

Reflective Essay: Welcoming Korean Students To the Middle School

I don't often sign up for un-required professional development or random learning opportunities that arrive, unsolicited, in my email inbox, but when the universe aligns in such a way that those opportunities catch my eye, because they happen to be on a subject I am desiring to explore, I take the risk and click on the email, knowing full well my time (and fee) may be wasted, or I may discover a true treasure trove of information. Recently, with the opening of a new battery factory in a nearby city to the one in which I teach, rumors have been flying that our area will play host to over 5000 Korean nationals coming to open the battery factory. As a teacher, this sparks my interest, because I assume I will soon be teaching Korean students who do not know much English, and I wonder how I will welcome them into my classroom. In fact, I wonder how our district will welcome them at all, considering that I know of no one with Korean language skills. With my Spanish-speaking students from Mexico and various countries in South America, my Spanish-speaking skills come in handy. I am the first teacher to properly welcome these students, and they often rely on me to answer their questions, such as "Where is the restroom?" It is a huge relief to them that I am able to converse in their language, but with Korean, I will be just as lost as everyone else. In fact, I realize that I know almost nothing about Korean culture, and quite frankly, I know of no local resources to help me learn. Then, out of the blue, I receive an email from PCCU about the workshop titled, "Cross-Cultural Comparison Between South Korea and the U.S: Belonging. It piques my interest. It is exactly what I am looking for, and I sign up immediately. The workshop is the starting point to a journey of better understanding how to welcome Korean students to my classroom. Ultimately, I am pleasantly surprised at what and who I encounter during the workshop, and I greatly enjoyed reading the books sent to me prior to the online meeting. The workshop turned out to be a valuable starting point to understanding some of the challenges Korean students may face as they acclimate to U.S. culture, connect with new people interested and knowledgeable in this topic, and to inspire me to continue learning so that I may truly welcome Korean students into my classroom.

Prior to the workshop, I was sent the novel, I Guess I Live Here Now, by Claire Ahn, as well as two graphic novels, Almost American Girl, by Robin Ha, and In Limbo, by Deb JJ Lee, all of which explore the experience of a Korean girl in transition between two cultures. I found these books extremely useful in orienting my mind to the Korean-American cultural comparison, as they highlighted many attributes of both Korean and American culture. Seeing this comparison play out in stories really brought it to life in a deeper way than what I may have discovered reading articles online. Descriptions of food, music, housing, holidays, customs, and more brought attention to the cultural elements one may discover on the surface of a culture, which are important elements, but the experiences and thoughts of the main characters, seemingly based on the real-life experiences of the authors, gave me a glimpse into understanding the deeper aspects of culture, including customs, beliefs, and ways of interacting with one another, that may not be evident as someone looking in from the outside. Examples of this include the dynamics of the young characters interacting with their parents, where the more traditional values of the older generations clash with the younger generation's desire to pursue a passion, fit in, find love, and explore life. Reading about the entire scope of the culture was eye opening, and it drove home the fact that just like in any place, each person wants to find friends, develop his or her identity, and figure out a way to excel. One common

theme amongst the books was the loneliness each of the characters felt in moving to a new location and trying to fit into a new culture. Each character faced the challenge of facing change, in themselves, their surroundings, and the loved ones around them. This theme piqued my interest, because in my desire to welcome Korean students to my classroom, I will have to work to help them overcome loneliness, to help them develop a place in my classroom community.

During the workshop, I realized what a unique opportunity it was to participate in a group of people from around the country, all interested in this particular topic, and I found it valuable hearing from the presenters that there are people knowledgeable and actively working to overcome the challenges faced by Koreans moving to America. Contrary to my beliefs prior to the workshop, it turns out that there are even people in my own community who have travelled to Korea and are interested in Korean literature. One of the presenters, Duane, even teaches at the high school from which I graduated! After the presentation I messaged Duane to connect, and he said he was open to meeting in the future, so I now have a local teacher from whom I can learn. Duane was the presenter who had recommended the books I enjoyed reading. After reading those books, I had the question in my mind, "How do I combat the loneliness Korean students must be feeling and welcome them into my classroom?" As if in response to this, the idea of Korea town was presented. Korea town allows Koreans to maintain their original culture in an atmosphere of celebration and preservation, while simultaneously becoming a part of America and American culture. I realized that to make students feel welcome, my primary goal would not be to help them learn about American culture, but to facilitate a space in which their own culture is welcomed and even celebrated. This gave me an idea for my 6th grade art lesson plan, which is essentially to have my students research Korean culture and create artwork, using Korean symbols, phrases, and pictures, to welcome Korean students in ways they will readily recognize. Through that process, I expect my own students to become interested in various aspects of Korean culture, whatever they may choose those to be, thereby creating a space in which Korean students may be sought after as sources of first-hand information.

