

How to Survive and Thrive in a South Korean Middle School

By Lee Colburn



If your experience was anything like mine, you arrived at your new teaching position filled to the brim with excitement and a range of teaching ideas and subjects in your head. I quickly found out, through trial and numerous errors, the activities which work like a charm and that sink like a stone. One size unfortunately does not fit all (regardless of what Korean clothes shops may tell you) and my examples of classes in the following document are only suggestions to get you through those difficult days where nothing seems to motivate, energise, and encourage.

'Hello, where are you from?'

(Saying Hello, Politeness, Likes and Dislikes, Who am I? Small Talk)

Let's begin with who you are... Who are you? Why are you here? What do you have to offer to these students? The answer I believe, is your personality and where you arrived from. We have all been there, a classroom full of new first grade students fresh from being the Kings and Queens of Elementary School to the novice puppies of Middle School. You may be

scared, they may be scared, maybe your co-teacher is scared! For me a day in Korea does not go by without at least one gasp from someone noting how ‘scarily’ tall I am, making the issue of icebreaking with a group of reserved twelve-year-olds even more of a challenge. Although there is nothing to fear about me, my classes, or about English in general, this is exactly the message I want my students to understand with perfect clarity as quickly as possible. The first five classes I choose to teach some might say are simple or boring topics, but I believe are essential for British English conversation, and I ensure that in all these classes the students are laughing. This stands as my main overarching objective.



Some of my personal highlights in these classes are showing the kids how big my feet are in relation to animal footprints (UK size 13), showing them how stupidly inappropriate and undersized my old car was (think circus clown cars), scaring them with a huge pop-up spider, explaining how they look like gummy bears to me, and showing them how horrible life can be without ‘**small talk**’. They may not completely understand *what* I am talking about, I might feel like a clown at times, but they *are* laughing. Do this enough, and you will have laid the foundations for as many teaching activities that an EPIK teacher could wish for later in the year. That is what the first 5 weeks are all about in my opinion.

‘What is it like where you live?’

(UK Part one, UK Part two, Shopping in the UK)

I don't live in London, I'm not from London, and I don't really like London, but my students might. They may have seen the UK on TV, they may hold ambitions of travelling or studying there in the future, and as I have some general knowledge about how to navigate the place, I am perfectly placed to transfer that knowledge. Tell your students not just where you are from, but what people do there. What do they eat? Watch? Play? Do you have public transport? Wildlife? What money do you use? How expensive is it? What are the current fashion trends? In **'The UK Part 1'**, **'The UK Part 2'** and **'Shopping in the UK'** sessions, we look around London and the UK using Google maps, eat some British food (Marmite hate it or love it), watch Gordon Ramsey cook my favourite meal, examine and use some real British money (bring one coin of each from home), walk around the supermarket, watch Sherlock Holmes, solve the confusing London Underground, and even listen and sing to One Direction songs.



My students saw my house and school in England, and they saw all the places where I made my memories during childhood. What is special about your country? What would your students like to see? I would suggest avoiding things that only people from your country are interested in, No one in Korea truly cares about the difference between Tetley and PG Tips teabags, or where 'The North' in England starts, especially Middle School students. Consider the things that confuse or shock you about Korea, what would you like to know how to do? Flip it around and show your students life where you are from.

‘What’s next? Who knows!’

(Suggestions, Chance)

Who doesn’t secretly love a bit of role-playing in the classroom? Well... me, actually! And lots of Korean school children! If you are going to attempt this ESL gem, my advice would be to keep it short and sweet, around the ten-minute mark. Even if you have expertly themed the activity around K-Pop, PC games, soccer or KakaoTalk, there is only so much acting one student or teacher can take in any given session. Try not to tell the kids who they are and let them decide as it’s far more exciting and unpredictable like that!



In my **‘suggestions’** and **‘chance’** classes, we look at how to give advice without being annoying, how to say no to something in the correct manner, potential tourist locations in the city of Daejeon, if you need to take an umbrella out with you, if (the best team in the World) Liverpool will win the Champions League, and a simple higher or lower card game, which was the most excited I have ever seen my boys! Keep things unpredictable, life (and English class) is exciting because we don’t know what will happen next.

