



Issues of EPIK (English Program in Korea) and Suggestions for the Enhanced Implementation

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ABSTRACT

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As a response to the globalization, the Korean government has tried to improve Korean students' English proficiency by recruiting native English speaking teachers (NEST) through English Program in Korea (EPIK). Although EPIK has been influential, there also has been issues which hinder its effective implementation. Two of the issues often pointed out are about the nationality policy and the qualification of NESTs hired through EPIK. With this background, this study investigated the current nationality status of EPIK teachers which reflects the nationality issue. Also, this study tried to investigate possible solutions for the issues by comparing EPIK with the NEST programs of Japan and Hong Kong. The data gathered revealed that EPIK teachers are mostly from only a few countries, which hinder Korean students from being exposed to diverse English varieties. In addition, comparing the three NEST programs, this study suggested that EPIK should expand the eligible countries for EPIK to expose Korean students to diverse English varieties and should request higher qualification criteria to its effective implementation.

KEYWORDS

EPIK, English Program in Korea, JET, NET, world Englishes, EIL

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, English language proficiency has become a crucial skill for navigating global communication and boosting global competitiveness. In the Korean context, English is the subject that parents spend the most money on for private education for their children in 2023 (Korean Statistical Information Service 2024), which highlights the strong desire for English language proficiency among Korean stakeholders of education. In addition to the stakeholders, the Korean government also has tried to foster Korean students' English proficiency with policies such as inviting native English speaker teachers (henceforth, NEST) through the English Program in Korea (henceforth, EPIK). One of the purposes of the program is to foster Korean students' English language proficiency by providing them with chances to communicate with NESTs in school. However, previous studies have pointed out that EPIK has issues which hinder the program from being implemented effectively. Therefore, some changes should be made for more effective implementation of the program.

In this situation, the Korean government is not the only government that invites NEST with the purpose of fostering their students' English language proficiency. For instance, Japan and Hong Kong are also making efforts to help their students by providing opportunities to communicate with NEST through their own government-funded programs as the Korean government is (Jeon 2020). Since each country has its own government-funded program that invites NEST with the similar purposes, comparing the programs of those three countries might shed light on how to improve the EPIK program for its increased effectiveness. With this background, this study will investigate how the EPIK program is being implemented and compare government-funded NEST programs in Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. In addition, based on the comparison, this study will suggest some possible ways to enhance EPIK's effectiveness focusing on English abilities required in the globalized world with English as an international language (EIL).

2. Research Background

2.1 English Program in Korea (EPIK)

As the Korean government's response to globalization, the English Program in Korea was established in 1995 with the affiliation of the Ministry of Education (Jeon 2009). Through EPIK, the government has invited native English speakers with the purposes of "improving English-speaking abilities of Korean students and teachers, developing cultural exchange between Korea and abroad, and of introducing new teaching methods into the Korean education system" (EPIK 2024). To accomplish the goals, EPIK has been trying to hire NESTs who meet certain conditions.

The first condition is related to nationality of NESTs. Specifically, to be EPIK teachers, NESTs must be citizens of one of the following 7 countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States, and South Africa. If they are from where English is not the primary language, such as Quebec in Canada and South Africa, applicants must have studied from 7th Grade and graduated from a university in one of the designated countries listed above or must provide proof that their schooling from 7th year/grade and through university was conducted in English. Along with citizens from those countries, Indian citizens who meet all the requirements and hold a valid teaching certificate in English education, which cannot be replaced with TEFL/TESOL/CELTA certificate, can also apply for EPIK. The second condition is about educational background or qualification of NESTs. EPIK requires NESTs to hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree from an accredited university with the

designated countries above. In more detail, NESTs are not required to have a TEFL/TESOL/CELTA certificate in case they have a teaching license/certificate or who majored in teaching, TESOL, Second Language Studies or any other of education-focused major. Otherwise, obtaining a TEFL/TESOL/CELTA/etc. certificate of at least 100 hours or more from an accredited program is required for applicants to be eligible for EPIK. Furthermore, EPIK requires NESTs to be mentally and physically healthy, to have a good command of the English language and to have the ability and willingness to adapt to Korean culture and life, which should not be neglected for NESTs to teach in Korea effectively. With these conditions to be met, EPIK has tried to recruit NESTs who can help their goals to be achieved.

Since its start with 54 NESTs in 1995, EPIK had recruited more than 1900 NESTs by 2008 (Jeon 2009). Although there has been ups and downs in enacting NEST policies depending on administration (H.W. Shin et al. 2021), the number of NESTs recruited through EPIK increased up to 14106 within 2009 to 2018 (EPIK 2024). Overall, the EPIK program has tried to achieve its goals by recruiting NESTs who could help Korean students and teachers to improve their English abilities.

