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The Lives of English Language Educators: Narratives of Growth and Transformation in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to explore the experiences of personal and professional growth and emotional well-being among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors working in higher education in South Korea.

Method: The study employed a narrative inquiry approach informed by the theory of the transformative self. Data were collected through 16 semi-structured interviews with eight EFL instructors and analyzed thematically.

Findings: The analysis revealed four major themes: change and redemption, growth as an EFL teacher, the gift and cost of care, and the limits of growth. The findings indicate that meaningful connections with students and the wider community, an ethical orientation, and a commitment to others' growth can contribute to instructors' personal and professional satisfaction and overall well-being. In contrast, institutional pressures, burnout, and limited opportunities for growth can undermine their well-being.

Conclusion: EFL instructors' growth and well-being depend not only on individual characteristics but also on the quality of their social relationships and the support provided by institutions. Strengthening supportive interactions, encouraging professional reflection, and providing opportunities for professional development may help improve instructors' emotional well-being and job satisfaction.

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1- Introduction

Based on the findings of the extant literature and the changing landscape of English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) practice in South Korea (hereafter, Korea), we explore the personal and professional growth of EFL educators in tertiary institutions. Reyes and Lee (2023) examined the continued impact of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) on EFL education. While the previous work accounted for ERT's impact, this study offers a deeper examination of the emotional well-being of EFL university educators. Scholars typically view EFL education through a pedagogical lens, emphasizing sound teaching practices to advance the field within the broader discipline of Applied Linguistics. Martínez-Alba et al. (2022) have emphasized the need to investigate the emotive character of EFL educators, for the educator's emotions impact the output of EFL learning. Studies on second language acquisition have highlighted the role of positive emotions in the language classroom (Blake & Dewaele, 2023; Dewaele et al., 2019). Compelling evidence suggests that language instructors who adopt a humorous and agreeable demeanor positively impact student happiness (Dewaele et al., 2022). As emotions have become a focal point in EFL studies, researchers have investigated how educators' personal lives intersect with their professional selves in the language classroom (Martínez-Alba et al., 2022; Mercer, 2023). There is a need to examine the emotions of language instructors as they contribute to their students' language development. One inspiration for this research was Killam's (2023) autoethnographic work on how recent changes in working conditions have impacted her emotional well-being. Although her poststructuralist autoethnographic account focused on her experiences as a doctoral student and student counselor, her words portrayed the recent challenges that educators have faced since the pandemic:

Why did/does it seem so difficult for our university communities to exemplify pro-social qualities at an organizational level and make decisions that hold people, especially those directly impacted, in the highest regard? Even in my generally supportive teams, I experienced suffering from decisions or policies outside the control of my office, my division, and sometimes my university (p. 38).

In Killam's (2023) reflection, the modern university, under financial constraints, operates in a fashion that is indifferent and detrimental to educators' well-being. The university has become a less compassionate space than in previous decades (Killam, 2023). Her observation is based on a personal account, but recent research on instructor experience has demonstrated a decline in teacher well-being (Martínez-Alba et al., 2022; Mercer, 2023; Shen, 2022). A critical response to a decline in teacher well-being is required to provide a path of redemption for people working in education. While institutional challenges and policies have

negatively impacted teacher well-being, educators must acknowledge how they themselves have the narrative agency (Bauer, 2021).

In this study, we examine the narrative life stories of eight professional EFL university educators in South Korea to demonstrate how their personal and professional **growth** and positive emotions lead to transformation and overall well-being. Through interpretations of their life choices as preconditions for their growth and their ability to improve others' lives, we believe that establishing a narrative of EFL educator experiences is crucial in understanding the challenges of the EFL profession in Korea and beyond.

