



체험수기부분 (원어민교사)



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The Power of the Crowd

I started this essay while waiting for the next activity to start at my school's sports day. The students were clad in what can only be described as eclectic attire, and most of their homeroom teachers dressed equally for the festivities. Given the Cold War-style tension that ensues in my classroom during a simple game of Trashcan Basketball, I assumed that the day would be an incredibly competitive affair. I was right.

But the students' camaraderie and enthusiasm also delighted me. Every way I turned, there were teenagers in Minnie Mouse bows, Superman capes and color coordinated t-shirts yelling—no, screaming—their reassurances and hastily hugging each other, no matter the outcome of the event. Of course, this kind of performance can be attributed to the Korean collective spirit, and my personal reflection of the past eight months revolves generally around such unity and how it affects the educational workplace as a whole.

In order to give a concise picture of my work environment, it is important that I elaborate a bit on the characteristics of my middle school. The enrollment is comparably lesser than other schools in the area, and the socioeconomic status of our students is among the lowest in the city. This makes for an interesting environment in that I have still been able to get to know my students, regardless of their English-speaking ability. Most have not been afforded costly language lessons outside of the public classroom, but they have clearly learned that an aggressive attitude opens more doors than a timid one. With the obvious exceptions of the biannual speaking tests and well, regular class time, these kids go to the most outrageous ends to get their points across. They will draw collages on my blackboard, put on mini theatri-





cal performances and shout the same thing twenty times over in Korean, just to be sure I understand. I love these moments because they make for excellent learning opportunities and are quite frankly, adorable. The best part is that they rarely do it alone; it is always a team effort. If one student is trying to ask for permission to go to the restroom, it takes a nanosecond before half the group is up in arms screaming, “Bathroom!” or waving a roll of toilet tissue.

I would be lying if I said that teaching was a breeze simply because the students are willing to help each other and are less reserved outside of regular class. It’s not. Certain factors can make an English classroom an ominous place for a middle school student.

Firstly, the textbook is something incoming GETs should be prepared to worship and detest on alternating hours for the next year. I cannot deny the weeks in which I was far too busy and tired to create a lesson plan purely from scratch. In these cases, the less-than-concrete themes in the text gave me a foundation to work with. The rest of the time, it was the bane of my existence. At the beginning of the year, I found myself dreading the moment when I would have to open it and plan the next week’s lessons. The material was far too difficult for the students. Even if it had been more accessible to their level, nothing could change the fact that some of the content was just too random to pull together functionally.

Secondly, as noted earlier, the majority of the students only have exposure to English in the public classroom setting. This means that they have larger class sizes than those found in a private academy, and the majority of their earlier studies were grounded in developing reading and writing skills. Because of this, my students not only have difficulty communicating with me; they struggle to understand me as well. I learned quickly to concentrate on my speed and intonation when giving instructions or introducing new target language. Nonetheless, at times it remained exasperating to get the students to speak *genuinely*.

Ingenuity is a tough word. It’s hard for me to say, and it’s something difficult for everyone to put into practice. As a second language learner myself, I can attest to the agony people face when first trying to verbally express themselves with originality.

This is in part due to the fact that they don’t have the vocabulary or experience us-



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ing unfamiliar sentence structures. My students tend to give up easier because of this and for the reason that, for years, they have been subjected to a “say and repeat” method of language learning. When this becomes the backbone of a class, students spend less time concentrating on the significance of a particular text, monologue or story, and instead focus their attention on lazily repeating whatever they hear. This is the final reason why my classroom was a scary place. When it came time to speak their mind or articulate something that deviated even slightly from the standard dialogue, they were terrified. My expectations, at the beginning, for a classroom full of babbling, wannabe future diplomats might have been a bit excessive.

I needed to prevent my lessons from taking on the atmosphere of a lackluster business meeting. I declared war on silence. The first decision I made was to rearrange all of my desks into groups of four. Next, I began giving the monotonous textbook only as much attention as I was required to, and focused more of my time on creating slideshows, videos and hands-on activities. I used dialogue with funny pictures in place of missing words or phrases, videos with a clear theme and games that required all students to participate, not just a select few. Finally, I increased positive reinforcement. This required more than dishing out a few more pieces of fruit candy each lesson.

Students received high fives, fist pounds, and “awesome job!” more frequently. If a particularly shy kid answered something correctly, I made the whole class give him a round of applause. Some brief cheers and hoots usually followed, neither, of which were my doing. They simply wanted to make their classmate feel included and comfortable. I can happily confirm that a good number of withdrawn teenagers began coming to my class more attentive and more relaxed simply because their peers made them feel special. I must also admit to a number of problems that surfaced during the transition from a stuffy and uncomfortable classroom to a lively learning space.

Placing a teenager directly across from her or his peer is a great way to instigate verbal communication in a foreign language. Unfortunately, it also led to a foreseeable amount of conversation in their first language as well. I can only begin to speculate what these exchanges entailed, but I assume they usually touched on the oppo-





site sex, someone's regrettable haircut, or the most recent release of StarCraft 2. Also, because my students were more comfortable, they began to be less hesitant about breaking other classroom rules including writing on their desks, sneaking candy or food in under their books and putting trash on the floor versus in the wastepaper basket. Obviously, we wanted to keep such occurrences to a minimum, if not obsolete. In this sense, my coworkers have become invaluable in my classroom.

Like so many other native English teachers, I started my career as an educator in Korea completely unsure about what to expect of my new home, workplace and colleagues. Much to my surprise, I was immediately inducted into the close-knit group that has become our English department. These five women quickly turned into mentors for me in the arts of resolve and patience. They taught me important skills in following through in our responsibilities to both bureaucracy and education, two entities that do not always compliment each other. They also gave me a great deal of insight into working with youth in general.

When trying to wrangle nearly thirty adolescent minds to attention in a language they don't understand, I simply could not do it alone and still lead a productive lesson. Wouldn't have had time. Students needed to be focused on the subject matter and the impending activities immediately from the beginning of lesson, and it was our job as educators to maintain that focus for the next hour. If two students found themselves lost in discussion over CNBlue's newest single, I could express my disapproval by stopping the class and asking them to please pay attention, and I did. when it came to exceptionally bad behavior, it took a great deal more time and effort to make my frustration understood and to find some sort of suitable consequence, before getting back on track with the activity at hand. Under these unfortunate circumstances, it proved easier and more effective to for my co-teacher to address the problem with the student(s), while I continued to teach the class. This prevented a loss of valuable class time and kept attention on the lesson rather than the problem. In short, my co-teachers helped to ensure that my class was perceived as an integral part of the weekly routine at school and not playtime or free hour.

Classroom management wasn't the only way in which my coworkers and I learned to collaborate and divvy up responsibility. At first, I think we all felt rather confused

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about our roles at school, and I tended not to consult with them as much as I would have liked to. Luckily, I had a number of co-teachers with a great deal of intuition. They noticed when I was having problems or felt unsure about my lesson plans, and started to approach me about it after class. Shortly after, I found myself soliciting them regularly for advice regarding my ideas for upcoming lessons. They would kindly negate things they thought frivolous or difficult and offer a substitute idea, and they reinforced plans they were fond of. Eventually, they started coming to me for counsel as well. During lunchtime, we started discussing cultural quirks over heaps of fresh vegetables and rice cakes. We talked about everything from teaching methods, to gender differences, to ideas about personal space. For example, those that had travelled to the United States found it exceedingly strange that people waved to complete strangers there, while I jokingly compared elderly women trying to board a bus in Korea to defensive tackles in the NFL. I have learned a great deal about Korean perceptions of the U.S. during those conversations, and the company was something to look forward to everyday.

During class time, I often confronted blank stares after describing something two or three times in two or three different ways, but my coworkers quickly translated what I needed explained. This ensured that our class continued at its pace. When we had disagreements about a particular grammar point or piece of the text, we tried our best to make our opinions heard in a way that insinuated respect and not confrontation. Of course, there were times when we felt frustrated with each other, but when we entered the classroom, we made sure to leave it at the door and address our issues later. Sometimes I had a hard time understanding where all of the paperwork and extra documents came from, why English teachers seemed to continually get more and more work, and why my schedule never failed to change at the last minute. They were equally surprised at my astonishment; such things are commonalities in Korea.

