2. Seoul National University: Language Education Institute

a. Chai Kim, Summer 2018 Final Report

I took the Advanced Academic Class (Level 7) at Seoul National University’s Regular Program for the second time during the Summer of 2018. I had taken this class before during the Spring of 2018, but I took it again with the hope that an extra ten weeks of intensive language study would help solidify the vocabulary and grammar that I have accumulated heretofore. The structure of the class did not vary in comparison to the one offered in the Spring. Of course, topics and themes of discussion and debates were different and more “up to date” for they reflected the current events and news, but the overall organization of the class remained the same. For example, each day of the week focused on one of the following four skills: listening, writing, reading, and speaking. Classes were held Monday through Thursday, and graded quizzes offered for the listening, writing, and speaking class. Every day, we either listened to the news, gave presentations, wrote essays between 300-500 words, debated with fellow classmates on Korea’s societal issues, and acquired a new knowledge of around 30 vocabulary words.

One of the benefits of taking the same class again was that I was able to focus more on improving the areas that needed the most attention. For example, speaking and writing were areas that I still felt needed improvement because I lacked strong delivery and crafting a sophisticated sentence structure. Therefore, I did some extra independent work by watching the news while eating at home, or while running on the treadmill at the gym. Of course, watching the news and reading the transcript of the news report was a part of the daily routine for listening class, but I wanted to learn even more advanced vocabulary and sentence structure. Listening to the news also helped me to catch a lot more idiom phrases and pick up a few Chinese characters along the way.

The fact that Academic Advanced Class devotes equal time to its Speaking, Writing, Reading, and Listening may be a strength. However, it can also be a weakness especially for advanced heritage learners like me. In fact, I wish that SNU gave students the option to personalize their classes so that students who wished to improve their speaking skills more their listening skills, for example, could tailor their learning accordingly. For example, I wished that I could listen to more news broadcasts and documentaries during class time. That way, I can acquire a bit of archaic vocabulary rather than the colloquial vocabulary used during our listening exercises. Furthermore, another improvement that I would like to suggest is to make the classroom atmosphere more active. All of the three teachers that I had for my classes were very engaging and lively. They always asked the questions themselves and asked the students to ask questions in return.
However, I do wish that we could go beyond the confines of discussing the content in the textbook and instead, talk more about a greater variety of current day issues on a global scale and compare the societal issues of the countries that my fellow classmates are from. My class was very diverse as it hosted students from countries such as China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Russia, and Brazil so it would have been an enriching experience to share our opinions about our respective countries societal and cultural issues.

Nonetheless, the Advanced Academic Class was a fulfilling experience. By the end of the summer, I improved my language skills in all areas, with my speaking skills experiencing the greatest improvement. I received a B for the Spring class of Level 7, but I received an A for the same class during the Summer semester. I would attribute this improvement from a numerical grade of an 88 to a 95 not only to the class but to the fact that I took full advantage of the opportunities to engage with Korean society and culture outside of the SNU LEI’s classrooms. In fact, during the months between May and August, I worked almost full time as a private tutor for Korean international high school students.

I worked as a private tutor helping my students out with AP and IB curriculum, English conversation, pre-calc, and college admission essays. This was my first experience working in Korea and getting to know a group of Koreans outside of my immediate family. I learned a lot about teaching and the Korean education system. Gaining a foothold in the Korean private education market also led me to meet Korean American Yale alumni who were working and living in Korea. Through these relationships and me seeking advice from them, I was able to gain wisdom regarding my current studies at Yale and future career path.

Overall, I was very pleased with my learning experience in the Advanced Academic class. I learned a lot of vocabulary that I was able to apply while working as a private tutor and meeting new Korean people. Another specific area that I was able to improve this semester was presentation skills. In fact, I had to deliver two major presentations this summer. One was for a Korean college consulting business and another one was for SNU’s Speech Contest (말하기 대회) in which I received the fourth prize and a monetary award of 200,000 won. This was my first time participating in a contest and winning an award in Korea. This summer was a time of many firsts.

I highly recommend SNU’s Regular Program for all heritage speaking Light fellows. Level 7 is especially a good choice for those wishing to acquire Korean language skills required for graduate school level. It will help students gain a greater breadth of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure often used in the Korean news and academic research papers published in Korean journals. Finally, if location or housing is of concern, then SNU is quite easily accessible because it is on Subway Line 2 which also connects to Gangnam and the rest of the Seochodong area. (Although I’d recommend getting up early because the morning lines at the bus station outside of SNU subway station are ridiculously long!)

Surrounded by the flickering lights of noraebangs (karaoke rooms) and vibrant homey scents of local street food carts, 10 weeks of my summer were spent in the urbanized yet cultural city of Seoul, Korea. Beyond exploring the bustling city, I had an exceptional opportunity to attend the Korean Language & Culture Program offered at Seoul National University Language Education Institute (SNU LEI). The Light Fellowship enabled me to not only study Korean language in an international community of eager students, but also allowed me to immerse myself in all aspects of the colorful city.

