

“Not in the Test” -Memorable Experience-

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Although I'm a new recruit to EPIK, this is my second year teaching in Korea. With a little understanding of language and culture, and taste buds sufficiently dulled by many a spicy jiggae, I thought that my second year here would be a breeze.

Last year, I taught in a Hagwon, with classes of around 8 students. I saw them every day and helped them grow and improve. Over the year, I got to know them really well and we had loads of fun together. This year, I am in a public all Girls High School. I teach about 1,200 students, including after school classes. My average speaking class has between 40 and 44 students, who I see once a week. Beyond the cheery waves and 'hi, teacher!'s, it is impossible to know them all as individuals. It is heartbreaking when a student says 'teacher, please remember my name', because I know I probably won't. In Korea, knowing someone's name is more significant than in the West. If you know a person's name, then a permanent bond has been established. This is certainly true of the few students whose names I can remember- they are more forthcoming and warmer towards me as a result.

At the end of the semester, the students take their Speaking Test. Each student gets around two minutes to sit with me one-on-one, and I ask them 3-5 questions at random from a bunch of about 100.

One student came to me for her test, and I tried a couple of the prescribed questions. She was shaking, and giving stilted responses like she was trying to remember something she had memorized. Worried she was about to break down in tears, I decided to scrap the questions and just talk to her freely to see if I could get her to relax a little. I asked her what she loved the most. To my amazement, her face brightened up and she began to speak easily. She told me she loved to play piano and she had dreams of becoming a solo pianist. Although her English wasn't perfect, she was communicating easily with me and I understood everything she said. She left the room grinning from ear to ear.

I tried this approach with all my students, asking about their personal thoughts and feelings, their lives and ambitions. The results were amazing- some students who never spoke in class opened up, and I felt that the time we had spent together was more meaningful for both teacher and student. I had a rare chance to make a connection with my students, and show

them that even though I might not remember their name, I care about them sincerely as their teacher.

I learned that if you show an interest in your students as individuals, you can give them confidence and encourage them to do their best.

