

Teaching English in Korea comes with its own lessons

Posted by [Emily09](#) on 7/14/10 • Categorized as [Quality of Life](#)



Emily Shapiro's Korean students practice writing sentences in English. Photo by Emily Shapiro



English teacher Emily Shapiro dresses the part for a discussion of Roman politics with her Korean students. Photo by Emily Shapiro

By Emily Shapiro

Stacks of books piled haphazardly, board markers waiting in their fresh, plastic pouches, and binders and sheaves scattered all over my desk: This was the welcoming sight that greeted me on my first day teaching English in South Korea. On that day I had been full of adventurous spirit and excitement, but I was also a tad bit nervous.

As I headed to the first class of my teaching career I tried to calm my jittery thoughts. It's been said that the best way to learn is to jump right in. Granted when I arrived I had had a training session, which lasted a few days, but practice only goes so far. It was now time to sink or swim. Even though I had little experience in a teaching setting I figured that I could easily hold the students' attention, and that I was tough enough to address any discipline problems. I also knew that I could make a difference in these students' lives.

Before I opened the door, I quickly exhaled and crossed my fingers. I was about to enter uncharted territory. What lay beyond that door could be total frustration, or total exhilaration. I had sincerely hoped that my weeks, and in fact my months here, would be the latter, but I knew I would face challenges.

For instance, I did not know how much, if any, English the students spoke, read, or wrote. In my school students are grouped together by ability level. However, some students could be higher or lower than the level to which they were assigned. The worst case scenario would involve me talking at the students instead of to them. There is nothing more aggravating than trying to converse with someone who just stares blankly at you.

The best situation was one in which most of the students had a fair amount

More in 'Quality of Life'

- [Dr. Hans Einstein honored in Bakersfield ceremony](#)
- [The search for a cure: Juvenile diabetes](#)
- [Cancer survivors share stories at Relay for Life](#)
- [As Valley Fever cases spike, vaccine is still elusive](#)

Login

Username:

Password:

Remember me

[Login »](#)

- [Register](#)
- [Lost your password?](#)

Recent Comments

- [Chumash traditions | Zimicort](#) on [Center of the World Festival will feature Chumash traditions and playwright contest](#)
- [Try movies and game shops for low-cost summer fun | Bakersfield ... | omilukacoki](#) on [Try movies and game shops for low-cost summer fun](#)
- [Lynda](#) on [The search for a cure: Juvenile diabetes](#)
- [becky](#) on [The search for a cure: Juvenile diabetes](#)
- [Zaragoza Torch](#) on [Cancer survivors share stories at Relay for Life](#)

Popular Topics

art arts Arts Council of Kern
 Bakersfield Bakersfield Museum
 of Art community service concert cooking
 CSUB culture downtown Bakersfield
 eating economy education
 entertainment events exhibit farmers'
 market food fresh fresh food fruit
 fundraiser gardening health health care

of English conversational skills, and one in which I could easily breeze through the materials before jumping into my forte, writing. You never knew if there were budding reporters in the class. My plan was to wow the kids the first day, and then to progress into full throttle learning.

Needless to say I had some bumps. One was my clear lack of experience. Throughout the lessons, in each class, I felt as if I was talking to myself. Of course I had thought that this was just first day jitters. After all, both the students and the teachers are just getting acquainted, so it is natural to have some shyness among the group.

As the days wore on, however, I began to rethink my situation. My lower classes were the worst in terms of not talking. Most days I felt as if I was a comedian with my one sided conversations, but it wasn't funny. On these days I would ask the students questions, but after numerous blank stares, followed by pin drop silence, I reverted back to a one woman act.

Then one day in the middle of term I had an epiphany. On the first day of class I had introduced myself as Emily and I had shown pictures about my life. I passed around photos of friends, dogs, places I had been to. I had hoped to start a dialogue on travel with the students.

However, it had not occurred to me I should have focused the lessons on my "kids," after all a wise man once told me "People like to talk about themselves." From then on my lectures were all about them. With questions to peak their interest, such as "what is your favorite subject at school," and "who is your best friend," I had hoped to coax something from them.

After a week or so, most of my students blossomed out, with the brightest kids talking in full sentences, and some of the shyer ones speaking one word answers. With this small victory I steered my attention and energy toward making sure that they were soaking in and retaining all of the information that was being presented

Being crystal clear and being understood are two very different animals. No matter how slow I talked or how simple the words I used were, I wasn't sure if they were able to comprehend the ideas that I was trying to teach them.

Every day I would ask each of my classes to do a task from a book and they would look at me and say "Teacher ... do?" Yes, do. Frustration abounded as I felt that these kids were never going to understand. With my higher level classes I could communicate above a third grade level, but my lower classes were at a very low comprehension level.

My lowest could not follow simple instructions. For example, I asked my students to write a few sentences, and I was met with a questioning stare. For a moment I had a sinking feeling that we had regressed. With my pen in hand I quickly wrote a few sentences, "The cat is fuzzy," "The tree is tall," and "She went to the store." Per my instructions we repeated each sentence. Then I asked them to write one more sentence. However, the kids simply copied my sentences. So much for creativity.

Instead of feeling dejected I tried this same exercise with the next level class. At first, the students did not want to come up to the board. But after some encouragement a few, some bright and some shy, showed off their skills. A number of the students stuck to my prompt. Instead of writing, "He went to the market," they wrote, "I went to the market."

Resigning myself to the fact that I was attempting to beat a dead horse, one of my brightest students came up to the board. I gave her the directions and waited. Then the words came, "This... is... for... you." At first I couldn't believe it, and then I felt the first twinge of pride. I was now a teacher.

Emily Shapiro is a 2009 CSUB alumna who majored in communications with emphases in journalism and public relations. She is working as an English teacher in Seoul, South Korea. Read her [first two stories here](#).


Tagged as: education, Emily Shapiro, English, foreign, Korea, learning, Seoul, South Korea, teacher, teaching

Leave a Response

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

health care reform healthy eating In Season
Now Kern County locally grown Michelle
Beck music news nonprofits organic
performance produce Quality of Life
recipes seasonal produce theater
things to do vegetables
volunteering

Follow Us

Bakersfield Express on 
Bakersfield Express on 