

Three Times a Charm - Getting a Korean Driver's License - Part 2

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Part 2.

In the coffee shop I kicked back with a cup of joe and worked on remaining calm. I knew from recent past experience that passing the test was no sure thing. I was going to get a license no matter what it took.

Although I really wanted to pass the on road test on the first go I also prepared my mind to fail for some obscure reason. I made up my mind that I would take the next test and each subsequent test until I passed. Grace under fire was my new mantra. With a clear mind and peaceful heart I headed back over to the test site.

After turning in my paper work and sitting through another video I took a deep breath and waited for them to call my name. I was paired with a young Korean guy, who was so nervous he was visibly shaking, for the actual test. The instructor was a middle aged man who asked me in Korean if I could speak Korean. Of course I replied in Korean that no I couldn't. "How about we do this in English?" I asked. He was not amused. As it turned out my partner was hearing impaired and so the rest of the test was conducted in hand gestures, body language and gruff Korean.

The kid went first and was now sweating bullets. He was a disaster. He obviously had completed a driving course but he couldn't drive. It was actually pretty scary. The instructor had to release the handbrake for him as he started out. It took lots of shouting and hand gestures to remind him to use the turn signals. In addition, he couldn't keep the vehicle in the proper lane. He swung so widely on left turns that the instructor had to reach over and grab the steering wheel to keep him from hitting the car in the next lane. The instructor wasn't wearing his seatbelt and at first I wondered why. Then I realized he had to be free to take action in an emergency to avoid a serious accident. To get back into the testing center parking lot the kid had to make a sharp left. He just froze. The poor instructor had to turn the wheel for him and shout at him to go. I felt sorry for him and got some kind words ready to give him. Then I heard it, Pass!! I couldn't believe it but was buoyed about my chances. Surely I could out drive this kid.

I sincerely congratulated him as we switched seats. I buckled up and told the instructor I was ready. He fired up his tablet and informed me that I should drive the 'D' course. I requested the 'C' course since I had just watched the kid terrorize it. He said in perfect English "Random, Random". Then he pronounced his only other English vocabulary item "Go". I went.

The test was about a ten minute course through the city streets with left and right turns, a school zone and a couple of u-turns. It was really not a problem. I breezed through till I came to the second u-turn. It was at a four way intersection with a traffic light. As I approached the light turned green and I easily put on my left turn signaled, coasted into the left turn lane behind several cars and effortlessly signaled again and glided into the marked u-turn lane and made the u-turn. The instructor exploded and told me to pull over and put it in park. I had no idea what happened. He told me to get out and took the wheel to drive back to the test center. He said I failed. Since I half expected to fail on the first try I was ok with it but I sure didn't know why.

Back at the barn they told me to wait a minute. A guy, who was I suppose their Go-to English guy, came over and asked if I knew why I had failed. Of course I told him I was clueless. He started to explain in pretty rudimentary English that I had made an illegal u-turn. I pressed him for details but he was already at the end of his English and probably regretted getting involved. Then another guy came over with a

clipboard and started making diagrams. Seems like they were saying I made a u-turn from the left turn lane. I knew that wasn't right and so I switched to Korean and fired them up. Absolutely not! Next the three of them went into a huddle and after awhile the head guy came back and said they had accepted my opinion and they would give me a re-test. I realized this was extremely rare when one guy took me aside and told me never tell anybody about the re-test.

The re-test went off without a hitch until the very end. The instructor was the same guy who had been overruled by the boss so I thought he may have a little bit of cud to swallow. He was quiet but professional. For my part, I smiled and kept my mouth shut. I sailed through the course and was pretty sure we were going to close the deal this time. Thinking back now I guess the problem was meters vs. feet. Now I am an inch, foot and yard kind of guy. Of course, in Korea like the rest of the civilized world it's all about meters. The directions for turning were given in terms of meters. I had to convert from meters to feet in my head while looking for the turn, and negotiating traffic. I can do it but it takes a little more concentration and time. Something had to give and unfortunately what gave was keeping my eye on the speedometer. Somehow I drifted over the speed limit of 70/kilometers per hour and the on-board computer shut me down with a loud "YOU ARE DISQUALIFIED!" Nothing I could say this time. My long suffering instructor looked dejected. Back at the barn I put my arm around his shoulders and told him don't worry, next time. He said "sorry" several times and "you are a good driver".

Ah well, a new day and a new appointment. This time the head instructor got in the passenger seat and another instructor got in the back seat as an observer or more likely a witness for the prosecution if things went badly wrong. No problem on my third try. "Congratulations! You passed" the computer announced. The only thing left was to have the actual license issued. Of course before they would do that they threw one more obstacle in my path. When I turned in by paperwork the nice lady informed me I needed two photos. "What!" I had already, days ago, purchased nine pass port size photos and figured that should get me through the process. When I made the original application I handed all nine to the nice lady and she took two and attached them to the application. I took the rest home and tossed them in a drawer with all the rest. Now she is telling me she needs two more. It seemed like the often quoted last straw and felt I was just about to boil over. But then in my recently acquired Gandhi-like state that had so recently served me well in completing the actual licensing course, smiled and in a near Zen trance, strolled over to the photo concession and plopped down another eight bucks for nine more photos. That was it. Within ten minutes I had that document in my hot little hands. Yea I put it up on Facebook. Milestones are what Facebook is for, right?

Back at the coffee shop I took some time for an after- action report to me. This city and the world are full of folks who have driver's licenses' so it may not be a big deal but it was a goal and accomplishing it after a few setbacks was validating. Also, working through language and culture based problems takes a little extra thought and patience. As an ex-pat living in Korea I fight culture and language wars, big and small, everyday. A reminder of what is involved and a little practice was good for me. There's a reason why folks say that the third time is a charm. Once you decide to do whatever it takes to do something then it is only a matter of trying again and again. The first step in controlling the world is controlling myself. Now I need to buy a car.

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