

Korean TOPIK 3 (B1)

— What to Study

Level: **TOPIK 3 · CEFR B1 (Threshold)** · Language: **Korean** · Audience: **Learners**

TOPIK 3 is where Korean stops being about you. At levels 1 and 2 almost everything you learned served your own immediate needs — what you want, where you are going, what you did yesterday. Here you gain the machinery to talk about other people: what they said, what was done to them, what you infer about them without being told. That shift is the whole level.

The exam changes shape at the same point, and it is worth knowing before you plan. TOPIK 1 and 2 are awarded from one paper, TOPIK I. Levels 3 to 6 come from a different paper, TOPIK II, and you do not sit a level — you sit TOPIK II and are awarded 3, 4, 5 or 6 according to your score. TOPIK II also adds a writing paper that TOPIK I does not have: short sentence completions, a piece describing a chart or graph, and a full essay.

That last fact reshapes how you should study. Reading and listening improve by exposure; writing does not. If you leave it until the month before the exam, it will be the paper that decides your level.

Grammar to master

Indirect speech. The defining structure of TOPIK 3, and the one to start first because everything social runs through it. Korean does not shift tenses the way English does — it changes the ending and adds a verb of speaking.

- Statements: -(ㄴ/는)다고 하다 for verbs, -다고 하다 for adjectives, -(이)라고 하다 for nouns
- Questions: -(느)냐고 하다
- Commands: -(으)라고 하다
- Suggestions: -자고 하다
- The spoken contractions, which is how you will actually hear all of the above: -대요, -내요, -래요, -재요
- Reporting yourself, for insisting or reminding: -다고 했잖아요

Study these as one system rather than four separate patterns. The four sentence types map onto four endings with no exceptions, which makes this one of the tidiest things in Korean grammar — and unusually, drilling the table really does work here.

Passive and causative. Structurally the hardest thing at this level, because Korean marks both inside the verb rather than around it.

- Passive suffixes 이 / 히 / 리 / 기: 보이다, 먹히다, 열리다, 안기다
- -아/어지다 for a change of state: 좋아지다, 만들어지다

- -게 되다 for coming to be in a situation, often without choosing it
- Causative suffixes 이 / 히 / 리 / 기 / 우 / 추: 먹이다, 앉히다, 울리다, 웃기다, 재우다, 맞추다
- -게 하다 for making or letting someone do something

There is no rule that tells you which suffix a given verb takes. These are learned per verb, in pairs with their active form, and there are only a few dozen frequent ones — treat them as vocabulary rather than grammar and the level gets noticeably easier.

The retrospective -더-. A category with no European equivalent: it marks something you personally witnessed and are now reporting.

- -더라고요 for relating what you saw or noticed yourself
- -던 and -았/었던 as modifiers, for the recalled and the discontinued past
- -더니 and -았/었더니, which differ by subject in a way that catches everyone

Supposition and inference. At A2 you stated things. Here you learn to hedge, which is most of adult conversation.

- -(으)ㄴ/는/(으)ㄹ 것 같다, the workhorse
- -나 보다 and -(으)ㄴ가 보다, for inference from evidence
- -(으)ㄹ 텐데 for expectation, often with concern attached
- -(으)ㄹ 겠요 for a guess you are fairly confident of
- -겠- used for conjecture rather than future, as in 힘들겠어요

Connectives with narrower jobs. At A2 you learned connectors that cover broad ground. These are specific, and specificity is what makes speech sound adult.

- -느라고 for a cause that prevented something, same subject throughout
- -다가 and -았/었다가 for interrupting or switching
- -자마자 for immediately after
- -(으)ㄹ수록 for the more one thing, the more another
- -아/어도 and -더라도 for even if
- -(으)ㄴ/는데도 for despite
- -기 때문에 against -(으)니까 and -아서/어서, now a three-way choice with a register difference
- -(으)려면 for if you intend to, and -기 위해서 for in order to
- -(으)ㄴ/는 대신에 for instead of, and in exchange for

Nominalisation. Korean turns clauses into nouns constantly, and choosing the wrong nominaliser is a persistent low-level error.

