

Learning Korean

Let's begin this info packet with a classic story about a North American in Korea, the "Average Expat":

"Average Expat" is excited to come to Korea. He recently got a job at a prestigious hagwon in an exciting part of Seoul, but he still has some reservations. One of his first questions was, "Do I have to speak Korean to conduct my classes?" to which the answer is, "No." He was assured that, depending on Average Expat's situation, he may have a co-teacher to help translate, but classes are usually conducted entirely in English.

Average Expat is relieved to hear this, but nonetheless wants to study a little bit of Korean just so he can "get by." He starts to study about a month in advance, either studying online or perhaps investing in Rosetta Stone software. And though he studies for about a half hour every day, he is still very confused by the sentence structure and pronunciation.

Average Expat finally comes to Korea and says "An-nyuhng ha-say-yo" (*hello*) to the headmaster, who smiles and laughs at his efforts, and then greets him in English. Over the subsequent weeks he begins to realize that he doesn't need really need any Korean at all to get by in Korea. He says, "Hwah-Jang-Sheel Oh-Dee-Aeh-Yo?" (*Where the toilet?*) to a restaurant owner and gets a response in English, "Second door on your left." Moreover, his hagwon insists that he speaks only English within the building, as it is an "English only" zone.

Within a month, he is too busy with friends to study Korean regularly, and he begins to get lazy about learning or even using the language. He spends most of his weekends in Gangnam, Hongdae and Itaewon, places where most bartenders and restaurant owners speak a bit of English. He orders pizza without knowing how to say, "I don't want corn on my pizza," and then complains about the corn on his pizza. Of course, he does run into restaurant owners in Seoul who don't understand English, and he gets flabbergasted with complications in his orders, even borderline resentful of the owner at times.

This is not to say that Average Expat doesn't enjoy Korea. He loves his friends, the weekends and the nightlife, the comfort of teaching in Korea, and the majesty of Seoul. However, he opts not to stay another year, because he feels like an outsider looking through a distant window of a fascinating, yet exclusive culture. At the end of his contract, his eager replacement asks him via a Skype interview, "Do you know any Korean?" and the Average Expat says, "I know enough to get by," which is technically true, as he got by for a full year knowing about 10 words and the verb "*joo-say-yo*," (I'd like _____.)

Why we tell the story

We don't want to discourage you, but we don't want to sugarcoat the situation either. It is no secret that Korean is a very, very difficult language to learn, just as English is very, very difficult for Koreans. The United States' own Defense Language Institute ranks Korean along with Arabic, Chinese and Japanese as the hardest languages to learn for native English speakers. Also a fact: most Koreans know English better than you know Korean. With the exception of the oldest generation of Koreans, most have studied it since elementary school. Moreover, few expats know how to study Korean in an effective way. Some arrive believing that by watching TV and listening to Korean dramas, they will magically learn the language via osmosis. Those people are more discouraged than anyone, and they end up in the same shoes as "Average Expat." The truth is that learning Korean is a long journey that takes practice, discipline, and patience.

Why you should learn Korean

We strongly believe that this is a journey worth taking. The Korean people are very gracious hosts, and do not expect the common expat to speak Korean. Yet, they are usually quite impressed and feel a sense of pride when an expat has put effort into learning Korean. Truthfully, speaking even a tiny bit of Korean with superior pronunciation will earn you respect and praise.

As Asia continues to grow in influence, speaking Korean proficiently or fluently gives you an untold competitive advantage in your career, no matter where you want to end up. The amount of people fluent in both Korean and English is staggeringly low, and Korea is an incredibly powerful little nation with some gigantic mega-conglomerates and an international presence and a desire to sell myriad products to English speakers. You may find yourself in a very lucrative career from this experience, or starting a business here like we did. Here are some other practical reasons to learn Korean:

- Learning Korean will make you a leader among your peers, even if you're not a natural leader.
- Learning Korean helps you do your job. An understanding of how Koreans see language will allow you to better tailor your lesson plans.
- Your understanding of the culture will increase a hundred times over.
- You will command respect, even if you're not particularly articulate or formal. It is amazing how forgiving most Koreans are when you screw up the formality of the verb endings. They're just happy you're trying!