2- Literature Review

2-1 Negative Emotions & Educators' Decreased Well-Being

For many educators worldwide, COVID-19 has been a decisive factor in determining the conditions of their recent careers (Lee et al., 2021; Zhang & Hwang, 2021). Their experience with ERT implementation has highlighted the importance of close personal interactions and in-person teaching (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). Professional burnout persists years after the pandemic, as links between burnout and reduced well-being have been documented and extensively examined (Chang, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Nazari et al., 2022; Zhang & Hwang, 2021). Samadi et al. (2020) showed how burnout correlates with teachers' desire to leave their positions. An investigation of educator burnout provided statistical evidence linking stress to digital adaptation and the search for new teaching identities (Zhang & Hwang, 2021). Looking at examples of demographic vulnerabilities, Panadero et al. (2022) found that female educators and younger professionals, in times of duress and pressure when their sense of well-being was uncertain or unstable, were more likely to feel less confident and more pessimistic about their professions. Due to the challenges introduced by COVID-19, EFL instructors were more likely to report negative emotions (Stewart & Lowenthal, 2021). There is a degree of irony given that there has been evidence of the importance of the teacher's emotional health to ensure the quality of the educational experience of language learners (Heydarnejad et al., 2021; Samadi et al., 2020; Shen, 2022). Shen (2022) writes, "educators with burnout could suffer from a loss of vitality, engagement, and excitement to proceed with their job" (p. 5). Burnout is often inevitable in teaching because performance demands tremendous emotional labor; teachers must manage negative emotions through reflective practice (Ghyasi & Gurbuz, 2023). The educator's role in fostering positive emotions in the classroom has been increasingly recognized, leading researchers to urge policymakers and stakeholders to promote such emotional well-being (Blake & Dewaele, 2023; Dewaele et al., 2019; Heydarnejad, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Fostering positivity has become vital in teacher education (Martínez-Alba et al.,

2022; Mercer, 2023; Moodie & Greenier, 2024), as educators are expected to increase their positive output despite increased stress and burnout (Shen, 2022; Zhang & Hwang, 2021).

2-2 *The Challenge of Teaching EFL in Korea*

The Korean experience of professional burnout in language learning has been documented with qualitative reports of educators finding difficulties with classroom management, ERT training, and institutional pressures (Chang, 2020; Lee et al., 2021). A study by Moodie (2023) found a tentative connection between educators' well-being and professional commitments, revealing the importance of teacher certification in maintaining professional confidence and loyalty. Comparatively, this sense of faith has been shaken by COVID-19's impact on EFL teaching in Korea. Chang (2020) found that heightened stress undermines educators' perceptions and sense of trust. The Korean experience of ERT is unique because of the combination of the expatriate experiences in teaching EFL and Korea's shrinking domestic population (Moodie, 2022; Moodie, 2023). Korea's declining domestic student population (Byun et al., 2011; Walton, 2020) has highlighted the country's socioeconomic inequalities, the greater need for social justice, and the salience of a more open immigration policy to mitigate the effects of Korea's population problem.

To complicate matters further, Korean universities have followed the global trend of turning higher education into profit-making organizations, with students and teachers as consumers and customers, and focusing on global outreach and internationalization (Byean, 2015; Park, 2022). EFL university educators from the West occupy a strange place (Moodie & Greenier, 2024; West, 2019) since they have socioeconomic privileges but are socially and professionally disenfranchised (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Sherman, 2022). EFL university educators have faced pressure as their roles have shifted amid the pandemic and institutional challenges (Reyes & Lee, 2023). Moodie and Greenier (2024) reported that many EFL educators in Korea suffer from a lack of professional legitimacy and a sense of alienation. Following Mercer's (2023) suggestion, Moodie and Greenier (2024) also recommended a broad investigation into the negative factors affecting teacher well-being in Korea. Thus, given the ongoing deterioration of working conditions and, consequently, teachers' sense of well-being, there is an ethical imperative to listen to the voices of these marginalized educators and address the factors that undermine their well-being. As such, this paper contributes to the current literature on teacher well-being by examining the narratives of EFL educators at the micro level of subjectivity. In response to the growing concern for teacher well-being (Martínez-Alba et al., 2022), this research attempts to gain insight into how educators have navigated the professional and personal challenges posed by Korea's changing educational landscape. The extant literature has addressed the factors affecting their well-being. However, our engagement with the literature

has revealed a lack of insight into individual actions in response to situational factors that affect teacher well-being; there is a need to better understand the intersubjective quality of an educator's life story.

Using the methodology of narrative analysis (Kim, 2016; McAdams, 2008; Rodriguez-Dorans, 2023) and the theory of the transformative self (Bauer, 2021), our narrative examination provides a broader and deeper contextualization of EFL educator experiences established by the works of Mercer (2023) and Moodie and Greenier (2024), both of whom examined the life stories of EFL educators. This work is a reconceptualization of the narrative arc of EFL educators as stories of personal and professional growth. Our research attempts to answer the following

3- question:

RQ: How do EFL educators narrate their life stories, and how do those narratives construct and make sense of their transformation as individuals and educators?