In this way, I think we taught each other helpful lessons in balance. For example, their anxiety was palpable the first few times I diverged from the textbook questions in order to do something a bit more engaging. Nine times out of ten this elicited more verbal participation and more enthusiasm in the class, and when it didn't, most





of my coworkers tried to find a polite way to discuss a better solution with me. At times, schedule changes and what seemed like never-ending paperwork drove me wild, but they all took it as it came and worked through it. They understood that although bureaucracy can make things more stressful, it is a necessary component to a functioning educational system. I know they were tired, exhausted, in fact, but when it came to their responsibilities to the students, they never faltered. Whenever I met them in class or watched their interaction with students in the office, their upbeat attitudes were like a course in positive thinking. In this way, they helped me to stay motivated and approach each day on its own.

Looking back at the past eight months, I am incredibly grateful for this experience. As the only foreigner in a small workplace where few people speak the same language, it could have been disastrous, but thankfully, I have many happy memories. My students showed me that sometimes having fifteen kids shouting the wrong thing is better than no one saying the right thing, wit can be an incredibly useful tool when you are trying to communicate but just can't find the words, and that calling hail "rain-ice" still gets the point across. I also had the opportunity to work with people who accepted the formalities and regulations of the establishment while staying true to their roles as educators, welcomed me into their community willingly and were always open to learning new things themselves. All in all, I am elated about all the excitement, stress, frustration and adventure I have encountered here, and mostly, I am really glad that I didn't have to go through it alone.



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Lessons Learned from the Life of a Guest English Teacher

I don't think I can express just how different every foreigner's experience is when they move to a new place. In fact, the one thing every foreigner likely does have in common when they think about their life in Korea is that it's nothing like they imagined it would be. Talk about room for personal and professional growth! Here are some of my own stories from this transition to Korea so far, and the lessons I've gleaned from them:

☐ Expect adventures in Korean dining

I've had some interesting experiences just trying to eat in Korea. I love Korean food, but had to give up some of my own stubborn eating habits in order to truly enjoy it. When I first arrived in Korea, I was a vegetarian and wanted to maintain that dietary standard. However, after a few strange encounters with restaurant food, I decided a little meat in my diet wouldn't be the worst thing after all. This first comedic incident occurred before I even left EPIK Orientation, and it's one I'll never forget:

Sitting with my friends in a Korean barbeque with virtually no knowledge of the Korean language, no readable menu, and my dietary needs... we defaulted to the other foreigners we saw in the restaurant, and enlisted their help. This resulted in one of the most awkward experiences I've had to date. Soon our fellow foreigners and the Korean servers were in what appeared to be a discussion over why someone would willingly come to a barbeque when they don't eat meat. If that wasn't enough, they all began





pointing at me from across the restaurant so we could clear up this debacle. It was hard not to sink in my chair from this point on, especially when they came over and laughed when I verified that I really couldn't eat anything on the menu.

The lesson I would like to pass on from this night is that one should always come prepared to dine in a foreign country. The Korean culture is very hospitable and the women working that night definitely didn't let me go hungry, but I certainly could have been more helpful if I was aware of some options to ask for in advance. Of course, there is always the possibility that the etiquette of a new culture will provide enough of a challenge. Here are some feelings from my first experience dining out with my school:

It's my first staff meal and I feel completely lost. In the United States, I would be contributing to the conversation and making jokes. In Korea, I'm not even sure when I'm supposed to pour the water, which way to put my chopsticks, or even how to eat many of these dishes! These factors, in combination with the language barrier, make me about as comfortable as sitting on the floor does. Both I'm going to have to get used to. For the first time, I felt so socially out of place I thought I might begin to spill tears in the middle of lunch; not the impression I want to make on my new Principal and staff! Fortunately, one of my co-teachers told me not to worry. "We're all very nice, don't be nervous" she said. Those few words were enough for me to keep trying to cut fish with my chopsticks.

Although I still can't cut fish properly with my chopsticks, I have learned how to act socially-presentable on a variety of other levels since moving to Korea. A few days after this lunch, I had a private meal with my co-teacher and took the time to ask her about proper eating manners in Korea. At first, I was a little embarrassed to ask her which way I should place my chopsticks between bites, but she seemed more than happy to help me adjust to Korean culture. Now that I see how eating together is an important part of social and professional life, I sometimes wish I had received a lesson on manners in Korean dining from the EPIK Orientation. It certainly would have helped to boost my confidence when taking those first few meals together as a school!

❑ Learn some of the history

Upon arriving at EPIK Orientation, it was made abundantly clear that learning some history of Korea would be necessary to our understanding of the culture. I gave each lecture my full attention but didn't understand the magnitude of their importance until one night, heading home:

I'm in a taxi and the driver begins to speak to me in English. He seems very friendly and comments on how much he loves American baseball. We speak in broken English and Korean for a few minutes when he begins to share his extremely negative views toward Japan with me. I sit and listen, remembering the history lesson on Japan and South Korea I received at EPIK orientation.

Understanding history helps us to see the way culture is shaped. The two concepts are intertwined. One teacher at my school is very dedicated to my learning of Korean history and culture, and is kind enough to take me and other foreign teachers I know around our area to show us more about the country we live in now. The more I see and learn about Korea's past, the more I can understand and find meaning in the present culture I live in. It is useful if I want to work professionally with other teachers, relate to my students, or hear a taxi driver's story with an enlightened perspective.

❑ Trust the system

Sometimes, we are truly tested in another culture. One of the most obvious times in our lives when we depend on a system to work is when we are ill. Here's a short account of the first time I was sick in Korea:

This past week, I've been feeling a bit low on energy and recently have begun to experience dizziness when I wake up. What made this situation even more interesting was that this was my first encounter with Korean medical practices. The nurse gave me some pills, all labeled in Hangul, and sent me off. No better time to start really trusting another culture than when you have to get medical attention!





I was really nervous to go to the doctor in Korea. In American culture, people generally have a bad habit of waiting until the illness becomes serious to go to a doctor. It wasn't until one of my foreigner friends gave me some words of encouragement that I decided to put my health in the hands of the Korean medical system. "You need to trust the doctors here," she said. Sure enough, all I had to do was let the medical system do its job (and let my co-teachers help me to and from the doctor), and I was healthy in no time! As with many cultural differences, sometimes it's difficult to let go and try something a different way. However, it's usually better to let go and let it happen. In this particular case, I couldn't have put my health in better hands.

☐ Honor your native culture

I came to Korea with the humble perspective that this opportunity was going to be solely about Korean culture, but I was only half-correct. Although it's true that on a daily basis, foreigners adapt to a new set of customs and habits, it doesn't mean that their own culture isn't of interest to Koreans! I learned this very quickly after starting my job. Being a foreigner in an elementary school sometimes feels akin to being a celebrity: everyone wants to know about your life! If I had thought about my teaching job with this perspective before moving to Korea, I would have brought more artifacts from America for the students to look at, which I now know to be a useful learning tool in the classroom. It would've been nice to see something like this on a packing list from EPIK, encouraging us to be just as ready to accept this new, Korean culture as we should be to share whatever we can from our native, English-speaking one.

☐ Remember with culture, it's not better or worse.

It's just different

As a foreigner, understand that there will be times when you feel ridiculous or out

of place. The best way to counter this is with humility, not embarrassment. Culture is a far bigger and more powerful force than our own prides, so take every stumble as a learning opportunity and move along. Occasionally, you will feel completely lost. You may hear your name in conversation but not know what the conversation is about, and you may not know how to eat half the food you are served on any given day. To deal with these factors gracefully take on a sense of trust and adventure in the people you surround yourself with. If you can look at the big picture, it's easier to trust this new system. Keep in mind that this won't happen overnight. For a long period of time, you may not know things you once considered basic, such as where, or even if you can buy shoes in your size. There are things for every foreigner that makes them feel a little more at home. Recognize what those things are to you and figure out how to fulfill those needs. Even if it's internet shopping.

As with any life experience, the outcome and lessons you gain from them is a choice. With new cultural experiences, this is no different. Every experience, good or otherwise, has the potential to enrich your life. All it takes is humility to realize that you'll never know it all, but the courage to learn from whomever or whatever comes your way.





All's well that ends well! This is the cold noodle dish I ate in place of Korean barbeque. It was delicious and quickly became one of my favorite Korean dishes.



Here is me with a few of my co-teachers in the English Department at Yaksa Elementary.



Mr. Woo, a fellow teacher, mentor, and my 'Korean father' teaches me about Korean history and culture on a daily basis.