2.2 Effectiveness of EPIK

With its 29 years of history and numerous EPIK teachers who have served in Korea, previous studies have examined EPIK from different perspectives such as the identity and living experiences of EPIK teachers in Korea (Jeon 2020, Kim 2012, Seo and Kubota, 2023). However, many studies have focused on investigating the effectiveness of having EPIK teachers in school, showing that NESTs hired through EPIK affect Korean students positively to some degree at both elementary and secondary school levels (Hwang et al. 2011, Kim 2011, Lee et al. 2011).

First, Kim and Lee (2005) investigated the effectiveness of team-teaching by Korean English teachers and a NEST on elementary school 5th and 6th grade students. They found that team-teaching with a NEST helped students to improve their English abilities in all four language skills. In addition, the NEST could help students to improve pronunciation and to learn daily expressions and cultures of English-speaking countries more effectively. Furthermore, researchers found that team-teaching with a NEST positively influenced students' affective domain, such as interest, motivation, and self-esteem. As a result, students could have more positive and active attitude towards English language and also they could learn English with less fear than before. Similarly, Kim and Han (2009) also showed that team-teaching with a NEST was positively influential in improving elementary school students' English communication abilities, especially listening and speaking.

In addition to the effectiveness of having NESTs through EPIK in the elementary school level, previous studies showed the effectiveness in the secondary school level. Lee et al. (2012) showed that, across middle school and high school levels, Korean English teachers, students and parents tend to think that having NESTs was beneficial in developing students' English abilities and their cultural understanding. Furthermore, analyzing data from 1412 general high schools nationwide, Choi and Kim (2013) found that NESTs influenced positively on high school students' achievement in English and the effectiveness of NESTs is correlated with students' current English proficiency and confidence in English. Finally, Kang (2015) investigated the impact of hiring NESTs through EPIK in Gangwon Province and found that English teachers from all school levels tend to think that NESTs helped Korean students to develop their English speaking and listening abilities as well as their affective variables related to learning English such as motivations and confidence. In addition, teacher respondents reported that extra activities such as English camp and English club activities with NESTs were also effective in improving students' English abilities.

All in all, previous studies have reported that NESTs hired through EPIK have helped Korean students to develop their English abilities and affective factors related to English learning. Furthermore, it was also found that NESTs could help Korean students to have better understanding of English-speaking cultures required for English communication.

2.3 Issues of EPIK

Although previous studies showed the positive effects of EPIK, other studies pointed out some issues of EPIK that could affect the effectiveness of EPIK negatively. Although there could be different factors that cause ineffectiveness of hiring NEST through EPIK, it seems that main factors that cause hiring NEST to be ineffective results from the policies by the EPIK itself.

2.3.1 Qualification of EPIK teachers

One of the frequently raised concerns is about the qualifications of NESTs hired through EPIK. According to the previous studies, EPIK did not require participants to have a teaching certificate such as TEFL, TESOL or CELTA certificates. For example, encouraging other foreigners to apply for EPIK, a former EPIK teacher described the requirements of EPIK as ‘simple’ due to the lack of teaching certificate requirements (Seo and Kubota 2023). This lack of mandatory qualifications is supported by Lee and Ko’s (2010) findings. They found that 57.9% of their NEST participants did not major in either English or education and 51.3% did not have any certificates related to English teaching, which might contribute to ineffective teaching of NESTs. In addition, Korean English teachers participating in the study expressed their opinion that higher-quality NESTs should be hired. Similarly, one of the NEST participants in Hwang and Yim (2019) expressed his/her concerns about qualification of peer NESTs and suggested that NESTs should be hired among English speakers with bachelor’s degree in English at least. Additionally, the study found that NESTs often struggled with classroom management, potentially due to a lack of qualifications or experience. Furthermore, Korean English teachers participated in the study argued that unqualified NESTs are not helpful, therefore, well-trained NESTs are needed. All in all, in case of unqualified NESTs, they are just a ‘human tape recorder’ (Crooks 2001) or ‘performing monkeys’ (Jeon 2009), which might lead the government’s budget to be used ineffectively. However, as described above, EPIK is now requiring NESTs to be qualified with a teaching certificate or teaching related majors depending on their educational background in order to teach in Korea, which appears to be a positive change.

2.3.2 Nationality of EPIK teachers

The other issue raised in previous studies is about the nationality of NESTs. Earlier, Tanghe (2014) pointed out that E-2 visa, which is required to teach in Korea as a NEST, is available only to English speakers from the U.S., the U.K., Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Until now, except for Indian citizens with certain requirements, EPIK still only considers citizens from one of the seven countries above as eligible NESTs. In other words, it seems that EPIK is still on the side of native speakerism (Holliday 2006) with their policy that prioritizes citizens of inner-circle countries and only two outer-circle countries (South Africa and India). However, nationality itself is not a factor that decides whether a person can be a proper English teacher or not. For example, one of the NEST participants in Hwang and Yim (2019) mentioned about EPIK teachers from the U.S. who did not have a proper English competence because they became American citizen recently. In addition, finding that

NESTs recruited through EPIK were not helpful in developing Korean students' English efficacy, Hwang et al. (2011) pointed out that the quality of NESTs is more important than the nationality for the effective implementation of EPIK. In other words, recruiting NESTs based on their nationality might not guarantee the success of the policy (Jeon 2009, No 2006) as 'native speaker fallacy', the belief that native speakers are ideal English teachers, implied (Phillipson 1992).