4- Method

4-1 *Research Design*

This study was designed following Kim's (2016) narrative inquiry approach where teachers' life stories were documented as potentially revealing narratives of personal growth. A biographically-informed approach was considered necessary to gather and analyze the data as this provided a nuanced and detail-rich experiences. As EFL educators, we drew upon our personal and professional experiences to inform our approach to the study. We began with five general questions designed to inspire participants to narrate and reflect on their lives. It was crucial to make the interview memorable so that the participants could recall the significance of their vocation and identify the process through which they have grown (Bauer, 2021). We designed the interview so the educators can imagine themselves as biographers, as telling their life stories. Table 1 presents the life story questions composed using Kim's (2016) narrative inquiry guidelines to establish a dialogue that inspires participants to articulate a biographical account.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you start your EFL career?
2. What were the motivating factors for individuals like you to continue your EFL career, given the other careers you might have had?
3. How would you describe the story arc of your EFL career?
4. How have you adapted to the changes and challenges of teaching EFL in South Korea?
5. What would you say if you could advise your younger self before starting your EFL career?

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Participant Information

		Gender	Country of Origin	Teaching Experience
1.	Rachel	Female	United Kingdom	> 10 years
2.	Scott	Male	United States	> 10 years
3.	Dan	Male	United States	> 10 years
4.	Franz	Male	Australia	> 10 years
5.	Clara	Female	United States	> 10 years
6.	Melissa	Female	Canada	> 10 years
7.	Robbie	Male	United States	> 10 years
8.	Maureen	Female	South Africa	> 10 years

All participants worked for the same mid-sized university in Korea (see Table 1). Although there were notable differences in age, nationality, and ethnicity, most participants had been in Korea for over 10 years. All eight educators have been teaching EFL for over a decade. The sample population comprised veteran teachers immersed in the Korean cultural experience that characterizes privileged EFL educators. Although women and people of color participated in the study, the sample reflects the dominant demographic of white male teachers from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa (Appleby, 2016). The sample population aligned with the typical demographics of EFL teachers in Korea (Moodie, 2023).

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling at the institution where the researchers were employed. The requirements to participate in this study were the following: teaching full-time at a university in Korea for at least five years. A minimum of ten years was established to ensure that participants have lived in Korea long enough to provide a very deep and richly-detailed explanation of their experiences, both professionally and privately. The researchers sent an invitation to colleagues via a university email system, including information about our study. After a three-month-long recruitment period, eight teachers responded to the invitation email and agreed to participate in the research project. All participants were fully informed about the requirements for participating in the project and what would be required of them. Both oral and informed consent were received prior to the start of the data collection.

Both of the researchers participated in all 16 semi-structured interviews. In the span of one year, the eight participants were interviewed twice for formal interviews. While there were informal meetings to build rapport and trust with the participants (Kim, 2016), we formally recorded and analyzed two sets of life story interviews. The purpose of having two sets of interviews were twofold: the first interview was rather general and broad with participants more freely discussing what they chose to focus on based on the interview prompts. The second follow-up interview allowed for a deeper discussion on the points which the participants explained in the first interview. During this second interview, the researchers asked follow-up questions for greater clarification and confirmation of key points and concepts touched upon during the first interview. Each interview was about 90 minutes to two hours, with both researchers asking questions, leading with prompts, and taking notes. All interviews were conducted in-person at the second author's office on campus. Each set of interviews were conducted one to two weeks apart based on the participants' availability. The second interviews were not conducted too much later than the first interviews as this allowed the details of the first interview to be fairly recent and easy to go back to for discussion. The interviews were audio-recorded by the second researcher's laptop and then manually transcribed by the second author. Once each interview was completed, the key components of their narratives were summarized by both of the researchers together in a post-interview meeting. In addition, to increase accuracy and credibility, member checks with the participants were conducted verbally, in person or via email. This ensured that the participants understood how the researchers understood and interpreted their life stories.

Theory of Narrative Identity & Transformative Growth

We used two theoretical frameworks to explain how the participants expressed their stories of growth in their own words. The first is McAdam's (2008) theory of storytelling and personality development. McAdams (2008) theorizes that we know ourselves through storytelling. The philosophical assumption is that the self is a piece of fiction and that personal identity is a story (McAdams & Dunlop, 2022). We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell. Our sense of self as an existing "I" emerges from the virtual plane of the imagination and becomes actualized through our negotiations with others. The "I" is not solipsistic but a negotiated artifact of interconnected relations; an individual personality has a symbiotic relationship with society and culture (McAdams, 2008). One of our critical assumptions is that the participants believed their social function was to significantly contribute to the development of others, i.e., their students, enabling them to develop as people (Bauer, 2021).

