

Korean TOPIK 4 (B2)

— What to Study

Level: **TOPIK 4** · **CEFR B2 (Vantage)** · Language: **Korean** · Audience: **Learners**

TOPIK 4 is the level with the most practical weight attached to it. It is the point at which Korean institutions and employers generally stop asking whether you speak Korean and start assuming you do — many universities set level 3 for admission and level 4 for graduation, and level 4 appears repeatedly as a threshold in hiring and in visa scoring. Requirements vary by institution, so check the specific one rather than trusting a general figure, including this one.

Linguistically the level has an unusual shape. The grammar list is shorter than at level 3 and the individual patterns are less structurally strange. What makes level 4 hard is vocabulary and register: understanding a news report, reading an opinion column, and writing something that does not read as a transcript of speech.

That means the study that got you to level 3 will not get you to level 4. More conversation practice alone will make you a more fluent level 3.

Grammar to master

Connectives with fine distinctions. Most of these could be paraphrased with something you already know. Using them anyway is what the level measures.

- -(으)ㄹ 뿐만 아니라 and -는 데다가 for not only, but also
- -는 반면(에) and -(으)ㄴ 반면에 for whereas
- -(으)ㄴ에도 불구하고 for despite, in written register
- -는 바람에 for an unforeseen cause with an unwanted result
- -(으)ㄴ 나머지 for a consequence of an extreme state
- -기는커녕 for far from, let alone
- -(으)ㄹ 정도로 and -(으)ㄹ 만큼 for to the extent that
- -는 한 for as long as, on condition that
- -(으)ㄴ/는 김에 for while you are at it
- -(으)ㄹ 지라도 and -더라도 for even supposing

Judgement, hedging and counterfactuals. Where level 3 taught you to guess, level 4 teaches you to qualify — which is most of how educated Korean actually sounds.

- -(으)ㄴ/는 셈이다 for it amounts to

- -(으)ㄹ 만하다 for worth doing
- -기 마련이다 and -는 법이다 for what naturally happens
- -았/었더라면 for the counterfactual past, usually with regret
- -(으)ㄹ 뻔하다 for what nearly happened
- -(으)ㄹ 리가 없다 for there is no way that
- -(으)ㄴ/는 편이다 for tending toward, the most useful hedge in the language
- -(으)ㄹ 수도 있다, 다소, 어느 정도, 아무래도 as softeners

Written register, properly. This is a section on style, and at level 4 style is content.

- The plain style -ㄴ 다/는다/이다 used consistently, including in negatives and questions
- Written connectives that rarely appear in speech: 또한, 따라서, 그러나, 즉, 반면, 다만, 게다가, 오히려, 결국
- Noun-heavy construction: preferring 증가 to 늘어나다 where the register calls for it
- Quoting and attributing in writing rather than with -대요
- The structure the TOPIK II essay expects — a position, support, a concession, a conclusion — which is a rhetorical skill in any language and has to be practised in this one

Honorifics under pressure. You have known the forms since level 2. Level 4 is where they get complicated, because the person you are speaking to and the person you are speaking about stop being the same person.

- Sustained 하십시오체 in professional and public settings
- Email and message conventions, which are more fixed in Korean than in English
- Referring to a third party honorifically while speaking politely to your listener
- Knowing when the honorific is wrong — over-honorific Korean is a recognised error, not extra safety

Vocabulary areas

Roughly 5,000 words and up, but the count matters less than the source. This is the level at which Sino-Korean has to be studied deliberately rather than absorbed, because it is what the newspapers, the exam and the workplace are built from.

- Sino-Korean word formation, studied as parts: the suffixes -적, -화, -성, -력, -자 and -를, and the negating prefixes 비-, 무-, 미- and 재-
- Abstract and social topics: environment, education policy, employment, technology, ageing, inequality
- News language, which has its own compressed grammar and its own headline conventions
- Workplace and academic vocabulary in your own field
- 관용 표현 — the fixed idioms, such as 발이 넓다, 손이 크다, 눈이 높다
- 속담, at least the frequent ones you will actually hear

- The most common 사자성어, recognised rather than produced
- Pairs of near-synonyms and what separates them, which is where level 4 vocabulary questions live
- Onomatopoeia and mimetic words, which are ordinary Korean rather than decoration and are largely invisible to learners who study only from textbooks

What you should be able to do

- Follow a news broadcast or a podcast on a familiar social topic at native speed
- Read a newspaper article or opinion column and summarise its argument
- Hold a position in a discussion, concede a point, and come back to your own
- Write a structured essay in the plain style, with a position and support
- Work or study in Korean for routine purposes, including meetings and email
- Understand humour, irony and indirectness rather than only literal content
- Explain something from your own field to a non-specialist
- Move between formal, polite and casual registers according to who is in the room
- Understand frequent idioms and the cultural references that come with them
- Handle an unfamiliar or awkward situation without switching to English

Common difficulties

The Sino-Korean wall. The characteristic level 4 experience is being conversationally fluent and still unable to read a newspaper. Everyday Korean is largely native vocabulary; public and written Korean is largely Sino-Korean. Nothing about your speaking practice touches this, and no amount of it substitutes for studying word formation directly.

Writing in speech. Submitting an essay in 해요체 caps your level regardless of content. The plain style has to be practised in production, not only recognised in reading.

Near-synonymous grammar. -는 바람에, -느라고 and -기 때문에 all give a reason; -더니 and -았/었더니 differ by subject; -(으)ㄹ 텐데 and -(으)ㄹ 겠요 both hedge. Explanations help less than collected examples here, because the distinctions are about typical use rather than rules.

Listening speed. The TOPIK II listening paper is not slowed down, and it moves into interviews, lectures and news. Learners who trained on textbook audio find this the sharpest jump in the exam.

Passives and causatives resurface. They were level 3 grammar, but they appear constantly in written and formal Korean, and errors that survived level 3 become conspicuous here.

Fossilisation, now permanent. At this level Korean speakers understand you effortlessly and therefore stop correcting you entirely. Whatever is wrong at level 4 tends to stay wrong unless someone is paid to

notice it.

Comprehension outpacing production. You will understand considerably more than you can say for the whole of this level. That gap is normal, and it closes only by producing.

How to know you are ready for TOPIK 5

You are ready when you can read a newspaper for information rather than as an exercise, when you can write in the plain style without translating out of **해요체** first, and when you can disagree with a Korean speaker about something abstract and stay in the conversation. Until all three are true, more level 4 is the right answer.

Level 4 is commonly estimated at a further 200 hours or so beyond level 3. As at every level, treat the figure as a scale rather than a target.

Next step

Levels 5 and 6 shift again, from using Korean competently to using it professionally and academically — research, specialised fields, and the ability to follow implication rather than statement. Guides for those levels are planned.

In the meantime, the thing that moves level 4 fastest is being corrected by someone who will not simply understand you. Book a Korean conversation class and ask your teacher to correct register, not only grammar.

Written by LinguaXchange. Aligned with the TOPIK level 4 descriptors published by the National Institute for International Education (국립국제교육원). The CEFR equivalence shown is NIIED's own published TOPIK-CEFR linkage; it is a linkage rather than an identity, and no TOPIK certificate states a CEFR level. Admission, graduation and visa requirements described here vary by institution and change — confirm them with the body that sets them.