

Hanguk GO! (The Importance of Korean in Korea)

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Yes, you have been chosen to come to Korea and become an English teacher. You'll hear time and time again about how important English is here and the amount of time (and money) that the government spends on making sure this country's students get as much exposure as they can. Practically everywhere, the amount of English signs and available translations could give the impression that most here can speak some fair amount of our native tongue. While most people here will know how to utter some of our most common phrases and greetings (i.e. those located in chapter 1 of any English textbook), to think that you'll have an easy time communicating while in Korea is a huge mistake. Let alone the cultural differences, which are difficult to adjust to for even the most cultured Westerners, to come to Korea blind without any exposure to the language will guarantee at least a couple "OMG, What am I going to do?" moments. Therefore, learning the Korean language (or at least giving it an attempt) despite its difficulty will have a drastic effect on your entire experience here. So much that I would go as far as to say that you should consider it a personal requirement.

Is the Korean language difficult to learn? Absolutely. But the good news is that it's not impossible to get the hang of at least a little of it. In my opinion, Korean is by far the easiest Asian language to learn. Yes, they have their own alphabet, but with the amount of applications and online resources available (for free, especially) a little diligence could have you reading and writing by the end of one session. Again, I understand that it's difficult, but be reassured by the fact that unlike Japanese and Chinese who place heavy dependence on Chinese Hanja, once you learn the Korean alphabet you can read almost any sign in the country. You won't know what it means, but recognition of the letters can save you in a bind.

Although I feel much more confident in my proficiency now, when I first got here was a completely different story. One night I drank way too much. And when I say "way too much," I mean I fell asleep on the Seoul subway and woke up at the end of the line with a dead cell phone battery. This is what I meant about an "OMG what am I going to do?" moment. Having no phone and being in a completely unfamiliar place is not fun. But I could read signs and it got me to a place where I could at least ask someone the general direction that I should go.

I'm telling you, learn that alphabet people. Now let's assume that you are in fact, an upstanding young individual who confidently believes that no matter how crazy they might get, or how un-crazy, why would learning Korean still remain relevant to you?

When shopping, or eating out you will likely encounter one of two extremes. Either the salesperson will be practically caressing the side of your body (with the tendency to comment on literally anything you touch) or they will avoid you like the plague. Both have their advantages, although the first will be really annoying. With case number one, if you speak even a little Korean that one salesperson will do anything for you in that moment. They will go out of their way, (and even sometimes ignore other guests) to make you feel comfortable. However, when you tell them you're just looking and they don't understand, it's hard to get them to realize what you mean without coming off just a little bit rude. Conversely, with case number 2 if you want to be left alone, then you will have no problems but, good luck trying to find someone to help once you want to find that different size or check out. One time I was at a Mr. Pizza, and it took literally 10 minutes before I had to get up and walk around the corner to ask someone for help. There stood the entire staff playing rock, paper, scissors, deciding who should talk to us. The "winner" came over and nervously said some English greetings, to which I responded with Korean. The look of complete joy and relief on this girl's face is unforgettable. After she finally took our order she did one of those gestures where she felt really accomplished, even though she barely said three words. Also, I've walked into stores with my foreign friends and seen people RUN, and I'm not talking casually and smoothly move them self away. I'm talking, look you in the eye and sprint.

Probably most importantly, it will immensely improve your relationship with your co-teachers. And when I say immensely, I mean that they will look at you as a completely different person. When I first got into the car with my co-teachers, I said "안녕하세요," and then proceeded to introduce myself in Korean. They turned to look at each other and literally cried. They went on to explain that their previous foreign teacher had absolutely no interest in Korea or Korean and that their attempts to connect with him outside of the classroom had consistently failed. The result was a year of miscommunication, difficulty, and overall unhappiness. As an English teacher, of course you're not expected to know Korean, but any little attempt not only eases the tension but also gives your co-teacher a drive towards bettering their English skills so that they can make it easier for YOU. Something I have grown to love about Koreans is

their willingness to bend over backwards to make your life comfortable. And that small attempt to learn will be met with a ridiculous amount of happiness.

Word spreads quickly too, and soon the entire school will be lining up to at least say hello to you. I've found that trying to speak as much Korean and trying to follow all of the cultural practices IN school has made a change in the way the school as a whole treats me. My principal had once called me into his office to tell me (via translation) how overwhelmingly happy he is that I make an effort, because it not only enhances my experience but will make the work environment a lot less tense. Not to mention your kids will LOVE it. When you know how to say something to a kid in Korean, and they say it again in English they are too shocked NOT to pay attention. For about the first month I didn't say any Korean words to them, but once you drop that first bomb, your popularity skyrockets. I have noticed that showing your efforts towards being able to better communicate them can be used as a motivator for them to try and speak with you more as well. Even the smallest amount of words opens a door for you to connect with your students on a deeper level and therefore, be able to more effectively educate them. I firmly believe that showing your honest efforts to learn their culture will gain you much respect as a teacher.

If your still not convinced that you should try to learn at least a little Korean, at least try to keep some very important things in mind. Korea can be your playground, and learning some Korean opens up a whole world to you that would otherwise be inaccessible. However, you now live in a country where you are a minority. The Korean people are amazing, so don't be that foreigner that shouts English at people, expecting them to understand. Take a chance and make some Korean friends. Help keep a positive opinion of foreign teachers. Please remember that you are a cultural ambassador whose actions, both positive and negative, reflect upon our presence here as a whole. And lastly, don't forget that English is probably the hardest language in the world. Feeling completely lost while learning Korean can be humbling, and once you know that feeling, you'll know exactly how your students feel when you're teaching them English.