

Embrace the Differences, Enjoy the Similarities

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“Those who visit foreign nations but associate only with their countrymen, change their climate but not their customs. They see new meridians but the same men, and return home with traveled bodies and untraveled minds.”

These are the words of the 19th century English cleric and writer, Charles Caleb Colton. And they are hard to disagree with. There are very few similarities between South Korea and South Africa, besides the ‘South’ in both countries’ names. Most things differ; from the food to culture to weather. There are many challenges when it comes to communication, educational systems and the way of life. But teaching English in a foreign country, especially South Korea, can be an educational, awe-inspiring opportunity if you only let it be.

Change your mind set. Many a foreigner comes to South Korea to teach English. They have no idea what to expect and grow frustrated, therefore, with the communication barrier, the food or the way things work in the public schooling system. Some teachers seem to forget that *they* actually applied to work as a native English teacher in this country. You are the foreigner; it is not the other way around. Make an effort to adjust to Korean life and enjoy your teaching experience, even though things work a little differently here.

Respect the culture. And in turn, you will earn respect for your own culture. When you show enthusiasm to learn about the way things are done here, you’ll notice an immediate attitude change towards you. Bow to those older than you and learn the basic greetings as soon as you arrive. If you go out to eat with your co-teacher, ask them to teach you a few of the table manners and traditions; like pouring drinks for others or waiting for the eldest person at the table to begin eating. Learn how to eat with chopsticks instead of asking for a fork. As time goes on, in the classroom, you will get used to how students react to certain material, their level of maturity and how much pressure they deal with daily.


Get involved. You are in an interesting foreign land; make your time here count. Find common ground where you can. Go to as many teachers’ dinners as you can; you’d be surprised how much fun they can be and the friends you can make. Have an open-door policy in your classroom environment. Talk to your students during break times and free lessons; these are the times they really learn English from you. Join a teachers’ or private sports club, even if it is a sport you have never played. If you are not a sporty person, why not start a theatre troupe or a singing group? Learn a little Korean or a lot if you can. Being able to

communicate with Korean people shows them you are making an effort to be part of their society and they will respect you for that. It also makes daily life so much easier here.

Be patient. And with patience will come some wonderful memories and experiences. Soon, you will be sad to leave. You will miss the ‘strange’, spicy food, your friends, the excellent public transport, the dedication of most teachers, the few fantastic students that made your job so worth it. And you will certainly miss being made welcome in a country just because you speak a language fluently. Some of you may never leave because you love Korean life so much.

There is most definitely a difference between ‘overcoming cultural challenges’ and ‘accepting cultural challenges’ and working through them. Make a little effort every day and you will indeed leave Korea body and mind well-traveled.



 Tennis in Korea



Having fun at a village party



Busan International Performing Arts Festival