

Korean TOPIK 1 (A1)

— What to Study

Level: **TOPIK 1 · CEFR A1 (Breakthrough)** · Language: **Korean** · Audience: **Learners**

Korean has a gate that Spanish and German do not. Before any grammar makes sense you have to be able to read, and until you can, every word you meet is a picture rather than a sound. The good news is that this gate is unusually cheap to pass: Hangeul is a designed alphabet, not an inherited one, and most learners read it — slowly, but genuinely — within a week.

TOPIK level 1 describes someone who can carry out basic conversations for daily survival: introducing yourself, buying something, ordering food. You can understand and produce simple sentences about very familiar subjects — yourself, your family, your hobbies, the weather — using roughly 800 basic words and a small set of sentence patterns.

Everything below serves that description. If a grammar point does not help you survive one of those situations, it is not a TOPIK 1 problem yet.

Before grammar: Hangeul

Do not postpone this and do not use romanisation as a crutch. Learners who lean on romanised Korean spend the following year unlearning the pronunciation it taught them.

- The 14 consonants and 10 vowels, and how they assemble into syllable blocks
- The three-way consonant contrast that has no English or Spanish equivalent: plain ㄱ, aspirated ㅋ, tense ㆁ
- Vowel pairs European ears merge at first: ㅏ/ㅗ, ㅓ/ㅜ, ㅗ/ㅜ, ㅓ/ㅜ
- Final consonants (받침) and the seven sounds they collapse into
- The main sound-change rules, because Korean is not written as it is spoken: 좋아요 sounds like 조아요, 한국말 like 한궁말

Give this two weeks of daily practice. It pays back for the rest of your study.

Grammar to master

Word order and particles. Korean is subject-object-verb, and the verb always comes last. Roles are marked by particles attached to nouns rather than by position, which is why word order is flexible in a way English and Spanish word order is not.

- Topic 은/는 versus subject 이/가 — the hardest distinction at this level, and the one to start living with early
- Object 을/를

- Location and time 예, dynamic location 에서
- 도 (also), 와/과 and 하고 (and, with)
- 의 for possession, usually dropped in speech

The copula and existence.

- 이다 / 아니다 for "is" and "is not"
- 있다 / 없다 for existence and possession — one verb covers "there is", "I have" and "I am at"

Present tense and speech level. Korean verbs conjugate for politeness, not for person. This replaces the European habit of conjugating for I/you/he.

- The polite 해요 form: -아요 / -어요 / -해요, and how the stem's final vowel decides which
- The formal -(스)ㅂ니다 form, which you should recognise even if you speak in 해요
- 반말 exists; do not use it yet with anyone you have just met

Past and future.

- Past -았어요 / -었어요
- Near future and intention -(으)ㄹ 거예요
- The present tense also covers habitual actions, as in English

Negation.

- Short negation with 안 before the verb
- Long negation with -지 않다
- 못 for inability, which is a different idea from 안 and not interchangeable

Numbers. Korean has two complete number systems and you need both from the start.

- Sino-Korean 일, 이, 삼 for dates, money, minutes, phone numbers
- Native Korean 하나, 둘, 셋 for counting things, hours and age
- The common counters: 개, 명, 살, 시, 분, 권, 마리

Sentence building.

- Question words: 뭐, 누구, 어디, 언제, 어떻게, 왜, 얼마
- Questions need no word-order change — intonation and the ending do the work
- Joining clauses with -고 (and) and -아서/어서 (so, because)
- 주세요 for requests, which will carry you through every shop and restaurant

Vocabulary areas

Aim for around 800 words you can retrieve, not merely recognise. Depth in these areas beats breadth.

- Greetings, introductions, and the fixed phrases Korean uses constantly (감사합니다, 죄송합니다, 괜찮아요)
- Family and relationships, including the fact that sibling words differ by the speaker's gender
- Numbers, dates, days, money, time
- Food, drink, restaurant and café language
- Shopping: prices, sizes, colours, 이거/그거/저거
- The city: 학교, 병원, 은행, 지하철, and asking where something is
- Daily routine verbs: 가다, 오다, 먹다, 자다, 공부하다, 일하다
- Weather and the seasons
- Adjectives for basic description and feeling

What you should be able to do

Treat this as the exit test. Grammar you cannot deploy here is not yet learned.

- Read Hangeul aloud at conversational speed, even if you do not know every word
- Introduce yourself: name, nationality, occupation, where you live
- Ask someone the same and understand the answer
- Order in a restaurant or café and ask what something costs
- Buy something, ask for a different size or colour, and understand the price spoken aloud
- Ask for and follow simple directions
- Talk about your family, your day and your hobbies in short sentences
- Say what you did yesterday and what you will do tomorrow
- Understand slow, clear speech on these familiar topics
- Write short simple sentences about yourself

Common difficulties

The verb arrives last. In listening this is the real cost: you cannot know whether a sentence is positive, negative, a question or a request until it ends. Train yourself to hold the sentence and wait rather than translating as it goes.

은/는 versus 이/가. Expect this to stay uncomfortable for a long time — most learners are still refining it at TOPIK 4. Do not look for a rule that settles it. Start with the working approximation that 은/는 introduces

or contrasts a topic and 이/가 identifies a subject, and let exposure do the rest.

Two number systems. The split is not arbitrary but it is not intuitive either. Learn each counter with the system it takes rather than learning the numbers separately.

Speech levels have no European equivalent. Choosing between 해요 and 반말 is not a register choice like *tú* and *usted*; it is closer to a decision about the relationship itself. When unsure, use 해요. Being slightly too polite is invisible; being too casual is not.

Particles do not map onto prepositions. 에 and 에서 both become "at" or "in" in English, and the difference is whether something exists there or something happens there. Learn them through examples, not through a translation.

Subjects disappear. Korean drops anything the context supplies. A sentence with no stated subject is normal, not incomplete.

How to know you are ready for TOPIK 2

You are ready when Hangeul is genuinely automatic, when the 해요 form comes out without assembling it, and when you can hold a slow conversation about yourself without rehearsing it first. Hesitating over verb endings means more time at this level, not a harder textbook.

TOPIK 1 is commonly estimated at somewhere around 100 to 150 hours of guided study for a European-language speaker — more than Spanish A1 would take, largely because of the writing system and the word order. Treat that as a rough scale, not a target.

Next step

Move on to the Korean TOPIK 2 guide, which adds the connectives and modal endings that turn short sentences into real conversation.

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