After transcribing and rereading the transcripts, we began the formal coding process. In some instances, we used coding techniques from McAdams' (2008) exploratory meaning

process and highlighted the theme of redemption (McAdams & McLean, 2013). When participants described their struggles and failures during their reflective journeys, we marked keywords in the transcripts that reflected their optimistic outlook and resilience.

The second theoretical framework focused on conceptualizing the participants' personal development. Following Bauer's (2021) ideas of *transformative growth,* we examined the data regarding their narrative growth structure. The narrative structure of personal growth can be revealed in psychological maturation (Bauer, 2021). Transformative growth has a specific eudaimonic structure in which an individual develops a deeper sense of communal well-being by finding meaning through obligation. While analyzing the data, we looked for specific narrative episodes that indicated they recognized how their teaching may have fostered growth in their service to others. This orientation was grounded in our empathic connection with the participants and highlighted the link between the educator's ethical function and personal development.

As we examined the data, the temporal distance of critical reflection made us aware of the inherent fictionality in the narrative structures we analyzed. The narrating self is not identical to the self that experiences (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2023). This divide between the narrating and the experiencing self has the advantage of agency: the narrating self is revealed when one recollects one's experiences (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2023). Integrating these differing approaches to narrative analysis broadened our understanding. Life as a story is one of revision and repositioning (Pals, 2006). The narratives we documented were performative acts, creating order from the raw flux of immediate experiences. We coded the narratives, recognizing the difference between the narrating and experienced self, highlighting how our participants were agents and witnesses. We analyzed the narratives to show complications and resolutions, thematizing the arcs of educators' life stories. We connected these stories to the constructs of exploratory narrative processing (McAdams & Dunlop, 2022) and to a life transformed by intimate connections with others and with one's world (Bauer, 2021). In the end, we identified fifteen narrative categories, and saturation was reached when three principal themes emerged. The first author coded and categorized 16 interview manuscripts, which were then verified and analyzed by the second author. Once these themes were explicated, we recognized our function as editors, helping revise the subjects' narratives (Kramer, 2000).

"Restorying" & Positionality

Creswell (2007) described narrative approaches as co-authored, constituting a collaborative co-writing process with the subjects. In this way, we played a part in the "restorying" (Creswell, 2007) of the participant's memories and became conscious of the intersubjective space in which we interpreted people's narratives. Our intersubjective function

as narrative interpreters included our prejudice (Gadamer, 1975). We bring the baggage of our experience to understanding and interpreting the data, a fact that became more apparent after each interview. We listened to the recordings, reread notes, and tried to establish a temporal distance in the interpretive process (Gadamer, 1975). During the transcription and interpretation process, we felt that we were connecting the past with the present. Inspired by Gadamer's philosophy, we realized our part was small in the integral event of fusing the horizons of different educators in our shared tradition. We realized our function in answering a question from our historicity (Gadamer, 1975), our shared historical experience.

5- Findings

Within the theoretical underpinnings of the two aforementioned frameworks of narrative identity and transformative growth, themes were uncovered utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. First, the two researchers independently became familiar with the interview transcripts and generated initial codes. Both authors actively engaged with the data while reading and coding transcripts reiteratively to search for new themes. Upon finding the first set of themes, the two researchers met together and compared and analyzed the two sets of themes. During this coding cycle, the two researchers actively engaged in discussion about the themes. The discussions led to the themes being continuously reviewed. Some themes were deleted while others were added or merged. New themes were defined and renamed. Coding ended when saturation was reached and no new themes were uncovered in the data. The four main themes found are discussed below.

Change and Redemption

For many educators, teaching EFL was not the first choice. Someone in their life would recommend a job post when these individuals were at a crossroads. Franz, an Australian educator, described how a job offer at a Korean academy was life-changing.

The real reason was that I was desperate. I did think that getting away from where I was at that time was critical—to remove myself from the environment that I was in. Korea was great because it was a completely different culture. My eyes were always wide open, and everything constantly distracted me. It was not European culture, which I was familiar with. That novelty kept my brain focused.

Franz's account includes notable repetition, a need for change, and a sense of novelty. He associated Korean culture with the other, Korea, representing a necessary distraction from himself. We did not pry into the truth behind Franz's desire to romanticize the differences. It was sufficient that his narrative established that teaching was an escape and offered Franz the possibility of improving his station.