Recruiting NESTs within the limited scope of countries seems to be problematic in the other aspect as well. The current landscape of English reflects world Englishes, which includes diverse English varieties (Kachru 1985), and English as an international language (EIL) that emphasizes communication "between speakers coming from different cultural and national backgrounds" (Sharifian 2009, p. 3). In this situation, Korean students should be exposed to diverse English varieties to prepare for these international communication situations (Lee 2022). With the recognition on the current landscape of the English language in the globalized world (Matsuda 2003), the current Korean national curriculum revised in 2022 includes the term "World Englishes". Additionally, Lee (2020) emphasized the need to prepare Korean students for world Englishes and EIL by dealing with various English accents in the Korean context. Also, previous studies have shown that Korean educational stakeholders' recognition of the need for dealing with different English varieties in school. For example, in-service English teachers acknowledged the need for dealing with various English varieties in school (H. Ahn 2014, M. Ahn 2015) although it is not easy for them to incorporate different English varieties in their class. Besides, high school students and pre-service English teachers also showed their recognition on the need to deal with various English varieties in school to prepare for international communication using English (Lee 2022, 2023b). Therefore, EPIK's nationality restrictions seem outdated compared to these changes.

In conclusion, EPIK's limited nationality criteria for NEST recruitment could hinder the program's effectiveness in that the current policy is restricting students' opportunities to develop the English communication skills needed to interact with speakers from diverse language backgrounds. Furthermore, it fails to address the growing recognition among the Korean educational stakeholders of the importance of exposing students to a variety of English varieties.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Questions

EPIK has been implemented to improve English abilities of Korean students and teachers. However, previous studies have kept pointing out the issues of qualification and nationality of NESTs hired through EPIK and the issues should be handled for its effective implementation. In this situation, it seems appropriate to compare EPIK with NEST programs of Japan and Hong Kong to find possible solutions for the issues. Therefore, this study will investigate how to improve the EPIK's effectiveness by answering the research questions below.

- RQ 1. What is the current nationality status of NESTs recruited through EPIK?
- RQ 2. What is the difference between EPIK and other government-funded NEST programs (JET programme of Japan and NET Scheme of Hong Kong) in terms of the NEST's qualification and nationality policies?

Regarding the qualification issues of EPIK teachers, it seemed hard to deal with the issue with a certain research question as the nationality issue in RQ1 because of the contradictory information found. It was found in Seo and Kubota (2023) that EPIK did not require NESTs to have a teaching certificate as a former EPIK teacher mentioned. However, according to the EPIK website, NESTs who did not major in teaching English-related or education-related majors need to obtain a teaching certificate. So, it was assumed that there was a change in the policy recently. However, an EPIK officer mentioned that it has been more than 8 or 9 years since they started to require NESTs to have a teaching certificate and they cannot find the record about when the policy was changed. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to exclude the qualification-related issue with an assumption that NESTs hired through EPIK are qualified either by majoring in teaching English-related or education-related majors or by holding a teaching certificate.

3.2 Materials

First of all, in order to answer RQ 1, the data about nationalities of NESTs hired through EPIK was collected. The researcher contacted the Offices of Education nationwide by using the Open Information portal (<https://www.open.go.kr>), a service operated by the Ministry of Interior and Safety that allows public access to government information upon request. Through the portal, requests were submitted to each Office of Education for data on the nationalities and number of NESTs from each country. Other information, such as name, age, gender, race, etc., were neither requested nor gathered. As a result, the researcher could collect the data from all 17 Offices of Education listed on the website of the Ministry of Education.

Next, in order to answer RQ 2, comparative analysis was conducted on the policies of EPIK with government-funded NEST programs in Japan and Hong Kong. Information from the official websites of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme (<https://jetprogramme.org/en/>) and the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme of Hong Kong (<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/resource-support/net/index.html>) were used for this comparison with EPIK's policies.

4. Results

4.1 Nationalities of Current EPIK Teachers

RQ1 was suggested to check the status of nationality of NESTs working for EPIK program. It was because, although the eligible countries are limited, it might be a case that NESTs from eligible countries are teaching at school evenly, therefore, they can provide Korean students with opportunities to be exposed to various English varieties. With this background, the information about NESTs' nationalities and the number of NESTs from each country were collected to answer the question. All the 17 Offices of Education in Korea provided the data about the nationalities of NESTs hired through EPIK and the number of the EPIK teachers from each county as of April or May 2024. The data revealed that EPIK teachers currently teaching in school are citizens of 8 different countries. In more detail, all the NESTs are from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland except for two Korean citizens. Based on the information provided on the EPIK website, it is assumed that those Korean nationals are with a legal residency in one of the designated countries and provided a proof of English education beginning from 7th year/grade and through university. The table below shows the nationalities and the number of EPIK teachers from each country who are teaching in 2024.