‘What are we doing today?’

(Movie Reviews, Would You Rather, Bucket Lists, Round the World)

Keep your students on their toes through variety as much as you can. Once your students have relaxed, are comfortable with you, and can be themselves, the various activities you wish to run should become easier. Some examples of these activities are **'movie reviews'**, **'would you rather'**, **'bucket lists'**, **'round the world'**, shopping and game shows. All of these contain target English phrases and expressions, but they also contain choices and options.



Your students may sound and act the same to you but give them a choice and their personalities and interests suddenly explode out of nowhere! I love Forrest Gump! You don't!? Why!? I hate comic book movies! You don't!? Why!? You would rather put your hand in a beehive than a spider web!? Why!? Have been to Singapore? Wow! Tell me about it because I really want to go!... My thoughts are that if students don't know *exactly* what they are going to be doing in your class before you arrive then they can't be bored by the thought of it. If you do sense the general buzz or atmosphere is dropping during your classes, then don't be afraid to not break out one of your 'special' classes (more on these later) just for a break. "Teacher, what are we doing today?" is music to my ears.

'Third graders... The final boss!'

(Senses, Life on Mars, Emoji Stories, Illusions, Memories, School Life)

3rd Graders just don't like anything do they?... Maybe sleep and make-up, but not English. If you know the secret for getting your overworked fifteen-year-olds to take part in activities

like roleplaying, then please share your insights! My personal methodology for this age group is to focus on morality. After all, the students are mini adults now and I like to treat them that way. Each of these classes contain a small life lesson or something that keeps them thinking after the bell rings. So far, I have covered the body and the **'senses'**, **'life on Mars'**, **'emoticons'**, **'illusions'** and **'memories'**. My only real advice is not to burden the 3rd grade students with too much, as you will lose them faster than you can imagine.



As you may know, Korean students have a lot to do, so allowing them to think about and focus on something completely different for an hour can be quite refreshing for them. Ensuring that the loud or strong characters come to the front and including them in an activity helps with class participation, or so I have found. I like to joke about sports with my boys, (they love talking Liverpool) and music with my girls. Do what you can to keep them on your side outside the classroom as well as in, and it will help you massively during class time.

'English in disguise'

(Quiz night, UK TV Shows)

A fundamental part of being British is the local Pub Quiz and the game shows on a Saturday night. Yes, I know the students can't go to a pub, but the pub quiz can sure come to the kids! Every three months (or when the mood is low) I run my 'special' pub quiz with the winning team earning a prize! (Of your choice - but I buy some Haribo for this occasion) The quiz days *always* go down well. Rounds have included famous babies, logos, guess the place, animal scrambles, face jumbles, who sings this (student favourite), fruity, populate, lights camera action, and a closer look. Let your creativity run wild here!



These quizzes admittedly take a bit of preparation but once you have the template set up the rounds can be simple to change. Trust me, the students will always look forward to playing. Minus points for saying the answers out loud or spying on other teams and it will get *seriously* competitive. YouTube can provide you with all the video and audio files you need to add variety to your games. Four rounds of ten questions, thirty seconds per question works well for a class.

'Hang in there!'

I can't promise you that all these activities and topics will work every time, as the context and the needs of each school and each group of students will vary, but they may just help you out when Middle School is on top and seems to be beating you down. I'm not a genius,

but I do know (after three and a half years of practice) how to make Korean teenagers laugh, take part in, and enjoy an English class or two.

I sincerely hope some of the topics and activities mentioned will be of use to you or ignite a few ideas of your own. I truly believe English can be taught in a variety of ways, using a wide variety of non-traditional activities. Experiment and get creative! Put your personality on show, insert it into your PowerPoint, and don't forget that it is healthy to laugh at yourself every now and then!

Regards,

Mr 'Colburn Teacher'

