complete the self-funded quarantine before they can join the workforce in South Korea. This study aims to understand the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of a group of native English teachers who decided to come to South Korea to develop their English language teaching career, particularly those who came during the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological approach with interview session, focus group activity, and member checking interview were employed. Based on the social cognitive career and motivation theory and qualitative data from 38 participants, three themes were categorized: special life pathways, easy employment, and attractive cultural environment. The results of this study may provide some recommendations to school leaders, employers, and policymakers for native English teachers who would like to provide teaching services in their countries. As the COVID-19 pandemic and traveling restrictions will eventually eliminate, the human resources management and school leaders should continue to reform and improve the management to meet the needs of the long-term human resources shortage.

Keywords: school human resources, social cognitive career theory, social cognitive career and motivation theory, South Korea, teacher shortage, teaching abroad, workforce management

1. Introduction

English language teaching is a meaningful occupation that many pre-service and in-service teachers would like to join. English language learning is one of the popular topics in educational fields as many schools and universities require their students to have at least 12 years of English language learning experience in order to graduate (Baumert et al., 2020; Dos Santos, 2019a; Jin et al., 2014). Besides the school curriculum requirements, employers and organizational leaders expect job applicants and candidates to have at least an intermediate level of English language proficiency (Salamonson et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2005). As a result, the demand for English language teachers is growing, regardless of the economic downfall and geographic location. Although domestic teachers can teach many English language courses with bilingual and excellent English language proficiency, many students and parents expect English language courses to be hosted by native English language teachers. As a result, many private academies, schools, and universities are looking for native English language teachers to fill the human resources gaps in their language learning classes (Wang, 2015).

However, teaching in a foreign country is not easy for many teachers and school staff, particularly those with families and children. Over the past few decades, South Korea has become a popular education and teaching destination for native English teachers, international school teachers, and university lecturers. Unlike other neighboring countries and regions, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, with multicultural societies and large populations of foreign professionals, South Korea does not have a significant foreign population. According to recent statistics (Kim, 2021), due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the foreign population in South Korea has declined significantly, from 2.52 million in December 2019 to 1.98 million in June 2021.

Based on the statistics, although not all of the foreign nationals living in South Korea are native English teachers, the decrease in the foreign population might explain the shortage of qualified teachers. Although there are no official

statistics about English and foreign language teachers in South Korea, the numbers of these teachers have probably been reduced due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 regulations. Unlike normal times, when native English teachers could come to South Korea without any self-quarantine requirement and the additional time management and financial expenses such a requirement entails, individuals from foreign countries are now required to self-quarantine in a designated area. The government agencies do not cover the fees for the quarantine sites or the expenses. More likely, the employees themselves need to cover their own expenses before starting their employment.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of a group of native English teachers who decided to come to South Korea to develop their English language teaching career, particularly those who came during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021), the current study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Why do native English teachers decide to come to South Korea for their career development, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when teachers need to handle their own fees and time management for the self-quarantine requirement?
- 2) How do native English teachers describe their motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes for the development of their English language teaching career in South Korea?

1.2 Significance of the Study

Although some studies (Bullough & Knowles, 1990; Dos Santos, 2019b; Watt et al., 2012) have been conducted to understand the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of English language teachers, many of them were completed before the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, the participants and teachers who participated in these studies did not need to complete self-quarantine and deal with the additional financial expenses and time management issues. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the requirements and regulations for employment, it is important to understand how these changes may impact the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of individuals and groups (Ewing & Cooper, 2021; Hoang, 2020). From the perspectives of native English teachers, the results of this study will fill the gaps in this area, particularly in regard to the short- and long-term management of shortages of native English teachers in South Korea and the wider East Asia region.

2. Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

The social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021) was used to investigate the problems examined in this study. This theory was developed on the basis of social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 1996) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1982), and it proposes that internal and external factors might impact individuals' motivations and decision-making processes.