Table 1. Nationalities of EPIK NESTs and the Number of EPIK NESTs from Each Country

| | U.S. | U.K. | Canada | Australia | New Zealand | South Africa | Ireland | Korea | Total |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|-------------|--------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Seoul | 252 | 104 | 30 | 13 | 6 | 29 | 13 | | 447 |
| Busan | 138 | 39 | 10 | 9 | 4 | 64 | | | 264 |
| Daegu | 132 | 60 | 11 | 5 | 4 | 67 | 6 | | 285 |
| Incheon | 71 | 25 | 11 | 6 | 3 | 22 | 2 | | 140 |
| Gwangju | 40 | 13 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 25 | 0 | | 87 |
| Deajeon | 88 | 33 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 42 | 1 | | 178 |
| Ulsan | 5 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | | 11 |
| Sejong | 27 | 11 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | | 48 |
| Gyeonggi | 77 | 23 | 14 | 4 | 2 | 59 | 1 | | 180 |
| Gangwon | 116 | 24 | 10 | 2 | 4 | 78 | 5 | 1 | 240 |
| Chungbuk | 47 | 10 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 21 | 1 | | 85 |
| Chungnam | 67 | 18 | 9 | 3 | 0 | 58 | 2 | | 157 |
| Jeonbuk | 53 | 15 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 42 | 0 | | 121 |
| Jeonnam | 115 | 36 | 24 | 11 | 0 | 142 | 1 | | 329 |
| Gyeongbuk | 116 | 24 | 22 | 2 | 0 | 59 | 1 | 1 | 225 |
| Gyeongnam | 112 | 27 | 22 | 4 | 3 | 92 | 4 | | 264 |
| Jeju | 59 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 40 | 0 | | 115 |
| Total | 1515 | 471 | 199 | 77 | 31 | 843 | 38 | 2 | 3176 |
| % | 47.70% | 14.83% | 6.27% | 2.42% | 0.98% | 26.54% | 1.20% | 0.06% | 100% |

Note. According to the data gathered, 10 native speakers are working as researchers at Gyeongbuk Provincial Office of Education Research Institute. However, since they are not teaching in school, they were excluded in the table.

As Table 1 above shows, the total of 3176 EPIK teachers are currently teaching in school nationwide. Considering that the number of NESTs recruited through EPIK within 2009 to 2018 was 14106 (EPIK 2024) with the maximum of 2151 in 2011, it can be said that the current number of EPIK NESTs is outstanding. In terms of nationalities, it was found that 47.7% of EPIK NESTs (1515) are the U.S. citizens. And then, South African citizens account for the second biggest portion with 843 teachers (26.54%) and the U.K. citizens account for 14.83% with 471 teachers. The number of citizens of those three countries is 2829 out of 3176, which accounts for about 89% of the entire EPIK teachers. Along with EPIK teachers from those three countries, there are 199 Canadian teachers, which account for 6.27%. The number of EPIK teachers from Australia, Ireland and New Zealand were only 77, 38, and 31 respectively and they account for only 4.6% in total. Finally, there were two Korean citizens working as EPIK teachers which account for 0.06%. Based on the data, it was found that more than half of the EPIK teachers are from the U.S. and the U.K. whose English varieties are considered as the standard English varieties (Lee 2023) and the primary targets of English education in Korea (Ahn 2014, Park 2017).

On the other hand, an interesting point in the data is the significant number of South African EPIK teachers which constitutes over a quarter (26.54%) of the total. Considering that South Africa is the only outer-circle country of which citizens are teaching as EPIK teachers, the fact that South African EPIK teachers account for the second biggest portion seems noticeable. In fact, in terms of three concentric circles of world Englishes (Kachru 1985), India is also an outer-circle country of which citizens are eligible to apply for EPIK once they meet certain conditions required. Nevertheless, none of the Offices of Education reported that Indian EPIK teachers are teaching

under their jurisdiction. Finally, although Lee (2022) showed that Australia was the country of which citizens visited Korea the second most among the inner-circle countries from 2017 to 2019, the number of Australian EPIK teachers working in Korea currently is just 77 which is lower than the numbers of British and Canadian EPIK teachers.

