



Korean Ladder Study Note

못해요

Saying 'Cannot Do' vs 'Not Good at Doing'

Level	Topic	Focus
A1 · Beginner TOPIK 1	Grammar Negation	못해요 Saying 'Cannot Do' vs 'Not Good at Doing'

Study Links

Open this lesson on Korean Ladder

<https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-GRAM-NEG-006>

Watch the full video on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcVaOt3OCpA>

Visit [koreanladder.com](https://www.koreanladder.com) for all free lessons

<https://www.koreanladder.com>

Core Idea

Okay, real story. A Korean coworker asked if I can cook. I said I can't, but I actually cook a little. Did I say it wrong?

아마 요리 못해요라고 했죠? That sounds like 'I can't cook at all.' 그래서 동료가 조금 놀랐을 거예요.

Oh no. So now they think I eat cereal for every meal.

괜찮아요. If you cook a little, say 요리 잘 못해요. That means 'I'm not very good at cooking.'

Conversation Snapshot

Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Junho	하나 씨, 수영할 수 있어요? —	Hana, can you swim?
Hana	아니요, 수영 못해요. 물이 무서워요. —	No, I can't swim. I'm scared of water.



Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Junho	저는 수영 잘 못해요. 그래도 조금은 해요. —	I'm not very good at swimming. But I can do a little.
Hana	그럼 요리는요? 요리 잘해요? —	Then what about cooking? Are you good at cooking?
Junho	아니요, 요리는 잘 못해요. 라면만 끓여요. —	No, I'm not good at cooking. I only make instant noodles.
Hana	저는 요리 잘해요. 다음에 같이 해요. —	I'm good at cooking. Let's cook together next time.

Vocabulary & Useful Expressions

Word	Meaning	Example
못해요 mot-hae-yo	can't do (at all)	먼저, 못해요. 할 수 없다는 뜻이에요. In English, 'I can't do it.' The answer is basically zero.
잘 못해요 jal mot-hae-yo	not good at (can do a little)	그리고 잘 못해요. 잘은 'well'이에요. So 잘 못해요 is 'I can't do it well.' In other words, 'I'm not very good at it.'
저는 스키 못해요 jeo-neun seu-ki mot-hae-yo	I can't ski.	예를 들어 볼게요. 저는 스키 못해요. I can't ski. I have never tried it.
저는 운전 잘 못해요 jeo-neun un-jeon jal mot-hae-yo	I'm not very good at driving.	저는 운전 잘 못해요. I'm not very good at driving. 운전은 해요, but slowly, and parking is hard for me.
저는 노래 잘 못해요 jeo-neun no-rae jal mot-hae-yo	I'm not very good at singing.	하나 더. 저는 노래 잘 못해요. I'm not good at singing. 노래방에서는 노래해요, just not well.
한국어 잘 못해요 han-gu-geo jal mot-hae-yo	I'm not very good at Korean.	그리고 이 문장은 정말 자주 들어요. 한국어 잘 못해요. I'm not very good at Korean. Learners say this all the time, in Korean.
못해요 · 잘 못해요 mot-hae-yo · jal mot-hae-yo	zero ability · some ability, but low	Exactly. 못해요 means zero ability. 잘 못해요 means some ability, but low. Think of a volume knob. 못해요 is off. 잘 못해요 is turned down low.
수영 잘 못해요 su-yeong jal mot-hae-yo	I'm not very good at swimming.	네, 맞아요. Then you say 수영 잘 못해요. You're being honest, and a little modest.



Grammar / Structure Notes

못해요

못해요 — can't do (at all)

Zero ability

잘 못해요

잘 못해요 — not good at (can do a little)

잘 = well

잘 못해요

잘 못해요 — not good at (can do a little)

잘 = well

저는 스키 못해요

저 + 는 + 스키 + 못해요 — I can't ski.

예를 들어 볼게요. 저는 스키 못해요. I can't ski. I have never tried it.

저는 운전 잘 못해요

저 + 는 + 운전 + 잘 + 못해요 — I'm not very good at driving.

저는 운전 잘 못해요. I'm not very good at driving. 운전은 해요, but slowly, and parking is hard for me.

Pronunciation Loop

Phrase	How to practice
모태요	mot-hae-yo → mo-tae-yo
수영 모태요	su-yeong mot-hae-yo
잘 모태요	jal mot-hae-yo

Self-Check

- 1 Say 못해요 three times: slow, natural, then inside a short sentence.
- 2 Write one original sentence that was not in the video.
- 3 Rewatch the YouTube lesson and pause when the same pattern appears.

Related / Subsequent Studies



Lesson	Why study it next	Link
아니예요 Choosing 'Is Not' or 'There Isn't'	A1 Grammar: compare 아니예요 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-GRAM-NEG-003
안 Two Ways to Say 'No/Can't'	A1 Grammar: compare 안 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-GRAM-NEG-001
안은 동사 바로 앞에 Where to Put 안 in a Korean Sentence	A1 Grammar: compare 안은 동사 바로 앞에 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-GRAM-NEG-004
없어요 Two Beginner Ways to Say You Don't Have or Aren't Doing	A1 Grammar: compare 없어요 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-GRAM-NEG-002

My Notes

Your ladder to fluent Korean. This PDF, the website, and the video lessons are free for personal study.