

## COWS GO MOO By Jeremy Taylor

“We are very happy that you are with us, Mr Doyle.”

“And it is a great pleasure to be here, Mr Suk,” I replied. It was the first time I had said his name to his face and tried very hard to pronounce it ‘Sook’ rather than ‘Suck’.

“Are you ready for the nine o’clock class of twelve year olds?”

“Yes, I’ve prepared quite a few things. What sort of level are they? Beginner? Intermediate?”

“Oh, they are very poor, very poor indeed. They are lazy, very lazy.”

That was not what I had heard about Korean students. I imagined that they would be super keen and well-disciplined. But, Mr Suk was my boss and who was I, with the ink barely dry on my TEFL certificate, to question him?

At five to nine I went into the classroom to prepare my things for the class. I was amazed to see a class full of students. As I entered the class, everyone stood to attention. I walked to the front of the class and surveyed the group of ‘very poor, very lazy’ students. They were all dressed identically in blue uniforms and yellow ties. Boys on the left, girls on the right. On each desk was the same red text book, the same black pen and pencil. “Please, sit down,” I said, motioning them to be seated. They sat. Forty pairs of eyes remained fixed on me.

“Well, good morning everyone, my name’s Mr Doyle and I will be your teacher this year.” I looked around for a nod of understanding or a puzzled lack of comprehension. I received nothing but the continued undivided attention of every child in the class. “Okay, today I want to look at animals.” No reaction.

I opened my bag and drew out a picture of a cow stuck to a piece of red card. “This,” I said, pointing at the cow, “is a cow. Can you say cow for me?” I asked a girl sitting in the front row. “Cow,” I said very slowly.

“Cow,” she repeated.

“Very good!” So far so good. “Um, can you say ‘cow’?” I asked a boy in the fifth row.

“Cow,” he repeated.

“Excellent!” After three more “cows”, I felt it was time to move on. I did the same with sheep, mouse, dog, cat and lion. Everything was going fine. They were shy but had no serious pronunciation difficulties with basic vocabulary.

“Okay, now we are going to look at the noises that each animal makes. A cow...” I held up the picture of the cow. “...goes ‘Moo!’” I held up a blue card with ‘MOO’ written on it next to the picture of a cow. “Can you say ‘moo’ for me please?”

“Moo,” came the rather flat response.

Teaching in Italy in my pre-TEFL days, the mere presence of a picture of a

cow sent the children into fits of giggles. When they started making animal noises they split their sides laughing. But in Korea? Things were very very different. What was I doing wrong?

After an array of equally deadpan ‘Baas’, ‘Squeaks’, ‘Woofs’, ‘Miaows’, and ‘Roars’, it was time for the checking part of the presentation. ‘Okay, here we have lots of animals...’ I held up all the red cards in my left hand. ‘...and lots of animal noises,’ I held up all the blue cards in my right hand. Then, accidentally on purpose, I dropped all the cards on the floor. Some of the children wanted to pick them up for the apparently clumsy teacher but I motioned for them to stay in their seats. ‘Oh look!’ I cried in mock horror. ‘Teacher has dropped all the cards on the floor! I must try to put them all back in my bag correctly. Mmm..’ I picked up the picture of a lion and a blue card with the word ‘Moo’ on it. ‘Lion - Moo. Is that right?’

In Italy there would be a chorus of ‘NO!!!!’ but in Korea, nothing, just forty pairs of eyes that were making me feel decidedly uncomfortable.

‘No, a lion goes ‘roar’, a cow goes....’

I optimistically waited for a chorus of ‘MOOOOOOO!’ I think I saw a lip or two move but I can’t be sure. Something was seriously wrong. ‘A cow goes ‘mooooo!’, not ‘roar!’. Okay.’ I threw the lion and ‘moo’ back onto the floor.

‘Wait a minute!’ I said, pretending that I had just had a good idea. ‘Children, do you think you can help me? Can YOU find the animal and the sound?’ In Italy there would be a chorus of ‘YEEEEEESSSSS!!!!’ and then I would be trampled underfoot by eager children trying to find a ‘baa’ or a picture of a dog. But in Korea? Nothing but a very embarrassing silence.

‘Do you understand me?’ I said very slowly. ‘You, I’m sorry I don’t know your name,’ I asked a boy in the second row. ‘Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, sir,’ he replied.

‘Do you understand what I want you to do. Can you do it?’

‘I believe, sir, that you would like us to match the pictures of the animals on the red cards with the noises that each animal makes on the blue cards. Yes, sir, I believe we can do that.’

And he didn’t even smile.

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