In the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021), "psychological and internal factors with self-efficacy" refer to the instinctive motivations that drive behaviors. Under this category, three sub-directions have been identified: 1) academic interests, 2) personal considerations, and 3) achievement of education and career goals. On the other hand, individuals' motivations and behaviors can be impacted by extrinsic motivations. In the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021), social and external factors refer to the extrinsic influences that drive the decision-making processes of individuals. Under this category, three sub-directions have been identified: 1) interests in career development, 2) financial considerations, and 3) surrounding environments and individuals. Figure 1 outlines the social cognitive career and motivation theory.

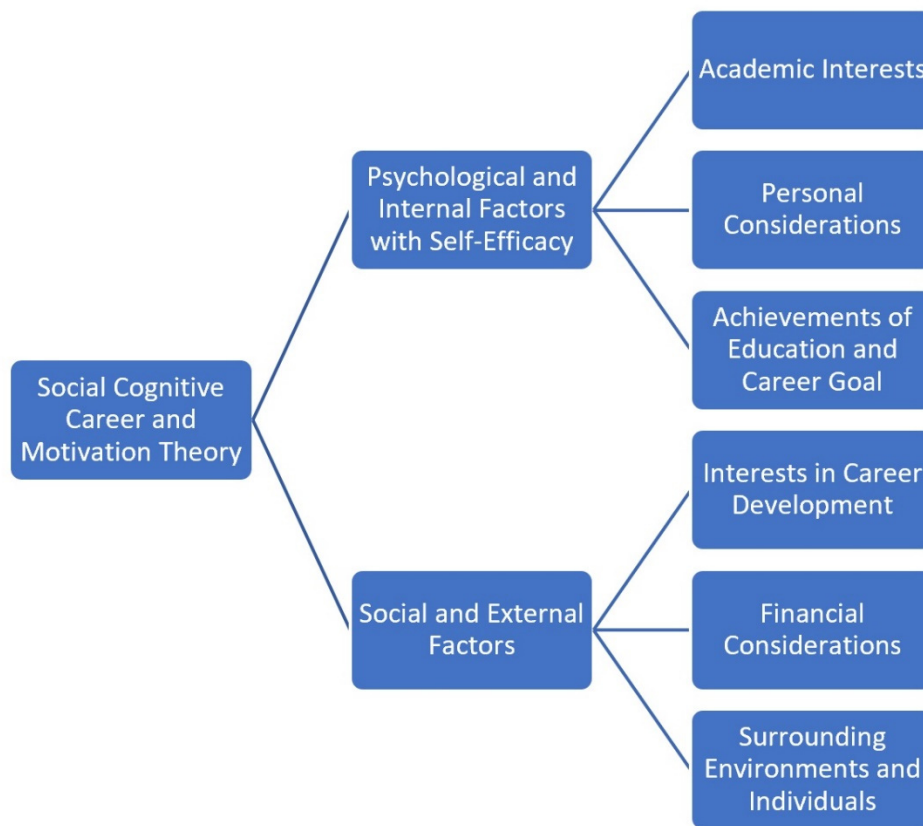


Figure 1. Social Cognitive Career and Motivation Theory (Dos Santos, 2021)

2.1 Teachers' Career Decisions and Decision-Making Processes

Teaching is an isolated occupation. Many teachers and school staff experience stress, burnout, and mental health disorders due to the lack of support and engagement from their co-workers, school leaders, and government agencies (Weiner, 2012). Although teaching is not an easy occupation and life commitment for many individuals and groups, many traditional-age students and second-career teachers continue to join and stay in the teaching profession (Kwee, 2020). However, international schools and teachers in the foreign school environment face significant challenges due to different factors, such as culture shock, language barriers, and discrimination (Hardman, 2001; Odland & Ruzicka, 2009).