Expat Voices: *"Even a small amount of vocabulary is worth it. People here are curious about foreigners. It's the biggest pay-off in the world when you're able to connect with the security guard at the front desk, or chat with your usually taciturn co-teacher about his newest grandson. In the security guard's case, he gave me invaluable help when I had a frozen pipe emergency.*

One Korean friend explained it to me this way: if you attempt to learn Korean, it shows you don't want to just skim the surface of Korean culture like a tourist does; you truly want to connect with it. And people will be twice as receptive to you."

Heather, Gyeonggi-Do

- Cultural exchanges will come much easier to you, as part of the fun of hanging out with Koreans is comparing cultures.
- You will open another window into Korean culture through understanding television, whether it's reality TV or a historical drama.
- If you're a single man or woman, you can instantly make any Korean under the age of 30 **fall in love with you** by singing a contemporary Korean ballad flawlessly at a noraebang (karaoke bar).
- You will be able to order food. Gotta eat, right?

We fully realize that learning Korean is not for everybody, and you'll still get a lot out of this experience if you decide not to learn the language. But we actively recruit people who are interested in taking on this challenge, because these people have the most fun while in Korea. So take a shot at it. It's our challenge to you.

Say it in Hangeul

The writing system of Korean is now primarily Hangeul (not Chinese, as in years past). Invented and advocated by King Sejong the Great in 1446 as an alternative to Chinese characters, this is the only alphabet in the entire world with a clear purpose and a reason behind each symbol. Reading Hangeul is actually quite easy. *Even "Average Expat" eventually learned how to read Hangeul, without learning the rest of the language.* Here's why it's so handy:

- Loan words – The US's influence on the Korean language is undeniable, and many 20th century words like computer and tire (or 20th century imports like tequila and fitness centers) are just the English word, hangeulized (or as we say, Konglish).
- Bus stations – Subway stops are usually in Korean and English, but bus stops are more often than not only in Korean. If you know how to read and write your stop in Hangeul, you can easily find the right bus to take you home.
- Sounding it out – sometimes Koreans speak quickly, and Hangeul helps visual learners to "hear" the word.

The author from *Ask a Korean* has an excellent *entry* explaining all the rules of pronouncing Hangeul.

Romanization: The Romanization of Korean (writing Hangeul with the ABC's) uses a set system, which replaces Hangeul characters with specific Roman letters. It's called the "Revised Romanization of Korean," based on the formerly popular McCune-Reischauer system. The system may be convenient for Koreans when it comes to typing and printing Korean in Roman characters, but it's a lousy model for

*"I felt that when I moved to Korea, I should learn as much about the culture as possible. I quickly learned that so much of their culture is intertwined with their language, so I found time to take a couple lessons a week for a few months when I first arrived. Learning the basics of Korean was the best foundation to living and working in Korea – and I'd highly recommend anyone living here to **at least** learn how to read Hangeul."*
-Reuben, Gyeonggi-do

pronunciation because English speakers are used to sounding out English words a certain way. For example, “Hong” to American English speakers would rhyme with “wrong,” while in Korea it is pronounced with a long O. And some cities like *Incheon* look like they should be pronounced “Inch-ee-ahn.” This is wrong, because English speakers don’t realize at first that “eo” is supposed to read like “uh.” Use Romanization to ensure you get your care packages from back home, but for pronunciation, it’s just easier to learn Hangeul!

Tips to help you Learn Korean: Wrap your head around the basic grammatical structure. Korean differs from English in a couple of big ways. If you understand these three points, you’re already miles ahead.

1. The sentence structure is subject, object, verb. Instead of I eat rice, it is “I rice eat.”
2. Words are followed by markers to indicate topic, subject, object, indirect object, place, and so on. While ensuring that the meaning of each sentence is clear, these markers actually change the pronunciation of the word at times.
3. Verbs are conjugated differently not only based on tense, but on formality of the situation and whether the verb is a question, command or request.

