



Korean Ladder Study Note

나이 / 띠 / 빠른 년생

Why Koreans Ask Your Age First

Level	Topic	Focus
A2 · Elementary TOPIK 2	Culture Etiquette	나이 / 띠 / 빠른 년생 Why Koreans Ask Your Age First

Study Links

Open this lesson on Korean Ladder

<https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A2-CULTURE-ETQ-002>

Watch the full video on YouTube

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

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

<https://www.koreanladder.com>

Core Idea

Okay, real talk. The very first time I met a Korean friend's mom, she smiled and asked '몇 살이에요?' — like, two minutes in. In America that can feel a little personal. Why do Koreans ask your age so fast?

It feels sudden, I know. But here is the secret — she is not being nosy. She is figuring out how to talk to you. 나이 means age, and in Korean, age quietly decides the whole conversation.

In Korean, we choose 존댓말 or 반말 — polite speech or casual speech — partly by age. So before we really talk, we want to know: who is older? Age is not gossip. It is grammar.

With someone older, or someone you want to treat with extra respect, we lift it up. 몇 살이세요? The 세 adds honorific politeness. In English, it's like 'May I ask your age?'

Conversation Snapshot

Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Junho	저기, 실례지만 나이가 어떻게 되세요? —	Um, excuse me — may I ask how old you are?



Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Hana	저는 서른 살이에요. 무슨 띠세요? —	I'm thirty. What's your zodiac year?
Junho	아, 저도 서른이예요. 우리 동갑이네요! —	Oh, I'm thirty too. We're the same age!
Hana	그럼 우리 편하게 말해요. —	Then let's speak comfortably (casually).

Vocabulary & Useful Expressions

Word	Meaning	Example
존댓말 / 반말 jondaenmal / banmal	polite speech / casual speech	In Korean, we choose 존댓말 or 반말 — polite speech or casual speech — partly by age. So before we really talk, we want to know: who is older? Age is not gossip. It is grammar.
정확해요 jeong-hwak-hae-yo	Exactly / precisely right	정확해요. 몇 살이에요? is fine with a peer or someone younger. 나이가 어떻게 되세요? is safer with an older adult. Same information, different respect level.
언니 / 오빠 eonni / oppa	(for a female speaker) older sister / older brother	Now, why does one year matter so much? Because age unlocks the address terms. If a woman is older than me, I might call her 언니 — big sister. A man older than me, I'd call 오빠.
형 / 누나 hyeong / nuna	(for a male speaker) older brother / older sister	And if I, a man, have someone older — an older man is 형, an older woman is 누나. These aren't only for real siblings. Friends, seniors, even a favorite older coworker can be 형 or 누나.
동갑 dong-gap	the same age	네, 맞아요. It's a tiny act of respect. And if we are the same age, there's a lovely word — 동갑. Same age means we can relax into 반말 together, like instant friends.
쥐 · 소 · 호랑이 · 토끼 · 용 · 뱀 jwi · so · horangi · tokki · yong · baem	rat · ox · tiger · rabbit · dragon · snake	There are twelve, one per year, in a cycle. 쥐띠 is rat, 소띠 is ox, 호랑이띠 is tiger, 토끼띠 is rabbit, 용띠 is dragon, 뱀띠 is snake.
말 · 양 · 원숭이 · 닭 · 개 · 돼지 mal · yang · wonsungi · dak · gae · dwaeji	horse · sheep · monkey · rooster · dog · pig	그리고 — 말띠 horse, 양띠 sheep, 원숭이띠 monkey, 닭띠 rooster, 개띠 dog, 돼지띠 pig. If I know your 띠, I can often guess your age without asking a number at all.



Word	Meaning	Example
편하게 말해요 pyeon-ha-ge mal-hae-yo	Let's speak comfortably (casually)	Did you catch it? I opened politely — 나이가 어떻게 되세요? Then we discovered we're 동갑, same age, so Hana suggested 편하게 말해요 — 'let's speak comfortably,' meaning we can drop into casual speech.



Grammar / Structure Notes

존댓말 / 반말

존댓말 / 반말 — polite speech / casual speech

Age helps decide which one to use.

몇 살이에요?

몇 + 살 + 이에요 + ? — How old are you?

So let's meet the star question. 몇 살이에요? means 'How old are you?' 몇 is 'how many,' 살 is the counter for years of age, 이에요 is the polite ending.

몇 살이세요?

몇 살이세요? — How old are you? (honorific)

이세요 = more respectful than 이에요

나이가 어떻게 되세요?

나이가 어떻게 되세요? — May I ask how old you are?

The polite, adult way to ask age

정확해요

정확해요 — Exactly / precisely right

Match the question to the person.

Pronunciation Loop

Phrase	How to practice
나이가 어떻게 되세요?	na-i-ga eo-tteo-ke doe-se-yo?
어떻게	eo-tteo-ke
완벽해요	wan-byeok-hae-yo

Self-Check

- 1 Say 나이 / 띠 / 빠른 년생 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
신발 벗고 들어오세요 Shoes, Floors, and Korean Homes	A2 Culture: compare 신발 벗고 들어오세요 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A2-CULTURE-ETQ-001
경조사 예절 결혼식·장례식 봉투와 조의금	B2 Culture: compare 경조사 예절 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-B2-CULTURE-ETQ-001
고개 숙여 인사 How Koreans Bow and Greet Elders	A1 Culture: compare 고개 숙여 인사 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-CULTURE-ETQ-003
눈치 / 정 / 체면 The Social Concepts Behind Korean Behavior	C1 Culture: compare 눈치 / 정 / 체면 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-C1-CULTURE-ETQ-001

My Notes

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