

A Two -Way Street

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I would like to extend my congratulations to you for becoming a teacher through EPIK! This is a very exciting, albeit somewhat apprehensive time for you as you prepare to embark on your new role as an English teacher in South Korea. I have been living and teaching in South Korea for about 11 months now, and I would like to share a few of my experiences and insights with you in the hope that my few words will better inform you on what to expect, and help you prepare yourself for what is to come!

My first few weeks in Korea, I was slightly overwhelmed with the sharp and sudden transition from living in the States as a recent college graduate, to being an English teacher in a major city in South Korea. My first day at school, my conscious was flooded with so many observations! One was just how much freedom and also responsibility Korean elementary school students had! It seems like a paradox, but it's true. Students ran without care through the halls, playing joyfully with their friends as they prepared to go to their next class. At noon, a few students donned printed caps and aprons and happily served their fellow students lunch. Students would clean the classroom after class while talking to their friends, seemingly grateful for the special task.

Nonetheless, at the end of that first day, I remember being surprised at just how similar my students seemed, not only to other children back home, but to myself when I was their age. When I look at my students, I see myself 12 years removed- curious, gullible, full of energy, wholly aware of the mindsets of my fellow classmates, and eager to both express my opinion to, and accept all facts from the people whom I called my teachers.

The biggest shock, however, was the large amount of students I had to teach each week. My first semester, I had about 300 students. This semester, the number is over 1000. Inevitably, I did get to know some of my students well, and rest assured you will too! Though most students you will see less often than you would like, you will learn the basics about many of your students- in time you will learn their personalities, their ability levels, and what dynamics they take on in the classroom (as a disclaimer, never judge a student wholly by their behavior in your class. If you get to know your students outside of your class, you just may find that they take on a completely different character)!

As you will soon discover, teaching and learning is a two- way street. I learned so much not only about what teaching methods work best when teaching students, but also about the South Korean culture. For example, my students taught me what it means to

simultaneously be the best you can in a competitive environment, yet still care about others. One of my 5th grade students, DaBin, broke her leg during the semester. She was confined to a wheel chair, and later, to crutches as her leg slowly healed. Everyday, from the day she returned to school after the injury, until the day she no longer needed crutches, a few of her classmates would help her get from one class to the next by steering her wheelchair and carrying her crutches. They arrived late to class to help her, and they stayed after English class had ended to assist her to the next class, even if it meant being late.

Without hesitation, I can attest that my students have had a major impact on me. As a *waygook* (foreigner), (you will learn this word rather quickly!) you will also have the chance to make an impact on your students. In light of this, remember that your students will most likely remember you in the years to come, just as you remember the teachers you have had throughout your school years. Remember that you are, (whether you intend to be or not), an ambassador of your country to these highly curious pupils. It just might be that when your students hear about your country in any context, they think of you, because you are the one real representation to them of the country you come from. For me, this served as a motivation to be the best teacher I can be!

You will take joy in seeing your students try their best to break the language barrier that exists between you and them, when they use all of the English they can to communicate to you. To them, you are not only a teacher, but a real life, living, breathing, speaking motivation to learn English! Your kids will learn because they want to speak to you.

No matter the age of your students, or the number of them that you teach throughout the week, I can say with thorough confidence that your role as a teacher will be fulfilling, challenging, and highly rewarding.

It is natural to feel a bit overwhelmed when you first arrive, just as it is expected that you might experience symptoms of stress somewhere along the journey. But just remember that you are making such an impact on those students who come to you to learn English. For a year (or more) you will see your students grow, mature, and transition. Their vocabulary will expand – their grammatical poise will sharpen, and their confidence will improve. It is rewarding to know that you helped have an impact on their learning processes. In time, you will be able to say that you helped to sustain and in some cases implement a passion for English that will last well into the future

I hope that you feel a bit more comfortable now, and that you can proceed as an English teacher in complete confidence! Best of luck with your time in Korea, and welcome to EPIK!



Two of my 5th grade students reading to the class.



3rd graders showing their work during their English Festival.



5th grade students showing their answers to a quiz during their English Festival.



My 4th graders and I at the end of the semester.