I hope to continue learning more about Korean culture, and I am excited to interact with Koreans who come to our town and Korean students who attend our middle school. I believe I am lucky to be the art teacher, where self-expression is readily encouraged, as I noticed how in the books I read prior to the workshop, art played an important role in helping each of the main characters find their unique modes of self-expression, which led to them achieving a sense of belonging. I am excited to facilitate and see that process happen first-hand. I am encouraged by the workshop and the fact that I now have people I can reach out to with questions and ideas.

Overall, the PCCU workshop was a success, in that it served as a great introduction to Korean and US cultural comparison, introduced me to some basics of the Korean culture, and connected me with knowledgeable people. Thank you for providing this opportunity!

Middle School Art Lesson Plan: Welcoming Non-English Speaking Korean Students With Art

Grade Level: 6th Grade (Could be adapted to 7th and 8th grade standards)

Duration: 5-7 class periods (42 minutes each)

Standards

2023 Indiana Academic Standards, Visual Arts:

1. (VA: Cr1.1.6a): Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas for creating art.
2. (VA: Cr1.2.6a): Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.
3. (VA: Re7.1.6a): Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

Objectives

1. **Welcoming Design:** Students will create artwork specifically to welcome non-English speaking Korean students to the school, integrating Korean cultural symbols and language into their designs.
2. **Collaborative Innovation:** Students will combine ideas within their groups, incorporating personal and cultural influences to create inclusive, welcoming art.
3. **Cultural Exploration:** Students will explore Korean culture, symbols, and language, using these elements in their artwork to make Korean students feel included.
4. **Connection to Literature:** Using the excerpt from I Guess I Live Here Now, by Claire Ahn, students will draw parallels between personal expression, design, and the creation of welcoming environments. In addition, excerpts may be used to describe hanboks (traditional clothing) and hanoks (traditional housing).

Materials

- Excerpt from "I Guess I Live Here Now" (Chapter 26), by Claire Ahn
- Pencils, sketchbooks, colored pencils, markers, paint
- Large drawing paper, posters, or canvases for group artwork
- Examples of Korean art and symbols (e.g., Taegukgi (Korean flag and its constituent symbols), hanbok (traditional clothing) and hanoks (traditional houses), also featured in I Guess I Live Here Now, Korean traditional patterns), and Hangeul (Korean alphabet)
- Multimedia resources showcasing Korean culture (videos, websites).
- Basic Korean phrases (e.g., "안녕하세요" – "Hello," "환영합니다" – "Welcome")
- English to Korean translator website.
- Art supplies for text (e.g., brushes, pens, calligraphy tools)

Lesson Plan

Day 1: Introduction to Welcoming Non-English Speaking Students through Design

1. Introductory Reading and Discussion (12 minutes):

Begin by reading Chapter 26 of *I Guess I Live Here Now* by Claire Ahn. In this chapter, Melody, a Korean-American girl, redesigns her home to convince her parents to let her compete in an interior design contest, back in New York. Discuss how Melody used design as a tool for personal expression and problem-solving. Ask students how they can similarly help create welcoming environments, especially for students from different cultures and languages, like Korean-speaking students.

2. Class Discussion on Welcoming Non-English Speaking Korean Students (10 minutes):

Ask students to think about how they would feel if they were starting at a new school in a foreign country where they didn't speak the language. How can art and design help students feel more comfortable and welcome? Discuss Korean culture, language, and what elements could make a Korean-speaking student feel at home in your school. Reflect on their own first days of school and the cultural elements or communities that made them feel most welcome.

3. Introduction to Korean Art and Language (10 minutes):

Show examples of Korean art and design, from traditional symbols like the Taeguk (yin-yang symbol on the Korean flag) and Hanbok patterns to modern interpretations. Introduce basic Korean phrases written in Hangeul, such as "환영합니다" (Hwan-yeong-hamnida – "Welcome") and "안녕하세요" (Annyeonghaseyo – "Hello"). Discuss how incorporating these elements into art can make a space more inclusive.