In conclusion, the data reveals that the current EPIK teachers teaching in Korea are mostly from the three countries (the U.S., South Africa, and the U.K.), even though EPIK is recruiting NESTs among citizens of 9 different countries (including Korean citizens who fulfilled suggested conditions) with their current policy. Therefore, it can be said that this limited diversity of EPIK teachers restricts Korean students' and teachers' exposure to a wider range of English varieties, potentially hindering them from developing their English communication skills needed for EIL contexts.

4.2. Comparison between EPIK, JET Programme and NET-Scheme

To answer RQ 2, policies of government-funded NEST programs in Korea, Japan and Hong Kong were compared, especially in terms of qualification and nationality of NESTs. The comparison of their policies was made based on the information provided on their official website¹.

4.2.1 Comparison of the nationality policies

In terms of the policies about nationality of NESTs, the three government-funded NEST programs have differences. First, the nationality policy of EPIK seems quite stringent in that the eligibility for EPIK teachers is limited to native English speakers who are a citizen of one of the following countries: the U.S., the U.K., Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India (with some conditions to be fulfilled). Additionally, Korean citizens who are with a legal residency and have studied for secondary schools and university in one of the countries above are also eligible. In essence, EPIK prioritizes native English speakers from inner-circle countries and only two outer-circle countries (South Africa and India with conditions). In other words, this policy restricts Korean students' and teachers' exposure to a wider range of English varieties in school settings.

Secondly, unlike the EPIK's nationality policy, JET does not seem to have a stringent nationality policy. For JET in general, applicants "must be a national (not just a permanent resident) of the country where the recruitment and selection procedures take place by the time they submit their application form." In addition, according to the statistical data they provide, citizens of 50 countries are participating in JET programme for 2023-2024 years (JET, 2024). Narrowing down the scope of the nationalities of JET participants to the nationalities of participants in the assistant language teacher (ALT) position, English speakers from various countries are teaching as NESTs in Japan and those countries are the U.S., the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, South Africa, Philippines, Singapore, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Malta, etc. In other words, the JET's policy regarding the nationality allows English speakers not only from the inner-circle countries but also from the outer-circle countries to teach English as a NEST in Japan, which seems similar to the nationality policy of EPIK. However, the broader range of nationalities including Philippines, Jamaica, Barbados, etc. shows

¹ JET invites foreigners for three different positions such as Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), Coordinator for International Relations (CIR), and Sports Exchange Advisor (SEA). For this study, policies about the ALT position were the targets of comparison because ALT can be considered as a counterpart of NESTs of EPIK and NET Scheme.

that Japanese students and teachers are being exposed to a wider variety of English compared to Korean students and teachers.

Lastly, NET Scheme of Hong Kong has a more flexible nationality policy among the three programs. For NET Scheme for both primary schools and secondary schools, applicants should “be a native speaker of English or possess native-speaker English competence” (NET 2024). Unlike EPIK’s list of eligible countries, the NET Scheme offers no such restrictions. This openness extends further by allowing qualified non-native English speakers (NNESTs) to apply, although they suggest that non-native English speakers’ English competence should not be “different from that of native-speakers in terms of fluency, accuracy and creativity in language use” (NET 2024). In other words, the NET Scheme prioritizes English competence over nationality, potentially exposing Hong Kong students and teachers to the widest range of English varieties compared to the other two programs.

In conclusion, the analysis of nationality policies across the three government-funded NEST programs (EPIK, JET, and NET Scheme) reveals significant differences. EPIK and JET primarily recruit NESTs from inner-circle and some outer-circle countries. However, the JET program offers a broader range of outer-circle countries, potentially providing Japanese students with greater exposure to diverse English varieties. The NET Scheme in Hong Kong stands out for its most flexible policy. By not restricting nationality and even welcoming qualified NNESTs, the program offers Hong Kong students and teachers the potential for encountering the most extensive range of English varieties among the three programs.

4.2.2. Comparison of the qualification policies

In terms of the policies about qualification of NESTs, it was also found that the NEST programs of the three countries have different policies. First, to be eligible to apply for EPIK, applicants must “hold a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree from an accredited university with the designated countries.” (EPIK 2024) However, there are additional conditions to be fulfilled depending on their educational background. In the case of applicants who “have a teaching license/certificate, B.Ed., M.Ed., or majored in teaching, TESOL, Second Language Studies (University of Hawai’i), or any other of Education-focused major (Physical Education, Math Education, etc.)”, they are exempt from obtaining a TEFL/TESOL/CELTA certificate. Otherwise, applicants are required to obtain an English-teaching certificate of at least 100 hours or more from an accredited program. Therefore, EPIK is recruiting NESTs among applicants either who studied in teaching/education-related majors or teaching English as a second language majors or who have a TEFL/TESOL/CELTA certificate. In other words, EPIK is making efforts to recruit qualified NESTs who can teach English and help teachers effectively by requiring applicants to provide an objective proof of their qualification to be eligible for EPIK.