C: If you could go back in time and talk to the young man who just started teaching EFL, what would you say to him?

F: You may have messed up the last ten years. However, at this point, you know you did the right thing for yourself, and you should be grateful for that. You are going to meet your wife soon, and she is lovely. It is all OK, and you will be able to make friends again.

Franz shared a story of redemption and gratitude. Before teaching EFL, Franz was in a dark place; Korea became an accidental destination to become a better person. Teaching changed his life.

Another educator's life narrative featured the theme of gratefulness. Scott's story documented the benefits of teaching EFL. Like Franz, Scott married a Korean national and had spent two decades teaching EFL. Unlike Franz, Scott was familiar with Korean culture.

I befriended several Korean students who told me about employment possibilities in Korea. I came to Korea with the idea that teaching English here would allow me gainful employment while doing fieldwork and groundwork for a possible future career in anthropology.

Scott's story presented a critical contrast to Franz's account. Scott had prior interaction with Koreans. Being in Korea provided the opportunity to continue Scott's academic interests. Teaching EFL was not a novelty, but like Franz, Scott thought of his EFL career in instrumental terms. Scott reflected:

From losing weight to gaining confidence, my EFL experience has enriched my life in countless ways, not to mention a small savings bonus accrued to boot. It was already apparent that I could no longer return to my old life. From the people around me to my inner voice, I could hear the words: "Go back and keep doing what you do, as it is perfect for you."

Scott's choice of words clarified the principal motivation of many educators to continue teaching. For Scott, Korea was not just a place to escape the past; teaching and living there offered a better life than the one he would have had if he had stayed in America.

While I was with students for 60-70 hours a week, I didn't mind it because I finally stopped feeling penniless. In the meantime, several of my former anthropological professors were struggling in the US, burdened by high costs. I could enjoy free housing from the school, receive professional medical care, live without fear of crime, and consistently save a portion of my salary. The drawbacks were constant culture shock, isolation, and a lack of preferred foods.

There was a fundamental shift in the mainstream narrative of my home country, from economic crises and soaring underemployment to social and political upheaval.

Scott's narrative granted us insight into the socio-economic dimension of expatriate life. EFL teaching was not just about cultural immersion to escape. For Scott, Korea enabled him to access better social services; it was a shift in his personal narrative. Despite experiencing some

integration issues, Scott focused on the transactional benefits of relocation. Scott did not have to endure the turmoil and upheaval of living in America and still achieved a privileged socioeconomic status.

Financial freedom was also an essential element of Maureen's story. Like Scott, Maureen explained that obtaining higher-quality healthcare was a strong reason she stayed in Korea for the past sixteen years.

I have considered going to other countries, but Korea is comfortable. I think about how we have health insurance. We have a good pension system, and that is a big deal because, in South Africa, it is not good, and people die waiting to see a doctor. Safety is a big thing. Health insurance is a big thing. The pension is a big thing.

Maureen's narrative explains why a woman would leave her loved ones and live in a different culture. Korea offers benefits that its home country cannot. Over time, she developed additional reasons, or in Maureen's words, "big" reasons. South Africa was comparatively worse. While Scott and Franz offered accounts of their upward mobility, Maureen's story focused on peace of mind and attaining personal safety. Despite their differences, all three participants testified to long-term advantages. Staying in Korea provided opportunities for redemption (Franz), an elevation in socioeconomic status (Scott), and a stable, safe living situation (Maureen). These testimonies do not reflect the majority. However, their stories could help explain why some have stayed in Korea for so long.

Growth as an EFL Teacher

The prior themes and discussion of findings reported the perspectives of those who have benefited from teaching in Korea. However, their testimonies were incomplete; they did not convey the reflective wisdom inherent in growth narratives. For example, Maureen's professional development and personal growth account was purely egoistic.

I have to say that being here, I've been allowed to grow a lot more in terms of a career than if I had stayed in South Africa. I've had the opportunity. I got my second master's degree, so I've had excellent opportunities to grow in different areas that I don't think I would have pursued in South Africa.

Maureen's account described her professional growth, focusing on the accolades she accrued and her achievements over the years. However, while speaking to Maureen and later analyzing her words, it became clear that her narrative lacked eudaimonic perspectivity, closely tied to growing others or, more specifically, helping others grow (Bauer, 2021). Her story was primarily of her individual development, lacking a broader consideration of how her teaching has aided others. In other words, Maureen primarily constructed growth in terms of individual

professional development and personal achievement, with less explicit emphasis on contributing to others.

