

7 Things I Learned in Korea

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When I first arrived in Korea, I faced a little bit of culture shock. Here are some of my observations of Koreans, Korean culture, and my own attitudes.

1. People were staring at me. Every day when I would go to school, I would see people turn their heads to study me. I felt like I had some strange sign on me that said, “WAYGOOKIN!” Sure, I understand that I look different. I come from America... a land of immigrants—with considerable racial and cultural diversity! Korea is more of a homogenous culture... here; I stand out like a sore thumb.

2. Korean school is very different than American school. On the first day of class at Taepyeong Middle School, EVERYTHING was different. Everything from wearing slippers at school, bowing my head at everyone, saying “Annyeong Haseyo” to all my new coworkers, having students gasp and point at me. At my first teacher dinner with all the staff, I struggled to sit cross-legged on the floor. I thoroughly enjoyed eating fresh bulgogi that was being cooked right at our table. At school, I love eating lunch in the school cafeteria. Also, using chopsticks was very difficult at first and I frequently dropped food in my lap, but now I am used to using chopsticks.



3. Koreans have an amazing sense of community and mutual respect. Koreans like sharing, bowing, respecting elders, and traveling in groups. This part of Korean culture is so beautiful. I noticed that Koreans usually travel in groups to the cafeteria. Also when we go out to restaurants, we always share. Despite the fact that I have difficulty communicating with many of my coworkers, the Koreans will call my name and wave me over so I could have some food in the office. I don't think a single day has passed where someone hasn't brought in a snack to share...be it some fresh strawberries, rice cakes, walnut cake, cheesecake, or Korean melon. I wish people would share more in America.

4. Koreans work HARD. The Korean strong work ethic is what has made Korea so successful in such a short time. But, sometimes I worry...are kids being pushed too hard? Students spend about 8 hours at school and often go to *hagwons* after school. To be a success' Koreans must study hard, get into a good university, and eventually get a good job...either to satisfy their parents and their society. This is similar to America. But, in Korea, it is much more competitive to get into prestigious schools. Americans are workaholics, but I don't

think many people in America would tolerate going to school for that many hours. When I was a student, I never went to a private academy. Instead, after school I would do sports and fun extra-curricular activities such as School Musicals, Speech Team, Volleyball, and Track (running). Doing fun activities at school was a good way to relieve stress.

5. Korea has a *bali bali* culture. Korean life is very fast-paced. I remember being shocked when I saw Koreans sprinting across the street or racing to catch the bus or subway. What is ironic is how this rule does not apply to schools. In America, as soon as the bell rings, you are supposed to be in your seat, ready to listen; otherwise you will get in trouble. In Korea, many students come late and we usually waste about five minutes at the start of the class! Also, I often notice that Korean coffee shops and stores will close down one day, and then immediately put up a new business almost instantly. For example, I joined a theater group with some foreigners in Daejeon. We performed our show in a bar. Two weeks before the show, the bar changed owners and cleaned up the bar within one night. The Koreans worked so hard to help us out, and I was very impressed. It showed me that Koreans have teamwork, good planning skills, and a strong work ethic.



6. Korean is a beautiful language. Thus far, I have really enjoyed learning Hangul. I have been attending Korean language classes but my favorite way of learning Korean is to ask my students questions. In class, to check students' comprehension, I ask them, "How do you say that in Korean?" My students shout it out, and I try and write it in Hangul on the chalkboard. I am amazed to see how excited the students get when I make an effort to learn their language. My goal is to be able to speak Korean by the end of the year!

7. Korean students are wonderful. I have had the pleasure of teaching Debate Team and I got to know great students like Young Yeon, Yoon Jung, Jae Hae, Seong Yup, June Hyeok, Hanna, Ji-Woo, Chanu, and Chung Hyun. Also, I loved watching Sports' Day! I think the best part of the day was to see the creative costumes each class designed. I also adore my Spanish Club with Estrella: Pedro, Timo, Rafael, Mariano, León, Abril, Regina, Sofía, Alma, Tea, Lucía, and Estefanía. ¡Gracias!

After 4 months of living in Daejeon, Korea, I have learned so many wonderful life lessons. I have to thank my amazing school for being so kind and welcoming. Thank you for making my experience in Korea incredible! 감사합니다!

