

## Challenge: Know Your Predecessor

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Forget the language barriers, forget the cultural barriers, forget the occasional difficult situations with students, and don't worry about not knowing what you should be doing most of the time or how to find English speaking doctors if you're not in Seoul: The most unexpected challenge that you might encounter at your school is the previous GET.

I didn't get off to the best start at my school. Sheer exhaustion, coupled with frustration at not being able to communicate with 95% of my Korean colleagues, led to a cultural misunderstanding between me and another teacher within my first week. Although easily identified as a simple cultural misunderstanding, it didn't make the situation any less frustrating for an emotional person like me. Despite my best efforts, I ended up in tears – mostly tears of frustration but tears nonetheless for my Korean colleagues who saw me crying but couldn't understand why. Fast forward a few weeks, and a few more misunderstandings, and I can now see that my greatest challenge at school is not my students or the language barrier but rather changing the perception my colleagues have of foreign teachers – particularly female teachers!

There are currently three GETs at my school – one of whom arrived five weeks before me and has been welcomed with less hesitation than I have. The GETs who have broken their contracts at my school, for various reasons, have always been female teachers. The result seems to be a general suspicion that all female GETs will, inevitably, follow this pattern – me included. It was then that I truly understood that what one GET does in Korea, and particularly at a school, is how future GETs will most likely be viewed too.

My predecessor left after only three weeks: Over a weekend, she notified my co-teacher, via email, that she would not be returning on Monday. Her predecessor left after six months. Neither seems to have left the school on good terms. Consequently, the frequent questions from my colleagues about whether or not I have friends here, if I like the students and the school, if I'm happy, what I do on weekends and if I now have internet at home now make more sense.

I still need to prove myself. Convincing my colleagues that I intend staying for at least the first year is no easy task. I tell them that I'm very happy here and I truly love my school but, at some point, they're going to have to start believing me – my co-teacher says that this will probably happen by Christmas (three months into my contract). I've already

stayed longer than my predecessor so the next milestone is six months. Unfortunately, six months can become a very long time if I'm still being 'tested' by my colleagues. Even the students seem to believe that any change of teachers for a lesson is the result of a GET leaving Korea – an embarrassment for the school and a personal disappointment for our co-teachers who really do go out of their way to help us. Furthermore, being the fourth GET that some of my classes have had this year has made it difficult to build a relationship with my students – some of whom have already lost all interest in English as a result in the lack of stability with GETs this year.

I try to look at the situation from their perspective. For my colleagues, I'm not married, I'm considerably younger than the other two GETs at my school, this is my first trip to Korea, and I came here alone, not knowing anyone else here – it would be easy to leave Korea before the end of my contract. For my students, I'm just another English teacher who will soon tire of trying to adjust to (very different) local customs.

Attempts to follow Korean etiquette are always appreciated and my co-teacher jokes that I'm slowly becoming a Korean. Similarly, letting my colleagues know that I'm actively trying to learn Korean also seems to suggest that I'm different to my predecessors. Ironically, having three large boxes of things from home delivered to my school instead of my apartment seems to have convinced most of my colleagues that I intend staying here. My Vice-Principal waves when greeting me now, and even the shy PE teacher has started greeting me. As for my students, they've started actively engaging in my lessons, asking me questions in and outside of class, and stopping me in the street to persuade me to taste whatever food they happen to be eating which shows they're slowly warming up to me – or trying to poison me. Of course, handing out candy in class helps too.