Although the East Asian region is known for multiculturalism and international education, many foreign professionals face challenges in South Korea due to discrimination, stigma, and background issues. A recent study (Yi & Kim, 2020) indicated that workers in South Korea experience stress and burnout due to their workplace environment which highly impacts job satisfaction, particularly for foreign teachers (Im et al., 2016). Another recent study (Dos Santos, 2020) examined the career developments of a group of university lecturers who had provided teaching services for a decade at one of South Korea's universities. The participants indicated that marriage was one of the significant points as their Korean spouses had no interest in leaving their country. Some scholars (Kartika & Purba, 2018) have also argued that the satisfaction rates of international school teachers and school staff might be impacted by managerial style and school management. Chandler (2010) argued that geographic locations and environments were significant considerations for international school teachers who decided to stay or leave their workplace and position. Although some studies have been completed, the literature has not captured the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the career decision-making processes of native English teachers in South Korean environments (Byun & Slavin, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the recruitment and retention management policies and plans for many native English teachers, school leaders, and government agencies, it is important to understand the relationship and how it may change the educational background after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Results

The phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) was used to understand the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of a group of native English teachers who decided to come to South Korea to develop their English language teaching career, particularly those who came during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the recruitment and retention problems concern the South Korean educational environment, an examination of the wider population and comments from the targeted population may be useful. Therefore, the employment of the phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) should be appropriate to capture the voices and comments of individuals who met the criteria of the study.

3.1 Recruitment and Participants

The snowball sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009) was employed to recruit a group of native English speakers. First, the researcher contacted 12 participants who met the criteria of the study. The researcher sent the invitation email to these participants. All participants agreed to join and share their stories for this study. After the interview session, the participants should try to refer at least one participant with a similar background. After several rounds of referral, the researcher could recruit 38 participants. Some qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) argued that phenomenological studies should recruit only up to 25 participants. However, during the data collection procedure, the researcher continued to receive additional new ideas and stories with different perspectives and approaches. Therefore, the researcher did not want to miss the new perspectives from the potential communities in South Korea. As a result, the researcher continued to recruit new participants until it reached the saturation (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2012). Therefore, a total of 38 participants were invited. The participants should meet all the following criteria:

- 1) Citizens from one of the following countries, Australia (Participant #1-3), Canada (Participant #4-11), Ireland (Participant #12), New Zealand (Participant #13-15), South Africa (Participant #16-23), the United Kingdom (Participant #24-28), and the United States (Participant #29-38),
- 2) Came to South Korea for English language teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- 3) Non-vulnerable person.

3.2 Data Collection

Three data collection tools have been used, interview session, focus group activity, and member checking interview (Merriam, 2009; Morgan, 1998). First of all, the researcher invited each participant for the individual, semi-structured, and private interview sessions for sharing. Each interview session lasted from 65 to 132 minutes. After the interview sessions, the participants should refer at least one participant for the study. After the interview sessions, the focus group activities were employed to collect stories based on the group sharing format. As the research eventually invited 38 participants, four focus group activities were formed (i.e. three groups with ten participants and one group with eight participants). Each focus group activity lasted from 124 to 155 minutes.

After the interview sessions and focus group activities, the researcher categorised the qualitative data based on each participant's personal file. The researcher sent the data back to each participant for confirmation. The member checking interview sessions have been used to confirm the data. During the member checking interview sessions, the participants confirmed and agreed with their data. Each member checking interview session lasted from 44 to 56 minutes. Please note, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the abovementioned data collection procedures were conducted online. The researcher also used a digital recorder to record the voiced message. All participants agreed with the arrangement.

3.3 Data Analysis

The three-step data analysis procedure was employed, including the open-coding, axial-coding, and selective-coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to study the massive data to meaningful themes and subthemes. First, the researcher transcribed the voiced messages into written transcripts. The researcher re-read the data again for potential themes and subthemes. The open-coding technique was used to narrow the stories to the first-level themes and subthemes. At this stage, 20 themes and 35 sub-themes were yielded. After the open-coding technique, the researcher further employed the axial-coding technique to narrow the first-level themes and subthemes for the study. At this stage, 10 themes and 12 sub-themes were yielded as the second-level themes and subthemes. Eventually, based on the second-level themes and subthemes, the researcher employed the selective-coding technique to narrow the data for the study. Last but not least, three themes and three subthemes were yielded for the study.

