

Oh Korea!

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Arriving in Korea for orientation was such an exciting experience. We were in a new and foreign country, we got to meet new people, see new things, taste new foods, and experience a whole new culture.

On leaving orientation, emotions were running high. No one knew what to expect. We were all extremely nervous on our bus ride into this enormous city, Busan. It was the first time we were meeting our co-teachers, seeing our schools, seeing our apartments, finding out exactly which area we were living in. Meeting my co-teachers for the first time was my biggest fear. I had so many questions and worries running through my head as I had heard so many horror stories via the grapevine. “What are they like? Can they speak English? Will they like me? Are they helpful or will they just leave me to fend for myself?”

When I heard my name being called my heart started racing. I was nervous. I took a deep breath, said goodbye to my new friends and headed off to meet my co-teachers. When I walked up to the taxi I saw two women, one who looked to be in her mid-twenties and the other in her mid-thirties (although you can never really tell with Koreans as they always look younger than you think). They seemed very friendly and I greeted them with the limited Korean that I knew. They really seemed to appreciate this gesture.

We sat in silence as we travelled the short distance to my apartment. Once there I started asking questions. It turned out that the younger lady was not my co-teacher but was the previous English co-teacher and was just there to help translate. Her English was really good. When this younger lady left, I was left with my older co-teacher whose only form of communication with me was through Google translate. This was the most frustrating experience. However, instead of getting angry or showing my frustration, I just smiled and nodded at everything she said or suggested.

Arriving at school for my first day of work was also very nerve-wracking. I had no idea what to expect. I was quite despondent now knowing how little English my main co-teacher spoke.

I was introduced to my principle, vice-principle and school all simultaneously at a school assembly. This was very intimidating. I was then taken to the English office, shown to my desk and computer and introduced to another younger Korean lady who I was told will be my co-teacher for grades 4 and 6. No one seemed to talk much English or tell me exactly what I was supposed to do so I just sat at my computer. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to ask exactly what I was supposed to do. This was probably the best ice-breaker. It turns out that they were also new to their positions as English teachers and were just as nervous and clueless on what to do or expect.

I am very happy to say now that I have an amazing relationship with both of my co-teachers. Yes, there will be times when I want to scream and shout and throw my toys because of cultural differences, misunderstandings and miscommunications but the best thing I have learned to do is to take a deep breath, smile and do my best by putting in extra effort when I can. Ultimately they have your best interests at heart. And as for no one speaking English at school? Well it turns out that pretty much all the teachers can speak some form of English. They were just shy and intimidated by the new “Waygook” at school.

My advice to you is to go into your school with no expectations. Don't expect anyone to speak perfect English, don't expect to know exactly what your role is and don't expect anyone to warm to you straight away. Just always smile, always be available and always go the extra mile. They will appreciate it in their own ways and the bonds and friendships you form with them will come naturally. Remember... you are in Korea, a different country, a different culture. Be respectful and work hard. Your efforts will be rewarded.

