

Learning Korean in an Illegal Immigration Setting in Seoul: A Case Study¹

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The forces that drive people away from the comforts of their culture —family and friends, native language, known surroundings— many times have to do with strong needs which will propel them to seek a better situation than the one they are facing in their present circumstances. This moving away from one culture to another is what we commonly know as a case of migration. After being driven, then, by different forces, people usually find that the reality of their new settings is not simple or easy. One of the determining factors that will usually contribute to the difficulty of the new situation is the fact that those people do not speak the language of the place where they now live. If those people who emigrate come from developing countries, have not had the opportunity of learning other languages such as English, the scenario may become even more complicated and hard.

In 2001 Maria² migrated to South Korea from a South American country with the hope of finding work that would allow her to support her family. Leaving her four children under the care of her mother, Maria embarked on her Korean attempt to build a new life for herself. But immediately upon arriving in Seoul, the language barrier became the number one obstacle for her to arrange employment. That language barrier could have been due to the fact that linguistically speaking, Korean is an agglutinative language that belongs to the Altaic family of languages. In contrast, Maria's native Spanish is an inflectional language that belongs to the Romance group of languages. Because the two languages belong to linguistic groups that are so distant and have very different alphabets, it does not come easy for a South American Spanish native speaker to acquire Korean easily without formal studies.

When South Americans come to Korea to work, the reality of the language difficulty stands out as a thick wall for them. In many cases and due to different circumstances these people end up being in a situation of illegal immigration. Since they do not have access to a formal way of learning Korean in their condition of illegal aliens, the alternative these people have is to pick up the language in the streets of Seoul. For some it comes easier to pick up the language in a shorter period of time. For Maria, and under the circumstances in which she found herself, she got to know some other illegal migrants from her own country. They connected her to local people who hired her to work cleaning a hotel. It was hard work that promised to pay well

but ended up being extremely demanding with very little pay. And due to the fact that Maria could not speak Korean, she could not ask questions or demand any right as an employee. She communicated by means of the universal language of gestures and signs.

As time went by the working conditions did not get better for Maria. Contrary to all her expectations, life in Korea became more and more difficult. She hardly had any rest or any money. At a given time, her employers threatened her with deportation if she failed to do her part of the job well. Maria became easy prey for those employers who used her condition of not knowing or speaking the language as a means to exploit her with hard work and very little or no pay at all. In her desire to raise some money to send to her family, Maria put up with inhumane treatment on the part of her employer. She had no choice but to comply with the demands of hard work and a hard life. At a given moment she owned only a pair of slippers, and no other shoes. There was no way out for Maria. She had no means of defending herself or claiming any rights.

Maria eventually came to the conclusion that in order for her to receive a regular income and better pay, she would have to learn to speak the local Korean language. However, she had no one to teach her and neither the money to pay for lessons. She thought that there had to be a way by which she could learn to speak at least some good Korean. In her desperation and her need to learn Korean Maria armed herself with great valor and determination and challenged herself to learn to communicate with the local people. She started by paying attention to people and watching how they interacted in Korean society. She would notice how people greeted each other when they met, and what they said when they parted. She found it a bit strange that they would use the same expression when they met at any time of the day. This was different from her native language that uses a different form of greeting form for morning, afternoon, and evening.

Another way that Maria found useful to learn more Korean was to watch Korean dramas on television. She found them to be entertaining and seemed to be quite present-day life situations. Soon Maria started to recognize expressions from the dramas right on the streets of Seoul, and street expressions on the TV dramas. She would practice those expressions by repeating them aloud many times until she felt she got them right. Back in her country Maria had had very little schooling. She had to start working at an early age to help her mother make ends meet. She was not even aware of her capacity to learn something like a very different new language. But she did not stop and continued making the effort of learning at least something new every day. As a result, and little by little, her efforts started to pay off. For instance, she would start asking for the price of things in Korean and people would respond in a way that she could understand!

However, the best way that Maria found to learn more and better Korean was to work on the streets of Seoul selling bijouterie late into the night. With the help of some migrants friends

and a small amount of money she had gathered, she was able to start her own small personal business. She would keep working at the hotel during the day, but the night was used for her sales activity. Knowing the numbers well in Korean and how to say the price of her goods, Maria was able to become a little more fluent and to learn how to say more things. At the same time her income started to improve, since the night movement in Seoul provided many customers, especially young men buying necklaces, bracelets, and earrings for their girlfriends. These people would usually do small talk with Maria, and in this way she learned some more Korean and expanded her linguistic knowledge.

