

Teaching While Being Taught:

Adjusting to a New Life in Korea

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When I first moved to Korea in August of 2008 I can honestly say that I didn't know what to expect. Before signing up for the EPIK program I had travelled a large portion of the world, but Korea was the first Asian country I had ever visited. I had lived in foreign countries before, but always with at least a little understanding of the language and always being able to recognize the alphabet. I was accustomed to culture shock, but I still had no idea what life in Korea might have to offer. Needless to say, I arrived rather clueless. From those very first days in the country, Korea has proven to be an amazing adventure. The people, the job, the culture, the food – all of these aspects have both excited me and, at times, caused me great frustration. In the following essay I hope to shed a bit of light on what a foreigner experiences during their stay in this country, and hopefully encourage more people to take a chance and move outside their comfort zone.

The great advantage of being involved in the EPIK program is that you are given help from the very beginning. Upon arrival in Korea someone is there waiting to take you to orientation, (or straight to your new hometown, if the case may be) and from that time forward you are always surrounded by people who are willing to help. My personal experience included missing most of orientation and therefore arriving in my new home city of Gangneung within 24

hours of being in the country. The teachers from my new school were eager to meet me and to help me set up my new life. I must say, this was all slightly overwhelming when you factor in jetlag to the equation. I was initially brought to a small, very small, apartment near the outside of town. I was told this would be my new home for the next year. It was one room. There was no refrigerator, no washing machine, no bed, or no furniture for that matter! I was confused as to how all the things that my contract had told me I would be receiving were going to fit into this tiny space. At the time, I was with five of my male co-teachers – none of whom spoke much English. However, they could see that I was obviously distressed and immediately got my new co-teacher (who speaks incredible English) on the phone. I told her my concerns very delicately, as I didn't want to seem troublesome on my first day! I was concerned as to how my colleagues might react, and nervous that I was making a bad impression. But my worries were all in vain. My school was very understanding and decided to try and find me a new place to live. While they did so, they paid for me to stay in a motel for three days. When they brought me to my new apartment a few days later, I was thrilled. No, it wasn't the biggest place I'd ever seen, but it was all I needed. It was then that I realized my co-workers really cared about my comfort and wanted me to feel welcome in their country.



My original co-teachers from Sacheon Middle School.

Once I was settled into my new home, it was soon time to start my job as an English teacher. It was not my first time teaching English, but it was my first time teaching children, so I was a little nervous. I found out that I would be teaching at not one, but three schools, as they were all rather small. Sacheon Middle school would be my home base and three days a week I would travel to Yeongok and Unyang Elementary schools to teach with them. This arrangement didn't bother me in the slightest and I was eager to get to know each school. My first few days were hectic and slightly confusing. To this day I love my co-workers, but if there is one thing to be said about Korean teachers it's that they don't give you much warning or instruction as to what's going on! The job became a kind of 'learn on your feet' experiment and I discovered that things were a lot easier if I asked a lot of questions. I stopped expecting people to inform me of, what I considered, important details and I began holding myself responsible for finding out what was going on. The kids were insanely eager to get to know me and I had a great time just trying out different teaching styles to decide what worked best for them. It was sometimes frustrating to have such little direction, but I tried to use that to my advantage in order to run the classes the way I wanted. I paid attention to how the kids reacted to different activities and I started to understand how they learned best. At the same time, since I was developing my own lessons and working very hard to keep them from being too boring, the kids were really starting to enjoy my class and I began to get to know them better. It was a wonderful feeling to walk into school every morning to a chorus of greetings. The kids would always run up to say hello and ask how I was. I would question them about their weekend or their classes and I found this to be a great opportunity to take English outside the classroom. The children seemed much

more eager to use English for a practical purpose and were always pleased with themselves when they were able to express their thoughts and ideas correctly. Having a good relationship with my students has been one of the best rewards of my entire experience teaching in Korea.



My students from Unyang Elementary School.

My lessons with the middle school obviously had to differ from my lessons with the younger children. Also, at Sacheon I had my wonderful co-teacher to help me in my classes. My elementary school classes were small and the teachers only stayed if I was having discipline issues. Otherwise, I was happy to teach on my own. In Sacheon, however, Jane was there for me in every class I taught. She was wonderful. She still is. Her English is incredible and she is a wonderful teacher. We work amazingly well together as a team and I could not ask for a better co-teacher. I have discovered I am very lucky in this way, and therefore remain thankful that there has never been any conflict between us. I also discovered I was very lucky in the support I had from the parents. Although at my middle school it was not as common to meet them, at my elementary schools the parents were often involved in sports days and

other activities. They were all so welcoming and excited that I was there to help their children learn. They encouraged their children to talk to me and practice their skills. I believe that getting to know all the people who surround your job – not just your co-teacher and the students you directly work with – will make your job in Korea much more fulfilling.



Some of the elementary school mothers, enjoying Sports Day.