4. Brainstorming Session (10 minutes):

In small groups, students brainstorm ideas for welcoming artwork that integrates Korean cultural symbols and language. They will think about how their designs can represent inclusivity and warmth, focusing on making Korean-speaking students feel valued.

Day 2: Artistic Investigation – Exploring Korean Culture

1. Cultural Exploration and Personal Connection (10 minutes):

Discuss how welcoming environments can reflect personal and cultural backgrounds. Ask students to consider their own cultural identity and how they can connect it to the welcoming message they want to convey. How can they balance welcoming Korean students while also showing unity and inclusivity for all students?

2. Group Work on Concept Development (32 minutes):

In their groups, students will begin sketching their concepts for the artwork. They should include Korean phrases like "Welcome" or "Hello" in Hangeul, along with symbols that reflect Korean culture (e.g., Taeguk, traditional patterns, natural elements like Gingko leaves). Encourage students to think creatively about how to blend Korean culture with other global and personal influences.

Day 3: Project Development – Bringing Ideas to Life

1. Work Session (42 minutes):

Students begin working on their group projects, focusing on integrating the Korean cultural elements discussed. They will use their sketches to start their final designs on large paper or canvases. Emphasize that their goal is to make Korean-speaking students feel included and celebrated, while also creating an art piece that speaks to the diversity of the school as a whole (VA: Cr1.1.6a).

Day 4-5: Project Development Continued

1. Work Session (42 minutes each):

Groups continue developing their artwork, adding in detailed elements and refining their use of Hangeul, Korean symbols, and designs. Encourage students to experiment with various artistic techniques (painting, drawing, collage) to represent the vibrancy and inclusivity of their school.

Day 6: Art Critique and Reflection

1. Gallery Walk (20 minutes):

Groups display their artwork in a gallery-style setup around the classroom or hallway. As students walk around, they take notes on how each group incorporated Korean cultural elements and whether the pieces successfully convey a welcoming message.

2. Group Presentations (22 minutes):

Each group presents their artwork, explaining how they included Korean language and culture in their design to make Korean-speaking students feel welcome. They should reflect on how their work connects to what they learned from I Guess I Live Here Now, especially regarding the power of design to express personal identity and create inclusive spaces.

Day 7: Reflection and Interpretation

1. Written Reflection (25 minutes):

Students will write a reflection about their experience creating the welcoming artwork. Prompts could include:

- How did your group incorporate Korean culture and language into your artwork?
- How did reading about Melody in I Guess I Live Here Now, help you think about the role of design in welcoming people?
- How does your artwork make non-English speaking Korean students feel welcome and included at your school?
- What did you learn about Korean culture, and how can this understanding help make your school a more inclusive place?

2. Class Discussion (17 minutes):

Lead a final discussion where students share insights from their reflections. Focus on how understanding another culture, like Korean culture, can enhance the sense of community and

belonging in the school. Discuss how art can be a universal language that helps break down language barriers.

Assessment

- Participation: Engagement in group discussions, brainstorming, and collaborative work.
- Artistic Investigation: Demonstration of thoughtful research into Korean culture and effective integration of these elements in the design.
- Final Artwork: Completion of a cohesive welcoming artwork that uses Korean language and cultural symbols to make non-English speaking Korean students feel included.
- Reflection: Insightful and personal reflections on the process, making connections between the literature, design, and inclusivity.

Extension Activities

As an extension, students could individually design small posters that include Hangeul phrases like "Welcome" or "Friend" (친구, Chingu), alongside Korean cultural symbols, to be displayed in key areas around the school. Each student would present their poster, explaining how the design would help non-English speaking Korean students feel more connected.

Students may select certain pieces of artwork or certain ideas to further develop and/or present to the principal for approval to hang around the school.

Students may interview Korean students to gain more insight into their culture and into what elements would make them feel more included and welcome at the school. Students may also seek feedback from Korean students, in regards to their artwork and how it made them feel.

Reference List

Ahn, Claire. *I Guess I Live Here Now*. Viking Books for Young Readers, 2022. Chapter 26.