

TALK LIKE A LOCAL

Korean

한국어

1,500+ Essential Phrases & Conversations
for Travelers & Beginners

With Pronunciation Guide & Cultural Notes

BEGINNER – INTERMEDIATE

Vega Publishing · 2026 Edition

Talk Like a Local: Korean

1,500+ Essential Phrases & Conversations for Travelers & Beginners

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While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, language is living and regional variations exist. The romanization follows the Revised Romanization of Korean (RR), the official system of South Korea.

First Edition — 2026

Published by Vega Publishing

Printed in the United States of America

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How to Use This Book

This is not a textbook. You will not conjugate verbs or memorize grammar tables. Instead, you will learn the phrases that real people use in real situations — the kind of Korean that gets you a table at a packed samgyeopsal joint, helps you navigate the Seoul subway at rush hour, and earns you a genuine smile from the halmeoni at the corner store.

How Each Phrase Works

Excuse me (to get attention)

POLITE

저기요

jeo-gi-yo

English → what you want to say | **한국어** → Korean script (show this to locals!) | **romanization** → how to pronounce it

Look for These Boxes

- **Real Talk** — Natural dialogues you will actually hear
- **K-Culture Moment** — The context behind the words
- **Sound Like a Local** — Shortcuts and natural speech
- **Common Mistake** — What foreigners get wrong (and the fix)
- **Try It Yourself** — Quick practice to lock it in

About Formality

Korean has speech levels that change depending on who you are talking to. We have kept it simple: most phrases in this book use **polite form** (해요체 / hae-yo-che), which works in nearly every situation. When you see a formality tag, it means:

CASUAL — With close friends your age or younger

POLITE — Your go-to for strangers, shops, restaurants (safe default)

FORMAL — Business, elders, official situations

Before You Start

A few things nobody tells you about Korea until you land:

You already know some Korean. Words like *kimchi*, *taekwondo*, *hallyu*, and *bibimbap* are Korean. If you have ever watched a K-drama without subtitles for even thirty seconds, you have heard *oppa*, *aigoo*, and *daebak*. That counts.

Koreans appreciate any attempt at their language. Most visitors never try. Even a basic *annyeonghaseyo* and *gamsahamnida* will change how people treat you. Doors open — sometimes literally (restaurant owners have been known to bring out free side dishes when foreigners attempt Korean).

Hangul is shockingly easy. King Sejong designed it in 1443 so that “a wise person can learn it in a morning, and even a fool can learn it in ten days.” Chapter 1 takes about 30 minutes. After that, you can sound out signs, menus, and subway stations — even if you do not know what the words mean yet.

This book is your wingman, not your teacher. Flip to the chapter you need, find the phrase, point at the Korean script if your pronunciation fails. Nobody is grading you. The goal is connection, not perfection.

같이 가보자!

ga-chi ga-bo-ja!

Let's go together!

CHAPTER 1

The Korean Alphabet in 30 Minutes

Hangul is not a wall — it is a door. And it only takes half an hour to walk through it.

Korean uses its own alphabet called **Hangul** (한글). Unlike Chinese or Japanese, Hangul is not made of thousands of complex characters. It has just **24 basic letters** — 14 consonants and 10 vowels — that snap together like building blocks.

King Sejong the Great invented Hangul in 1443 because he believed ordinary people deserved to read and write. Before that, only scholars who spent years learning Chinese characters could be literate. His alphabet was literally designed to be learned in a single day.



Here is the good news: the shapes of the consonants are based on the position of your mouth and tongue when you make each sound. Once you see the pattern, the letters start to make intuitive sense.

KR **WHY KOREANS CELEBRATE HANGUL DAY**

October 9th is a national holiday dedicated to King Sejong's alphabet. Linguists worldwide consider Hangul one of the most scientific writing systems ever created. UNESCO even named the King Sejong Literacy Prize after him. When you learn Hangul, you are learning a piece of cultural heritage that Koreans are deeply proud of.

Basic Consonants











Each letter represents one sound. The shape hints at how your mouth moves.

 g / k	 n	 d / t	 r / l	 m
 b / p	 s	 ng / silent	 j	 ch
 k	 t	 p	 h	

See the patterns? ㄱ (g) is shaped like the back of your tongue touching the roof of your mouth. ㄴ (n) shows the tip of your tongue pressing behind your upper teeth. ㅁ (m) represents your closed lips. The shapes are clues, not random.

Basic Vowels

Vowels are built from lines and dots. Vertical line = "person standing," horizontal line = "earth," dot = "sky."

 a	 eo	 o	 u	 eu
 i	 ae	 e	 ya	 yeo

🌟 Mouth Shape Trick

For vowels: ㅏ (**a**) = mouth wide open, ㅓ (**eo**) = mouth like saying "uh" in English, ㅗ (**o**) = lips rounded like "oh," ㅜ (**u**) = lips pushed forward like "oo." Practice in front of a mirror — five minutes and you will have it.

