

# A Little Fish in a Sea of Kimchi

Patrick Mackay

Jumun Elementary School(Gangwon)

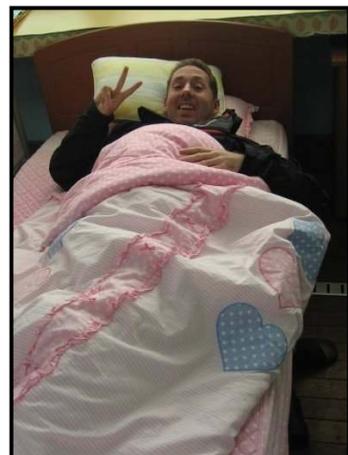
It's amazing how life plays itself out. I had always wanted to travel abroad, to live and work in a different country, to immerse myself in a new culture, to become a “foreigner.” While I was at university, I planned (like so many others) to take a year off



and “see the world.” I wanted to broaden my scope of the world and live adventures that I could revel in during my old age. But as soon as I graduated, I was offered a job, one that provided healthcare, a 401k plan, and all the sensibilities one

must attain to become a bona fide “adult.” Recognizing a diminishing home job market, I put my travel plans on hold and took the more adult avenue, promising not forget my dreams of global adventure.

After a year at my “sensible” (i.e., boring, mediocre, completely unfulfilling) desk job, I began researching teaching jobs and noticed a blossoming market for English teachers all over the world. Having earned a degree in English, I figured what better way to put it to use and simultaneously live out my dream as a globetrotter. But once again, life took an unexpected turn and I was offered a local job as a contract teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District. I was getting older and



was concerned about becoming one of those 30 year-olds working part-time at a coffee shop while still living with their parents. Believing that this was the opportunity I



needed to get my career going as a teacher, I once again put aside my dreams of world travel, this time I thought forever.

As my contract with LAUSD expired, the district announced that due to an ongoing budget crisis, no contracts were being renewed and all contract teachers were to be let go. At the

same time, my roommate was moving out, forcing me to leave the apartment as well. All of a sudden I was looking at being jobless and possibly homeless.

I could not think of a worse condition to be in. And yet, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Out of the blue, I received a phone call from a very good



friend who happened to be working in Korea as an EPIK teacher. Within an hour, he had sold me on the notion of becoming a teacher in Korea. By day's end, I had contacted an EPIK recruiter, and two weeks later, I was on a plane to Korea, my belongings burdening the houses of my friends and family, and my car left in brother's driveway with a note saying, "See ya in a year." I was off to become and ESL teacher in the "land of the morning calm."



Now I have heard many stories about people arriving in Korea without a shred of knowledge about the language. I was no different.

In fact, I will now confess that I had little knowledge about Korea in general. I was considered “globally aware” by many of my friends for just being able to locate it on a map. I learned the requisite “hello,” “thank you,” and “beer please” from the gentleman



ajeossi sitting next to me on the airplane. He looked at me as I fumbled through my “Learn to Speak Korean in 5 Easy Steps” phrase book and kindly offered to help me out. I spent the remainder of the flight getting an insight as to

what to expect in the next year of my life. He also provided me with my first glance at the Korean persona, the Korean desire to share with others their country and culture (a sort of humbled pride I find endearing), and the ability put aside their own shyness and private insecurities to help those in need. By the time the plane had landed, I had already made my first Korean friend. Lucky for me, many more were to follow.

I met my taxi driver outside of Incheon airport, where we both fumbled with our attempts to greet and converse with each other (poor guy probably got sick of me smiling and nodding, accompanied by my occasional butchered “kimchi-hamnida”). As we drove through Seoul, I looked at all the brightly-lit neon monoliths covering the metropolitan cityscape, the beautiful bridges crossing the Han River, the



signs and ads covered with “Konglish” (a popular and often amusing hybrid of English and Korean). I took it all in, knowing that this was not going to be my home. I had signed up to be a teacher in Gangwon-do, a place that sold me on its natural beauty,

agricultural leanings, and lack of Starbucks. Being a native Los Angeles resident, I didn't want to simply move to another big city. I wanted to immerse myself in an area where I would be forced to integrate into the culture and society. I wanted to "leave my comfort zone," as the cliché goes.

