



Metaphorical Representation of English Program in Korea (EPIK): Insight from New Native English-Speaking Teachers*

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to identify how the newly recruited Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) perceive and conceptualize the Education Program in Korea (EPIK) through an analysis of the metaphors they responded with. Data was collected during the EPIK orientation, which included both online and in-person sessions. A total of 250 participants responded to a written questionnaire featuring open-ended prompts designed to elicit metaphorical descriptions of their experiences. Responses were manually transcribed and analyzed using a hybrid approach that combined traditional qualitative methods with Perplexity, one of AI-supported tools. This enabled the identification and categorization of recurring metaphors into six themes: Opportunity & New Beginnings, Support System & Community, Journey & Adventure, Learning & Growth, Challenge & Transformation, and Unpredictability & Surprise. These themes reveal NESTs' dual roles as cultural mediators and institutional actors, navigating opportunities for growth alongside systemic challenges such as emotional unpreparedness and hierarchical workplace dynamics. The study highlights EPIK's transformative potential as a platform for global citizenship while advocating for reforms to address gaps in teacher support and equity. Future research should explore longitudinal changes in metaphorical narratives and conduct comparative analyses with similar programs to enhance teacher retention and satisfaction.

KEYWORDS

metaphor analysis, native English-speaking teachers, EPIK program

1. Introduction

In the globalized 21st century, English proficiency remains a critical competency, driving non-English-speaking nations like South Korea to prioritize programs employing Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs). Initiatives including the English Program in Korea (EPIK), launched in 1995, exemplify efforts to enhance students' communicative skills and intercultural competence by leveraging NESTs' linguistic authenticity (Ko and Kim 2021, NIIED 2025, Shin et al. 2021). However, the program's evolution has been shaped by structural and institutional factors, including shifting political priorities, equity concerns, and debates over NEST qualifications (Lee 2022). Under the Lee Myung Bak Administration (2008 - 2013), EPIK expanded rapidly, with NEST deployments peaking at 9,320 in 2011 before stabilizing at 4,813 by 2019. This growth reflected a policy emphasis on national competitiveness through English education, though challenges like uneven regional distribution, cultural adaptation barriers, and reliance on recruitment from seven English-speaking countries persisted (Lee 2022).

Concurrently, the digital revolution has introduced artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, exemplified by chatbots and adaptive learning platforms, that personalize language acquisition and simulate immersive environments (Cambridge University Press & Assessment 2023, Li 2017). While AI promises to democratize access to English education, its integration raises questions about the evolving role of NESTs, whose cultural mediation and interactive teaching remain vital for fostering human-centric learning (Copland et al. 2016, Copland et al. 2024).

Despite decades of NEST deployment, systemic challenges endure. Studies reveal that NESTs often struggle with inadequate pre-departure training, institutional hierarchies, and unpredictable workloads (Ark 2020, Shin et al. 2021). Meanwhile, students frequently prefer NESTs for authentic pronunciation but criticize their unfamiliarity with local pedagogies (Tajeddin and Adeg 2016). These issues highlight the need for rigorous evaluation of NEST programs, particularly as AI-driven tools redefine educational norms. However, existing research predominantly relies on quantitative surveys, which oversimplify the nuanced interplay of cultural, cognitive, and institutional factors shaping NESTs' experiences (Baxter and Jack 2008, Moodie and Nam 2016).

Metaphor analysis, a qualitative method rooted in cognitive linguistics, offers a robust alternative for unpacking these complexities. By examining how NESTs conceptualize their roles through metaphors like "bridge" or "lighthouse," researchers gain insights into their cognitive frameworks, emotional challenges, and identity transformations (Cameron 2003, Lakoff and Johnson 1980). While metaphor analysis has illuminated teacher beliefs in broader educational contexts (Saban 2004), its application to NEST research remains scarce, a gap this study addresses.

This study aims to identify how NEST students perceive and conceptualize EPIK in a non-English speaking educational environment, South Korea, through an analysis of the metaphors they responded with. The specific research questions are:

- 1) What types of metaphors do NESTs use to perceive and conceptualize EPIK, and what are their implications?
- 2) How do factors related to individuals and institutions influence perceptions of NEST's role in such programs as EPIK?

By addressing these questions, this study is expected to derive implications to English educational policies, particularly focusing on the role of the NESTs.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 NESTs' Perceptions of the English Teaching Programs like EPIK

Shin et al. (2021) investigated the beliefs of EPIK teachers and found that teaching experience significantly shapes how NESTs perceive language teaching and learning. The study revealed that experienced teachers demonstrated a more evidence-based understanding than novices, particularly in areas such as feedback and student learning. For instance, novice teachers were more likely to believe that students learn directly what is taught and that feedback should be immediate and indirect. These findings are consistent with previous research, which suggests that teaching experience plays a critical role in reshaping teacher beliefs and improving instructional approaches. The study also highlighted that novice teachers often hold misconceptions about teaching-learning relationships and corrective feedback, which could impact their classroom practices. This emphasizes the importance of providing targeted training and support to help novice teachers develop more effective teaching strategies and align their beliefs with evidence-based practices.

Ark (2020) examined the cultural adjustment struggles of female EPIK teachers in South Korea, emphasizing inadequate preparation and limited in-country support. Many NESTs arrived with little knowledge of Korean language or culture, and minimal training left them ill-equipped for both teaching and daily life. Successful adjustment often depended on strong relationships with co-teachers and school communities, while lack of such support led to isolation and low self-efficacy. These challenges were compounded by the rigid school hierarchy, differing classroom norms, and pressure to conform. Lee (2022) further highlighted the systemic issues within the EPIK program, including the unchanged assistant teacher status of NESTs, resistance to granting them independent teaching roles, and regional inconsistencies in deployment. Despite improvements in training and professional support, the program continues to reflect institutional inertia and political tensions. Both studies emphasize the need for deeper structural reforms to support the cultural and professional integration of foreign teachers.

