

## From Tears to Cheers!

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There have been many happy moments during my time in Korea, but perhaps the most rewarding came on the heels of an event I'd rather forget. I arrived in Korea with only a little teaching experience. I had applied to teach in an elementary school and, after a week long induction, I found myself in front of a class of astonished looking students. For my first lesson I decided to teach the children how to introduce themselves and to ask other people their names. The lesson went well; I had introduced the target language and the activities had been successful. In my lesson plan I had allocated the last 5 minutes to reviewing the target language. I had the class sit in silence and raise their hands if they wanted to speak and I asked them 'What's your name?' to which they responded 'My name is.....' I was impressed by how well the students had retained the language. They were listening actively and responding with enthusiasm. However, there was one student who had been very quiet and so I turned to her and asked 'What's your name'? She stared at me for a moment, her eyes deep in thought, I smiled expectantly and then she burst into tears. I was mortified. The whole class turned to stare, my co-teacher rushed over to console her and I was left at the front of the class feeling dreadful. I'm not sure how long she was crying for, but it felt like a lifetime. I asked my co-teacher what was the matter and she said 'She's scared of you'. I knew teaching would be difficult, that there would be challenges along the way, but I had not prepared myself for this. I became a teacher to teach children English and to help them learn about another culture, not to terrify them. Eventually she stopped crying, but when I tried to say goodbye she hid behind the legs of my co-teacher, too frightened to look at me.

Over the weekend I thought a great deal about what I could do to put this student at ease and encourage her to speak. I decided that I needed to speak to the student one on one, rather than in front of the whole class. The topic of the next lesson was families; I wanted students to be able to say 'This is my father' 'This is my mother' and so on. I had the students create a 'family album' in which they had to draw their relatives and then present them to the class. Whilst they were drawing I went from student to student asking them 'who is this?' Eventually I came to the student. She looked terrified, but she wasn't crying and so I persevered. I bent down, so not to tower over her, and spoke very quietly, 'who is this?' I

asked. She looked up at me blankly. I tried again and eventually, very quietly, she said ‘She’s my mother’. I responded with an enormous smile, a small round of applause and placed a ‘well done’ sticker on her piece of work, she smiled and when I pointed to her father she said ‘he’s my father’.

As in the previous week the last five minutes of the lesson was dedicated to reviewing the target language. The students had to volunteer to stand up and show the rest of the class their work. The usual hands went up but, to my astonishment, so to did the hand of the student who had been too scared to speak the week before. I pointed to her and, very quietly, she showed the rest of the class her work. I was thrilled at the transformation that had taken place. Without doubt this was one of the most impressive moments of my time as a teacher in Korea. It has taught me the importance of encouraging and rewarding shy students.