On the other hand, JET’s policies seem different from the ones of EPIK. Applicants must “hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher, or obtain such qualifications by the designated arrival date (applicants for the ALT position may alternatively hold a certification of completion of a 3-year course to teach at primary/elementary or secondary schools or obtain such qualification(s) by the designated arrival date).” (JET 2024) In addition, having language/general teaching experience or qualifications is not a part of eligibility criteria, although they will give additional considerations for applicants who fulfilled one of those conditions. Overall, JET’s qualification requirements appear less stringent compared to the EPIK’s policies.

The NET Scheme of Hong Kong enforces the most stringent qualification requirements among the three programs. Requirements for applicants are categorized based on school level (primary or secondary), and each category has specific eligibility criteria. For the NET Scheme for primary schools, the priority will be given to applicants who 1) have a bachelor’s degree in English (i.e. majoring in English Language/English

Literature/English Studies/Linguistics/a Modern Language); 2) a recognized teacher training qualification in primary education and 3) a TEFL/TESL qualification at least at certificate level, or an equivalent course of study recognized by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong. And then, the second priority will be given to applicants who have a teacher training qualification in primary education and a TEFL/TESL qualification but have a BA degree in any subject but English. Along with these requirement categories, there are two more categories. An important point is that having a TEFL/TESL qualification at least certificate level is compulsory in all categories.

For the NET Scheme for secondary schools, qualification requirements become more complex with 7 different requirement categories. For example, NET Scheme for secondary schools will consider applicants first who have 1) a bachelor's degree in English Language/English Literature/English Studies/Linguistics/a Modern Language or a bachelor's degree in education (major in English or a Modern Language, but not primary education specialist obtained after 3 years' full-time study from a Hong Kong university or equivalent; 2) a Post-graduate Diploma in Education majoring in English or equivalent; 3) TEFL/TESL qualification and 4) at least 1 year's post-graduate experience of teaching English (preferably as a second or foreign language) at secondary level or above. The second priority will be given to applicants who fulfilled requirements suggested in the first category except a TEFL/TESL certificate. Subsequent categories offer slightly flexible criteria with all categories mandating at least 1 year of post-graduate experiences of teaching English at secondary level or above. With these requirements, it could be said that NET Scheme is implementing the most stringent qualification policies among the three NEST programs compared. As a result, the NET Scheme is likely to recruit highly qualified English teachers who can teach English effectively.

Comparing the qualification policies, it was found that NET Scheme requires the most complex and stringent qualifications for applicants with compulsory requirements such as TEFL/TESL certificate regardless of applicants' major (for NET for primary school) and teaching experiences (for NET for secondary schools). On the other hand, the other two programs seem a little flexible in terms of qualifications in that EPIK requires applicants to have a teaching certificate depending on applicants' major and JET does not require applicants to have a teaching certificate regardless of their major.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the current nationality status of the EPIK teachers and compared the nationality and qualification policies of EPIK with similar programs in Japan (JET) and Hong Kong (NET Scheme). Based on the results found, this section will suggest possible solutions for the issues found while implementing EPIK.

5.1 Expanding the Scope of Eligible Countries for the Nationality Issue

Currently, English is being used as an international language that bridges communication between English speakers from different language backgrounds (Alsagoff 2012, Sharifian 2009). Therefore, the importance of the ability to comprehend different English varieties keeps growing (Ahn 2014, Lee 2022, 2023b). However, EPIK still considers only English speakers from 8 countries as eligible NESTs, which provides restricted opportunities for Korean students and teachers to be exposed to diverse English varieties.

The data collected for research question 1 (RQ1) reveals a dominance of teachers from the U.S. (47.7%), South Africa (26.54%), and the U.K. (14.83%) in the EPIK program. As mentioned, the eligible nationality of EPIK teachers is limited to 8 different countries with the EPIK's policy. However, the actual data revealed that Korean

students are being exposed to even more limited English varieties, which seems more problematic than it could seem with the policy. For example, considering that the number of Indian English speakers is roughly 129 million (Ploscaru 2024), Indian English varieties should not be overlooked and should be included in English education to prepare Korean students for international communication. However, no Indian teachers are currently employed. In fact, H. Lee (2022) reports that four Indian teachers were hired in 2010, but concerns about their pronunciation led them to be assigned to institutes rather than a school. In other words, it seems EPIK is not appropriately helping Korean students to prepare for international communication happening with diverse English varieties because of native-speakerism reflected in their policy (Holiday 2006). As a matter of fact, it has been years since the nationality issue of EPIK teachers was pointed out as a problem (Tanghe 2014). However, the nationality issue has not been changed yet, while the landscape of English has been changed in a way to reflect English as an international language. Therefore, the current EPIK's recruitment policy needs changes in ways to reflect world Englishes and EIL by benchmarking the nationality policies of the JET programme and the NET Scheme.