On the other hand, Tajeddin and Adeh (2016) examined NEST - non-NEST dynamics, revealing differing perceptions regarding status and skills. Many non-NESTs viewed NESTs as having superior pronunciation, fluency, and self-confidence, influenced by the “native-speaker fallacy” (Tajeddin and Adeh 2016). These perceptions influence how NESTs view their roles in programs like EPIK, often entering with assumptions of linguistic superiority while facing challenges adapting to local contexts (Kim 2011, Ko and Kim, 2021). However, as noted by Tajeddin and Adeh (2016), NESTs themselves were less likely to agree with the notion of their superiority, suggesting a shift away from traditional stereotypes. Student perceptions also reinforce this dynamic; for example, Lee et al. (2022) found that 78.2% of Korean students preferred NESTs, citing better cultural knowledge (37.2%), higher English proficiency (29.1%), and more authentic learning experiences (24.4%). These attitudes likely shape NESTs' own views of their value and identity within Korean classrooms, despite research showing that non-NESTs can provide greater accuracy and cultural adaptability (Tajeddin and Adeh 2016). Consequently, this dynamic illustrates the impact of native-speakerism, where accent and race socially influence perceptions of teacher competence (Amin 2001).

2.2 Theoretical Framework for Understanding NESTs' Perceptions

The framework of the current study integrates three theoretical perspectives to analyze the experiences of NESTs in EPIK program. They are Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, and Tinto's Institutional Support Theory. These perspectives collectively address the cultural,

cognitive, and structural dimensions influencing NESTs' adjustment in non-native English-speaking contexts.

Byram (1997) conceptualizes Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as consisting of five fundamental components: knowledge, attitudes of curiosity and openness, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Proficiency in these areas is vital for effective intercultural engagement. While many NESTs exhibit curiosity and openness toward Korean culture (attitudes), deficiencies in other areas, including limited knowledge of Korean educational practices and underdeveloped skills in interpreting, relating, discovering, and interacting, can hinder their adjustment. As Ark (2020) and Shin et al. (2021) observe, insufficient pre-arrival training often leaves teachers unprepared for the hierarchical and collectivist context of Korean schools. Such gaps in intercultural competence may lead to misunderstandings and conflict, particularly when navigating school power structures and communication styles (critical cultural awareness).

Mezirow's (1991) theory highlights how disorienting dilemmas, including cultural or professional challenges, can prompt critical reflection and identity transformation. For NESTs, these challenges often shift their self-perception from being solely language experts to becoming cultural mediators. While some teachers grow through these transformative experiences, rigid curricula and limited teaching autonomy frequently hinder deeper professional and personal development (NIIED 2025, Shin et al. 2021). For example, the lack of flexibility in lesson planning and the emphasis on rote learning can restrict opportunities for NESTs to innovate or adapt their teaching styles to better suit their students' needs.

Tinto's (1975) model highlights the importance of institutional support in facilitating successful transitions. While EPIK provides logistical assistance, including housing and visa arrangements, it often falls short in offering sufficient emotional and professional support. Teachers, particularly those placed in rural areas, frequently report feelings of isolation and burnout due to weak mentorship structures and unpredictable placement systems (Ark 2020, NIIED 2025). The absence of consistent guidance and standardized co-teacher training exacerbates these challenges, leaving many NESTs to navigate their roles with minimal support.

These theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how NESTs' perceptions evolve through cultural adaptation, identity development, and institutional support. For instance, a teacher might develop classroom strategies informed by intercultural competencies (Byram 1997), reflect on and redefine their professional identity (Mezirow 1991), and seek peer or institutional support to mitigate challenges (Tinto 1975). This integrated approach highlights the interplay between personal agency and structural factors, emphasizing the need for holistic program designs that address both individual and systemic challenges. By fostering intercultural competence, supporting transformative learning, and strengthening institutional support mechanisms, programs like EPIK can better equip NESTs to thrive in their roles.

2.3 Metaphor Analysis

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), suggested by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), argues that metaphors are cognitive tools that shape how individuals conceptualize abstract ideas by mapping knowledge from concrete source domains (e.g., "bridge") to abstract target domains (e.g., "cultural exchange"). In education, metaphor analysis has proven valuable for exploring teachers' beliefs, professional identities, and intercultural interactions (Cameron 2003, Cinnamon 2020, Ko and Kim 2021). For instance, metaphors such as "gardener" or "guide" reflect pedagogical philosophies, illustrating teachers' roles as nurturers or facilitators (Akkaya 2021, Saban 2004). These align with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which highlights how cultural adaptation can trigger shifts in professional identity.

Metaphors like “bridge” emphasize bidirectional learning and cultural mediation, resonating with Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence and the goals of programs like EPIK (Shin et al. 2021). Such metaphors put an emphasis on the role of teachers as cultural mediators, facilitating mutual understanding and dialogue across diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, metaphors like “safety net” highlight institutional support structures while revealing gaps in emotional and cultural preparation (Ark 2020, Tinto 1975). These metaphorical insights shed light on the dual role of institutions in both supporting and constraining teachers’ growth.

By analyzing metaphors, researchers can uncover deeper insights into teachers’ beliefs, identities, intercultural competence, and the institutional frameworks that shape their professional journeys. CMT provides a powerful lens for understanding the complexities of teaching and learning in cross-cultural educational contexts

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Setting

The Korean Ministry of Education, in collaboration with Metropolitan and Provincial Offices of Education, requires newly arrived NESTs to attend the EPIK Orientation. In February 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were transported directly from the airport to a designated university in Chungcheongbuk-do Province, where they completed a mandatory two-week quarantine. During this period, an online pre-orientation program introduced essential topics including English teaching methodologies, cultural understanding, and classroom demonstration techniques.

