

Teaching Beyond Barriers

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There are a lot of challenges that face teachers in classrooms in Korea. The different levels of social hierarchy based on age and status are usually one of the things most western teachers notice immediately after arriving in Korea. We see it with our coworkers, people on the street, in shops, restaurants, and everywhere else – it's a part of daily life here; however, much less obvious to most people is how this same cultural trait affects our students in the classroom.

When my school asked me to teach a small after-school class for 20 students, I agreed, but I had no idea what to expect. After teaching several sessions of the class, which was a mixture of Grade 1 and Grade 2 male high school students, I realized that four distinct groups had formed among them. At first, I was surprised and confused, because many of these students appeared to have very little in common with one another. I soon realized that in addition to dividing themselves by grade level, the students had also divided themselves by English ability, and to a lesser extent, socio-economic background. The four groups, high and low from each grade, were like oil and water – they simply would not mix and interact with each other.

I knew I needed to do something to get these students to speak to each other and break down the social barriers that existed between them. I was very careful to divide my attention evenly among all the students, regardless of which group they'd gravitated into, and took great efforts to formally introduce the students to each other by name. Even this small action went a long way towards making them more comfortable with each other. Several classes of icebreakers and social activities later, my class was a world away from where it had been at the start. Every student knew the name of every other student. They were all treating each other with respect, and I saw some genuine new friendships blossom in that classroom.

There are always going to be cultural barriers when teaching a language in a foreign country, but patience and understanding can usually work through them. Those students showed the highest level of progress of any that I worked with over my two years at this school, and I often saw them spending time together as a group outside of that class.

Challenges that may seem difficult or impossible to solve, whether they're from social or cultural barriers, can usually be overcome with some ingenuity, empathy, and patience. That particular class was one of my biggest challenges in Korea, and also one of my

proudest achievements. I feel so proud to have known and worked with those students!