Inside the classroom

I chose the program at SNU because of its well-balanced curriculum. Before entering the program, there wasn’t a particular aspect in my Korean learning that challenged me the most, but rather an overarching lack of confidence in my Korean abilities. I thought an evenly distributed balance in reading, listening, writing, and speaking would be a suitable approach to my language learning.

SNU’s intensive curriculum design more than exceed my expectations. I first started Korean at Yale with L1 in the fall of my first year, and completed L2 before heading to Seoul. I was placed into 2고/Level 2, which turned out to be quite suited towards my skill level. I chose the morning class which began at 9am and ended at 1pm. The curriculum closely followed the SNU textbook on a daily basis – covering around two new grammar structures, a dialogue, and a piece, reading, or listening exercise each day. In addition, every three chapters were followed by a review day in which we consolidated the materials we learned. I found this particularly helpful because of the fast-paced nature of the course. Even though the structure of the class was somewhat repetitive, I genuinely enjoyed them. The textbook focused on topics that were useful and applicable to daily life, including how to mail in the post offices, order food, etc. My class had three teachers on a daily rotation. While every teacher had their own distinct teaching style, there were always very patient, passionate, and lively in their lectures. They even prepared cultural activities every now and then to keep us engaged – my favorite one being 윷놀이, a traditional Korean board game commonly played during Korean New Year.

Beyond the academic aspect, I was pleasantly surprised by the diversity of the students in our classroom. My class had 14 students and from 12 different countries. During our discussions on Korean culture (traditional clothing, holidays, etc.) it was intriguing to hear how my classmates compared Korean traditions to cultural aspects of their own hometowns.

While the program was exceptional, I would say that the one predominant inconvenience of the SNU program was the location of the school. Yonsei, Ewha, and Sogang University are all located in the center of downtown Seoul, making exploring tourist attractions, restaurants, and the typical Korean college student experience a lot more convenient. SNU however, is located on
the edge of the city on extremely high ground (if you don’t like walking, you’re in for a wild
time). Despite this somewhat inconvenient location, it was still possible to visit more popular
tourist areas via subway, but you might need to do a bit of walking so be prepared!

Living Situation

I lived in an off-campus single dorm, which I had to apply for on the SNU website after
enrolling in the program. My room was pretty spacious and well-equipped (came with a fridge,
microwave, washing machine, air conditioner, ceramic stove top, etc.), and I had my own
bathroom inside the single, which was really convenient. Note that there are no dryers for the
washers, so you do have to purchase your own cloth drying rack to hang and air dry the laundry.
In addition, getting access to the wifi can be a bit tricky. I was told we had to bring our own
LAN cable to use the internet. If the LAN cable cannot be plugged in to your laptop, you can
buy/bring a router to set up wifi (I did this). When you look for rooms, make sure there is an air
condition unit installed in the room – summer in Seoul can get very humid and hot which can be
very uncomfortable without AC.

Overall, the single dorms were very nice and relatively close to the bus stops. The only
issue was that it was a bit far from the subway station (5-minute bus ride or 18-minute walk).

Outside the classroom

- The Buddy Program

As I was applying for the program, I realized that the language barrier would make
meeting native Korean friends a bit difficult. Despite the existence of the Buddy Program, it was
difficult to run into native students on the SNU campus, as most of the students in the LEI
program were foreigners. The Buddy Program did however make my experience abroad a lot
richer, as I was able to talk one-on-one with an actual Korean college student. Beyond practicing
speaking, I learned about the academics and social life of native students in Seoul. I wish there
were more opportunities to meet native Koreans in this regard.

- Travel/Food

The study abroad experience is completely dependent on what you make of it. With each
day, I acquired several memorable snippets even through everyday life. Some of these snippets
were academic (me being overwhelmed on day one because the teacher taught in Korean only,
but later finding out that the other students were just as overwhelmed as I was), but for the most
part my memories outside the class could be split into two categories: travel and food.

If you have the chance (and budget), try to visit other cities in Korea. As the capital city,
Seoul has lots of attractions and lively events, but there are also plenty of other cities/places in
Korea with their own unique specialties. One weekend, I was able to visit Jeju Island, known by some as the “Hawaii of Korea”. The serene ocean views and delicious seafood were more than enough reasons to visit. If you have the time, I would definitely recommend visiting Jeju with some friends (it’s only a 1-2 hour plane ride from Gimpo Int. Airport).

If you’re a vegetarian or vegan, eating out in Seoul might be a little difficult. Most meals in Korea are comprised of staple, 반찬 (side dishes), and meat, so it might take some effort to find vegetarian-friendly dishes. I however, am not vegetarian so I was able to try a few more options during my time in Korea. One of my favorites was 닭한마리 (boiled chicken) (there are a few locations in Myeongdong and Dongdaemun). Definitely give it a try if you can!

Seoul also has a lot of well-decorated themed cafes. While the coffee is alright, the real appeal of these cafes is the aesthetics. From a steampunk-themed cafe to the 2D visual illusion café, there were plenty of artistic coffee shops perfect for Instagram and Snapchat pictures.