Following quarantine, a week-long in-person orientation provided further pedagogical training and cultural acclimatization to support their successful integration into Korean public schools. 277 participants attended the main orientation program at the same university. The program included lectures, workshops, and practice-based sessions on classroom management, lesson planning, the Korean curriculum, and school culture. Additional components included beginner-level Korean language classes, cultural education sessions on daily life and traditions, and teaching practice in simulated settings. Peer interaction and lesson observation further supported professional development. The orientation aimed to enhance teaching competence while facilitating a smooth transition into Korean society and public schools.

3.2 Participants

The study targeted newly recruited NESTs who arrived in Korea in February 2021 to join the EPIK program. Managed by the National Institute for International Education (NIIED), EPIK recruits teachers from seven countries, including Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK, and the USA, and places them in elementary and secondary schools across Korea as assistant English teachers. During the orientation period, 277 NESTs participated in sessions covering cultural education, teaching methodologies, and administrative guidance. The study captured their initial impressions and metaphorical representations of the EPIK program. Of the 277 NESTs, 250 participated in the research by responding to open-ended questions.

A total of 250 individuals participated in the study. In terms of gender, 198 participants (79.2%) were female and 52 (20.8%) were male. Regarding nationality, the majority of participants were from the USA (80.4%), followed by Canada (9.6%), Australia (3.6%), and other English-speaking countries, including the UK (0.4%), Ireland (2.0%), New Zealand (2.0%), and South Africa (2.0%). As for teaching experience, most participants had

0-3 years of experience (92.8%), while 6.0% had 4-6 years, and 1.2% had 7-9 years of experience. In terms of overseas teaching experience, 96.4% reported having 0-3 years, 2.8% had 4-6 years, and only 0.8% had 7-9 years.

Overall, the table shows that the majority of participants were relatively early in their teaching careers and had limited overseas teaching experience. The diversity of participants, representing seven different countries, ensures rich datasets that reflect varied cultural perspectives and experiences. This diversity also allows for an exploration of how metaphors are shaped by participants' cultural backgrounds and their interactions with the Korean educational system.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Gender	Female	198	79.2	79.2
	Male	52	20.8	20.8
Nationality	Australian	9	3.6	3.6
	British	1	.4	.4
	Irish	5	2.0	2.0
	New Zealand	5	2.0	2.0
	South Africa	5	2.0	2.0
	USA	201	80.4	80.4
	Canada	24	9.6	9.6
Teaching	0-3years	232	92.8	92.8
Experience	4-6 years	15	6.0	6.0
	7-9 years	3	1.2	1.2
Overseas Teaching	0-3years	241	96.4	96.4
Experience	4-6 years	7	2.8	2.8
	7-9 years	2	.8	.8
Total		250	100.0	100.0

3.3 Data Collection

The study aimed to gather qualitative data from newly recruited NESTs participating in the February 2021 EPIK Orientation. These participants were selected to provide insights into their perceptions of the EPIK program, Korean culture, and their roles as English teachers. The data collection process was carefully designed to ensure accessibility, accuracy, and depth in capturing participants' experiences.

The data collection procedure was conducted during the EPIK Orientation, held from February 21-27, 2021. On the final day of the orientation, prior to participants' departure to their assigned Provincial/Metropolitan Offices of Education, a written questionnaire was distributed. The questionnaire included open-ended prompts designed to elicit metaphorical responses, regarding Korean culture, EPIK, and teaching English as a NEST. The current study addresses EPIK. Participants were asked to respond to the prompt: "*EPIK is (like) ... to me. This is because*" This prompt encouraged participants to use metaphors (e.g., objects, food, abstract concepts) to articulate their thoughts and reasoning, fostering rich and nuanced narratives (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

To ensure ease of participation, the questionnaire was provided in paper format during the orientation sessions. Participants completed the survey in a structured yet informal setting, allowing them to reflect on their experiences without external pressure. After the surveys were collected, all handwritten responses were manually transcribed into Excel for systematic organization and analysis. The transcription process was conducted with meticulous attention to detail, ensuring that participants' original wording and intent were preserved. This step was critical for maintaining the integrity of the qualitative data and ensuring consistency in subsequent analysis.

The use of open-ended prompts and metaphor-elicitation techniques was central to the data collection methodology. This approach allowed participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences, resulting in a dataset rich in metaphorical language and personal insights. For example, one participant described EPIK as “a lighthouse in the night,” highlighting the program’s role in guiding them through cultural and professional challenges. Such metaphorical responses provided valuable perspectives on how teachers internalized their experiences and framed their perceptions of the program. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the data collection process. Voluntary participation implied consent, and the researcher assured participants that their responses would be anonymized.

3.4 Data Analysis

Metaphorical analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research to uncover participants’ cognitive frameworks and lived experiences, particularly in educational contexts like the EPIK. This section compares the traditional manual process of analyzing metaphorical data with the AI-driven approach employed by Perplexity. A hybrid model which combines both approaches is suggested. It is used in this study.

3.4.1 Traditional metaphorical data analysis process

The traditional method of analyzing metaphorical data involves a structured sequence of steps grounded in qualitative research principles (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Researchers manually collect qualitative data through interviews, open-ended surveys, or written responses. The collected data is transcribed and cleaned manually to ensure accuracy and remove irrelevant content. Researchers then identify metaphors through iterative readings and assign codes based on recurring patterns (e.g., “safety net” for institutional support). These codes are linked to theoretical frameworks including Tinto’s Institutional Support Theory and Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory to contextualize the findings (Ark 2020, Byram 1997). Themes emerge from recurrent codes, such as “Opportunity & New Beginnings,” which are interpreted within sociocultural contexts to explore deeper meanings. Validation processes like peer debriefing or member checking ensure reliability and minimize researcher bias.