3.4 Human Subject Protection

Privacy is the most important part of this study as employers may locate the identity of the participants. Therefore, the researcher masked the identity and background of the participant. After the researcher completed the study, the signed consent forms, voiced messages, written transcripts, contact information, and computer were locked in a password protected cabinet. Only the researcher could read the materials. After the study was completed, the researcher immediately deleted and destroyed the materials to protect privacy. The study received support from Woosong University Academic Research Funding 2022.

4. Results and Discussions

Although the participants from different countries and regions arrived in South Korea to take up positions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant complying with the self-quarantine requirement, all of them were willing to join the teaching profession in the middle of the health crisis. After several rounds of interview sessions and focus group activities, the researcher categorized some common themes and subthemes for the study. Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes	
4.1.	Special Life Pathways
4.1.1.	Encouragement from Childhood and Previous Experiences
4.1.2.	Personal Desire
4.2.	Easy Employment: Demands on Native English Teachers
4.2.1.	Advantages of My Skin Color
4.3.	Attractive Cultural Environment

4.1 Special Life Pathways

Teaching in foreign countries is attractive for many teachers and school staff as they can experience international environments through their career development (Dos Santos, 2020a, 2020b). Although some individuals may experience culture shock and challenges in foreign environments, many believe that international experiences upgrade their teaching skills and sense of internationalism. The researcher captured several interesting stories:

...this is the first time...I left my country for job and working experience...I only went to other countries for tourism...I want to gain...some good experiences from South Korea...because not all people in my country...can learn new knowledge...after university...although I only plan to stay in South Korea for a short time...it is still a good time for me to learn international teaching and to teach for foreign students...(Participant #3, Australia)

...teaching in foreign countries is great...if I can join the teaching team in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic...it can be remarkable...because of this special life pathway and experiences...it can be costly...because of the self-funded isolation...but if I do not take this opportunity...I will stay in my homeland forever...life is short. We need to take the chance and experience...(Participant #8, Canada)

4.1.1 Encouragement from Childhood and Previous Experiences

...I have wanted to work in a foreign country...since my childhood...I had a very good friend and his family moved to South Korea because of his dad's work...we reconnected on Facebook afterwards...he shared some very good experiences with me and encouraged me...to work in South Korea as a language teacher after university...it sounds like a good plan and good adventure for young people...just like me...I did not know where to start...I searched some websites about language teaching...and English teachers...are in demand...so I decided to go to South Korea...(Participant #11, Canada)

Positive encouragement and previous experiences played significant roles in people's experiences, career decisions, and decision-making processes (Dos Santos, 2021). In this study, many participants believed that their career and career decision-making processes were somehow influenced by different factors from their previous situations, such

as friends and personal experiences (McWhirter et al., 2000). Some studies (Thomson et al., 2012; Watt et al., 2012) have also indicated that individuals listen to and observe other people's experiences and recommendations in their decision-making processes, particularly in the teaching profession. In this study, the participants' behaviors echoed these ideas and followed the theory as guidelines for their development.

4.1.2 Personal Desire

...I studied abroad in Italy during my college time...I enjoyed my time in Europe...I wanted to do something different after university...I can work in my home country for 40 years...until my great retirement...but why don't I work in South Korea for my first few years...I can be a life-changing decision...I don't think many people would take this adventure...it is very uncommon...because people just come to South Korea for tourism...not for teaching and work...(Participant #17, South Africa)

...I went to South Korea and Japan once...it was not a good experience in South Korea...but I want to see the development...because South Korea and Japan were the only two places that I went...I applied to these two countries...almost all companies accepted my applications in South Korea...why not give myself a try again in South Korea...perhaps this time is better...(Participant #24, United Kingdom)

