

How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love My Co-Teacher

Dustin Webster (Myeondong Elementary School)

I remember a training that was given for native teachers here in Seoul, when a lecturer named Nick Bruneau came out and started talking about his wedding. He was giving us the details about meeting his wife, the wedding festivities, and then talking about their current daily life. Finally, he stopped and looked at us. He said, “I’m telling you all this because you are all now married.” He then flipped his PowerPoint to an older, slightly severe looking Korean woman. “This was my first co-teacher,” he said. “You all have one, and I’m telling you right now that you are basically married to them.”

As we learn very quickly when we begin teaching for EPIK, the co-teachers we have and our relationships with them vary. Some of us have only one co-teacher. Many of us have multiple co-teachers. Some work with their co-teachers on lesson planning, teach 50/50, and run the class together. Some take turns sharing the leading role while the other serves as support during the lesson. Some build great and close relationships with their co-teachers that extend far beyond the workday. Others have a mostly professional relationship with their co-teachers. Ask ten different native teachers for a description of their role and interactions with their co-teachers, and you will get ten very different responses.

I happen to have three co-teachers: one who teaches 5th grade with me, one for my 6th grade classes, and one who was described to me as my “helper” teacher. My “helper” teacher, whom I now know as the NET Administrator at my school, is who I want to talk about here. She is undoubtedly the person who the lecturer would be referring to.

I could describe this teacher as my mom, my handler, my translator, my boss, my accountant, my guide, or even my personal assistant. Any one of these terms would be appropriate, but at the same time any one of these terms would fail to fully capture our relationship.

I would guess that the majority of us Native English Teachers do not speak Korean fluently or maybe even at all, especially when we first arrive. In those first weeks we are dealing with moving into an apartment, setting up a bank account, getting internet and a phone, immigration, and any number of other random problems that come up. I think most of us know how frustrating and tedious it can be to do these things in our home countries. Consider this frustration for us in Korea when we add the fact that communication with most people via traditional language is impossible. Now, remember that the only person you know who can speak both languages and help you, especially in the beginning, is your co-teacher.

I get home and there is a strange handwritten sign in Korean on my apartment door? Ask my co-teacher. A slip of paper was in my mailbox that looks something like a bill I might need to pay? Ask my co-teacher. I don’t know which is fabric softener and which is laundry detergent? Ask my co-teacher. Payroll at the school made a mistake on depositing my

salary? Ask my co-teacher. I want to buy tickets to a concert but the website is entirely in Korean? Ask my co-teacher. This list could go on and on.

Now think about everything in life that is kept private, especially from a work colleague. Then, because of the language barrier that we face, accept that this co-teacher is going to know everything about every last one of these details. The confidentiality that we might be used to back home goes out the window when there are three people involved in a conversation, and the important one does not speak English. Our co-teacher will know things like our passport number, Alien Registration number, bank account information, passwords to websites, when we visit the doctor and for what, our daily habits, and even what we do on the weekends (they seem to know this last one whether we openly share this information or not.)

One day early during my time in Korea, I had to go to the bank to try to get things set up so I could transfer money home. Since no one at my bank speaks English, my co-teacher came with me. We were sitting there together, and my co-teacher was able to see every detail of my financial information, and was discussing it quite openly with the bank staff. She could see how much money I had, how much money I'd spent, and even line by line what I'd spent money on. I was definitely a little bit uncomfortable, but it really drove home the point about marriage.

When we cannot speak the language, in certain types of situations, we are pretty helpless by ourselves. Sure, eventually I could have figured out how to open a bank account or get internet. I would have eventually found someone who spoke English and gotten my point across. However, it would not have been easy. It would not only have cost me more time, but in many situations probably also more money. Had I gone to the bank on my own that day most likely I would have either had to leave without getting accomplished what I needed, or I would have muddled through the process in broken language and left with only a vague idea of what had just happened and what I needed to do.

On this day with my co-teacher, we were in and out of the bank quickly, and while her translation and explanation may not be perfect, at least one of us has a full understanding of what is going on.

And I think that is exactly what this lecturer meant with the metaphor of marriage. I give a type of trust to my co-teacher like I have given very few other people in my life. Out of necessity and survival, she knows everything about me, and that's ok. If we cannot accept that, and we cannot find this trust somewhere within us, we are going to have a difficult time here. All co-teachers may not seem to love their jobs, and all may not be as helpful or nice as we might ultimately want them to be. However, they are our lifeline, and like it or not we are committed to each other by a legally binding contract. Kind of surprisingly, I don't think it's that difficult to let go and find this trust. It really just takes a couple of comments about how much money they see you've spent at the bar. It could be worse.