While this method captures nuanced cultural and emotional contexts (e.g., metaphors like “roller coaster” symbolizing emotional labor), it is time-intensive and laborious, especially for large datasets. Additionally, subjective interpretation may introduce bias during coding and thematic development.

3.4.2 AI-Driven metaphorical analysis using Perplexity

In recent years, the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into qualitative research has expanded methodological possibilities for analyzing complex textual data. In the context of metaphor analysis, specifically regarding NESTs’ experiences in EPIK, AI-based tools like Perplexity AI have become valuable assets within the research methodology toolkit. These technologies offer increased speed, scalability, and the capacity to detect linguistic patterns, making them particularly effective for supporting labor-intensive tasks, including identification of metaphoric language in interview data (Williams 2024).

Generative AI models can serve as analytical partners by automatically flagging metaphorical expressions and organizing them into conceptual themes. For novice researchers, tools like Perplexity provide initial support in structuring data and identifying trends, functioning as a cognitive scaffold that enhances both analytical depth and interpretive clarity (Dahal 2024). Additionally, AI tools can assist in exploratory coding and thematic clustering,

acting as a “second coder” to reduce the manual workload and facilitate the management of large data sets.

Despite these advantages, the use of AI in metaphor analysis presents notable limitations. A primary concern is the potential loss of contextual nuance, as AI may lack the cultural sensitivity and reflexivity needed to fully interpret layered meanings, particularly those embedded in specific sociocultural contexts like Korean educational environments (Williams 2024). Furthermore, generative AI models may occasionally produce inaccurate interpretations or hallucinated connections, which can undermine the validity of research findings (Dahal 2024). Ethical considerations also arise, including issues of data privacy, transparency in authorship, and the risk of overreliance on algorithmic outputs.

3.4.3 A hybrid model

To address these challenges, researchers are encouraged to adopt a hybrid model in which AI tools complement, but do not replace human interpretation. While AI may assist with data preprocessing or preliminary theme generation, final interpretive authority should remain with the researcher. Maintaining transparency about AI use, documenting its role in the analytical process, and critically reflecting on its influence are essential practices for upholding qualitative rigor. Ultimately, the thoughtful integration of AI tools like Perplexity can enrich metaphor analysis when used responsibly. By balancing technological support with interpretive sensitivity, researchers can generate nuanced, ethical, and methodologically robust insights into the lived experiences of NESTs in Korea’s EPIK program.

A hybrid model that combines both approaches offers an optimal balance between scalability and depth. For instance, Perplexity can be used for initial coding and theme generation in large datasets, while traditional methods can refine these findings by incorporating cultural sensitivity and theoretical depth. This hybrid approach ensures methodological rigor while leveraging the efficiency of AI tools.

A hybrid model is employed in this study. The decision to reduce the number of themes from eleven in the first file to six in the second file was driven by a need for clarity, coherence, and focus in representing the overall data. Originally the eleven themes were extracted. They were granular and often overlapped, leading to redundancy and making it difficult to interpret the broader patterns within the dataset. For example, themes like “Comfort & Welcome” and “Community & Unity” shared similar metaphors and ideas, like “a warm hug” and “a safety net.” Consolidating these into a single theme, “Support System & Community,” provided a more streamlined representation of the data while maintaining its depth. The revised six themes are broader and encompass multiple related ideas, allowing for a more holistic interpretation of the data. This approach aligns with best practices in thematic analysis, where themes are not only descriptive but also interpretative, capturing significant patterns that reflect the research question (Clarke and Braun 2013). By focusing on representative metaphors like “a lighthouse” or “a bridge,” the second file highlights concepts central to understanding NESTs’ experiences in EPIK without diluting their significance. By consolidating themes into broader categories, the revised one offers a more focused and interpretable representation of NESTs’ metaphorical narratives, enhancing both academic rigor and practical utility.

4. Results

4.1 Metaphorical Themes in NESTs' Perceptions of the EPIK Program

The analysis identified six primary themes in NESTs' metaphorical descriptions of EPIK. These themes reveal how they understand and perceive their experiences within the program.

Table 2. Thematic Categorization of Metaphors in NESTs' Perceptions of EPIK

Theme	Representative Metaphors
Opportunity & New Beginnings	A golden door, the greatest opportunity given, a new chapter, the train that transports you to your dream, a path to a greater means
Support System & Community	A family, a warm bowl of 해장국(haejangguk), a parent, a lighthouse in the night, a safety net, a supportive guide, a warm coat on a cold day
Journey & Adventure	A sailing ship, an airport, a bridge, a whole new world, a wayfaring stranger, a pathway, a stage
Learning & Growth	A garden, a melting pot, like college/school, a cultural exchange, a tree, a puzzle, an onion, a blooming flower
Challenge & Transformation	A big boat, getting caught in the rain without an umbrella, a trial through a wild forest, like Namsan, Pandora's box
Unpredictability & Surprise	A toy in a cereal box, a shoot in the dark, unpredictable, a surprise party, a box of chocolates, like a ladder to being an English teacher

4.2 Theme Characteristics and Analysis

4.2.1 Opportunity & New Beginnings

Teachers frequently characterized EPIK as a gateway to new possibilities, emphasizing its role in transforming their personal and professional trajectories. This theme highlights EPIK's function as a facilitator of life transitions, offering participants a unique opportunity to redefine their goals and aspirations. The program is frequently regarded as more than a mere employment opportunity; it serves as a transformative experience that introduces participants to new cultures, career opportunities, and avenues for personal development. For many, EPIK serves as a bridge between their current circumstances and a future filled with potential.