Tourism and personal desire played important roles in the participants' experiences, career decisions, and decision-making processes (Lam & Santos, 2018; Tsai et al., 2017). Many participants had previously visited South Korea for tourism. Many expressed their positive experiences and their desire to come back to South Korea for a second visit. Therefore, they decided to choose South Korea as their career site and location. Although not all of them will stay in South Korea (or other foreign countries) for their life-long career development due to the culture shock and cultural differences (Roskell, 2013), many expressed the encouragement they had received and their positive opinions about their career switching decision. In line with the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021), positive personal experiences (i.e. from childhood experiences to tourism) played important roles in the participants' experiences, career decisions, and decision-making processes. In fact, working in foreign countries is a life-changing step and decision. Many overcame the challenges through strong self-efficacy and personal desire (Bandura, 1982, 1995). Roskell (2013) indicated that cultural shock could significantly impact international teachers' job satisfaction and mental well-being. Many were unsure about the long-term development of their careers in South Korea, although many were excited about their teaching positions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Easy Employment: Demands on Native English Teachers

As indicated by recent statistics (Kim, 2021), the foreign population in South Korea has been significantly reduced during the pandemic period. Although there is a huge demand for staff in the English language teaching profession, many onshore native English teachers decided to go to another location or back home due to personal issues. Offshore native English teachers need to complete the self-funded quarantine before earning income from their employer. Therefore, the long-term human resources gap in native English teachers cannot be solved to meet the increasing staffing demands in the English language teaching profession, regardless of the educational facilities and levels. Many participants stated that as long as they are willing to join the English language teaching profession abroad, potential employers will sponsor their work visas. However, none of their employers reimbursed their self-funded quarantine fees. As one participant said:

...I directly applied...to three educational facilities in South Korea...I received emails from all three employers...within five working days...we completed the online interviews...within ten working days...three schools offered me the jobs...because they did not have enough teachers...for many of their students...(Participant #29, United States)

4.2.1 Advantages of My Skin Color

...it is very easy to find an English teaching job in South Korea...because of my skin colour...I did not know that before...I came to South Korea...the local expats told me that...as long as I have white skin and blonde hair...it means I can get the job...it can confirm that too...as a teacher here...the local academy employers love White girls with blonde hair... (Participant #12, Ireland)

...in many countries, Black people have a bad time because of their skin colour...Black people are at the greatest disadvantage of our skin colour...but in South Korea and in the private academies... employers love Black and White people...they don't need any East Asian teachers...because their parents love foreigners...White and Black teachers...they want to use our skin colour...as the logo for the native language...(Participant #30, United States)

Currently, South Korea only accepts citizens from Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States for English language teaching posts, regardless of their mother tongue and skin color. As all of the participants in this study were non-Asian people, they all expressed that their skin color became one of the considerations in their applications. Although skin color is an advantage, it can also be a cause of discrimination, bias, and stigma (Balatchandirane, 2003; Kim et al., 2016). Also, Black teachers indicated that their skin color had become the logo or symbol of private academies and employers. Some believed that their employers should not take skin color as an employment consideration but rather should consider experience and background instead (Ehrenberg et al., 1995; Hand et al., 2017; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). In line with the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021), there was a belief within the surrounding environments and among individuals that skin color was an employment consideration. Therefore, their skin color and ethnicity played significant roles in the participants' experiences, career decisions, and decision-making processes.

4.3 Attractive Cultural Environment

...over the years...many TV dramas and movies...were shown and promoted...many of my classmates and friends watched Korean movies...South Korea looks great from the movie...I want to spend a few years here for work...I don't speak Korean at all...it is very hard to find jobs other than teaching...but the culture and K-pop [the Korean pop culture] are so attractive...I am okay with teaching...let's try teaching in Korea...(Participant #12, New Zealand)

The pop culture and interests in the local cultural environment played significant roles in individuals' experiences, career decisions, and decision-making processes (Choi & Yi, 2012; Jin, 2018). The design of many recent foreign language teaching and learning materials was based on elements of Korean pop culture, such as singers and TV shows, and this significantly attracted foreign language learners (Jin, 2018; Joung, 2021). Although not all individuals are followers of Korean pop culture, many believe that such innovative teaching and learning strategies and materials have impacted their decision-making processes (Dos Santos, 2021).

