

## Three Times a Charm - Getting a Korean Driver's License - Part 1

Michael Downey

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### Part 1.

I recently decided to get a Korean driver's license. Decide may not be the best word. It's more like I finally faced the facts. I hesitated awhile and tried a few other ways to get a license. When I first came to Korea years ago I, of course, brought my Washington State license with me and drove with it until it expired. Then I continued to drive on the expired license for about five years. After a minor fender bender the police were not so happy with me and charged me with driving without a license. The fine was about a thousand bucks and I was prohibited from driving for two years. It was time to bite the bullet and get legal.

Korea is a small country with a dense population ideal for convenient mass transportation. There is an extensive subway system in the Seoul Metropolitan area and there are also an abundance of bus routes and buses. In addition, taxis are plentiful and comparatively inexpensive. It is really possible to go anywhere without a car. That being said just about everyone here wants to have a car. No matter what anyone says, the convenience of going where you want, when you want and in your own space trumps taking the bus or subway anytime. My job as an English teacher takes me to

schools and private homes all over Seoul and the surrounding province. I can go everywhere but I realized that on a lot of days I was spending as much time in transit as I was teaching. After paying my debt to society and an additional two years on the bus I figured it was time to start driving again.

At one time I could have exchanged my valid Washington license for the equivalent Korean document without much hassle. I don't really know what happened. Either I wasn't aware of the possibility, I forgot or I just ignored it. By the time I tried to exchange my license it had expired. My next idea was to, on one of my rare trips back to the States, get another valid license and bring it back to Korea for the exchange. What I found out was that since, I guess 9/11, things had changed. They wanted some kind of proof that I was actually a resident of Washington State. I tried to use my son's address but they wanted a utility bill with my name on it. Running out of time on my short trip I was forced to give up.

Back in the Land of the Morning Calm things were not looking any better. The buzz on the street was that I had to go to a private driving school for lessons before I could take the test. A buddy of mine shelled out the 500,000 Won and what's worse spent the three weeks and completed the course. He had nothing good to say about it. I refused to even entertain the idea and spent two more years on the bus.

Alas one of my New Year's resolutions was to get the damned license. Before I resigned myself to the dreaded driving school I figured I owed it to myself to do a little due-diligence on the education requirement. I spent some time with the official manual, English version, and learned that it said no where that you had to attend an outside education program. It did say that there was a requirement to complete a driving safety course. Armed with this possible loop hole I took myself over to the DMV (Korean equivalent) in the Gang Nam (You All remember Gang Nam Style, right?) section of Seoul. In a mixture of broken Korean, more broken English and a little body language I came to find out that the driving safety education requirement would be satisfied by staying awake through a one hour video presentation and guess what, the next showing was in ten minutes and if I hustled up to the second floor I could sit in. Jeez! That was a no-brainer. Next I followed the crowd of twenty-somethings down to the basement for an eye examination. I was a little worried because I didn't study for the test but somehow I got a passing score. Then it was back to the second floor for the written test.

I hadn't cracked a book but I figured I was on a roll. Now days the written test is really a computer test. When I entered the room they wanted to know if I wanted to take the test in English. Do bears crap in the woods? The test consisted of 40 questions and 70% was passing. The English translations were comical and I had to make my best guess as to what they were actually asking. Good thing there were pictures. Ah

well 72% was a pass and I was headed to the next level; the vehicle equipment proficiency test. Although I was hot and wanted to keep going, it was past five o'clock and I had to make an appointment for two days later. I was sure I had this and it was only a matter of showing up and breezing through two driving tests.

The Vehicle Equipment Proficiency Test was just exactly that. The goal was to show that you could operate the car's equipment such as starting the engine, shift in and out of gear, turn on the wipers, use the turn signals and turn the lights from low beam to high beam and back. Doesn't sound too difficult but wait there was a catch, a big catch.

Before starting the test I spent a few minutes reading the poster were the key points of the instructions were translated into some form of English. Not a form that was understandable to your average native speaker of English. Anyway I thought, how tough could this be? When I got in the car I adjusted the seat and put on the seat belt. The voice command in Korean and the small monitor in English both let me know the test was about to begin. The English monitor told me to start the engine within 10 seconds and the Korean voice prompt did likewise. I waited because I was warned not to do anything until I was told "Do it". I waited and waited watching the English and listening to the Korean and wondered how long 10 seconds is. Finally I started the car. BRINGGG. I was informed that 15 points were deducted. Well shit. Next I was told to turn on the left turn signal. Caggy as I am I waited and waited and listened for "Do it" (...하세요) in Korean but it was almost impossible to read the English and listen to the Korean at the same time. BRINGGG. 15 more points lost. By this time I was flustered and had to make effort to keep my head. I did manage to turn on the wipers and lights on command. Thirty points down by the time I was told to go forward I was intent on not making another mistake. Before I had gone thirty yards I was told to stop the car and get out. I had failed. It was a long walk back to the office to turn in the paperwork

I was eligible to take the test again after waiting three days. I made an appointment and got out of there without shouting at anyone. Over the course of the three days I wrestled with embarrassment and the incredulousness of the test. I told friends that I had failed but didn't go into details. Excuses are like assholes. Everyone has one and they all stink. I did figure out the real problem was the confusion of two languages going on in my head at the same time. Hey I got this. I would ignore the English on the screen and just listen to the Korean voice prompts.

Test Day dawned cold and clear. I made sure to be at the test site early and spent a little time puzzling over the English translations on the directions and comparing them with the Korean. I was fairly confident of my strategy and got in the test vehicle, buckled up and waited for the voice prompts. It was no problem. I started the car and operated all the equipment on command. Then I slipped it into gear and started down the track. If I could complete the required fifty meters without a major pile up I was in like Flynn. The last thing was to test my ability to stop the vehicle and activate the emergency flashers. Suddenly an emergency beacon began to flash and the speaker shouted Emergency! Emergency! Cool as a cucumber, I easily pressed the brake pedal and brought the car to a stop without locking up the brakes. I activated the emergency flashers and waited. Then Bringgg and the safety guy came over, opened the door and said "get out. Fail." I was flabbergasted. It wasn't till I made the long walk of shame back to the office and talked to the instructor that I had any idea at all what had happened. He let me know that I had to hit the brakes within two seconds of the emergency beacon going off. Now I was pissed. I told the guy his test "SUCKED!" Always the teacher, I calmed down and tried to explain in Korean what 'sucks' means. Then I made a new appointment for three days hence.

For three days I philosophized and ignored the taunts of my buddies who couldn't believe I had failed the test again. One even offered to have his fourteen year old near do well son give me some pointers on driving. What I needed was a new strategy. "When in Rome Do as the Romans" is a popular saying among Koreans. They don't like foreigners' complaining about how they do things. Ok then, I can do this.

Well another saying goes "Third Time is a Charm." On the third attempt I was in fact certified able to operate the windshield wipers and other equipment in a standard passenger vehicle.

It wasn't over yet. The final test was an on-the-road evaluation on the streets of Gang Nam. Not a big problem. Now I have been driving for over forty years. I took the drivers exam in my mother's Volkswagen Bug when I was seventeen years old. A few minor problems with parallel parking not withstanding I sailed through and got my first license. Since that time I have logged un-countable miles on city streets, country roads, beaches and freeways. I've driven everything from that first Bug to sports cars, vans, trucks, ATVs, 4x4s, 6x6s and even amphibious vehicles. If you've done it, it ain't bragging. I knew that driving wasn't going to be the problem. The problem was going to be passing the test. I immediately signed up for the next available slot and retired to a nearby coffee shop to kill the three hours and think about it.