One teacher described EPIK as "a golden door" because "they have created a very successful system that benefits both Korean students and foreigners. Korean students will be able to efficiently learn English from native speakers, while foreigners can learn about a new culture while saving money." This dual-benefit perspective emphasizes the program's ability to create mutually advantageous outcomes for both parties involved. The teacher's description highlights the program's structured approach to fostering cross-cultural exchange and professional development, which is a key element of its appeal. Another teacher echoed this sentiment, calling EPIK "an opportunity for personal and professional development" because "it has granted the opportunity to live and work in an entirely new country... Not only will I be experiencing a new society, but I will also be pursuing a profession that will help me move forward in my desired career path." This statement reflects the multifaceted

nature of the program, which simultaneously supports participants' career ambitions while immersing them in a new cultural environment.

The transformative nature of the program was further emphasized by those who viewed it as "the train that transports you to your dream" because "applying to this program has led me to a new country and an exciting journey." For these individuals, EPIK is not merely a professional opportunity but a catalyst for profound personal change. One participant described it as "the greatest opportunity given," explaining that "without the EPIK program I would not be moving to the greatest city in Korea." Such testimonials highlight the emotional and aspirational dimensions of the program, illustrating how it serves as a stepping-stone to achieving long-held dreams and ambitions.

Notably, many teachers emphasized how EPIK represented not just professional advancement but fundamental life change. One described it as "a path to a greater means" because "EPIK gives you access to so many options in Korea. It opens up paths you would have never thought of otherwise." This perspective emphasizes the program's ability to expand participants' horizons, enabling them to explore opportunities they might not have considered before. The idea of EPIK as a transformative experience resonates strongly with participants, as it combines career development with personal enrichment. By facilitating access to new environments, cultures, and professional roles, EPIK becomes more than just a teaching program - it becomes a life-altering journey that reshapes participants' perspectives and aspirations.

4.2.2 Support System & Community

A significant number of teachers conceptualized EPIK as a robust support structure, emphasizing the program's role in providing guidance, fostering community, and offering comfort during their transition to life in Korea. For many participants, EPIK was not just a professional program but also a source of emotional and practical assistance that alleviated the challenges of adapting to new environments and a different cultural context. This supportive function was often described in metaphorical terms, reflecting the deep sense of security and belonging that the program instilled in its participants.

One teacher expressed EPIK's supportive role as "a warm coat on a cold day," explaining that "EPIK made the opportunity to teach English as a NET a possibility and gave me the instructions and tools I needed to succeed." This metaphor highlights the program's ability to provide essential resources and guidance, ensuring that teachers felt prepared and equipped to navigate their new roles. Similarly, another teacher likened EPIK to "a warm bowl of 해장국(haejangguk)," a comforting Korean dish, because "I worked in a hagwon prior to working for EPIK. In my hagwon, there wasn't a big welcome for teachers, but EPIK makes all of its teachers feel important and valued." This comparison highlights how EPIK fosters a supportive environment, in contrast to the less welcoming atmosphere often reported in other teaching contexts – for instance, private academies (hagwons).

The familial aspect of EPIK's support system emerged as a recurring theme, with many teachers describing the program as "a second family." One teacher elaborated on this sentiment, stating, "I have had the wonderful opportunity to meet so many interesting people and made new friendships that I would not have been able to without EPIK. The EPIK staff has been supportive and patient, willing to give a helping hand, just like a family would." This perspective highlights the role of programs in promoting a sense of unity and interpersonal bonding among participants, fostering connections that extended beyond professional relationships. The idea of EPIK as a "second family" reflects the emotional bonds formed within the program, as well as the staff's dedication to ensuring the well-being of its teachers.

Guidance during periods of uncertainty was another key characteristic of EPIK's support system. Teachers

frequently described the program as a source of stability and reassurance in the face of challenges. One teacher referred to EPIK as “a lighthouse in the night,” explaining that “it has been a life-changing experience that’s fun and amazing, but something unexpected happens every day and keeps me on my toes!” This metaphor captures the program’s role in providing direction and clarity amidst the unpredictability of living and working in a foreign country. Another teacher used the metaphor of “a guide,” stating, “EPIK has provided the necessary assistance to come to and be successful in Korea. But after orientation, EPIK will bring us to our new schools and communities where we won’t need a guide anymore.” This description highlights the program’s dual role in offering initial support and fostering independence, ensuring that teachers are well-prepared to integrate into their new environments.

Overall, EPIK’s support system and community-building efforts were integral to its success in helping teachers transition to life in Korea. By providing practical guidance, emotional reassurance, and opportunities for connection, the program created a nurturing environment that empowered participants to thrive both personally and professionally. The metaphors used by teachers to describe their experiences - whether as a “warm coat,” “a second family,” or “a lighthouse” - illustrate the profound impact of EPIK’s support system on their lives, underscoring its importance in facilitating a smooth and fulfilling transition.