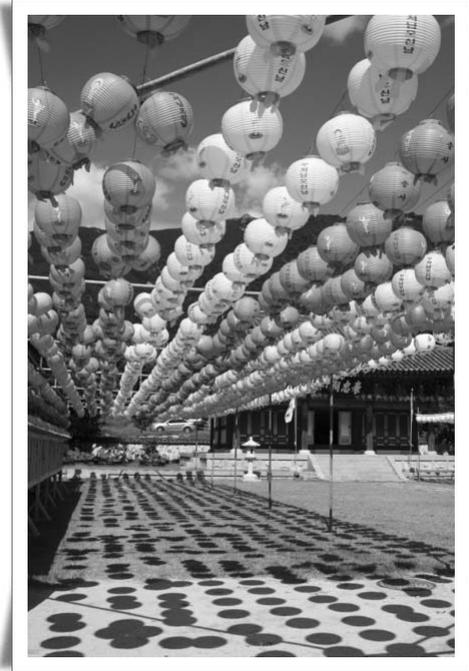
Sharing culture is an important part of a Guest English Teacher's job! For Halloween, I organized a 'trick-or-treat' activity after lunch with my students. Everyone was interested in getting free candy, even my co-teachers!

I know I can feel at home in a new place when I find natural beauty. Sometimes, it's difficult to find nature in the middle of a big city, but not from the Lotte Wheel in Ulsan at sunset. Amazing!





On a day trip around Ulsan, I saw these beautiful lanterns hanging in a temple to celebrate its 400th anniversary.



Another way I feel at home is hiking. This is my first hike in Korea. I climbed Mt. Namsan in Gyeongju with several teachers from my school.



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Attitudes for Avoiding Conflict in Korean Schools

Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.

— *William James*

The remit for this essay was to discuss overcoming conflicts with Korean teachers and students. I am however, a stranger to conflict in my school. I was lucky to be placed in a school with flexible and supportive teaching partners and a group of students who are, most of the time, a pleasure to teach. Wherever you are placed though, your attitude will help you to avoid or resolve the conflicts you will meet. William James' quote applies equally to times of conflict and non-conflict: in picking your way through your time here, your attitude will be either your greatest asset, or your fatal failing when it comes to having a happy Korean experience.

The key to avoiding conflicts anywhere is compromise, and at the heart of compromise is listening. If I have learnt one core truth from my time here, it's that if you listen to your students, your lessons will be better and you will be a happier and calmer teacher. One of my proudest teaching moments in Korea came at the end of a lesson early in my second semester. Ten or so of the students gathered around me after the bell had gone: "Teacher. Teacher. What are we doing next week?" This may not seem a particularly unusual or notable question, but this was the first time that these students seemed genuinely excited about the prospect of next week's class. Bear in mind that this was at the end of a lesson tackling the grammatical ins and outs of the second conditional, and you can understand how I felt that this was something of a victory. So how did this come about?

Towards the end of my first semester I was feeling that I was just going through





the motions in my classes. I would sit for a long time at my desk thinking. What could I teach? What was interesting to me that I could pass on to the students? Then I realised my mistake. I was thinking more about what I wanted to teach than what my students wanted to learn. The following lesson I gave my students a survey, to find out what they had enjoyed, and more importantly what they wanted to do in the future. Stupidly I had thought that my students wouldn't really be interested in music. How wrong I was. Almost 80% of my students wanted to do lessons based on music, and most of them wanted to involve movies too. I decided that including them was at least worth a try.

Over the course of my summer break I planned a series of 4 lessons on various Western musical acts, and another 5 using the movie *Up*. To my surprise, rather than limiting my teaching, it allowed me to do so much more. I discovered the blindingly obvious truth that my students would rather learn second conditional grammar from Beyoncé than me. This is the beauty of letting your students choose the materials. You can get away with teaching the dull but necessary skills for them to succeed in English. I spent an entire 50 minute lesson practising dictation with my students with no complaints. The big difference was that the dictation was coming from a loveable animated Asian boy. The change in my classes in this term has been marked, students are happier, more involved, and in some cases have even tried to keep going after the bell. Remember that you are there to serve your students, not the other way around. Listen to what they have to say, accommodate what you feel is reasonable, and you'll find yourself butting heads with them less often.

I take a lot of my teaching ideas from a website called EFL Classroom 2.0. The motto of the website is, "When one teaches, two learn." While sometimes wondering, particularly in a first thing Monday morning class of 30, if this might not be startlingly accurate, keeping this in mind leads to a more harmonious classroom. As well as listening to what your students say, listen and observe what they don't say, and learn from it. For example, when I walk into a classroom and start speaking, I'd say 60% of heads turn and look at me. However, when I walk in and put a video on, 95% turn and watch it, and when it has finished, all of those heads turn my way. So, now, I rub my bruised ego and try to start each class with some kind of

video. It gets my students interested immediately, and puts me as their focus of attention without having to shout or get frustrated.

I also observed that when I picked on them, students would often simply not answer. Now, when choosing students, I try to use a dice or number cards. They can't argue with chance and are usually happier to answer, albeit with a rueful smile. Small observations like these will eventually build into a framework for your classes that you and your students are comfortable with. I would strongly advise keeping a notebook or word processor file for each class that you teach, in which you record anything that you learn about the class, be it successes, failures, or just the names of the students who impressed you (or otherwise). The onus is on you as a teacher to observe these small details, and your attitude should be to learn as much from them as they do from you.

Your attitude to teaching in the classroom should be matched by your attitude to planning outside it. Lesson planning will help you avoid situations in class which could cause confrontation. I recently went to watch a demo class at a city high school, where the students were paired off to practise a conversation. I have tried similar experiments in my classroom where the students have a much wider range of levels. The activity quickly disintegrated into Korean speaking, disorder, and a flustered teacher yelling at his class. Now I work harder to come up with activities in which students can practice the same conversations, but in more guided, group based activities and with more preparation time. Everyone is still learning, but in an environment that suits them and me better. Sometimes it's just not as easy as saying "practice this": your attitude should be to find the best way for your students to practice it.

Another reason to lesson plan thoroughly is that it will impress your colleagues. Korean teachers work long hours with little vacation. Someone has to be at school until 10 o'clock to teach night classes, and come in during the holidays to teach summer school or go on residential training courses away from their families. You can imagine that if you come to class with nothing prepared, they may be less inclined to help you. Your co-teachers will not expect you be a great teacher the first time you walk into the classroom. In my experience they will appreciate any efforts





on your part and do their best to support you. The support of your co-teacher will help you enormously in your class. If your students see that your co-teacher is not involved in your lesson, they will be far less likely to involve themselves. Teaching with your co-teacher involved is much easier than doing it alone. Remember that Koreans will be impressed by hard work, and will forgive you a lot if you're seen to be making an effort.

Getting your students motivated is one of the biggest challenges you will face as a high school teacher, and having a motivated class will remove a lot of the possibilities for conflict. Once again, this is a case of listening to your students. Find out what drives them. Even at high school, I keep a bag of candy to hand out as prizes for games or answering questions correctly. This makes for excellent positive reinforcement of participation and effort. Prizes for students also make a huge difference to their commitment. For "Music Month" prizes I had a selection of my old CDs shipped over from England for the teams that accumulated the highest scores, and witnessed a big jump in participation. I also found that taking an interest in students' progress in their English classes with their Korean teachers built closer bonds with my students. I looked at my students exam results with my co-teacher and then spent the next week either praising or admonishing them based on their scores. Those that I praised seemed genuinely happy, and I got some crestfallen looks from those with whom I told I was disappointed. I think one or two are even working harder in my class because of it. Anything you can do to connect your class to their regular English classes will help you establish more credibility as a teacher, leading to more attentive students, and a happier you.

Arguably as important as listening to your students is understanding them, and your role in their lives. My students Jeongeun and Gyeongmi come to school at 8.30am, and don't leave again until 9.15pm, after which they go to two academies, and then study at home, sometimes until 2am. Everything they do is geared towards tackling the Korean SAT, which looms at the end of their school careers. The only 50 minutes of their week that are not spent preparing for this exam are the minutes they spend in my class. If I find them flagging in class, or surreptitiously trying to



finish their homework for the following class, I try to bear in mind the stress that they are probably under and go easy on them. I am not for one minute advocating letting students sleep or study other things in your class, but if you do catch a Jeongeun or a Gyeongmi doing this, take a moment to think about the pressure she is under. Adopting a firm but understanding attitude will head off a lot of conflicts before they have had a chance to start.