Beyond the new people in my life and my new job, there was still a lot to learn when I first arrived in Korea. The alphabet was simply one obstacle to overcome, and although I still speak very little Korean I can at least read it and therefore understand all the ‘Konglish’ that is found everywhere. Also understanding the new culture and traditions I was surrounded by was important to me. Korea has a rich history and Koreans love to celebrate it. At school festivals, sports days and holidays my schools would often put on amazing performances. I always admired how diligently Koreans passed on their traditions to the younger generation. Even my youngest students could perform complex dances and sing songs completely from memory. There is a great cultural pride that exists in the country and it is widely displayed in the

school system. My favourite example of such a display comes from the sports days at my elementary schools where all the little girls dress up in beautiful pink ‘hanboks’ and participate in a complicated and intricate fan dance. To see so many students – and some at such a young age – be able to re-create such an amazing performance has always remained impressive to me. They practice this dance from the time they are very young and you can see in their faces how proud they are in their ability to do it well. The same pride can be seen on the faces of the students who study the traditional musical instruments or the other dances that often grace these events. Being a part of all these moments really allowed me to gain an important understanding of Korea and its history.



The girls of Yeongok Elementary school performing for Sports Day.

Beyond understanding traditional culture, however, there was also the challenge of learning to understand modern customs. I must admit that of all the countries I have visited I find Korea to be the most different in relation to where I' m from. Although you are able to find all the modern comforts and conveniences you could possibly need in Korea, the way daily life is conducted can be a little difficult to get used to. First and foremost, Koreans work hard. And by work hard, I mean work long hours. Often my schools are open Saturdays with the children attending classes. In the high schools teachers are often at work until 9 or 10pm, along with students diligently studying for exams. They rarely ever take sick days and have almost no vacation to speak of. Therefore, when first arriving at my job I had to learn not to take advantage of my situation. As an EPIK teacher, we are extremely fortunate in the amount of holiday time and sick days we are able to claim. However, I learned that just because I had 15 days available to use for sick leave, it was not expected I abuse that privilege. To be fair, I' m not the type to take time off work unless I am near my death bed, but it helped me to know that my co-workers respected me more if I showed up to school. In a full year I only had to miss 2 days of classes due to illness and on both these occasions I had my whole work 'family' very concerned over me because they knew that if I was away, I was truly ill. Koreans take their jobs very seriously and come hell or high water, they will be at work.

Another difficult aspect for me to become accustomed to in my new Korean life was the lack of personal space. I' m not sure if this stems from the fact that Korea is a very small country with a very large population – but people do not seem to understand a 'comfort zone.' People will push,

squeeze and wedge their way through any sort of crowd and there is often little apology if someone bumps or runs into you. Especially when visiting Seoul, I often found the amount of people milling around me overwhelming. It took me awhile to get over the frustration that often consumed me in these busy situations. I was not used to being in a society where people didn't seem to notice if they were in close quarters. In most western countries there are much more defined boundaries and it is considered rude to stand too close to someone or push them if you need by. However, in time, I began to accept that this was simply the way of life and I stopped noticing the pokes and the prods. And this goes for all the other small annoyances that irked me during my first few months in the country – eventually you can become accustomed to almost anything.

Similar to the way I adapted to the customs of Korea, I soon adapted to the food. But I will say, this took quite a period of adjustment. Korean cuisine is not in any way like what many western people are used to. It's spicy, it's pickled, it's often raw and it's always shared. I think that was the biggest hurdle I had to jump in the meal department – sharing my food. In western society most restaurants serve individual dishes to individual people. In Korea, however, food is just laid out on the table and everyone digs in. For a foreigner who was new to chopsticks, this was a very daunting situation in the beginning. At my first 'teacher's dinner' I was more than surprised at how the meal was conducted, with everyone just grabbing randomly at an assortment of dishes laid before us. And not only that, we had to cook the meat ourselves! A mini barbeque right in the middle of the table, now this was something I hadn't seen before. Cooking meat, wrapping it in lettuce, eating with nothing but chopsticks and our hands... needless to say it was a unique experience. But my co-workers were patient teachers and helped me learn how to properly

prepare my food, as well as the name of everything I was consuming. They were especially pleased to find that I was fond of 'kimchi.' They also taught me how to properly give and receive 'soju.' Koreans have a unique drinking custom which involves a great deal of respect. Being able to properly offer an elder a drink and then properly receive one in return goes a long way in showing your colleagues that you honour their traditions and culture.



Enjoying Korean barbeque with some of my middle school students.

Adjusting to life in Korea was neither easy nor difficult. For every moment of frustration I encountered, I had an equally wonderful moment in which I experienced help or kindness. For all the things I found strange or confusing, I found just as many things to be exciting and beautiful. Every time I thought perhaps I had made a mistake in moving somewhere completely new for a whole year, minutes later these doubts were erased when I remembered how lucky I was to be having such an amazing experience. It is never easy to uproot and replant yourself. The life of a traveller is often a lonely one. However, in coming to Korea I have been able to discover so many things

about the country itself and about myself. Korea has taught me great lessons in understanding and acceptance. I have become considerably more patient. And if I could give one piece of advice to someone just beginning their own adventure in this land, it would be this: take the time to get to know the new world around you because the point is not to change your surroundings to fit your understanding, but to change your understanding to fit your surroundings.