Concern for others is a critical feature of the eudaimonic perspective; Clara's story clarified this connection. Clara studied business and accounting as an undergraduate and completed a law degree. However, she found herself teaching because she loved literature. After two decades of teaching, Clara confessed she was still not confident in her abilities.

My students enjoy me as a person and the atmosphere I create. I get good reviews, but they cannot communicate better. I will teach one student for three semesters in a row, and God blesses me to increase their motivation and confidence. However, she could not communicate much better, which profoundly affected me.

Clara was mindful of her efforts to make a positive impact on her students. However, she felt inadequate because of one student. Clara cared about one student's communicative competence and prayed about it. Her high level of conscientiousness was evident in how she fostered positive emotions in the EFL classroom.

We learn better when we feel safe. I can make the technique a science. However, if my students do not enjoy it enough, they won't learn. So, I realized that's critical because what's happening inside you affects whether you can take in and learn.

Clara understood that creating a safe environment was essential to teaching, and she prioritized her students' safety and enjoyment. Clara revealed her willingness to shrink her ego to prioritize her students' safety and learning, which made her distinct from the other participants. As a Black woman in Korea, Clara has had instances of Korean people dismissing her ability because she was Black. However, these instances did not deter her from seeing her presence and personality as a source of positivity.

Over the years, my personality has been the most significant thing. I have lived in Japan, South Africa, Sweden, Spain, the US, and Canada. What stands out most in every place I have visited is my personality. I have experienced situations that were based on people's initial judgment of ethnicity; they make assumptions and treat me a certain way, but those experiences have been in the minority. Here in Korea, people tell me, "You're so kind. You're so open." During my first year here, I went to a sauna, and people were curious about my appearance. They want to touch me. To touch my hair. I just got used to being a tourist attraction and being okay with that because they have not had this experience. I've had friends who come here and look at it the way they do in the States. How dare they touch my hair? However, it is because they do not know. They want to know.

Although Clara's racial identity shaped her experiences, she narrated her personality as the decisive factor in her teaching. Over the years, her attitude towards teaching was guided by

an ethical imperative to empathize with and consider others. During her time in Korea, she gained insight into how to differentiate the curiosity expressed by local Koreans from racial prejudice. Instead of being burdened by Korean curiosity, Clara sought to understand the difference she represented to them in the context of Korean culture (Bright, 2020). Clara exercised her discursive agency (Lim, 2020) by being willing to expand others' horizons and help them grow (Bauer, 2021). This was clear when she reflected on how to incorporate the students' native language into her lessons. She confessed, "Showing that you struggle, my students enjoy it when I struggle with Korean. When I try to spell or say something in Korean, and I show them that I struggle, it helps them feel that it's okay, and it puts them at ease."

Clara's testimony highlights how an educator's growth can be achieved by showing her vulnerability. By admitting her limited Korean proficiency, she fostered a positive atmosphere in the language classroom. Although other participants demonstrated the same care, Clara's account provided the most vivid picture of narrative growth. Her testimony prioritized the well-being of others.

The Gift and Cost of Caring

We have presented the stories of four educators in terms of their growth. Clara's testimony was a specific example of eudaimonic growth; other educators also interpreted their function in eudaimonic terms. For Dan, the main benefits of being an EFL educator were building connections with people across three continents and receiving positive feedback from former students. Another veteran educator corroborated this feeling. Robbie, who had lived in Korea for twenty-five years, similarly appreciated meeting and helping others. He told us how students would write to him, *'Teacher, thank you so much. You helped me with my English.'* Robbie looked back and said, *I am very grateful. Not all students remember their teachers, but apparently, some do."* Making a difference in young people's lives was echoed by other veteran teachers, who took pride in helping students improve their language skills despite the trials and tribulations at work. The struggle of teaching bestowed meaning and purpose. Scott, who has been teaching in Korea for decades, explained his personal and professional motivation:

I balance teaching by being sincere in my interactions with students and providing them with meaningful, productive lessons. When I begin greeting my students as they enter the room, I am in a moment with students deserving of my best. Giving the students my full attention and my very best is how I create meaning and value within my job and life.

Veteran teachers like Dan, Robbie, and Scott shared the joy of witnessing their students' language skills improve. Their recollection testified to a deep personal connection between two generations of Korean university students. They reported positive accounts of caring, giving, and being rewarded for their efforts.