With its broader range of participating countries (including outer-circle countries like the Philippines, Singapore, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago), the JET program exposes Japanese students to a wider variety of English. It means that Japanese students and teachers are having opportunities to learn English with more diverse English varieties, which corresponds with the current landscape of English (Matsuda 2003). The NET Scheme goes even further, not only considering NESTs but also welcoming qualified and competent NNESTs. This policy allows competent English users even from expanding circle countries to contribute to English education in Hong Kong, maximizing exposure to diverse varieties for students and teachers. In other words, the nationality policies of JET and NET Scheme are reflecting world Englishes and EIL by recruiting English teachers from various countries.

In contrast, even though the Korean national curriculum includes the term 'world Englishes', the current nationality policy of EPIK does not seem to correspond with the curriculum. Therefore, it is time for EPIK to consider expanding the eligible nationality of NESTs. In fact, the number of the speakers of English as a second or foreign language is already bigger than the number of native English speakers (Jenkins 2006). That is, Korean EFL learners are increasingly likely to encounter English speakers whose first language is not English. With this background, Lee (2020) suggested that Korean English education should incorporate diverse English varieties in order to prepare Korean students for international communications. Therefore, restricting eligible nationalities of EPIK teachers does not seem appropriate in that it could hinder Korean students from facing diverse English varieties which they will probably face in the EIL situations. In this situation, EPIK should be able to do a role of "preparing English learners to become competent users of English in international contexts" (Matsuda 2012, p. 7) by expanding the eligible nationalities of EPIK teachers and making efforts to recruit EPIK teachers from various countries. In fact, it was found through previous studies that Korean educational stakeholders such as students and in-/pre-service teachers recognize the importance of comprehending different English varieties and they expressed the need for including diverse English varieties in school education (Ahn 2014, Lee 2023b, Park 2017). Therefore, recruiting EPIK teachers from a broader scope of countries will provide students with opportunities to be exposed to various English varieties such as listening to various accents of English since EPIK teachers tend to put their efforts in teaching listening and speaking in their class (Park 2010). In fact, accent is an important factor that affects both listeners' actual understanding (S.-Y. Shin et al. 2021) and listeners' perceptual listening difficulty (Harding 2008). So, it is not hard to find English users having difficulties understanding when they listen to unfamiliar accents of English (Kang et al. 2019). However, it was found that exposing students to diverse English varieties even in a short time is effective in improving their listening comprehension. Lee (2022) found that listening to various English accents helped Korean high school students to develop their listening abilities to

comprehend unfamiliar English accents with learning transfer. Therefore, by expanding the eligible nationalities of EPIK teachers and making efforts to recruit EPIK teachers in various countries, EPIK should provide Korean students with chances to face diverse English varieties in school. If it could be done, Korean students will be able to make foundation for their English abilities required for EIL communications which will be transferred to future EIL situations (James 2008). This will also help the goals of the national curriculum to be accomplished.

In more detail, it is recommended that EPIK should consider expanding eligible nationalities of EPIK teachers as JET and NET Scheme recruit teachers not only from inner-circle and outer-circle countries, but also from expanding-circle countries. In other words, EPIK does not need to stick to recruiting EPIK teachers among native English speakers whose L1 is English. Earlier, Phillipson (1992) provided the term ‘native speaker fallacy’ with concerns about the belief that native speakers are ideal English teachers. That is, native speakers are not necessarily a good English teacher (Boyle 1997, Floris and Renandya 2020, Ma 2012). Also, Hwang and Yim (2019) showed that Korean students tend to like NESTs regardless of their nationality. Additionally, as the national curriculum suggests that Korean EFL students should be proficient English users who could understand ‘world Englishes’, EPIK should consider recruiting teachers from all three concentric circles in order to expose Korean students to various English varieties.

However, it does not mean that EPIK should recruit teachers from any countries. In fact, it is practically impossible to incorporate all the English varieties in education. Rather, as Matsuda and Friderich (2012) suggested, instructional English varieties should be selected based on the consideration of local context. Therefore, cautious considerations on local context should be preceded before deciding citizens of which country will be considered as eligible for an EPIK teacher position. For example, it might be possible to try including various English varieties based on the statistical data that shows the number of foreign visitors to Korea since the data reflects the possibility of Korean students communicating with foreigners in diverse English varieties.

5.2 Requesting Higher Criteria for the Qualification Issues

Previous studies have kept pointing out ineffectiveness of hiring EPIK teachers in school, which partially resulted from EPIK teachers themselves because they were less qualified and experienced. For example, EPIK teachers tended to have problems such as a lack of understanding about students (Chun 2015), poor classroom management skills (Hwang and Yim 2019) and challenges in designing a curriculum (Kim 2012). It makes NESTs feel hard to co-teach with Korean English teachers and also causes NESTs to teach only limited skills such as speaking and listening (Park 2010). Furthermore, some NESTs feel like they are a learner rather than a teacher (Hwang and Yim 2019), which might be caused by their lack of qualification and experience as a teacher. In fact, Korean English teachers answered that NESTs’ lack of quality contributes to the ineffective implementation of EPIK (Lee and Ko 2010). Therefore, to address this issue, EPIK should make efforts to recruit teachers who are highly qualified and experienced.

