

I Want to Give Dreams and Love to My Students

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Teacher's Day in Korea is a day where students honor their teachers with cards, flowers, gifts, and songs. I loved all my letters from my students, who all apologized for not being very good at English. It meant so much more that, despite their embarrassment, they tried anyways just so they could express their gratitude. One letter in particular stood out, which the student ended with: "Teacher, I fell in love with you". And I have fallen in love with them too.

How do you love people whose names you barely even know? I don't have a straight answer, but I know that you can. I know this because of the hundreds of faces I see from Monday to Friday who never fail to bring a smile to my face.

I could write for ages about these students, but I will try to summarize their many stories in a few reasons I have grown to love them.

Their Singing Voices: It may seem like a silly reason, but for me, the sound of children singing together is one of the best sounds in the world. One child singing is cute, put a large group of them together and you get the sound of innocence and joy. For a while, my grade 6 students were singing Justin Bieber's "Baby". 4 grade 6 classes singing "Baby" in a row, sometimes twice a class, and I never got sick of it. Each class brought something different. They all adored the rap, which I thought would be too difficult for them and had originally left out, but it has shown to be their favorite part. I love watching them sing, not only because of the joy you can see and hear, but it is amazing to see how much English they can learn through song. Many of these students cannot speak a lot of English, but know all the words and can sing it confidently. Watching them sing AND rap has taught me to never underestimate them, and has also shown me how much more motivated they are when you really spark their interests.

Hard Work: Students in Korea are under a HUGE amount of pressure. They spend their days at school and many spend their nights at a private academy, where they study more. If they are not there, many are at a musical instrument practice, or simply studying at home. If they do go home to play, then they are up very late so they can study. Some days you catch their eyes glazed over, or their heads beginning to bob. One day, one boy told me he was tired. I asked him what time he went to bed. His answer: 7 am. School starts at 8:30. He said he was studying because his mother was upset with him for doing poorly on a test. The majority of these students work extremely hard to succeed, which I admire, but can't help but feel heartbroken for them at the same time. Aside from how hard they work on their studies, they don't have a lot of free time at school like they do in Western schools, and I am sure that they have a lot of responsibilities at home as well. I sympathize for them, but admire their determination and their hard work and really hope it will pay off for them. I also hope they can find some fun along the way. What I have seen: the smiles on their faces and the laughter I hear in the hallways comforts me; telling me they don't know any different so they are having fun anyways.

Their Small and Overused English Vocabulary: Foreigners are rarities in Korea. Unlike my hometown of Toronto, where the schools are filled with kids from many different cultures and backgrounds, my school is filled with Koreans.... and me. I am the minority, and when things are rare, people are often fascinated by them. The fascination was strong in the beginning, and while it has faded for some, it is still strong for others. The walk up the giant hill to my school every morning is one of my least favorite parts of my day (especially in the heat), but also one of my favorite parts of my day. Not a day passes where I walk up the hill and do not receive a loud “Hi Katrina Teacher!” from one of the students. Many do not know very much beyond “hi” and “how are you”, but they want to use whatever English they know on the English teacher, especially in front of their friends. One of my favorite memories is from when I was walking after school one day and a group of grade 6 boys hopped off the bus across the street. They all started yelling the few English phrases they could think of off the top of their heads, which consisted of “Hi Katrina-teacher”, “How are you?”, and “I love you”. It was hilarious watching them all yell this across a street of busy traffic, while other Koreans looked on. Another time, on a Monday morning, a grade 3 student came up to me and said “Hi Katrina, TGIF!” As much as I wished it was Friday, at least it brought a smile to my face on a Monday morning, when few other things can!

Big Dreams and Inspiration: What I love the most about these students is how big they dream, and how inspiring they are to me. There have been numerous occasions when they have had the opportunity to share their dreams for the future with me. Among their dreams were the typical “I want to be a baseball player” or “I want to be a singer”, but there was also “I want to be the pope”, “I want to be a chemical engineer”, “I want to be the president”, “I want to be a genetics scientist”, “I want to be a diplomat so I can show more of Korea to the world so I study English very hard”...these are 11 and 12 year olds! That one last student in particular already awed me with that statement, then proceeded to awe me even more a few weeks later. She is a very quiet student who sits in the back of a grade 6 class, and usually looks very uninterested. One day, she brought me three English essays and asked me if I could correct them. She didn’t tell me anything beyond that. As I started to read, I was amazed, not only at her level of English, but at what she was writing about. She was writing about the world as a global village and what we need to do to make the world a better place to live in. Later, when she came to collect her papers, she was in a hurry because she was going to piano class and then she would go to her hagwon for three hours that night. This student already has enough on her plate and not only is she taking the time to write essays for an English contest, but she is also taking the time to care about such important issues. I was truly inspired by her. What I also loved about her writing, and many Koreans’ speaking, is the honesty that comes with it. Sometimes, they do not choose what we would call the “right” words, when really they are just not the words we would choose. Sometimes, this can make their words come across a little off, sometimes maybe even a little rude, but there are times it can make their statement simply beautiful and perhaps more “right” than any way we would ever be able to put it.

One sentence that I will never forget also came during the first week of school when students were introducing themselves and their dreams to me. A student stood and said “I want to be a teacher because I want to give dreams and love to my students.” It is something that I don’t think I would ever hear anyone at home say, but I think it summarized so beautifully why so many people want to be teachers; not for the salary, not for the summers off, but simply to love their students and help them to achieve their dreams. Though I may have never worded it like that, that is exactly what I love about teaching; it just took the 11 year old with little

English ability to word it properly for me. I have grown to love these kids and I can only hope I am providing them with love and dreams because they sure are giving them to me!



Dear My English teacher,

Wishing a
Teacher, hello? how are you happiness.
My name is kim-min-ji today, tomorrow
who is in the 4th class and always
in the 6th grade.
It seems to have passed more than 2
months since I met you.
Teacher, I really congratulate on your
Teacher's day. Teacher, I fell in love with
you ♡
on Teacher's day in 2013
From: kim-min-ji