In contrast to these stories, Melissa described her struggle to be an inspiring educator, a challenge many of us can relate to.

Teaching English can be frustrating because some of the students don't want to be there. That is when it can be particularly difficult, and in part it depends on which students you get in class. I have had some excellent classes with students who want to learn English. But then I had some students who didn't. I am just slamming my head against a brick wall.

Melissa's testimony offered a compelling counterexample. While Clara, Scott, and Dan found reasons for motivation, Melissa described teaching EFL as a barrier. While observing her students' distracted behaviors, her motivation waned, especially toward those she believed did not want to be taught. Melissa's story illustrated the emotional challenges of teaching, as her students' reactions heavily influenced her positivity. The narrative conveyed a possible explanation for teacher burnout: motivating and caring for students who are not interested in learning.

The Limits of Growth as an EFL Educator

Teaching is affected by external factors that extend beyond the classroom. Karlie, an American educator, was one of the younger participants. When asked about her teaching experience, Karlie admitted she was tired of teaching because she felt there was little challenge and few opportunities for growth.

It has reached the point where I am being evaluated at a specific level and no longer challenged. I'm not learning anything; I cannot enhance my skill set. You know it is too much of an energy drain for me.

Karlie's account is like Melissa's, but the difference is that Karlie's testimony was far removed from redemption. Teaching was no longer noble. It was not helping her grow, it felt draining, and the lack of direction and challenge negatively affected her well-being. Karlie's judgment about the limits of growth was not the sole example. While most participants liked teaching, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, Rachel was the most vocal critic of her chosen career path.

Interviewer: So, what would you say if you could go back and tell your younger self about teaching EFL?

R: Don't come. Your home country is not that bad. Initially, it was not bad, but I'm just frustrated that I am still here. I did not intend for that to happen. My problem is that I am ambitious and hardworking, but I do not know where to go with that. I feel Korea is not a good place for ambitious people. This is not a good place to realize one's ambition, especially if one is not Korean.

More than a few teachers commented on how exhausted they were, and many expressed their disappointment with the direction of EFL education. There were explicit accounts of how COVID-19 has worsened teaching in Korea. Of the eight people, only Rachel explicitly states her regret, which provides a crucial point of comparison with the redemptive arcs of Franz, Scott, Dan, and Clara. Rachel's story reveals that for some EFL educators, Korea will never be home, making it a less-than-ideal choice as they get older.

6- Discussion

How do EFL educators narrate their life stories, and how do those narratives construct and make sense of their transformation as individuals and educators?

Two discrete educator life stories emerged from our study. The first is a set of self-interested narratives that exhibit egoistic development but lack features of narrative growth structures (Bauer, 2021). Franz, Scott, and Maureen are examples of self-interested growth narratives who were also the beneficiaries of fortunate outcomes. In contrast, educators like Clara and Dan established robust connections with fellow teachers, students, and community stakeholders and reported higher levels of well-being. A valuable insight into transformative growth is Clara's experience as a black educator. In Taylor et al.'s (2019) narrative study of urban educators, the authors found anecdotal evidence that teachers can uproot the oppressive practices embedded in standard education by fostering positive attitudes. Taylor et al. (2019) provide further contextualization of Clara's cultural journey as an African American educator, yet Clara's story offered much more. Unlike Karlie or Rachel, Clara's story is a concrete example of what Alcalá (2024) describes as pedagogical generosity. The opposite of stupidity is not intelligence but the willingness to broaden others' horizons. Clara responds to Koreans' curiosity about her skin color with a genuine attempt to connect, sharing her heritage and ethnic background. Her generosity and understanding are a salient lesson that starkly contrasts with the narratives of Scott and Maureen, who interpreted their positive experiences in Korea in transactional and neoliberal terms (Killam, 2023; West, 2019). In Clara's story, there is a eudaimonic orientation to interpret her development as coinciding with the question of how to serve others better.