...I really like Asian culture...I love Judo, Kungfu, sushi, and kimchi...my families...have many Asian friends and churchmates...they told me that young people should try some new ideas before too late...I am very interested in Asian culture...China, Japan, and Korea are the greatest start...I don't mind...any of these three locations...I finally received three offers from Korea...I like the Korean culture too...with the job offers...I decided to come here for a nice try...(Participant #26, United Kingdom)

The attraction to East Asian culture and other cultural factors strongly influenced the participants' decision-making processes (Balakrishnan & Low, 2016; Thomson et al., 2012). In this study, many participants expressed that they had an interest in East Asian culture before they decided to move to South Korea for work. Almost all of them had applied for job positions in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, but all of them had decided to come to South Korea because the other countries rejected their applications. However, all of the participants believed that their move to South Korea was the right one due to their interest in East Asian culture. In line with the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021), personal considerations and personal interest in the East Asian cultural environment influenced the participants' experiences.

5. Limitations and Future Research Developments

First, the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine regulation have impacted the issuance of work visas and travel restrictions. Onshore native English teachers may fill the human resources gaps in South Korea because onshore applicants do not need to complete the self-funded quarantine before employment. Therefore, future research studies could capture the voices and comments of groups of onshore native English teachers in order to expand the practical understanding in this area.

Second, although South Korean educational facilities are thirsty for native English teachers, other subject areas (e.g. engineering) and educational sites (e.g. international schools) also need professionals to fill human resources gaps. Therefore, future research studies should expand the research directions to other subject areas and educational facilities in order to fill the gaps in these research areas.

Third, many countries and regions in East Asia have also experienced significant human resources gaps in regard to qualified and experienced teachers and school staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the results from South Korea may offer answers to the problems and situations in other East Asian countries and regions, there is still a significant need for contemporary data from participants in these countries and regions. Therefore, researchers in these countries and regions could use this study as a reference to capture data from their teachers and school staff.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic created inconvenience and disadvantages to schools, teachers, students, and parents internationally. Although many teachers want to teach in international locations, self-quarantine and time management have become restrictions and limitations for any potential overseas opportunities and career pathways. Based on the research finding, career pathways and cultural interactions would be the motivations and reasons, particularly these factors overcame the sociocultural and financial challenges. Although mixed sharing and opinions were captured, many continued to invest their career developments overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results also outline the teachers' mobilities and motivations for career development, career decisions, and the decision-making processes. The results of this study will fill the gaps in this area, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. Contributions to the Practice

First, school human resources management, teachers' shortage, and teachers' retention are some of the challenges in many schools and educational environments, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many schools provided help to recruit qualified and experienced native English teachers, many teachers rejected the offers due to the quarantine and traveling restrictions. The results of this study may provide some recommendations to school leaders, employers, and policymakers for native English teachers who would like to provide teaching services in their countries. As the COVID-19 pandemic and traveling restrictions will eventually eliminate, the human resources management and school leaders should continue to reform and improve the management to meet the needs of the long-term human resources shortage.

Second, international teaching is one of the challenges for many qualified teachers, particularly for teachers with family responsibilities and engagements. Although many could overcome the problems after they landed in the hosted countries, many teachers may want to understand the situations and issues in the hosted countries, in this case, South Korea. The results of this study may provide some ideas to potential teachers who want to teach in international locations, particularly in the East Asian region.

Third, in general, most English language teachers should originally come from one of the countries western countries. Many of them may not fully understand the sociocultural expectations and standards in the East Asian region. Therefore, based on the results of this study, the stories and sharing from the participants may become a reference to potential teachers in the East Asian region.

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