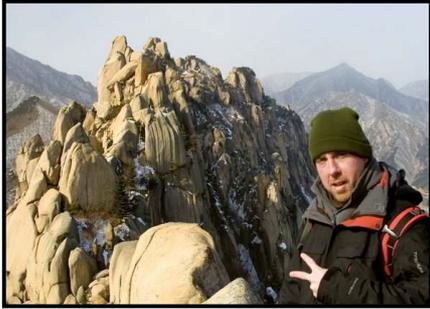


My new home was to be Jumunjin, a small beach town famous for its copious production of ojinga (squid). Wherever you turn, lines of squid abound. Squid is hung along the streets, across rooftops, and even in front of the local Family Mart. I can't tell you how many times I have been smacked in the face by a low flying squadron of dried squid. By the harbor, there is even a giant statue of a squid (whom my friends and I have deemed the "Ojinga Overload – protector of all things squid-like). But Jumunjin also holds a beauty like I have never seen. It has a pristine seaside to the east and the rugged peaks of the Taebaek mountain range to the west. It is a small community where everyone knows each other and each others' "going-ons". It was a place where I stood out like a big-white-American-sore-thumb. Despite being extremely nervous (downright scared, really), I knew that this was the right place for me, for there would be no way for me to hide, to shelter myself from immersion. I would become a member of this community.

After talking to many other EPIK teachers, I expected to be thrust into the classroom immediately upon arrival at Jumun Elementary School, clueless as to what or how to teach. But I had a completely



opposite experience. Sure, I was inundated with initial PTA meetings, community ceremonies and school introduction assemblies. I felt like Ms. America, always in a perpetual state of smiling and nodding, smiling and nodding. Yet after two weeks, I had



still not taught a single class. Apparently my teachers were more nervous about me entering the classroom than I was. I was given stacks of books to look at, videos of classroom demonstrations to watch, but was asked to stay out of the classroom until the

teachers were confident enough to overcome their shyness. In the end, I had to virtually beg to enter the classroom, promising to hide behind the desk if necessary. But I learned they were not keeping me out of the classroom because I hadn't proven myself to them.

I had already proven myself by making the journey to Korea, by leaving my family and country to teach their students. But what I missed was that

this was also a new experience for them. My presence was going to alter the way they taught and managed in the classroom. They no longer had to worry about just communicating with their students, but with me as well. I was the first waeguk (foreign) teacher at my school. My



being there was going to change the entire classroom dynamic, and ultimately, the lives of those in the school as much as my life was going to change. It was my responsibility to make this change as positive and beneficial as possible, especially with my new co-teacher.

Co-teaching is a hard thing to pull off under the best of circumstances, and here I was, a foreigner coming from a completely different background and speaking a



completely different language. Yet, I was so fortunate to have landed an amazing co-teacher. I was a little fish swimming in a sea of kimchi, and she had the added responsibility of looking after me both in the classroom and in my outside life. Yet she

never made me feel like a burden, but instead, more like a welcomed addition to her life.

We worked so hard together to become an effective and cohesive teaching team. We also became great friends. Now we joke and argue with each other as if we are family.

We praise and complain about our students together. We share personal stories and talk about our families. She came out to cheer me on when I did my first marathon race in Korea. I was even a member of her wedding party (look for the pale-faced, red head at

the top corner of her wedding portrait). She has really become like a sister to me, and I can't thank her enough for all she has done.



I find myself very privileged to be an elementary school ESL teacher in Korea. It is so unbelievably fulfilling. I get to work with these wonderful kids (except for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade—haha, just kidding—mostly) who are like sponges. They absorb everything you throw at them. There are few things as amazing (and downright entertaining) as seeing my students apply their own creative



imaginations to the language they are learning. I had one of my soccer players come up to me and say,

“Hello Patrick Teacher, my name is Park Je Sung and this is my friend, David Beckham.”

I get to answer important questions like the classic, “Is this called fur or hair?”, as students tug at the 털 on my arm (Korean students are fascinated with arm hair). I’ve had full conversations with my students using only the word “hi” and a plethora of body gestures. But the best part of my job is witnessing the enthusiasm on their faces as they begin to “get it,” to understand the concepts I am teaching and feel comfortable and secure enough to try and implement them. Their enthusiasm pushes me to be a better teacher, to do all I can to help them continue to grow.



As I begin my second year here in Korea, I realize that my adventure is really just beginning. It is only now that I am beginning to grasp an understanding of the Korean culture and persona, and I feel that there is so much more to discover and enjoy. It is only after a year of being in the classroom that I can see how to adjust and improve the curricula to better serve and benefit my students. I look forward to watching my students’ language abilities grow and seeing with it a rise in their confidence and enthusiasm. I look forward to further developing my relationship my new found friends, my community, and Korea as a whole. I even look forward to learning more about Korean texting emoticons (like the classic ^.^ and my favorite ㄷ.ㄷ). I have just scratched the surface of my experience, my abilities, and my life. I look forward to the future.