The truth for a high school teacher is that your class is the least important part of your students' school week. If you look back to your own school days, how would you have treated a class that had no exam and no grade? This is exactly the situation that your students find themselves in, except that they can't escape your class so easily. Realising that your class is far from a priority for your students doesn't mean that you should take it less seriously. In fact, it means you should take the class even more seriously. Your students are not obligated to learn anything that you teach, which means that you have to work several times harder to make what you teach interesting and fun enough for it not to be a chore. I have read a lot of negative comments about native speaking teachers simply being entertainers rather than teachers, but your students will learn from you just for the sake of learning, rather than for an exam that will eventually have a financial payoff. This can make it a thrilling experience when you hear students using the grammar you taught them last week when speaking to you outside the classroom. If your attitude is that you will teach your students something, and you can do it in a way they enjoy, they will respect you all the more.

Finally, your job outside the classroom will be just as important in fostering a productive relationship with your students. Interaction with them in their daily lives can have huge positive effects. I play football for my local town team, and a few of my students have trained with us. Afterwards, I noticed a real jump in levels of respect, behaviour and interaction from those students in my class. Now I try to play football as much as possible with my students now, especially as those that play are the boys whose behaviour could have become a source of conflict. Football is not the only method you can use. I ate lunch with some my students, and the bonds we forged





chatting were carried into the classroom. Do whatever you can to build these bonds. Helping students outside the classroom will also help your standing with the student and teaching bodies. For the last month my desk in the teachers' office has become a kind of unofficial clinic for third year students preparing for their university interviews. I've helped write speeches and ask mock interview questions to hopeful students, and have been able to share in their delight when they are accepted. Even though I no longer teach the third grade, it helps that teachers see me taking the time to help them out. Having the attitude that you will help your students wherever and whenever will take you a long way in Korea.

Going back to William James' quote, your attitude can help you avoid conflicts and resolve them if they do arise, but it is far more important than that. Your attitude will have the greatest bearing on your happiness at work in Korea. I would proffer three pieces of advice to new teachers. Firstly, give without giving in. I found myself and my ideas about teaching changing and being changed week to week during my first semester. Be prepared to question what you thought you knew, and to try things you never thought of. At the same time, cling on to what you believe is right for your students. Secondly, be humble and hardworking. It's unlikely you're the first foreign teacher at your school, and you're not in any way a celebrity. A good work ethic will go a long way to matching, or exceeding your schools expectations. Finally, set out to impress people in everything you do. Koreans of all ages will respect the time and effort you put in, and treat you accordingly. Remember, you are very, very obvious around your school, so wherever you are, try to create a good impression. Remembering these points has helped me through 8 conflict free months here, and will hopefully go on helping me for a long time yet.



Jeff Wasserboehr
(영문고등학교)

Waegook in Paradise

☐ Help Wanted; Seeking Open Minds

On the flight into Seoul it should be repeated like a mantra: *open mind, open mind, open mind, openmind, openmind openmindopenmindopenmind*. Until the words run together. Things are going to be a world different here than what we're used to. That's a no-brainer. I flew into Incheon International expecting culture clash. But no matter how much I prepared myself for the contrasts, I knew that I was still underestimating. No one can fully prepare themselves for the smack-to-the-face of culture shock.

Truth be told, I had a perfectly good job before I decided on Korea. For my first post-undergraduate year of professional work, I gripped for a video production company in Washington D.C. My boss contracted us out to world-famous companies such as CNN, National Geographic, and Discovery Channel. I met political figureheads, news anchors, and celebrities. I scrolled a teleprompter for Barack Obama in a taped interview. My name appeared in credits. I was in a position millions would have killed to have. I had everything; so why did I throw it all away for *kimchi*? Because none of it felt right.

I wanted to work, travel, and write. I researched. I discovered that Asia was feasible and I set my sights on Korea. I learned that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with a *hagweon*. When I found out, through a recruiting service, about EPIK, I thought everything seemed way too good to be true: an opportunity to teach in a foreign country, a nice salary, a free and furnished apartment, and few payments. How was it possible?

But, still, what about this whole teaching thing? I'd never taught before. I admitted





that in my application. And, so what? I was hired.

□ Welcome to Korea, Nice to Meet You, Here is Your Contract

When you think about it seriously, the whole concept is asinine. Some representative in a foreign country that you've never met before wants you to travel across oceans to teach their nation's children. It's crazy in both directions. Firstly, that they entrust you with this responsibility. And secondly, that you trust them to hold true to their promises. That's what the contract is for: assurance for both parties. I had never taught before, but the contract bound me to my promise to try my hardest.

First, I tried looking back to my own middle school and high school days for a remembrance of how my language teachers taught Spanish. As teachers and, more importantly, as ambassadors of English-speaking countries, we must find ways to relate to children and teenagers who are not only of an entirely different generation, but of an entirely different culture as well. These are students born in the entertainment age; they love pop music, brand names, games, sports, movies. We must use that to our advantage. The most important thing is to make sure that the children have fun while learning the language. It's hard enough that many of the students in Korea are at school from eight in the morning until ten at night. When it's our turn for them: let there be fun, for goodness sake. I am not saying do not challenge them; that would not be right either. The idea is to somehow combine relevant learning with fun challenges, laughs, and praise. When students are praised for great effort, their subconscious mind empowers them to utilize the language more often. That's the whole point. This is a massive challenge for us *waegooks* who have little to no teaching experience.

One thing that I've learned about this whole teaching gig: "English Teacher" to me sounds too stiff, mechanical—robotic even. I find it impossible to look through that lens anymore. "English Teacher" does not do my job a worthy definition. When I realized that this job was not that of an "English Teacher," but instead a job that fell somewhere between English teacher slash gym instructor slash game-show host slash manuscript editor slash singing-dancing-look-at-that-*waegook*-idiot, then I made





peace with the contract. I understood that my job title was not a precise pinpoint of what I did; understood that ambiguity was necessary when coming to terms with becoming a foreign English teacher, and that a grain of salt must be taken over contractual items such as “Required Instructional Hours” and “Dutiful Obligation.” There is peace in knowing that our jobs are not confined to the boundaries of fourteen pages of A4 paper. Nowhere in the EPIK contract does it say, “Article 18: go ahead and make a fool of yourself. Have fun. Your students will love it if you do.”

That said, the contract does make sense—it is all totally sane. I am just saying that in addition, we must be prepared to do the things that are not set anywhere in stone. We must be prepared to shed the rigidity of contracts, let loose, and have a blast at school.

▣ In Addition to Your Workload, Please Figure out How to Live Here

As if running the show isn’t work enough, in addition, we must adjust to the culture around us. Again, I stress the importance of an open mind. Koreans are pragmatic in a way that exudes brilliance to some and irritates others. For instance, I know that my parents would be displeased to brush their teeth while their bare feet stand upon a wet floor; moisture leftover from the shower taken earlier in the day. But it’s practical to have the sink and the shower share a single drainpipe. Likewise, it’s practical to have high-rise apartment buildings looming over cities as opposed to traditional housing; especially when land is at a premium. The same pragmatic thinking applies to the locking mechanisms on shopping-cart wheels and escalators at E-Mart. And for burning trash and for cleaning off your plate after you’re finished at lunchtime and for *Konglish*. There is well-reasoned practicality behind all of these things. This frame of mind extends to the Korean people. There is a pragmatic purpose to their friendliness, too; it’s outright and forward. Their intent for your friendship is obvious and you must not go digging to find out whether or not a Korean person likes you. They will state plainly, “we are friends.”

As an intricate part of their society, us *waegooks* also have a very particularized





role to fill. They expect us to be respectable, honorable. But they also expect us to be unaccustomed to their culture, their styles of eating, and their habits of daily life. That is why, I believe, if you choose to surprise the Koreans by mastering chopsticks, by learning to read *hangul*, and by speaking some native phrases, it will go a long way to fortify the brilliant reputation that we have here as teachers. It will continue the flow of ever-smiling faces that come at us from all directions.

□ A Community of Like-Minded Misfits

If ever you need help, there's a wonderful support group. I sometimes like to generalize and think of us foreign English teachers collectively like the misfits on the Island of the Misfit Toys in the famous "Rudolf Television Christmas Special."

"Are you sure you want to go to Korea?" people asked me before I left my comfortable job in Washington D.C.