4.2.3 Journey & Adventure

Metaphors of travel and adventure prominently featured in teachers’ descriptions of EPIK, capturing the sense of movement, exploration, and discovery inherent in the experience. For many participants, EPIK was not just a professional opportunity but a journey into the unknown, filled with excitement, challenges, and personal growth. These metaphors reflect the transformative nature of the program, as it encourages teachers to move beyond familiar boundaries and begin a journey of cultural immersion and self-discovery. One teacher described EPIK as “like an airport,” explaining that “EPIK will lead me to an adventure and a world I have never experienced before. Because of EPIK, I will live in South Korea and teach EFL at a Korean public school. Just like going to an airport, EPIK is leading me to a flight I have never taken before.” This metaphor encapsulates the anticipation and excitement of embarking on a new chapter, with EPIK serving as the gateway to an unfamiliar yet promising destination. The imagery of an airport conveys the idea of transition, movement, and the beginning of a journey filled with possibilities. Similarly, another teacher likened EPIK to “a bridge,” emphasizing its role in fostering connections and cultural exchange: “It allows for the connection between different people with different cultures. It also allows us to experience a new culture firsthand and to make a positive impact in the lives of Korea’s youth.” This metaphor highlights EPIK’s dual function as both a literal and figurative bridge, connecting individuals across cultural divides while also facilitating meaningful contributions to Korean society.

The metaphor of “a wayfaring stranger” was used by one teacher to describe the program’s mysterious yet inviting nature: “EPIK seems like a program that is sort of secretive and quiet, but also kind and welcoming because they have invited me to come to Korea.” This description captures the sense of intrigue and curiosity that often accompanies the decision to join EPIK. While the program may initially seem enigmatic to prospective participants, it ultimately reveals itself as a welcoming and supportive community. The notion of being a “wayfaring stranger” also reflects the adventurous spirit of those who choose to leave behind familiar surroundings to explore new horizons.

Several teachers focused on the themes of transition and transformation, describing EPIK as “a stage” where diverse individuals come Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), suggests that to share a common purpose. One teacher elaborated, stating, “All EPIK teachers come from varying

geographic locations and have different past experiences. While we all have differences, we all hold similar values.” This metaphor highlights the program’s role as a platform for collaboration and growth, where participants from diverse backgrounds unite under shared goals. The idea of a “stage” also suggests a sense of performance and self-expression, as teachers navigate their roles in a new cultural and professional context.

The recurring metaphors of travel, exploration, and transformation illustrate how EPIK is perceived as more than just a teaching program, which is a journey of personal and professional discovery. By framing their experiences in terms of airports, bridges, and stages, teachers convey the dynamic and multifaceted nature of their time with EPIK. The program is not only a means of career advancement but also an opportunity to explore new cultures, forge meaningful connections, and grow as individuals. These metaphors highlight the adventurous spirit that defines the EPIK experience, as participants embrace the challenges and rewards of stepping into the unknown.

4.2.4 Learning & Growth

Teachers frequently conceptualized EPIK as an environment fostering development, emphasizing continuous learning and personal evolution. This perception was often articulated through rich metaphors that captured the multifaceted nature of growth within the program. For instance, the organic nature of growth was vividly expressed by those who described EPIK as “a garden,” where “each native English teacher will blossom into something beautiful.” This metaphor clearly shows the nurturing environment provided by EPIK, where individuals are given the resources and opportunities to flourish. Similarly, another teacher likened the experience to “a blooming flower,” elaborating that “when flowers grow at first, they all look the same, but as they continue to grow, they develop into their own individual unique selves. EPIK has planted the seed in each and every one of us so that we may grow into a new and hopefully better person than which we came into the program as”. These metaphors not only highlight the personal transformation that teachers undergo but also suggest that the program fosters individuality and self-discovery, allowing participants to evolve in unique and meaningful ways.

The educational dimension of EPIK was another recurring theme, with some teachers describing it as being “like college/school.” This comparison reflects the program’s emphasis on learning from various sources, including peers, students, co-teachers, and fellow EPIK participants. One teacher explained, “Although the main job is teaching Korean students, EPIK allows you to learn from everyone - the students, co-teachers, and fellow EPIK teachers. You can learn about yourself, about Korean culture, etc. It’s a place for personal growth, like a school”. This perspective highlights the dual role of EPIK as both a professional teaching program and a platform for personal and cultural education. The idea of learning as a reciprocal process, where teachers gain as much as they give, reinforces the program’s role in fostering holistic development.

In addition to personal and educational growth, the integrative aspect of EPIK was emphasized by teachers who described it as “a melting pot.” This metaphor captures the program’s ability to bring together individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, creating a space for mutual learning and collaboration. One teacher remarked, “Elements from many different cultures are coming together to grow, learn, and become a cohesive group. Having this orientation experience has taught me a lot about not only others but myself.” This description highlights the program’s role in promoting intercultural understanding and fostering a sense of community among participants. The melting pot metaphor also suggests that the diversity within EPIK is not merely a backdrop but an active ingredient in the growth and learning process.

Finally, the gradual and sometimes challenging nature of adaptation and knowledge discovery within EPIK was captured by those who saw the program as “a puzzle.” One teacher explained, “It takes time to figure out where the pieces go, but as you learn, things become more clear, until you build a beautiful picture.” This metaphor

illustrates the iterative process of learning and adapting, where initial confusion gives way to clarity and a sense of accomplishment. The puzzle metaphor also reflects the complexity of the EPIK experience, where participants must navigate cultural differences, professional challenges, and personal growth simultaneously. Together, these metaphors paint a comprehensive picture of EPIK as a dynamic and transformative environment that fosters learning, growth, and self-discovery on multiple levels.

4.2.5 Challenge & Transformation

Many teachers highlighted EPIK's demanding yet rewarding nature, emphasizing the duality of difficulty and transformation. This theme was often expressed through metaphors that captured the physical, emotional, and professional challenges faced by participants, as well as the growth that emerged from these experiences. Physical challenges were reflected in metaphors like "Namsan," where one teacher explained, "It is only a small track to reach the summit, but it is an achievement, nonetheless. There are many higher mountains in Korea, but this one is safe and beautiful." This metaphor suggests that while EPIK's challenges may not be insurmountable, they are meaningful and foster a sense of accomplishment. Similarly, another teacher described EPIK as "a trial through a wild forest," noting that "teaching in a new country is an overwhelming and sometimes chaotic experience, but EPIK provides us with a clear path and understanding of what to expect". These metaphors highlight the balance between the unpredictability of the journey and the structured support provided by EPIK.