How Syllable Blocks Work

This is what makes Korean different from English. Letters do not sit in a row — they stack into **syllable blocks**. Every block is one syllable, and every block follows one of these patterns:

가

ㄱ + ㅏ = ga
consonant + vowel

한

ㅎ + ㅏ + ㄴ = han
consonant + vowel + consonant

The consonant always comes first. If a syllable starts with a vowel sound, you write the silent placeholder ㅇ in front. So the word for “child” (아이) is spelled ㅇ + ㅏ / ㅇ + ㅣ .

Build Your First Words

WORD	HANGUL	BREAKDOWN	MEANING
na-ra	나라	ㄴ + ㅏ / ㄹ + ㅏ	country
sa-ram	사람	ㅅ + ㅏ / ㄹ + ㅏ + ㅁ	person
mul	물	ㅁ + ㅏ + ㄹ	water
bap	밥	ㅂ + ㅏ + ㅂ	rice / meal
son	손	ㅅ + ㅏ + ㄴ	hand
nun	눈	ㄴ + ㅏ + ㄴ	eye / snow
dal	달	ㄷ + ㅏ + ㄹ	moon
hae	해	ㅎ + ㅏ	sun / year

KR **DOUBLE MEANINGS**

Notice that 눈 means both "eye" and "snow," and 밥 means both "cooked rice" and "meal" — because rice *is* the meal in Korean culture. When Koreans ask 밥 먹었어? (have you eaten rice?), they are really asking "how are you?"

Double Consonants & Compound Vowels

Once you have the basics, these are just combinations of what you already know.

DOUBLE (TENSE) CONSONANTS

Pronounced with more force – tighten your throat slightly, like the “p” in “stop” vs. the “p” in “pop.”

ㄱ kk	ㄷ tt	ㅃ pp	ㅆ ss	ㅈ jj
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COMPOUND VOWELS

ㅏ wa	ㅜ wo	ㅘ wae	ㅙ we	ㅢ ui
ㅚ yae	ㅝ ye			

Reading Practice: Korean Signs

Try sounding these out. Answers below.

HANGUL	SOUND IT OUT	MEANING
호텔	_____	hotel
택시	_____	taxi
버스	_____	bus
커피	_____	coffee
치킨	_____	chicken
메뉴	_____	menu
화장실	_____	restroom
출구	_____	exit

Answers: ho-tel, taek-si, beo-seu, keo-pi, chi-kin, me-nyu, hwa-jang-sil, chul-gu. Notice how many Korean words come from English? You will find these everywhere — coffee shops, restaurants, subway stations. Hangul is your decoder ring.

Pronunciation Rules That Actually Matter

Korean pronunciation has some quirks. Here are the ones that trip up English speakers most.

ㄱ (g/k) g at start, k at end **"g" in "go" or "k" in "back"**

At the start of a word it sounds like a soft G. At the end, it stops like K.

ㄹ (r/l) r between vowels, l at end **"r" in "butter" (tap), not "r" in "red"**

This is a light tap, like the American "t" in "water." At the end of a syllable, it sounds like L.

ㅇ (ng/silent) silent at start, ng at end **Silent before vowels, "ng" in "sing" at the end**

The ㅇ is a placeholder at the start of vowel syllables. At the end, it becomes "ng."

✗ Pronouncing Korean R like English R (with the tongue curled back)

✓ Use a quick tongue tap, like the "tt" in "butter" or "d" in "ladder" in American English

The Korean ㄹ is closer to a Spanish R or a Japanese R. Keep your tongue loose and just tap the roof of your mouth.

✨ The Magic of 발음 (Batchim)

The consonant at the bottom of a syllable block is called *batchim*. It changes how the syllable ends and sometimes affects the next syllable. For now, just remember: **consonants at the bottom get softer**. A ㅁ at the bottom sounds like an unreleased "p" (lips close but no puff of air). A ㅂ at the bottom sounds like an unreleased "t." You will pick this up naturally with practice.

Read Your First Korean Sentences

You already know enough to read these. Take it slow, syllable by syllable.

KOREAN	ROMANIZATION	ENGLISH
안녕하세요	an-nyeong-ha-se-yo	Hello
감사합니다	gam-sa-ham-ni-da	Thank you
죄송합니다	joe-song-ham-ni-da	I'm sorry
네	ne	Yes
아니요	a-ni-yo	No
저기요	jeo-gi-yo	Excuse me
한국어	han-gug-eo	Korean language

YOUR FIRST KOREAN MOMENT

You walk into a small restaurant in Myeongdong. The owner looks up. You say: **안녕하세요!** She breaks into a smile. You just read that from Hangul, not from romanization. She responds with a stream of Korean you do not understand — but that is fine. You point at the menu, say **이거 주세요** (i-geo ju-se-yo — “this one please”). Dinner is served.

TRY IT YOURSELF

1. Write your name in Hangeul using the consonant and vowel charts. (Hint: most English names can be approximated — “Mike” becomes 마이크)
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2. Read these signs without looking at the answers: 식당 (restaurant), 약국 (pharmacy), 은행 (bank)
.....
3. Ask a Korean friend or language partner to text you one sentence in Hangeul. Try to sound it out, syllable by syllable.
.....
4. Answers: sik-dang, yak-guk, eun-haeng
.....