With this background, a comparison of qualification requirements across the three programs reveals that the JET Programme has the most lenient policy, not mandating a teaching certificate for applicants. The NET Scheme, on the other hand, requires a teaching certificate for primary school NET applicants and at least one year of postgraduate English teaching experience at the secondary level or above for secondary school NET applicants. EPIK’s policy falls between these two extremes, requiring a teaching certificate depending on the applicant’s educational background. While EPIK’s current policy is not the weakest, previous research suggested a need for recruiting even higher-quality NESTs (Ahn and Lew 2017, Hwang and Yim 2019, Lee and Ko 2010, H. Lee 2020). Therefore, the qualification policy of EPIK should be strengthened in order to recruit professional teachers who

are qualified and experienced in teaching English as a foreign of second language (Bernstein 2023). By requesting higher qualification criteria such as requesting a teaching certificate regardless of their majors and having teaching experiences as the NET Scheme requires, EPIK will be able to recruit competent teachers.

In fact, possessing subject knowledge does not guarantee effective teaching of that subject. That is why Korean pre-service teachers are required to take courses not only about the subject they will teach, but also about teaching methods of the subject, how to develop a curriculum, how to assess students, etc. In addition, they must take part in a 4-week-long teacher practicum to achieve their teacher certificate. Similarly, courses for teaching certificates, such as TESOL certificate, include courses covering curriculum design and teaching methods and practicum hours (Miller 2020), which is a professionalizing process for English speakers to become an English teacher by transitioning their knowledge to effective teaching practice (Bernstein 2023). Therefore, in line with suggestions from H.W. Shin et al. (2021), EPIK is recommended to strengthen its qualification policy by requiring both a teaching certificate and teaching experience. It would enable them to recruit competent NESTs equipped with knowledge of teaching methods and practical experiences to teach English effectively to Korean students.

Furthermore, implementing stricter qualification requirements would enhance the feasibility of expanding eligible nationalities, as EPIK could then recruit NESTs from a pool of qualified and experienced applicants from a wider range of countries. For example, it is not hard to find non-native English speakers teaching English-related subjects at American universities. They can be considered qualified in that they are hired with the consideration on their major and work/teaching experiences. In other words, those universities consider quality of instructors more important than their nationality so that they can provide their students with opportunities to learn from more competent teachers. As a result, implementing stricter qualification requirements would be beneficial not only for handling the issues of low-quality EPIK teachers but also for hiring competent NESTs from the expanded eligible nationalities.

6. Conclusion

This study tried to investigate the issues of EPIK that have been pointed out by previous studies and tried to suggest possible solutions for the current situation by answering research questions. For the nationality issues of EPIK, this study revealed that EPIK still consider NESTs from only 8 countries eligible and teachers currently teaching in Korea are mostly from even more limited countries. However, considering the current status of English as an international language, the fact that NESTs from limited countries are teaching in school might not be helpful for Korean students to develop their English ability for EIL situations. Therefore, comparing the nationality policies of the NEST programs of three countries, this study suggested that EPIK should expand the scope of eligible nationality of EPIK teachers as the NET Scheme's nationality policy. For the qualification issues, the qualification policy of EPIK is in between the qualification policies of JET and the NET Scheme in that applicants of EPIK should have a teaching certificate depending on their major. However, to recruit teachers who can teach effectively, this study suggested EPIK should request higher qualification criteria with which qualified and experienced teachers would be recruited.

Of course, this study has limitations in that amending policies is not an easy process with a lot of things to be considered. For instance, requesting higher criteria might cause following changes in other policies of EPIK such as salaries of EPIK teachers. Also, many considerations on the Korean situation should be preceded before deciding which countries will be included in the list of eligible countries or not. However, given that the issues and ineffectiveness have kept being pointed out for a while, EPIK should consider amending their policies in some ways for its more effective implementation.

EPIK's effective implementation would be possible by requesting higher criteria and expanding the eligible nationalities simultaneously. If the policy of requesting higher qualification criteria would be implemented without expanding the eligible countries, it might lead the current applicant pool to be smaller. Also, if the policy of expanding the eligible countries would be implemented without requesting higher qualification criteria, it might cause the current ineffectiveness of EPIK to be worse. Therefore, with the two policies being implemented simultaneously, EPIK will be able to recruit qualified and experienced teachers regardless of their nationality and it will provide opportunities to expose Korean students and teachers to diverse English varieties with competent teachers. It will ultimately lead Korean students to improve their English abilities to comprehend diverse English varieties which required to participate in EIL communication, which helps the goal of English education of Korea to be accomplished.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Secondary