The transformative nature of these challenges was further emphasized through metaphors that captured emotional resilience. One teacher likened the experience to "getting caught in the rain without an umbrella," explaining, "The EPIK process was long for me since I deferred and have been waiting to come. There were a lot of unexpected things to happen. And sometimes, I was miserable. But I slowly learned to enjoy it; I learned to go with the flow and try to dance in the rain and see the positives. There is always a rainbow after the rain, and now I made it." This metaphor reflects the emotional highs and lows of the EPIK experience, emphasizing how resilience and optimism can transform difficulties into opportunities for growth.

Some teachers also highlighted the professional development fostered by EPIK, describing it as "like a ladder." One teacher explained, "Through EPIK, you get help along the way as you slowly climb the ladder to being an English teacher," acknowledging the program's role in facilitating gradual skill-building and confidence. The ladder metaphor illustrates the incremental nature of growth, where each step represents progress toward becoming a more capable teacher.

Together, these metaphors illustrate how EPIK challenges its participants while empowering them to overcome obstacles and transform themselves. Whether through physical trials, emotional resilience, or professional development, the challenges within EPIK serve as catalysts for meaningful growth and achievement.

4.2.6 Unpredictability & Surprise

A notable theme in the new NESTs' metaphors was the element of unpredictability in the EPIK experience, which was often framed as exciting and adventurous rather than disconcerting. This unpredictability was seen as an integral part of the program, adding a sense of novelty and discovery to the experience. One teacher described EPIK as "a toy in a cereal box," explaining, "You know there's a toy in the box. You just don't know what kind. EPIK is the same way. You know you will have experience teaching and living here. You just don't know what kind until you get there. The Korean Surprise!". This metaphor captures the anticipation and curiosity that accompany the EPIK journey, emphasizing the thrill of uncovering the unknown. The comparison to a toy in a

cereal box suggests that while the specifics of the experience may be uncertain, there is an underlying assurance that it will be rewarding and enjoyable.

Similarly, another teacher likened the experience to “a shoot in the dark,” stating, “You do not know where you are going to get placed or who you will be teaching. But it is the best shoot in the dark.” This metaphor illustrates the uncertainty surrounding key aspects of the program, such as placement and teaching assignments, while framing this unpredictability as an exciting gamble with positive outcomes. The phrase “the best shoot in the dark” suggests that despite the lack of clarity, the experience is ultimately worthwhile and fulfilling.

The inherent uncertainty of the EPIK experience was also reflected in descriptions of the program as “unpredictable.” One teacher remarked, “Everything seemed last minute. Finding out about where I would be for quarantine, the schedule, etc., appeared to me to be very last minute.” This perspective emphasizes the logistical unpredictability that some participants encountered, which may have initially felt unsettling. However, this unpredictability also contributed to the dynamic and spontaneous nature of the program, requiring participants to adapt and embrace flexibility.

Positive surprises were another recurring theme, with teachers emphasizing the unexpected joys that emerged from their experiences. One teacher described EPIK as “a surprise party,” explaining, “You have no idea what it’s going to be like until you arrive and then find a bunch of good food and friends.” This metaphor highlights the delightful and celebratory aspects of the program, where participants are often met with unforeseen pleasures and connections. The imagery of a surprise party conveys a sense of warmth and community, suggesting that the unpredictability of EPIK often leads to moments of joy and camaraderie.

Taken together, these metaphors illustrate how unpredictability and surprise are central to the EPIK experience. While the uncertainty may initially seem daunting, it is often reframed as an opportunity for discovery, excitement, and unexpected rewards. This theme highlights the program’s ability to transform unpredictability into a source of growth and positive experiences for its participants.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 The Formation of EPIK Teachers’ Perceptions

The formation of EPIK teachers’ perceptions seem to be influenced by three primary factors: their pre-existing knowledge of the program, experiences during mandatory quarantine periods, and the one-week training program that followed. The new NESTs entered the program with varying levels of understanding and expectations shaped by prior research or anecdotal accounts, often viewing EPIK as an opportunity for cultural exchange or professional growth. However, the quarantine experience introduced significant stress and emotional challenges, which altered their initial perceptions. The metaphorical framing of this period, like “caught in the rain” or “trial through a wild forest”, highlighted the emotional toll and adaptation required. The subsequent training program acted as a stabilizing factor, offering structured learning and community-building opportunities that helped teachers recalibrate their expectations and develop resilience.

The analysis suggests that institutional support mechanisms and individual teacher experience dynamically shape perceptions. Positive metaphors like “lighthouse” or “bridge” emerge when teachers feel supported during training, while negative metaphors like “shoot in the dark” reflect gaps in role clarity or co-teaching frameworks. These findings suggest that EPIK's effectiveness depends on its ability to address initial stressors while fostering intercultural competence and professional confidence. Recommendations include enhancing pre-departure

briefings to manage expectations realistically, integrating cultural orientation into quarantine periods, and adapting training programs based on teacher feedback to ensure alignment with their evolving needs.

5.2 Dual Status of Nests in Epik: Individual Acculturation vs. Institutional Expectations

Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in the EPIK program navigated a dual identity as cultural adapters and pedagogical authorities. Their experiences were shaped by the interplay between personal acculturation challenges and institutional demands, which influenced their professional efficacy and well-being.