- -는 것 as the general default
- -기 with the verbs and adjectives that demand it: -기(가) 쉽다, -기(가) 어렵다, -기로 하다, -기 시작하다

- -(으)ㅁ for the formal and written, which you will meet in notices and headlines

Two registers you have been avoiding.

- 반말, systematically rather than by imitation. You now have people you should be using it with, and continuing in 해요 with a close friend is itself a mistake.
- The plain written style -ㄴ 다/는다/이다. This is not a politeness level, it is the style of books, newspapers and the TOPIK II essay. You cannot read Korean without it and you cannot pass the writing paper in 해요체.

Vocabulary areas

Roughly 3,000 to 4,000 words, and the way you gather them has to change. Level 3 is where Sino-Korean stops being trivia and becomes the most efficient tool you have: recognising that 학 runs through 학교, 학생, 학기, 대학 and 유학 turns single words into families.

- Society and daily life beyond your own: neighbourhood, transport, housing, money
- Work: applications, interviews, colleagues, meetings, the language of asking and declining at work
- Education and study, including your own reasons for learning
- Health and lifestyle in more detail than symptoms
- Media: weather forecasts, simple news, notices, announcements
- Culture and custom, including the ones you are expected to explain about your own country
- Opinion language: agreeing, partly agreeing, disagreeing without offence
- Emotion and character with some precision — 답답하다, 아쉽다, 억울하다, 부담스럽다 and their neighbours
- Frequent Sino-Korean stems, studied as families rather than as isolated words
- The difference between spoken and written words for the same thing, which the level explicitly tests

What you should be able to do

- Report what someone else said, asked, or told you to do
- Maintain a friendship in Korean, including in 반말
- Explain a problem and negotiate a solution without switching to English
- Give an opinion on a familiar social topic and support it with a reason
- Infer and hedge: say what you think is probably the case rather than only what you know
- Follow a conversation between two Koreans about an everyday topic
- Understand the main points of a slow news item or a public announcement
- Read a short article on a familiar subject and get its argument, not only its facts
- Write several connected paragraphs in the plain written style

- Use a public office, a hospital or a bank for something non-routine

Common difficulties

Indirect speech in real time. Recognising -대요 is easy; producing 친구가 내일 못 온다고 했어요 at conversational speed is not. The ending has to be chosen before you start the sentence, which is exactly the kind of planning Korean requires and English does not.

Passive verbs sound wrong before they sound right. Learners regularise them — 열어지다 for 열리다 — for months. The fix is learning each passive alongside its active form rather than as a rule.

-더니 and -았/었더니. The subject changes between them, and almost nobody gets this from an explanation alone. Collect real examples.

The register gap opens. You now have three ways to say most things — 해요, -(스)ㅂ니다, and 반말 — plus a written style that is none of them. Level 3 explicitly tests whether you can tell them apart, and it is the first level where sounding wrong matters as much as being wrong.

Comprehension outruns speech. You will understand news you cannot discuss. That gap is normal at B1 and closes only through production.

Fossilisation begins. By TOPIK 3 you are comprehensible, so Korean speakers stop correcting you and start understanding you instead. This is where structured feedback from a teacher changes from useful to necessary.

How to know you are ready for TOPIK 4

You are ready when indirect speech comes out without assembly, when the frequent passives and causatives are stored as vocabulary rather than derived on the spot, and when you can read a page of the plain written style without translating it into 해요체 in your head. TOPIK 4 assumes all three and moves into abstract and social topics where the vocabulary, not the grammar, becomes the limit.

Level 3 is commonly estimated at a further 200 hours or so beyond level 2. Treat that as a scale rather than a target — as before, the variable that moves it most is how much you speak.

Next step

Move on to the Korean TOPIK 4 guide, which is where Sino-Korean vocabulary and written register become the main work.

And practise this level live. Indirect speech is not learned by reading about it — it is learned by having someone tell you something and then telling a third person what they said. Book a Korean conversation

class and put it to work.

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