Working on the streets of Seoul at night with no legal documents and no legal authorization to do this kind of job meant great stress for Maria many times. On occasions she was thrown out of the place where she was selling her products. On other occasions she was reported to the municipal police and she fled the scene in order not to get caught. Other times she was the object of great compassion on the part of guards at the places where she would set her little stall. Her friends usually told Maria where the Immigration Police would be doing their rounds so as to raid foreign workers with no legal papers and deport them afterwards. However, the driving force in front of so many trials for Maria was always her children and the future she dreamed for them. She was happy she was finally able to send them some money on a regular basis. The small amount she sent was taking care of their education back in her country.

According to the author of “Amnesty seeking UN help on abuses of migrant workers” (Jung 2014), the human rights conditions endured by migrant workers in South Korea are dire. Maria is just one illegal migrant who has found a way to survive in Seoul under not very pleasant conditions. Her case is probably one with better adaptation to Korean society, and that is due to her decision and resolution to learn to speak the local language. This factor has certainly aided her in a favorable way, to the point that she can now make a better living for her and her family. She says she feels grateful to Korea for allowing her to work here and in that way being able to provide for her family. At the beginning the conditions were hard and difficult for Maria, but these days she feels more hopeful. She now works cleaning houses and people call her to work for them seeing the quality of her work. Everything is good for her now.

APPENDIX

This is the survey which Maria answered in order to explain how she learned to speak the Korean language on the streets of Seoul. The interview was recorded and later transcribed for this research work.

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LINGUISTIC SURVEY

1) PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: Maria

Age: 50

Native Language: Spanish

Country of Origin: Peru

Date: 6 September 2016

Location: Sinimoon, Seoul

2) SURVEY

Answer the questions in the way that best reflects your experience learning Korean as a foreign language in Seoul

1. How long have you been living in Korea?

Fourteen years, almost 15 now.

2. How has your life been since you arrived here?

My life has been very hard. I worked for a lady for one year but she did not pay me well. I struggled to make ends meet. After one very hard year I was able to start my own very small business, even though I did not know how to speak the language well. Some friends from my country helped me by providing me with bijouterie that I was able to sell in Seoul.

3. What brought you to this country?

I came to South Korea because of the need to make enough money to support my family. Some people I knew in my country helped me come here to Korea. They told me that there was a lot of job opportunities for me here to earn good money. I was determined to work very hard.

4. What do you do for a living now?

I clean houses nowadays, but before I used work cleaning a hotel and also selling bijouterie on the streets of Seoul.

5. Do you support people back home? How many? Who are they?

Yes, I support my four children and my mother. I am mother and father to my children. I have no husband.

6. Is the money you earn enough for your needs and your family's?

Thank God it is OK for me now. But I work very hard cleaning houses.

7. Can you speak Korean well now? How did you learn it? Has it been easy

or difficult for you to learn it?

I can speak only a little Korean. I learned it on the streets, especially listening to people, watching people use it, selling bijouterie on the streets and interacting with the people. But it was mainly through listening to people. It has been a little difficult to learn the little Korean that I speak. TV also has helped me a lot, especially watching Korean dramas. Through them I learned a lot.

9. Can you communicate well with Koreans today? Can they understand you well enough?

No, I cannot communicate very well. I can communicate maybe fifty percent. I think they don't understand me sometimes. I use a lot of gestures when I speak so that Koreans can understand me.

10. Which better describes your process of learning to speak Korean?

Mark one.

Extremely difficult	_____
Very difficult	_____
Difficult	<u> X </u>
Not very difficult	_____

11. Why is that so?

Because I don't understand the Korean letters; I cannot read Korean. I cannot express myself well in Korean. It is very different from Spanish. But I do my best. I can communicate with customers and know what they ask for.

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Personal Interview of Maria, a South American illegal migrant working in Seoul. Seoul, South Korea, 6 September 2016.

Notes

- 1 This work was supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2016
- 2 Maria is a fictional name used in order to preserve the identity of the person upon whom this study is based.