"Positive," I said. To me, and, I know, to my fellow community of GETs here in Andong, this job just makes sense. Back home, in America, I received that furrowed-brow stare, that one raised eyebrow, that questionable tilt to the head that manifests someone's skepticism of your decisions. In this dynamic I felt trapped in the role of some foolhardy idealist. In reality, I thought that I deserved to be the one canting my head and questioning them: Don't you want to experience something new? Do you desire to see the world? Is it not wise to see what another culture is all about—to question your beliefs and embrace others? But, here, together, a collective community of misfits, we all belong.

There takes a certain type of character to uproot and move to Korea. Maybe it's unconventional to leave your country behind. But in Korea, the community of foreigners is so like-minded it's, at times, frightening. Someone pitches an idea and the responses follow: "of course I want to see that temple!" "We *should* go to Seoraksan!" "Why not try pig intestine?" Then it's as simple as agreeing on a date and a time. From site to site and city to city and mountain to mountain we move.

*
 □ There' s a Fallback Plan

I kept my *waegook* mouth shut when my co-teacher didn't slow down and passed right by my apartment building. *I thought I was getting a ride home*, I wondered to myself. Then my co-teacher said to me, rolling down the car window, that we were on our way to catch grasshoppers instead. I played it cool and nodded. Internally, I was laughing, I was saying, *catching grasshoppers! What? I've gone and caught fireflies before when I was a boy—but grasshoppers? This is crazy*. Then my co-teacher turned back to me, locked my eyes into his, and added: "then we're going to fry them. Do you like Korean beer?"

So it was decided: an evening of finding grasshoppers and a dinner of fried insects and beer.

Such a proposition in America would be considered outlandish. In Korea, *medduggi teegim*, fried grasshoppers, and *maekju* makes sense. It's situations such as these where that open mind becomes the clothing that you wear everyday—over your work clothes.

If it ever becomes too much to bear, let loose and fall back into a great foreigner support group. You might gain a new perspective this way.

There has been one *waegook* discussion that I will remember forever. One of my fellow GETs came over and mouthed off about how she thought Koreans were immensely vain because she spotted a local man staring at himself in the mirror for minutes on end trying to fix his hair. I am not a disagreeable person, I just like to have discussions. That night that the Andong population of foreigners sat on the floor of my *oneroom*, ate ramen and grilled cheeses—for a taste of home—and we discussed whether or not Koreans were vain. I argued first that vanity is not tied to a single, global definition, but that it is culturally relative. Second, that the impulse is innate; that we are all vain by nature. We all spend time looking at ourselves in mirrors. I proposed a question: the fact that Koreans spend a lot of time checking themselves in public mirrors and not behind closed doors; does that make them vain, or does it just make them honest? It's all food for thought. The point is that the difference is not a bad thing it's just new. We learned, that night, that it felt good to





hold discussions such as these. It felt good to learn that nobody was right.

□ Reap the Benefits

It should never be misunderstood: this job is not easy. It's difficult to be cheerful all day, to remain positive when you're co-teacher throws a last-minute detail at you, to act peppy and smiley for your students even when you just had a bad class and you have another class immediately to follow. It's hard. But we must embrace and come to love the cliché: "No one ever said it would be easy."

We're not expected to *know* everything about the way Koreans think and the way that they make decisions. But we are expected to try and understand. It's the least we can do. A last minute call to action is difficult for us to adjust to because we are unaccustomed to flying by the seat of our pants. At first we may wear long, tired faces. But eventually there will be success. And as long as we can shake off that momentary fright and accept that their culture is sometimes last minute, we will have a better understanding, an easier adjustment, and eventually we may grow to be that way ourselves.

Perhaps, on a more personal level, the most rewarding thing that this job offers you, more so than salary, more so than stability, is confidence. You grow. You find out more about your capabilities. Your limits stretch further. I wasn't too keen on teaching prior to my experience with EPIK because I didn't think I could teach. Hell, I didn't think I could karaoke. Teaching aside, back in the states, I would never have had the courage to sing in front of a crowded room. I would have been too timid, too scared of making a fool of myself. But after my fair share of *norebangs*, I have come to love the dynamic, and I know that I will miss them dearly when I do return to my home country. I've learned not to be afraid of making a fool of myself. I've learned that it's unwise to consider—even for a second—that you're ever, truly, a fool. I've shed a huge fear: the fear of failure. I have nothing else but Korea and this teaching job to thank for that.

At six in the evening on any given Korean day, I find solace in my American family and the people I know back home, and how they are all sleeping; I find

peace in their restfulness. I also like to consider, at this time, the others—us *waegooks* in a foreign land—who are still awake. While the world we left is dreaming, we are living vibrantly.

To all of the questioning westerns back home: I traded my job for more than *kimchi*. Korea is far more than pickled cabbage; it's a massive departure from our definitional norm. It's green mountains and golden rice fields. It's Love Motels. It's grasshoppers. Crickets. Mantis. It's smoking. Drinking. It's where-the-hell-is-a-public-trashcan? It's shameless K-pop. It's garish, rainbow-colored signs and bridges. It's smiling, joking, howling-with-laughter men and women drinking nightly soju in restaurants downtown. It's meals on mats on floors. It's spicy. It's ginkgo. It's men rubbing the hair on your arms in total awe that your body is capable of producing such a monstrosity. It's rivers. Seas. Ocean. It's eating grapes, but not the skin and spitting out the seeds; and it's also finding a method in which to successfully achieve this. It's *Konglish*. It's *Kapshida!* It's striking up the burner and boiling water for the Ziplock bag of chestnuts that you and your co-teacher found during lunch break. It's broadcast television with silly but unrelentingly catchy commercials. It's presents and gifts and tiny tokens of appreciation. It's a world of its own, with a history vast as time itself. It was never and will never be just and only *kimchi*. I like to think of it this way: I stepped out of my old world and entered another; one where gravity does not apply, and I am floating.



My co-teacher, Lee Dong-Jin, cooks up some freshly caught grasshoppers with salt and oil. An old, traditional, Korean-style *panchan*. The grasshoppers acquire a reddish color after five minutes of frying.



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Points, Empathy and a Rubber Chicken

Venturing down a then unfamiliar path of teaching English some months ago, my mind's pendulum of indecisiveness swung back and forth between; 'Wow, this is intense!' to 'Wow, this is fun!', before finally settling on the rational middle-ground.

Here stands a cartoon type character with open arms and hands out. A speech bubble rhetorically reads; "What other job lets you squeeze a rubber chicken-leg in the face of respected professional people and call it the self-correction method?"

That was in Ireland, in the summer of 2009.

Before coming to Korea I taught adults who came to my country from all over the world to immerse themselves in spoken English. Their brave leap of faith and finance was justly rewarded with supportive teachers providing practical lessons in conversational English.

But as teachers, we didn't really get to know our students in the short time they were our charge. Nor could we fully empathize with their choosing to embrace a foreign language environment as a means to improving their English and enriching their lives.

Now though the tables have turned. All of a sudden the native language of my immediate environment is gone and well... everyone's speaking Korean. Simple tasks and errands have morphed into little challenges and memorable occasions whereupon new language is inadvertently or urgently acquired. The language teacher has become the language learner - often spotted panicking in a supermarket having forgotten the Korean word for bin bags.

The blazing heat of my first Korean summer saw me with a fellow male native English teacher out on a weekend mission to purchase some shorts. After visiting some clothes shops in Downtown Gumi and posing the question 'Banji Issawyo?'

(Do you sell shorts) it soon became apparent from some of the reactions we were getting that all was not right with our delivery. Several shops later we discovered that the word for shorts is (바지) Baji, and (반지) Banji? Well that means ring!

An innocent mistake and retrospectively embarrassing it may be but I for one won't forget the Korean words for 'pants' or 'ring' in a hurry!

While the ability to speak Korean isn't completely necessary thanks mostly in my case to the guardian angel-like qualities of my co-teacher, if you do take the time to learn some Korean it will help to build trust and earn you some respect among your colleagues.

Yes, you are an English teacher and as such your primary concern is communicating at all times in English but if you want to simply buy some clothes without sparking an international incident warranting immediate self-imposed deportation, it's nice to have just a little bit of the language at your disposal.

Fast forward to fall of 2010 and that same cartoon character (let's call him Bob) is just as dominant in my mind's eye. The fake chicken appendage has been upgraded to a full rubber bird and my adult students of yesteryear are today the children of Gumi Elementary School in the province of Gyeongbuk.

At first the children were a little unsure. I am their first foreign native speaking teacher and so it took time to gain their acceptance. Then there came a point and I don't know what that point was, but afterwards there was a marked difference in their attitude towards me and towards English.

