

## Conflict Transformation Research Grant Report

### Lead PI's name and affiliation

Heekyeong Lee, Professor TESOL/TFL, MIIS

### Project title

Promoting Intercultural Citizenship and Social-Emotional Learning in an English Classroom for North-Korean Refugee-Background Students

### Date

January 2024 – December 2024 (\*extended to May 2025)

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### A. Statement of Research Question and Its Importance

This research examined the question: *How can English education that integrates intercultural citizenship and social-emotional learning (SEL) support North Korean refugee-background and minority students in transforming everyday conflicts and fostering well-being?* Drawing on Lederach's (2003) model of conflict transformation and Byram's (2008) notion of intercultural citizenship, the project explored English education not simply as language acquisition but as a tool for healing, empathy-building, and identity development among students with refugee and marginalized backgrounds. Given the socio-political tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the social inequities faced by North Korean defectors in South Korea, the project addressed an urgent need for more humanistic, student-centered, and context-sensitive English education.

### B. List of Collaborators and Partners

The project was conducted in collaboration with:

- **Daum School**, an alternative, nonprofit school in Seoul serving primarily North Korean refugee-background students
- Two graduate research assistants from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies:
  - **Carly Tozian**, who designed and piloted a speech and debate curriculum rooted in SEL and intercultural themes
  - **Jessa Zerpoli**, who implemented and assessed a "Daily Conversation" curriculum with SEL integration
- School administrators and English teachers at Daum School, who supported curriculum co-design, access to classrooms, and participant observation
- Daum students, who participated in surveys, reflections, and classroom activities

### C. Summary of Research Findings

Through classroom implementation, surveys, interviews, and reflective assessments, several key findings emerged:

- **Speaking as Both Strength and Challenge:** Students often cited speaking English as both their most enjoyable and most anxiety-inducing task. This ambivalence highlighted the need for safe, low-stakes speaking opportunities (e.g., debates, caring circles, and peer role-plays) and explicit SEL strategies (e.g., breathing exercises, reflection journals) to build confidence and reduce affective barriers.
- **Impact of SEL Practices:** SEL practices such as “caring circles,” “deep listening,” and structured self-evaluations led to greater self-awareness, empathy, and classroom cohesion. These activities helped create emotionally safe learning spaces where students felt seen and supported.
- **Intercultural Citizenship and Reflection:** Students expressed strong interest in learning about their peers’ backgrounds and sharing their own. Intercultural themes, especially those tied to identity, language, and culture, encouraged students to consider multiple perspectives and develop tolerance, even when debating controversial issues.
- **Need for Translanguaging and Flexibility:** Given students’ multilingual repertoires and mixed proficiency levels, the use of Korean alongside English (translanguaging) supported understanding, participation, and meaning-making. Teacher flexibility and responsiveness to learners’ emotional states and cultural contexts were essential.
- **Pedagogical Shift Toward Healing and Agency:** Teachers observed that students began to take more ownership of their language use, challenge personal assumptions, and even report greater enjoyment of English classes. The course design emphasized not just academic outcomes, but also healing and social belonging, particularly important for students with disrupted schooling or trauma histories.

### D. Implications for Study and Practice of Conflict Transformation

The project demonstrates that integrating SEL and intercultural communication into English education can serve as a viable pathway for conflict transformation in marginalized student populations. For refugee-background learners, school-based SEL and intercultural dialogue:

- Provide tools to process trauma and navigate social differences
- Enable constructive engagement with peers across cultural and ideological divides
- Support emotional regulation and resilience in academic settings

These findings align with Lederach’s (2003, 2007) principles of relational peacebuilding, emphasizing that transformation happens not through top-down resolution, but through fostering

individual agency, identity affirmation, and human connection. Practitioners and researchers in peace education, TESOL, and curriculum design can draw from this project as a model of context-responsive pedagogy that supports both linguistic and socio-emotional growth.

#### **E. List of Publications, Performances, Media Coverage, and Other Output**

- **Co-authored Book Chapter:**

Brown, H. D., & Lee, H. (2025). *Ecological and transdisciplinary approaches to language learning and teaching*. In *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (7th ed., pp. 200-218). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003494294-10>

This chapter introduces key themes of my grant project, such as ecological and transdisciplinary approaches, peace linguistics, intercultural citizenship, conflict transformation through language education, and global citizenship in additional language learning contexts, many of which were applied in the classroom-based research with North Korean refugee-background students.

- **News Feature:**

Lee, H. (2024, November 4). *Teaching English to North Korean Defectors as a Tool for Conflict Transformation*. Middlebury Institute News.

<https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/news/teaching-english-north-korean-defectors-tool-conflict-transformation>

This article profiles the project and its pedagogical significance, featuring interviews with the PI and graduate research assistants, and highlights the broader mission of using English education to promote healing and agency among marginalized learners.

- **Capstone Reports (2024):**

- Tozian, C. *Empathy, Empowerment, and English: Debate as a Tool for Social-Emotional Learning in North Korean Refugee Education*. TESOL/TFL, Middlebury Institute of International Studies.
- Zerpoli, J. *The Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in English Language Education for Korean Refugee and Minority Students in South Korea*. TESOL/TFL, Middlebury Institute of International Studies.

- **Planned Scholarly Article:**

Manuscript in preparation on the integration of SEL and intercultural citizenship in English language education for refugee-background learners. Target submission to *TESOL Quarterly* or *Journal of Peace Education*.