Clara's positivity stood in contrast to Rachel's and Karlie's testimonies, which were replete with negative perceptions. Rachel's and Karlie's narratives corroborated Moodie's (2023) findings regarding the connection between well-being and professional commitment. Rachel, Karlie, and, to some extent, Melissa recognized how their vision did not align with their EFL careers. Conversely, people like Clara and Dan found resilience in serving others. Instead of feeling stuck (Moodie & Greenier, 2024), their growth story was tied to their students' growth (Bauer, 2021). With Dan and Clara, their pride was reflected by how their teaching positively

impacted society (Mairitsch et al., 2024). Their language demonstrated perspectivity, heightened intercultural understanding (Bauer, 2021), and a willingness to be joyful (Blake & Dewaele, 2023; Dewaele et al., 2022). While Franz, Scott, and Maureen portrayed the individual arc of personal improvement, Dan and Clara's stories revealed the moral arc of an educator's life: to work without recognition and be willing to do more. The findings reveal how a few EFL educators narrate positive life stories by adopting an ethical and eudaimonic orientation towards their host country and by caring for their students. The narratives provide insight into the necessity of fostering positivity (Martínez-Alba et al., 2022; Mercer, 2023) amid rising stress and burnout in education (Shen, 2022; Zhang & Hwang, 2021).

Although ERT and COVID-19 were factors, choosing to become educators was a life-changing decision, and teaching EFL constituted a major aspect of their identity despite differences in temperament, character, personality, and background. The participants narrated their professional commitments as containing events that shape their personal development (McAdams & Dunlop, 2022). The struggles to overcome these challenges demonstrate the importance of teacher well-being (Martínez-Alba et al., 2022; Mercer, 2023), illustrating how the expatriate EFL educator attains well-being by building resilience and committing to the progressive advancement of one's vocation. There is a redemptive arc in the story of an EFL educator (McAdams & McLean, 2013) as a tale of personal growth (Bauer, 2021), as well as in personal reflections on the emotional labor of being educators (Ghyasi & Gurbuz, 2023). The narratives corroborate the lesson found in other studies: that a fortuitous combination of coping strategies and adaptation, along with a well-rounded support system, promotes healthy emotional regulation and higher levels of well-being (Fan & Wang, 2022; Moè & Katz, 2021; Shen, 2022).

In contrast to extant studies, we found corroborating evidence that professional burnout correlates with lower well-being and a dislike of teaching (Chang, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Nazari et al., 2022; Zhang & Hwang, 2021). These negative testimonies provide insight into the correlation between professional stress and a desire to leave the field of education (Samadi et al., 2020). It is also worth noting that female narratives contain more negative emotions (Pandero et al., 2022). Rachel and Karlie confessed to experiencing a loss of vitality, engagement, and excitement (Shen, 2022). Their reflections indicate the misalignment of professional and personal interests (Moodie & Greenier, 2024; Reyes & Lee, 2023; Samadi et al., 2020). Men told healthier and happier narratives; Franz and Scott appear to have attained professional pride (Mairitsch et al., 2024) and cultural adaptation (Croucher & Kramer, 2017). As married men to Korean nationals, they have identities that intersect with Korean society's familial, linguistic, cultural, and legal dimensions. In a critical sense, despite their varying

degrees of personal and professional satisfaction, the personal testimonies reveal how we continue to grow as we age (Bauer, 2021) and how long-term expatriates experience intercultural growth (Bright, 2020).

Limitations

A sample size of eight is suitable for narrative qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2007), but it may not represent the general lived experiences of EFL educators. Additionally, the narratives we examined have undergone narrative smoothing, and we have accepted our participants' self-reported stories in good faith (Kim, 2016). Both limitations betray our selective bias, which has informed our analysis. As stated earlier, prejudice foregrounds our work (Gadamer, 1975), and our interpretation does not close the gap between truth and fiction (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2023). Although this is not an objective account that can be generalized to the wider population of EFL teachers in Korea and globally, it contributes to a larger narrative, providing much needed insight on a subset of educators who seem to be growing in numbers and by extension, whose needs will demand more attention in the future.

7- Conclusion

The narratives presented in this study offer insights into the affordances of growing as a language educator, even amidst increasing negativity in the field. While external factors shape our experience of the world, individual reflection on one's social impact is a small but critical exercise of personal agency (Bauer, 2021). Through this individual reflection made by teachers, teachers can obtain self-realization and a sense of greater agency to improve their personal and professional circumstances. This study has important implications. First, teachers should be encouraged to share their growth narratives either in a personal or professional setting as it has been demonstrated that sharing one's struggles provides a space to encourage teachers to demonstrate their sense of agency and desire to improve their personal and professional circumstances. Through such actions, feelings of professional burnout can be alleviated. Educational institutions at all levels can benefit from professional development activities for teachers to help them boost positivity, productivity and better emotional and mental well-being. Through such institutional support and informing teachers the salience of eudaimonic action, higher levels of personal and professional satisfaction and overall well-being become an achievable reality.

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