Note: Occasionally, our packets teach you Korean phrases. Keep in mind that we write these phrases out in a “phonetic style” designed to get you reading it the way it’s pronounced, not the Revised Romanization way.

Take the basic phrases: and break them down, word by word, participle by participle. Understand each word, the relationship that the participle has to the word, the way the verb is conjugated, why it’s conjugated that way, and so on.

Discipline, discipline, discipline: [Read this story](#). In addition to being a great story, it’s a reflection of the Korean culture of discipline as a whole. Learning any foreign language requires a hefty amount of discipline. It may mean that you can’t spend the night out drinking, or that you have to study a bit on Saturdays. It might mean that you have to do some dreaded rote memorization (Oh no!). But Korea gives you a great environment to work hard. Koreans do it every day.

Learn words: Lots and lots of words. Your cell phone will have a built-in Korean-English dictionary (one more reason to learn to read). When you see a foreign word, type it in Hangeul, get the translation, make a flashcard out of it, and rote-memorize it. By the way, this is another great reason to take advantage of the phone plans at [The Arrival Store](#)!

More links: AT provides some [links](#) on our website to get you started.

Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is: It’s possible to learn Korean without spending a cent – it’s called being born and raised in Korea. Unfortunately for us, that ship has sailed! (But on the bright side, you’re

about to get a job based on your ability to speak English natively.) The truly dedicated Korean learners are going to end up spending some money in their quest for Korean proficiency. There are free lessons in Seoul offered by friendly Koreans, charities, government, and some churches, but in general these cater to absolute beginners and don't offer progressive lessons. Money will be a big factor for a few of you when deciding how to learn Korean. Here are some of the best language-learning products on the market:

- **Lonely Planet Korean Phrasebook:** At the cheapest end of the spectrum is the phrasebook method. The phrasebook is an essential in Korea, but as far as learning the language, it won't cut it. The Lonely Planet phrasebook does go through the basics of pronunciation and grammar, but it doesn't offer direct translation of words, which are the building blocks of the language. For example, in the "Making love," section of the phrasebook (which is a page that expats strangely gravitate towards), it went through things to say in the bedroom. One of the phrases, "Easy Tiger!" was translated to "sal-sal-haeyo!" For this reason, many expats in Korea think that the word "Sal-sal" is "tiger" in Korean. (Sal-sal-haeyo translates to "do softer," by the way.)

A phrasebook is a must-buy, but not an effective language learning strategy.

- **Rosetta Stone:** Everyone knows Rosetta Stone. It's the market leader, it's expensive, it's used by Fortune 500 companies and the Department of Defense. Is it all it's cracked up to be? Unfortunately, we think there are some serious limitations. The effortless "Immersion Method" may be a good marketing strategy, and it may hold true for Germanic and romance languages, which are closer related to English, but you will have to repeat sections of Rosetta Stone over and over again before you feel confident enough to use the new language.

The Pros: Rosetta Stone is in general well thought out, and progresses in a manner that makes perfect sense. The sentences start out easy and get gradually more complex, the pictures are vibrant and colorful, and the native speakers are of incredible value. It's as portable as your computer is. Rosetta Stone TotalE, the new online version of Rosetta Stone, finally pairs learners with native speakers, so learners are evaluated in more than RS's often suspect voice recognition technology. The games online can be fun, as well as good practice in becoming conversational. **Note:** *If you repeat sections over and over again, rote-memorize the vocabulary and the sentences, you will find success with Rosetta Stone.*

The Cons: The last sentence in italics is the reason why most people fail with RS software. The software is marketed in such a way that people who buy RS expect to learn the language effortlessly, like a child, without working. They'll complete a full section of Rosetta Stone and feel confident that they "got it." Then they'll walk outside of their comfortable apartment and not remember a thing. Some key phrases ("Where's the toilet?" and "What's your name?" for example) come surprisingly late in the curriculum. Rosetta Stone also lacks any cultural context, leaving out frequently used words like "bibimbap," "samgyeopsal," and "noraebang." Rosetta Stone's usefulness is limited. It

does not teach you the most formal verb endings, which are not commonly used in conversation but heard on television and public announcements all the time, or informal speech, which is common among your friends. Finally, Rosetta Stone is expensive. There are better ways to study for more affordable rates.

