# Inside the K-pop Trainee System: Training, Contracts, Fans

Name Date Class

## Reading

1 Imagine you are fourteen. After school you take a bus to a practice building, where you will sing, dance, and study languages until late in the evening. Tomorrow you will do it again, and the day after that. Nobody has promised you a place in a group, and nobody can. This is the life of a K-pop trainee, a young person who has signed a contract with an agency in the hope of one day making a debut. South Korean companies use the system to build performers **from scratch**, and many people describe it as one of the most **grueling** routes into show business anywhere.

2 Lessons usually cover singing and dance, and often foreign languages, acting, and how to behave on camera. Agencies **recruit** through open auditions, street casting, and online submissions, and many trainees join as children. There is no official figure for how long training lasts. Some trainees debut after a few years, while others wait far longer, and many **fall short** of a debut altogether. EJAE is a well-known example. She joined SM Entertainment at eleven and left more than a decade later without being placed in a group. Years afterward she helped write and sing “Golden”, the song from *KPop Demon Hunters* that topped charts around the world.

3 Contracts are where the system has been most **contentious**. In 2009, three members of the group TVXQ went to court to challenge a thirteen-year deal with their agency, arguing that it was too long and too **one-sided**. Their case drew the attention of regulators, and Korea’s Fair Trade Commission soon introduced a standard entertainment contract that **caps exclusive** deals at seven years. Fans have long talked about a “seven-year curse”, because groups often split up or changed agencies when their first contract ended, although more groups now renew early.

4 Trainees now have a standard contract of their own. It says that a trainee deal should run for no more than three years in principle, although it can be renewed, and it puts the cost of training on the agency. It is only a recommended **template**, not a law, so the details still vary from company to company. Korean law has also added protections, such as limits on the working hours of young performers and a ban on getting in the way of their schooling. The standard contracts were revised again in January 2026, with clearer payment deadlines and wider mental health support. Researchers who study the system argue that **enforcement** is still uneven, and because training so often begins in childhood, the industry draws close **scrutiny** from lawmakers and the public.

5 At the same time, the system has gone global. Agencies hold auditions in many countries in order to find talent that will appeal to audiences abroad, and group members now come from Japan, China, Thailand, the United States, Australia, and beyond. One large agency said in 2023 that about 28 percent of its trainees in Korea were foreign nationals. Some groups go further: VCHA, launched by JYP, was formed entirely from trainees chosen in Canada and the United States. Researchers suggest that a member from abroad can also **bolster** a group’s popularity in that member’s home country, which helps explain why agencies look so widely.

6 Fans are the other half of the system. Some follow trainees long before they debut, and agencies run their own apps so that fans can read posts, watch live broadcasts, and buy merchandise in one place. Weverse, run by HYBE, is one of the biggest, with users in 245 countries and regions, and company figures suggest that roughly nine in ten live outside Korea. Scholars call the bond between idol and fan **parasocial**: it feels personal to the fan, even though the contact is mostly one-way. Agencies depend on that closeness, and critics say it adds to the pressure on young idols to look and act in ways that keep fans loyal.

7 Supporters of the system point to the **polished** performances and the worldwide audience it produces. Critics point to teenagers who spend their youth in practice rooms, and to the many who leave with **nothing to show for it**. Reliable public figures on how many trainees ever debut are hard to find, so any claim about the odds deserves caution. As the model spreads to other countries, one thing to watch is whether the protections Korea has added will travel with it.

## Vocabulary Matching

*Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **from scratch** | _____ | **A** | extremely tiring and demanding |
| 2 | **grueling** | _____ | **B** | describing a one-way bond with a famous person |
| 3 | **recruit** | _____ | **C** | very skillful and carefully prepared |
| 4 | **fall short** | _____ | **D** | a ready-made pattern that people copy and adapt |
| 5 | **contentious** | _____ | **E** | given to one person or company only |
| 6 | **one-sided** | _____ | **F** | having no result after a lot of effort |
| 7 | **caps** | _____ | **G** | causing strong disagreement between people |
| 8 | **exclusive** | _____ | **H** | to find people and persuade them to join |
| 9 | **template** | _____ | **I** | sets an upper limit on an amount or time |
| 10 | **enforcement** | _____ | **J** | careful and detailed examination by others |
| 11 | **scrutiny** | _____ | **K** | to make something stronger by adding support |
| 12 | **bolster** | _____ | **L** | to fail to reach an expected goal or level |
| 13 | **parasocial** | _____ | **M** | favoring one side much more than the other |
| 14 | **polished** | _____ | **N** | from the beginning, using nothing already made |
| 15 | **nothing to show for it** | _____ | **O** | the act of making people obey a rule |