TLDR

Ultimately, if I had to characterize my experience in Korea with one word, it would be “immersion”. From day-to-day school life, going out with friends, and eating in restaurants all over Seoul, I not only practiced language but experienced Seoul from the perspective of a resident student, not just a tourist. I would like to express my gratitude to the Light Fellowship for giving me this precious opportunity to truly experience Seoul. If you receive this fellowship, make the most of it by focusing on culture and community, not just language.

c. Hannah Kwak, Spring 2019 Final Report

I just returned to the States after finishing up my last term at SNU, and I’ve been reflecting a lot on the nine months I spent in Korea. I’m grateful to the Language Education Institute at SNU, where I’ve met some really great instructors who have impressed me with their kindness and their dedication to teaching. From talking to my peers, it seems that the program at SNU is one of the more well-reputed language education programs in Korea. They say that because SNU is situated relatively far from the city center, the people there tend to be more serious about their learning compared to those at other programs. It also tries to focus on reading, writing, listening, and speaking equally, so it’s great for people who want to see progress in each of these areas (other programs may emphasize one of these skills more than the others).

That said, my last term at SNU deviated a lot from my expectations. Last term, I finished Level 6 and signed up for the Advanced Academic Class. In Korean, the course is called 연구반, which directly translates to “Research Class.” It was described as a preparation for undergraduate- and graduate-level classes at Korean universities, and I was told that students submit a paper on a topic of their own choosing at the end of the course. I thought the class sounded similar to some of the L5 classes Yale offers. I had taken a couple of French literature
courses at Yale which were listed as L5, and while they were still language courses, they were structured more like a seminar and involved a lot of reading from primary sources. So that was along the lines of what I was expecting from this course, but actually in terms of structure, the Advanced Academic Class isn’t that different from Levels 1-6. It’s highly structured: you work out of a textbook, you have vocab quizzes, and there’s a final examination that, in my opinion, tests your memory more than your language proficiency (the questions on the exam were often exact repeats from the review packet, making the test ridiculously easy - everyone in our class got A’s as our final grade). If there is one difference, it’s that for homework, you research a topic of your own choosing and submit a paper, about five pages in length, to be turned in by the end of the course. But the time you spend in class will be more or less the same as in Levels 1-6. I personally found that disappointing, although there may be some students who prefer that type of highly structured environment.

My issue with the class was that it claims to prepare you for undergraduate- and graduate- level courses at Korean universities, and I personally don’t think you can do that unless you structure the class to resemble an actual undergraduate- or graduate-level course. I can’t speak for the other students on how helpful they found the course. I would just make it very clear to potential students that they shouldn’t expect anything that resembles a college course. I would describe it as similar to Levels 1-6 but with harder vocabulary and more homework.

One thing I would like to stress for anyone thinking about taking a year off is that a year of language study will most likely involve moments when you feel like you’re not making any progress, especially once you start getting to the higher levels. When you first start learning a language, your progress is very noticeable, largely because you didn’t know anything at the start. But in the higher levels, I’ve found that your progress is much more gradual. I felt that way in Level 6, and I had to consciously make an effort to keep myself motivated, reminding myself that I was improving even if it wasn’t in leaps and bounds. A lot of my friends reported feeling the same way. I think it’s important to push through those times because even when progress isn’t visible, it doesn’t mean your efforts are being wasted.

Finally, I wanted to talk about my housing situation because I think this is an area that can really decide how much you enjoy your experience in Korea. My last few months in Korea, I had a lot of uncomfortable encounters with my landlord that made it difficult for me to enjoy my time there. It was a huge source of stress, which is why I would highly encourage others to stay in the dorms or at a goshiwon rather than find a one-bedroom apartment, which is what I did. I had decided to stay at a one-bedroom apartment because it was slightly cheaper than the dorms, and I knew that I would have a friend visit me for about a month during winter break, and I wasn’t sure how easy that would be if I were living in a dorm. But what’s risky about finding a one-bedroom apartment is that the quality of your experience largely depends on who your landlord is, and not all landlords have your best interests at heart. I lived in Daehak-dong, I found out a few months into my stay that I was paying 150,000-200,000 KRW more than my friends who were staying in the same area. The area near SNU is much cheaper than near the city center,
and even though the price I was paying was under budget (450,000 KRW plus utilities), it was pretty expensive for that neighborhood. If I could do it all again, I would probably stay in the dorms because finding a room as a foreigner was pretty stressful. I also expect that it’s easier to be a part of a community if you’re living in the dorms - it can be easy to feel isolated when you’re living by yourself, and you need to be much more purposeful about forming and maintaining relationships.

All in all, SNU is a solid program, and I would recommend it to potential students with the caveat that they shouldn’t expect the program to do everything for them. I think your time outside of class is when the real learning takes place, and the more you make an effort to immerse yourself in Korean culture, the more you will get out of your study abroad experience.