- **Language Vine:** Language Vine uses games, 3-D flashcards, videos and audio to keep learning engaging. You can use phone apps and MP3s. They're really wired for technology so it makes it easier to learn when you're on the go! And since all of Language Vine's learning tools are online, you can continue your studies while you're overseas. Although the courses are not free, they are less expensive than Rosetta Stone, plus you'll have access to Korean native speakers. You can familiarize yourself with the Language Vine resources and prices [here](#). Language Vine has provided Adventure Teaching with a promotional code to save you some extra money as well: **ARRIVE15**
- **Korean Hagwon:** As you know, the Korean private education system is highly effective, and you may be a part of it. Why not be on the receiving end? There are a couple of well-known Korean language institutes in Seoul, and they cater to a variety of ethnic speakers, from Chinese and Japanese to Western foreigners. The obvious advantage is that you will instantly have a peer group at your level of Korean, with which you will only be able to speak Korean. These people are usually quite motivated to learn.

The downside: This method is time-consuming and requires frequent visits to Seoul. Transportation in Korea is cheap and quick, but over time the costs add up. Lessons are expensive, too. In a year, you'll pay the full price of Rosetta Stone several times over. But it's an investment. This may be a great option for people planning on achieving a higher level of fluency.

Now, The Story of the Amazing Expat

The Amazing Expat wakes up for work and walks to work from his office-tel apartment. He makes conversation about the weather with his neighbors on his way down the elevator. He flirts with the girl behind the counter when he picks up his morning coffee at Dunkin Donuts. Also on his way to school, he calls a Rental Shop/Pension owner and organizes a ski-weekend for his friend's birthday, complete with rentals, lift tickets, and a rental cottage in the mountains of Gangwon-do. People stare at him as he passes, not because he's a foreigner in a strange land, but because his pronunciation is perfect and they rarely see such a sight. He hangs up and texts his friend in English: *"Everything is set up. All they need is the deposit and we're ready to go."* His friend thanks him excessively, asking him how he set it up so quickly. But the Amazing Expat knows that in Korea, everything from transportation to booking accommodation is convenient once you know the language.

He's enjoyed his two years of teaching at a public school so much that he's decided he wants to make it his career. His command of Korean was impressive to his interviewer, and a big factor in securing his newest position as an entry-level textbook writer in one of Seoul's largest producer of English language learning resources.

Koreans commend him daily on his impeccable Korean, but he humbly tells them he has much to learn. It's true that he still has difficulties with the language. He struggles while persuading Koreans that American beef imports are not riddled with mad-cow disease, and that white rice is not great for losing weight. He also has some trouble with some Korean idioms and sometimes can't understand his girlfriend's mom, who speaks with a Jeju dialect, and Kuhn-Hee, his hyperactive Korean friend who speaks faster than most people can read. But in all, his experience has benefited tremendously from his knowledge.

How did he do it? What method did he use? He would say it doesn't matter. He went home, made flashcards, listened to native speakers, memorized words, and memorized the lines of Korean dramas. He hit it hard, every day. Sometimes he studied for an hour a day. Sometimes he studied for seven. But every day he studied effectively and actively.

At the end of the day, the method you use to learn Korean is secondary to the amount of discipline and determination you have to succeed at learning Korean. Korean is a hard language for English speakers, but it is not impossible for the driven. If you're ready to put an hour, two hours, three hours or more learning Korean a day, you too, could be an Amazing Expat. You could use your knowledge to build a life in the Republic of Korea, or you could parlay your knowledge into a lucrative, six-figure career in international business or development. The choice is yours. Whatever you choose, we wish you the best!