## Fill in the Blank

*Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.*

| **bolster** | **cap** | **contentious** | **enforcement** | **exclusive** | **fall short** | **from scratch** | **grueling** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **nothing to show for it** | **one-sided** | **polished** | **recruit** | **scrutiny** | **template** | | |

1 She learned to cook _____ after moving abroad, with no recipes and no help.

2 After a _____ twelve-hour shift, the nurses were too tired to talk.

3 The hospital plans to _____ fifty new nurses this year.

4 If the team keeps making mistakes, it may _____ of its goal.

5 The new tax is a _____ issue, and politicians argue about it every week.

6 The referee's decisions seemed so _____ that the visiting fans complained.

7 The city plans to _____ rent increases at three percent a year.

8 The singer signed an _____ deal with one record label for five years.

9 Use this _____ for your resume and replace the sample text with your own.

10 Strict _____ of the traffic rules has reduced accidents on this road.

11 The company's accounts came under close _____ after the news report.

12 A strong sales report helped to _____ investors' confidence.

13 The pianist gave a _____ performance, with no mistakes at all.

14 He worked for years on the project but had _____ .

## Comprehension Questions

*Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.*

1 What is a K-pop trainee, and what do trainees usually study?

2 Why can no one promise a trainee a debut?

3 What does the story of EJAE show about the trainee system?

4 Why did three members of TVXQ go to court, and what changed afterward?

5 What does the standard trainee contract say about length and costs, and why is it not a complete solution?

6 Which other protections for young performers does the reading mention?

7 How is the system becoming more international, and why do agencies want this?

8 How do apps such as Weverse connect agencies, idols, and fans?

9 What do supporters and critics each say about the system?

**IELTS-Style Questions**

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Korea's standard trainee contract is a law that all agencies must follow."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that claims about the odds of debuting should be treated with caution."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin by asking you to imagine you are fourteen? What does this opening add to the reading?

## True or False

*Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.*

1 **T / F** According to the reading, nobody can promise a trainee a place in a group.

2 **T / F** EJAE trained at SM Entertainment for more than ten years and was never placed in a group.

3 **T / F** There is an official limit of two years for K-pop training.

4 **T / F** The standard entertainment contract caps exclusive deals at seven years.

5 **T / F** The TVXQ members went to court because they wanted a longer contract.

6 **T / F** The standard trainee contract is a law that every agency must follow.

7 **T / F** One large agency said in 2023 that about 28 percent of its trainees in Korea were foreign nationals.

8 **T / F** VCHA was formed from trainees chosen in Japan and China.

9 **T / F** Scholars describe the bond between idol and fan as parasocial.

10 **T / F** Company figures suggest that most Weverse users live in Korea.

## Discussion Questions

*Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.*

1. Do you listen to K-pop or another kind of pop music? What do you like about it?
2. Have you ever practiced something for years, such as a sport, an instrument, or a language? What kept you going?
3. How many hours a day can a teenager train hard without being harmed? Explain your view.
4. Would you like to audition to become a trainee? Why or why not?
5. In your country, how are young singers, athletes, or actors usually discovered and trained?
6. Nobody can promise a trainee a debut. Is it fair to ask young people to take that risk?
7. Many trainees leave with nothing to show for it. What could agencies do to help trainees who do not debut?
8. EJAE never debuted, but she later helped write and sing a worldwide hit. Can years of training be useful even when the original goal is not reached?
9. A seven-year limit on exclusive contracts is meant to protect artists. Could it also create problems for artists or agencies?
10. The standard trainee contract is a recommended template, not a law. Should governments make such rules compulsory?
11. What are the benefits and risks for a teenager who moves to another country to train as an idol?
12. Groups now include members from many countries. Is that a good thing, or does K-pop lose something?
13. Fans can feel close to idols they have never met. What are the good and bad sides of these parasocial bonds?
14. Sport, classical music, and acting also train children from a young age. Should there be global rules for the training of young performers?

**Language Focus: Purpose Clauses: To, In Order To, and So That**

A purpose clause explains why someone does something. After a verb, use to or in order to with the base form of a verb. Use so that with a new subject and verb when the purpose involves a different person or a result.

**In the reading:**

- "Agencies hold auditions in many countries **in order to** find talent that will appeal to audiences abroad…"
- "…agencies run their own apps **so that** fans can read posts, watch live broadcasts, and buy merchandise in one place."
- "…three members of the group TVXQ went to court **to** challenge a thirteen-year deal with their agency…"

**Practice:** Join these two ideas with *in order to*: *"Trainees practice for many hours each day. They want to improve their dancing."*

**Activities and speed challenge**
englishbridges.com/lessons/kpop-trainee-system

**Notes**