While out on a stroll one Saturday morning, from behind a small crowd of people, the call came: 'Jonodan Teacher'. I was then promptly taken by the hand and ushered a few blocks to meet the children's pet dog.

It's important to communicate on their level. You know what areas they've covered in class. You know the phrases and word orders that are familiar to them. So, outside of the class when you hear your name screamed out from a candy store or side street, you know that a simple conversation should follow soon thereafter: 'Hi, how are you? Who is she? Is this your dog? How old is she?'

Denying all knowledge of Korean when with the students doesn't mean there is no communication and understanding between us though. Effective teachers know their





students. They know their names and often their siblings' names. Sometimes they even know their dogs' names although I've since forgotten that one! They know their strengths, weaknesses, hobbies and interests. They can naturally relate because there is interest and empathy.

In my experience, the fundamental differences between teaching English to adults and teaching children are few. But where there is an expectation on adults to learn and improve their language skills at a more progressive pace, children being children don't really want to be there! They want to be outside and playing.

So what do you do? Do you don the metaphorical big floppy shoes and unleash unto the world Mister or Missus Silly? Or do you focus on the syllabus at hand, meticulously adhering to every grammatical nuance while insisting on flawless delivery all the way through? Sticking with the circus metaphors, the role is more like that of a trapeze artist than a clown in that it's all about balance.

Your relationship with your co-teacher is sacred and I'm frequently struck by the lengths to which Hong Soon Yong will go in order to help make my life here more comfortable.

A good working relationship based on mutual respect, requires the ability to listen and discuss ideas and suggestions from the students' point of view. Your co-teacher knows the student mindset and more and so is in a unique position to advise you as to what activities they will enjoy as well as those they're going to dread.

Two minutes before every lesson I ask 'Do you have your name-cards?' The students who have left their name-cards in their homeroom have a chance to go and get them.

Or those who have them promptly and proudly display their names on their desks while those who don't raise their hands in the air. We count the number of students without a name card. That number is then subtracted from the total class score which resides on a laminated sheet beside the white board. There's a collective sigh if the figure plummets and a cheer when it's raised.

Their 'score' goes up or down based on performance and behavior during the class.

Ah yes, points! Akin to a currency for the kids and as such they are watched with interest by the whole class. Because they have a very sharp sense of what is fair, we



always keep the scores tight between teams and class groups where possible.

To encourage English use we also have a sticker and certificate system. They know that making an effort to speak English outside of the classroom as well as inside is worth points. Points are worth stickers and stickers can accumulate to produce certificates.

Most of the kids take pride in their name-cards having stylized and colored them to a high standard. I prefer the children to use anglicized versions of their Korean names so that I can quickly read and accurately pronounce their names in class which is invaluable. In doing this though, they also learn how English name structures compare to their Korean counterparts. Plus I'm a little uncomfortable with the idea of making anyone change their name in principle.

There is no doubt that teaching children is a fulfilling experience. They constantly redeem themselves giving you the ultimate in job satisfaction. The child who is one minute screaming in Korean while hurling an eraser at another student's head later greets you with 'good afternoon teacher'. Or the third grade boy whose gregarious side is appeased at the start of every class by providing some dance moves when asked; 'Hey Jay Song, can you dance?'

Something happens when a tiny voice finally pronounces a word or phrase correctly or surprises you with content from a lesson you taught weeks or months before. Or when a child makes it his business to read up about your home country and asks your co-teacher's help to translate his questions to you.

Three fifth-grade students came to me this morning having been assigned a class project to interview someone. It went something like this: *How long have you been in Korea?* About eight months. *What about Korea?* It was scary at first because I didn't know the language but now I know a little more Korean so I love it. *What makes teaching English worthwhile?* Hearing my students speak English.

That the children are interested in us as foreigners is humbling. That they are motivated to work hard to improve their English, just to talk to us is inspirational.

But, such is the nature of children coupled with the potentially unnerving environment of English class that a chance to laugh out loud and mock other students who make an error is one that's seldom passed up.





While there's a plethora of socio-psychological methods for classroom management and the like, I have found that adhering to some simple key rules can improve the sanctity of your children's learning environment.

Firstly, 'never say no'. Language learning is a natural process open to error. In English language teaching, 'no' is a harsh word with only negative connotations. However it's delivered, the word 'no' implies your immediate dismissal of a student's honest attempt to resolve a question that you put to him.

When a student, regardless of age or ability answers your question in a less than perfect manner, I always try to respond with anything other than a demeaning, upward inflected 'No'.

Ok, so you've asked the class 'what day is it today?' There's a flurry of hands in the air before someone shouts out, 'it's sunny'. For many teachers the automatic response comes instantly: 'No...' before, adding insult to injury; 'it's Tuesday'!

So what are the alternatives?

Gestures provide a particularly effective means of overcoming the language barrier. Here, you could look a little puzzled, scratch your head, look up at the ceiling or wall while giving the impression that you are thinking their answer through. Nod even. Then reply giving the question again but emphasizing the key word. 'Hmm, yes it IS sunny, but what DAY is it today?'

Second; never laugh at a student. However difficult this may seem at times, it's important not to laugh at a student's answer. Whenever the rest of the class descend into a fit of reactionary giggles, I maintain eye contact with my student without raising a smile and talk over the noise until it subsides. I highlight what was correct and let the student figure out the error before asking again. There's an element of self-correction and the focus is taken off the original error and subsequent reaction.

Techniques like these bolstered by some obligatory well-placed praise help to build trust with our students. It is our job to provide a safe and secure environment for them to experiment with the language, free insofar as possible from ridicule or chastisement.

I like the English Language Teaching Mantra; 'Nothing is written in stone'. It leaves the door open for creativity and continuous trial with the occasional error thrown in for good measure. But hey, that's how we learn isn't it?





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The Teacher Becomes the Student

When it comes to the question of writing an essay on the experience of guest foreign teachers (GET) adjusting to Korean customs, it seems daunting to limit it only to four pages. But then I think about it and realize that it has no hold on how daunting adjustment has been at times. I will attempt to delve into my experience in Korea over the last seven months of exploring not only the physical country, but also the seemingly endless adventures of culture, customs and lifestyles.

Apart from the few 'hardened travelers' I have come across here in Korea, the majority of us are new to this and for many of us, it is both a frightening and exhilarating experience. And both of these feelings are rooted in the sudden culture shock we experience when first stepping foot off our flight. I remember those initial days with such clarity because I was inundated with 'new' things from all angles. From the traditional Korean customs to the more subtle differences in lifestyle and viewpoints, it is enough to make anyone feel like they are swimming against the tide and sometimes wonder (in those first days or weeks) whether they will ever find solid ground. This is not to say that the Koreans both in the work environment and the strangers on the street do not go out of their way to accommodate GET's. They do! And with so much selflessness that I found myself wondering what I had done to deserve being treated this way. And this is where I come to my first point: I had not done anything. It is simply the Korean way.

When I embarked from my very long flight from South Africa – feeling emotionally and physically drained – it was my co-teacher who proved to me how kind the Korean people are. He led me through the confusion of the first day like a captain steering his bedraggled ship through a storm. I must have looked like I was hardly capable of speaking coherently, let alone able to teach Elementary school children





English! But he took it all so well and managed to keep me on my feet after a long day of physical tests at the hospital, seemingly endless hours in a shopping centre finding things to make me feel more at home (with me staring into the bottom of the shopping trolley longingly, wishing I could crawl into it and disappear) and eventually showing me my new apartment. It was brand new, and I heard later that the original apartment the school had reserved for me was deemed unsuitable by my co-teacher. He spent days using his (very little) free time, hunting for a wonderful new home for someone he hadn't even met yet! The Korean dedication to care is unparalleled as far I am concerned.

When I was settled into my new apartment I was able to begin exploring, experiencing and adjusting. But it was terrifying at times! Without being able to read a single street sign, shop name or even my own apartment building's name, I was hesitant to venture too far away from home. And it was then that it hit me how different things here would be. I had naturally anticipated a difference between Korea and any Western country, but I think most GET's have no idea just how different it is until they arrive here. But then there were the wonderful people who could see on my face that I was struggling to keep my wits about me and, even though they could sometimes not speak a word of English, they would try their best to help. This was especially true when I first went into the little convenience store next to my apartment. The lady who works there to this day cannot speak a word of English, but she follows me around the shop chatting and pointing out things that she suspects may be something I would like to eat or try. And, without fail, I would leave the shop with a free gift of dried squid, eggs or some sort of candy. Or there are the people who will get friends of theirs on the phone who can speak English to try to establish some sort of communication between us. A GET will know soon enough that they are not only made to feel welcome in Korea, but they are made to feel a part of Korea.