At the individual level, NESTs conceptualized their roles through metaphors reflecting aspirations for cultural mediation and professional growth. For example, metaphors like “a golden door” and “stepping-stone” highlighted how teachers viewed EPIK as a transformative platform for career advancement and cultural immersion. Similarly, metaphors like “a bridge” and “an airport” emphasized their excitement about cultural exploration, while others like “a trial through a wild forest” and “getting caught in the rain” illustrated the emotional labor of adapting to new cultural norms. These narratives align with post-traumatic growth theory, which suggests that adversity fosters resilience.

From an institutional perspective, EPIK prioritized administrative efficiency and cultural diplomacy. However, gaps between policy promises and teachers’ lived realities reveal systemic shortcomings. Metaphors like “a lighthouse” validate EPIK’s logistical frameworks, including housing and visa arrangements, but teachers reported feeling unprepared for navigating school hierarchies. Additionally, metaphors like “a toy in a cereal box” reflect the unpredictability of centralized placement systems, which prioritize efficiency over teacher preferences.

This dual status creates a paradox: while teachers seek transformative growth and cultural integration, EPIK emphasizes structural functionality. Bridging this gap requires rebalancing institutional priorities to address teachers’ holistic needs.

5.3 Theoretical Analysis: Linking Themes to Frameworks

The six themes identified in the discussion are analyzed through three theoretical lenses: Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence Model, Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory, and Tinto’s Institutional Support Theory. These frameworks provide insight into how new EPIK teachers navigate their professional and personal journeys, balancing opportunities for growth with systemic challenges. By linking the themes to these theories, the analysis highlights the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures, offering a deeper understanding of the teachers’ experiences.

The theme of Opportunity & New Beginnings aligns with Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes identity shifts triggered by exposure to new environments. Teachers often described EPIK as a “golden door” or “stepping-stone,” reflecting its potential for professional reinvention and personal growth. However, the program’s rigid structure limits autonomy, making it difficult for teachers to engage in reflective practices essential for transformative learning. For instance, standardized lesson plans and administrative expectations often stifle creativity, leaving teachers feeling constrained. This tension suggests the need for more flexible policies that encourage critical reflection and adaptability.

The theme of Journey & Adventure is analyzed through Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Model, which highlights cultural curiosity as a driver of engagement. New NESTs used metaphors like “bridge” and “airport” to express their enthusiasm for exploring Korean culture and building connections. However, hierarchical dynamics within schools often hinder full integration, limiting opportunities for authentic intercultural

exchanges.

The theme of Support System & Community is examined through Tinto's Institutional Support Theory, which highlights the importance of structural guidance in reducing stress and fostering belonging. Metaphors like "lighthouse" and "safety net" illustrate the logistical support provided by EPIK, such as housing assistance and orientation sessions. While these supports are helpful, gaps in emotional preparation remain evident, with many teachers reporting feelings of burnout and isolation. Orientation sessions often focus on procedural matters, neglecting the emotional challenges of adapting to a new environment. Addressing these gaps could create a more holistic support system that prioritizes both logistical and emotional well-being.

The themes of Challenge & Transformation and Unpredictability & Surprise highlight the systemic stressors and instability teachers face. Metaphors like "wild forest" and "toy in a cereal box" reveal the emotional labor and unpredictability of their experiences. Teachers described feeling overwhelmed by chaotic circumstances and frustrated by the randomness of their workloads. These challenges reflect the need for clearer communication, consistent feedback, and stronger institutional support mechanisms. By addressing these systemic issues, the EPIK program could better support teachers in managing the emotional and professional demands of their roles.

6. Conclusion

This study aims to identify how the newly recruited NESTs perceive and conceptualize the EPIK through an analysis of the metaphors they responded with. The findings revealed six core themes: Opportunity & New Beginnings, Support System & Community, Journey & Adventure, Learning & Growth, Challenge & Transformation, and Unpredictability & Surprise. These themes highlight the dual roles of NESTs as cultural mediators and institutional actors, navigating both the opportunities and challenges presented by EPIK.

The study's results align with theoretical frameworks including Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence Model, Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, and Tinto's (1975) Institutional Support Theory. While EPIK provides logistical support (e.g., housing, visas), gaps in emotional preparation and cultural integration persist, as evidenced by teachers' narratives of isolation and unpredictability. The findings also reveal that while EPIK positions itself as a platform for global citizenship, its reliance on native-speakerism limits equitable representation of diverse English varieties.

NESTs in the EPIK program often face difficulties adapting to local school culture, unclear teaching roles, and emotional stress. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach. First, pre-departure briefings should offer clear explanations of Korean educational norms and co-teaching roles. Second, the orientation program should reflect the NESTs' feedback, focusing on intercultural skills and practical classroom strategies. Building peer networks during training and assigning mentors, especially in rural areas, can reduce isolation and support adjustment. Third, improving placement transparency and matching teacher preferences, when possible, can boost satisfaction. By improving preparation, orientation, placement, and continuous support, EPIK can better strengthen the role of NESTs in enhancing English education in Korea.

The implications of this research are significant for both academic inquiry and English language education. Academically, this study advances the use of metaphor analysis as a methodological tool for understanding expatriate teachers' cognitive frameworks, particularly in intercultural contexts. Practically, the findings suggest that EPIK should enhance pre-departure training with cultural-historical modules, standardize co-teaching models to reduce role ambiguity, diversify recruitment to include non-inner-circle teachers, and expand mentorship programs to address emotional well-being and retention issues.

Future research should explore longitudinal changes in NESTs' metaphorical narratives to track shifts in intercultural competence and professional identity over time. Comparative studies with similar programs, such as Japan's JET Program, could provide insights into best practices for teacher support and retention. Additionally, mixed-methods research incorporating classroom observations could validate metaphorical themes against actual teaching practices in diverse educational settings.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Primary and Secondary