

Chopsticks 101

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Before coming to South Korea, I had never used chopsticks. I tried once, failed, and returned to the comfort of my fork, knife, and spoon. In preparing for my journey here and considering the challenges I would face, using chopsticks hadn't even crossed my mind. Soon after arriving at the 2013 EPIK Orientation, I realized that my lack of chopstick knowledge and experience had just become challenge number one.

Entering the cafeteria for the first time, I looked around wondering where the utensils were. After searching high and low, it hit me. No forks. No knives. Only spoons and chopsticks! I could no longer take the easy way out. As I reached for the chopsticks I thought, "How hard could it be, really?" Surely, when I had no other choice, I would be able to master the art of chopsticks, right? Wrong. Here I was, attempting to use chopsticks for the second time in my life and they turn out to be heavy metal ones, slightly more difficult than the light wooden ones I had already failed with at home. Needless to say, eating was a struggle and I began to question if I would ever be able to eat in Korea without embarrassing myself. "It's okay," I thought, "I can't be the only one struggling." Then I looked around the room and made an unfortunate discovery. Had everyone else been given chopstick lessons that I hadn't received? They not only seemed capable of using chopsticks, but seemed like they had been using them their whole lives. My struggle already seemed momentous enough, and my self-esteem wasn't helped sitting in a room surrounded by peers who must have perfected the skill long ago.

I went back to my room and turned to my good friend who always has the answers: Youtube. If it couldn't teach me, then no one could. As I sat and watched a video titled, "How to use chopsticks," and mimicked the actions with some pens, my roommate walked in and caught me in the act. After a short burst of laughter, she provided me with some comfort when she announced that she too could not use chopsticks. We vented our frustrations and fears together, which included, but was not limited to: How does everyone else know how to use them, how are we going to survive, and what have we gotten ourselves into? As the week went on, this became our routine after every meal. It felt like the universe was crashing down around us because of our inadequate use of two pieces of metal. (Ok, it wasn't that dramatic, but it felt like it.)

However, those two pieces of metal represented so much more than failed attempts at feeding ourselves. They represented our fears and worries of what this year would bring. If we couldn't get past this seemingly simple first obstacle, what other failures lay ahead? Self-defeating thoughts ambushed my mind, "Maybe we weren't cut out for this. Maybe leaving the comforts of home to move across the world was a horrible idea. Maybe adjusting to life here wouldn't be as easy as we thought. Maybe we were dreaming too big. Maybe we would need to pack up our things and go home.

But we didn't go home. We stuck it out. We continued practicing. We continued to find comfort in the fact that we weren't completely alone in our struggles. We sought help from those around us who had mastered the skill. We reminded ourselves of all the reasons we came here. We continued to question our abilities to overcome obstacles, but more importantly, hold onto hope that we

could, and we did. By the time Orientation had ended, and after hours of painstaking practice, we had become semi-skilled in the art of chopsticks!

Now months later, when I look back on that week, I can't help but laugh. I look at how far I have come, not only with my use of chopsticks, but with adjusting to Korean life overall. I remember how worried and nervous I was and compare it to how happy and comfortable I am now. There have been many obstacles and I know there will be more to come. However, all the ups and downs, the struggles and successes, contribute to an overall amazing experience, where I have already seen myself grow and change in so many ways.

Learning to use chopsticks did not happen in a week. It was a process that took time and through which I've learned some valuable lessons that I can apply to other aspects of life in Korea.

Lesson #1: There is no right way. In the process of learning to use chopsticks, first, I tried learning how to position my hands. In trying to perfect the hand positioning, I realized the best hand positioning was simply whatever worked for me. As long as the end result is the same, it doesn't matter how you get there. If I can get the food in my mouth holding the chopsticks differently than someone else who can also get the food in his mouth, we both still leave satisfied.

While we may be facing similar challenges, we might have different ways of approaching, maneuvering and overcoming them...and that's ok. Don't be discouraged by looking at the progress others are making around you. Do what works for you to get to the end result of overcoming the challenge, whether it takes more or less time, or is harder or easier.

Lesson #2: One step at a time. Once I mastered the hand position that worked for me, I was able to master picking up certain foods based on some of their characteristics (size, texture, etc.). Rice was easy because it stuck to the chopsticks. Could I jump straight into picking up a slippery quail's egg? No. That was my second lesson. Do things one step at a time. Don't expect to be able to overcome something after one try, two tries, or even 20 tries. It can be a process, but the more you work at it, the easier it becomes. Before long, you will be able to conquer that tiny, slippery quail's egg without a problem, and it sure feels good when you do!

Lesson #3: Have fun and laugh at yourself. While my roommate and I pouted and vented in our room that first week of Orientation, we couldn't help but laugh at the situation. Was I really watching "How to use chopsticks" videos and practicing with pens? Another time I had eaten nearly half of my meal before I had realized I was holding one of the chopsticks upside down. You have to be able to laugh at yourself and the situations you are in. Laughter excuses and laughter forgives. It reminds you to not take things so seriously. If you can laugh at yourself, it makes it easier to pick up those chopsticks the next time and the next time, because even if you don't get food in your mouth, at least you can get a good laugh out of it.

Nowadays, when I eat my lunch I can't help but feel proud of myself. Just like there was much more represented by my struggle with the chopsticks, there is much more represented in the pride I feel as well. Overcoming that first challenge was bigger than I realized. Not only did I learn lessons that I can apply to many of the struggles I face here, but it gave me that first accomplishment in Korea. It told me that I am cut out for this, I wasn't dreaming too big and I will survive here after all.

There will be more challenges, but I am not worried. I am ready for whatever Korea has to throw at me, because I can overcome it one step at a time, doing what works for me, with a smile on my face.