Along with not being able to read anything came the common pitfalls of buying yogurt instead of milk, salt instead of sugar, vinegar instead of soy sauce as well as a fiery hot pepper or chilli sauce that I had mistaken for ketchup! There have also been days when I got so fed up with my washing machine that I pressed every but-



ton until it showed signs of life (I can say this now because it still works), took a photo of my TV's remote control and had someone at school translate it for me as well as go without cash because I had no idea how to use the Korean-only ATM. It is frustrating at the time, humorous now, and a constant reminder that there is always more to learn and experience.

I was also taken aback by the stares I get walking around here, minding my own business. It takes a while for anyone to get used to being stared at, and not to jump to the conclusion that you are doing something wildly inappropriate. I remember the first time I felt awkward by simply being outside I was stepping out of my building and a group of children playing on the corner saw me, shrieked unanimously, and ran around the corner out of sight. The bravest of the bunch peeked around the corner, saw me seeing him, giggled and disappeared. Slowly the rest did the same until they felt safe in a pack and walked closer to take a look at me. I felt like something in a zoo. Nowadays I take very little notice of the staring, but it is something to get used to! I now know that it is best to always view it as a compliment. To many Korean people we are interesting and different, and if they could they would ask us all kinds of questions about our homes, families and culture. This is because they are interested they want to know us but often, with the language barrier, the most they know is by what they see.

Once I started getting the hang of these potentially unnerving situations, I began to go through some informal Korean customs training. Since I work at two schools it has also given me more opportunity to witness the traditional culture first-hand. Having experienced sports days, singing contests, staff dinners, musical and dance events, I have slowly but surely built up a substantial resume to use in the event that I am asked what I know of Korean culture. One day my main school, Balsan Elementary, had a traditional tea ceremony to teach the students about this custom. The students urged me to go to the front and go through the motions as well. I am sure that within my 2 minutes up there I undid everything that is important about the custom, and would surely have insulted a great many people. But it was tolerated with a smile, and eventually when I managed to get it right, there was a great feeling of pride in the act. I have also been able to see the students wear traditional





Korean dress for special occasions as well as having the kitchen prepare traditional food for certain special occasions (like Chuseok). On sports days and other special days the students are often required to do intricate dances during opening ceremonies. This is a feat I have yet to see mastered by students back home! And it proves how dedicated and diligent Korean people are in all they do.

Dedication and diligence are two main reasons why Korea is slowly edging onto centre stage worldwide. Korean people work hard. And they work for (in Western opinion) excruciatingly long hours! Adults and children alike often work or study past midnight, only to wake up very early to start their day again. When I have brought this up with Korean friends they make no mention that it is too much for them to handle. This highlights the incredible work ethic that people in this country have, and I realized very early on that I am very lucky to have the time off that I do, plus vacation and sick days. It is not something to be taken for granted, and any kind of abuse of this will leave a bad taste in the mouths of your Korean co-workers. I have noticed that it is not part of Korean custom to be reprimanded outright – which can at times be frustrating coming from a place where feedback is so prevalent – but slight differences in attitude towards one can often offer enough evidence that one has erred!

One of the things I will miss about Korea is mealtimes, and my friends and family may find it a bit odd if I reach over and grab something off their plate once I return home. For most GET's, going out for a meal with other people consists of ordering our own dish and drink or maybe sharing a bottle of wine at the table. Korea turned this concept on its head for me! Here it is all about sharing, and once one grows used to this concept, it makes you realize how much more it can bring to a meal. When it comes to drinking also, I was very confused at first about why people would get up from the floor to walk over to me to give me a glass to hold and then pour a drink into it. And then watch me drink it! During my first staff dinner my principal came and did this to me and eventually one of the other staff members was kind enough to explain that it is part of Korean custom to then reciprocate the favour. I have heard of experiences where this has left the GET with a very unhappy liver the next day, but not to return the glass could prove more damaging to



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 a person than it would be to simply accept the back-and-forth drinking that takes place. It may feel uncomfortable at first to do this, and I was very unsure about how to go about it, but once one gets the hang of it, it makes a mealtime that much more enjoyable! The sharing of food and drink makes an event out of the meal.

It is not only the mealtimes that were out of my comfort zone, but also the meals. These took me a long time to adjust to simply because, like everything else about Korea, the food here is so different! There are the days when I think that if another grain of rice passes over my lips I may cry out in frustration or when my students ask me, “Teacher, you like kimchi?” and I feel like shouting to the heavens that I have had enough kimchi to last me a lifetime. But then I go to a restaurant and I find myself unconsciously picking up my chopsticks (which I can now use without having a piece of pork go flying across the room!) and eating the kimchi as easily as I breathe. Korea has a way to get into your system in that way. Before you know it, you will be bowing to people left, right and centre, feeling naked with your shoes on inside a building, wondering where your chopsticks are when in a ‘western’ restaurant, and crossing your arms in a big “NO” signal before the word ‘no’ passes your lips. And, you know what? I think it is wonderful to have the culture and food become such a part of one’s daily life.

I think one more aspect that threw me for a loop in Korea is the very popular ‘no-personal-space’ issue. I got my first taste of this one day standing in a queue at a shopping mall. As I was patiently waiting my turn, a lady pushed in front of me with her basket without a second glance and proceeded to unpack her groceries, heedless of my distress. I let it slide, passing it off as a mistake. However, other foreigners I have spoken to have had similar experiences and I eventually learned that I had left too much room between me and the customer ahead of me, leading the pushing in lady to believe that I wasn’t in the queue at all! When I look at queues here it is incredible to see how close people stand behind one another. This also becomes an issue when I go to larger cities like Seoul and have to take the subway. The combination of urgency and lack of personal space has seen me being bumped and bounced around like apinball without a backward glance or murmur of apology from my assailant. One could become very angry about it if one does not bear in





mind that there is no disrespect intended it is just the way it is. When in Korea, do as the Koreans do!

I could go on for ages rehashing my experiences. Like the times taxi drivers had no idea what I was saying because of a slight difference in my pronunciation (always have a backup location, I have learned). How wonderful – and sometimes frustrating – it is that leaving a tip is unheard of the amount of free stuff, or ‘service’, we get with purchases random acts of kindness I have encountered almost on a daily basis and conversations I have had consisting of “hello” followed by hand gestures that would put the most avid charades player to shame.

I have become accustomed to learning of new developments at school at very late dates and to simply adjust with a smile and go with the flow. I have had days where I wondered whether I made the right decision to teach in Korea, and days when I wonder how I was lucky enough to feel at home in two countries. Essentially it comes down to opening oneself up to the experience. Some days are better than others. We are guests in a place that will be the most conscientious host known to man. It is not to be taken for granted. I am happy here. I am living my life fully and learning more than I could ever teach!



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A Road to the East and a Road to the West

On July 27th, 1953, an armistice was signed suspending Korea's civil conflict. A boundary was subsequently established, dividing the country along the 38th parallel. This boundary, known as the 'DMZ,' has gone on to create a dichotomous nation that epitomizes our modern world of "have" and "have-nots." So my question is: how did South Korea manage to get what they "have" so quickly and how has it paved the way for so many GETs? I'm not exactly sure, but I have an idea and I think it has to do with "change."

▣ How Korea? The Story of a Phoenix and a Flightless Bird

South Korea has since taken off from the rubble of war, while its country mates in the North have remained grounded, stymied by a single party state and its fascist ruler. In this, a miniscule country, covered in mountains and void of natural resources, South Korea has flown toward world prominence. In the course of a mere 30 years (1980~2010) South Korea's GDP has rose from \$88 billion dollars to a staggering \$1460 billion. That's a bit of a change, I would say. This period of exorbitant growth is referred to as 'The Miracle on the Han River.' And despite the lack of any natural resource, Korea still continues to excel because of it has an even greater resource: its people. Korean people are a model of the new modern world: rapidly moving and changing, efficient and resourceful. It is something that is immediately apparent even for the casual voyeur.

Looking out my apartment window I can see high-rise apartments bearing down on the children as they run with their backpacks through the streets, past the gardens





and the convenient stores, along the beauty shops and BBQs, through the alleys to their hagwons. Like their children, it seems all of Korea never stops running, as if they have abandoned the clock, choosing to stay open all day and night, eager to move ahead in the world, unless it's a Wednesday night and everyone is in the mood for soju and samgyeopsal.

Korea's industrious spirit and warm heart has bridged the country to the western world, catching the eye of both investors and invaders, the latter being the GETs who have entered and never seem to want to leave. I fall into that group and I'm not ashamed to say so, because it's hard not to get caught up in a place that is experiencing such change and growth and if you are here long enough you'll change and grow yourself. I think that's why most of us come here anyway: to change and grow.

☐ Dynamicism or Cannibalism: Eat or be Eaten

I've heard a number of people make the same statement about living in Korea, I'm not sure where it originated, but here it is: "If you can 'survive' a year in Korea, you can spend the rest of your life 'living' there." Now that I've lived here for more than a year I could not agree more. So, when I sat down to write this essay, I tried to recall what it felt like to experience all those changes that are now just part of my every day. I wasn't able to recapture that certain sentiment of assimilation that you feel when you don't know where you are or what you are doing, so I have to refer to a blog that I wrote when I first arrived. This is what I put down after three weeks into my stay:

As I recline on a split-back office chair, legs extended, under-looking the high-rising apartment buildings, I'm thinking: humid heat. Having spent every Summer of my life in New England, I can say I've experienced humidity and in short stretches I've even enjoyed that sweet Summer smog, but now it's different: I'm living in Korea and I hear it's going to warm-up soon. With that being said, I'm taking advantage of days like today (70 and dry), relishing in this short-lived Spring, awaiting that ubiquitous ether of the middle months to catch me by surprise again.

Well, enough talk about the weather, I've spent three weeks or so living in Korea and





the honeymoon is over, I'm living and not vacationing here. Now, I think I can speak for a lot of people when I say that things materialize very quickly in Korea. I'm not even sure what to make of the few weeks I've spent here except that it's been a change. Change has steered the dizzy transition and rapid assimilation into this foreign culture of people drenched in Americana. Welcome to the unknown.

The unknown and its accompanying change warps time and distorts perspective, drawing the subconscious and disrupting the course. In a life of routine the mind begins favoring anticipation, caring only of results while forgetting the process. Our senses are lost without a process and the journey becomes a zombie-like charge down a worn path. What's left to feel or experience when you already know the result or have anticipated the possible outcomes? I'd grown sick of knowing and tired of forgetting guess that's why I came to Korea.

I think many people come to Korea bored with their life (or bankrupt from college debt), wanting to escape the everyday and to be surprised by something for once.

Working as a GET in Korea is the ultimate opportunity to experience a new culture and to be part of a time in a country's history that is something, I believe, to be akin to the late 1950~60's America and in a number of different ways. Just think: cars, commodities and culture change, post-war 'progress' of burgeoning democracies. Now consider this: The 'Korean Conflict' may be the only successful engagement in the United States' over-zealous attempt to make the world 'safer for democracy,' during a campaign that has seen its host of historic failures. It's something to consider, even though the 'Korean Conflict' is commonly referred to as 'The Forgotten War.' Irony?

But no matter how many parallels you draw between the two countries, living in Korea is not like living in America or any other western countries. So for anyone flirting with the idea of flying out here, just make sure that you are ready to leave the comfy confines of familiarity because you won't be in Kansas anymore and you will probably feel like you've gone through a tornado getting here.

▣ A Change of Careers and a Change of Heart

Before I came to Korea I worked at a company that serviced businessmen and women and would never have imagined teaching children but now my customers are





kids and meeting their needs is no different than those of my old clientele: make them happy and give them what they need. I know I've changed, having adapted to a new environment and a new language, but I have also grown to understand that no matter how far you get from your home, people are just people and the faces that once seemed so foreign to you begin looking a lot like the faces of your buddies at home. A tourist comes back with a pile of pictures to show his friends and an EPIK teacher comes home with an education, as well as a longing for bargain-priced BBQ and big bottles of bland beer and soju and all of these things at the same time.

▣ Follow the Golden Brick Road to the Land of ESL Education

The path to Korea is an easy one: if you have a bachelors degree and are a native speaker of English with a command of the language and are open to a new experience and a change of pace, then follow that road so many others have traveled before you. But just remember that it's not the credentials that count here, it's the character. I promise that Korea will try your patience and I'm sure this feeling will be reciprocated, so best to take your time with everything if you decide to come.

Learning to teach and trying to assimilate into a foreign country at the same can be a perilous journey if you don't embrace what you are doing and where are living.

▣ Celebrity Status and the "Friend Dilemma"

For many GETs who arrive in Korea it is the first experience they will have in a classroom (myself included). It can be an overwhelming experience to get in front of a room of students who are more interested in you than in what you are saying because, to be honest, they probably have no idea what you're actually saying. You have to learn to speak in a new, slowed-down, succinct and instructional way. Once you get the hang of it you'll find yourself speaking to your friends at home in the same manner and they'll wonder if you've really gone abroad to teach English or be part of some human experiment. They'd actually be right in thinking both.

Once you have settled into your new apartment and have started teaching classes,



you'll notice your status has changed: you've become a 'local celebrity.' Outside your 'dong' you're just another 'waegook,' but in and around your local neighborhood and school you're on the 'A list.' It's something that is a bit overwhelming and unnerving at first, but after the initial shock it's something you find comforting. If you were an American and decided to move to another state nobody would care who you were or be interested in what you had to say, you'd have to make new friends. But when you're a foreigner in Korea everybody is interested in you and everybody wants to show you a good time. At work, you're not the "new guy," but rather like a guest in someone's house whose owner wants to make you feel as comfortable as possible, even if that means coercing you into singing karaoke with your colleagues at a "noraebang" or better yet the mobile, nonetheless entertaining 'noraebus.' Pretty soon, after you've acquired the taste for soju, you'll be sharing the microphone with your 'gyojang' (principle) and at this point in your 'Koreanization' you'll know you have turned a new leaf or at least learned to turn on the hot water in your apartment.

With all this local notoriety you'll have to learn to keep a somewhat low profile amongst students or else they'll treat you more like a friend and less like a teacher. Learning to curb their enthusiasm, as well as conducting yourself as an effective, yet endearing teacher is something you must start doing immediately or it may hinder your ability to manage the class. Classroom management can be a daunting task, especially for inexperienced teachers.

As a GET, students are very intrigued and interested in getting to know you. They really want to be your friend and this is great, but sometimes it can be a problem. Some students are able to keep a friendly relationship and understand that in the classroom it is all about learning and respecting the teachers, but this is difficult for other students. Many students want to be friendly and talkative outside of the classroom i.e. in the hallways and on the street, but inside the classroom they're unable to focus or take the lesson as seriously as they should. Learning to manage relationships with the students while asserting confidence is one of the most challenging parts of teaching in Korea. For me, this student-teacher relationship is something that continues to evolve as I gain more experience.





☐ To Teach is to be Taught

The student-teacher relationship is something that I think every GET begins to cherish and appreciate. The reward of teaching is not felt immediately, but rather accumulated over time. Being a good teacher means continually working to better the relationship with your students. This is not something that happens without great effort, it is something developed over time. I will be sad to see my sixth graders move on to middle school next year. I've been with them the longest and they have taught me everything I know.

☐ The World in Microcosm

It is amazing to think about all the changes that have occurred in the years leading up to Korea's rise to global prominence. Our world has transformed into a new 'Global Village' equipped with technology that keeps us magically connected at all times. My job as a GET is a direct result of globalization and even though I'm living thousands of miles away, I still remain connected and informed. I can watch my local news, read my local newspaper, and keep up on my local sports teams, while remaining in-touch with all my family and friends at home. This being said, my view has changed, forcing me to see things differently with this new perspective. I can now look back on where I came from and have an understanding of what it has meant to me. Now that I'm not living in the states, I'm able to see what my hometown is really like and how it's so different from much of the world, but also how much it is the same as everywhere else.

The only view I ever had about the country I grew-up in was from standing in the middle of it. Now if that's not a view worth changing in this merging world, then I don't know what is. Yet sometimes I think to myself: has my perspective really changed that much? I'm now part of a globally connected world that allows me to connect to anyone at any time and place I want. So does anyone ever really leave home anymore? Thousands of people have fled their country and have come to Korea to find out if they can get a better view of our world and all in the name of fostering a universal language, one student at a time. Go figure.