SEOUL 서울

2022 AJ Pressland Fund Report

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Introduction

안녕하세요? My name is Kenza Tazi, I’m a PhD student in the Department of Engineering. My research focuses on applying machine learning to improve precipitation predictions in mountainous areas. In this report, I will discuss my experience taking Level 2 Korean at Seoul National University between December 2021 and February 2022.

I started learning Korean in March 2020 at the start of the Coronavirus lockdown in the UK. Through self-study, I grew to love this language and realised it could not only be useful for my doctoral research, but also for my professional development. Firstly, Korea’s complex topography makes it an interesting case study for my research. Secondly, many fields, including hydrology, suffer from a gap between scientific findings and policy decisions. South Korea has a strong track record of implementing evidence-based policies in its mountains and working closely with hydrologists and meteorologists. How is South Korea implementing this? And what can we learn from it?

I completed both Korean courses offered by the Cambridge University Language Centre, Korean Basic 1 and Korean Basic 2. The Cambridge courses gave me a good command of the Korean alphabet (한글/Hangeul) and basic vocabulary and grammar. To continue my learning, I knew the best way would be to go to South Korea myself. I was keen to strengthen my speaking skills by immersing myself in a native environment where I would have no choice but to communicate in Korean.

The pandemic strongly influenced my stay in South Korea. On arrival, I quarantined for ten days. Within this time, the Omicron variant of the Coronavirus hit the country. Cases, which had never risen above a few thousand per day, surpassed 250,000 in a couple months. Classes, which were to take place in person, moved online and many campus facilities including cafeterias closed. Gatherings of more than four people were forbidden and restaurants and bars were mandated to close early. I was therefore faced with walking the line between keeping myself and others safe and making the most of my time.

Despite these challenges, my three months in South Korea have been one of the most valuable and exciting opportunities in my life. I hope this report can be a useful tool for anyone who is considering a language course in South Korea or inspire you to start or continue learning a language yourself.

Please email me if you have any questions about the report or my research!

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Language course

AT A GLANCE

Course name: Regular Program
Duration: 10 weeks
Location: Seoul National University, Gwanak-gu
Price: 1,730,000 KRW (approx. £1100)
Commitment: 4 hours class/day + 1–3 hours of self-study
Opportunity for further study:
Classes up to Level 6 (fluency) are available, Level 4 students can apply to take Korean-taught programs at SNU
Website: https://lei.snu.ac.kr/mobile/en/klec/regular/regular.jsp

APPLICATION

To apply to this course and similar programmes hosted by Korean universities, you will need an apostille for a notarised academic transcript. This process takes time and is costly especially if you need to expedite postage. I would recommend finding a solicitor about three months before the application deadline.

A deposit and the course fees must be paid via online bank transfer. Transaction fees will be charged, however, the university is somewhat flexible with payments and will allow you to pay small outstanding fees when you get to Korea. A few weeks before starting, you will be asked to take an online written and oral test to determine your level.
SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Seoul National University (SNU) is widely regarded as one of the best universities in South Korea. The university was founded in 1946 but its history dates back to the 19th century when Emperor Gojong issued a decree to establish modern higher education institutions. The campus is made up of 17,000 undergraduate and 11,000 graduate students over 27 departments, institutes, and graduate schools.

The SNU Korean Language Education Institute (KLEC) follows the standardised Korean learning levels (1–6) with in-house textbooks, cultural field trips, and optional courses to enhance learning such as pronunciation clinics and Chinese character classes. Students from Level 4 onwards can also take classes to prepare for the Korean proficiency test (Test Of Proficiency In Korean or TOPIK).

The university is located outside the centre of Seoul at the foot of Gwanak mountain. This not only makes the campus beautiful, but it also meant that residents spoke English less readily. This encouraged me to practice whilst grocery shopping, trips to the doctor and the pharmacy, and at the hairdressers.

CLASSES

Level 2 students learn to communicate on topics necessary for daily life and to understand Korean culture and customs. Students who have not completed Level 1 at SNU are invited to enrol in a special two-part lecture where the grammar point and key vocabulary from Level 1 are summarised. In Level 2, there were about 15 students per class. In my mind, this was a good student–teacher ratio as there were enough opportunities to practice every lesson point at least a few times orally. Classes were taught in Korean only. However, our teachers had a strong understanding of our vocabulary level; classes were challenging but always understandable enough that we didn’t miss any important information. Classroom etiquette was similar to a typical Korean classroom with a strong emphasis on punctuality and attendance.

A typical day started by logging onto Zoom at 8:50 am, 10 minutes before the start of class to make sure I arrived before my teacher. During class, we focused on speaking and listening exercises where we replied to our teacher’s questions or interacted with other students using new vocabulary or grammar the teacher introduced earlier in the class. Although some exercises seemed repetitive, this kind of practice internalised many expressions that would have been hard to use spontaneously in real-life situations. Classes ended at 1 pm after four 50-minute periods.

Afternoons were usually free to complete homework. The campus library was only accessible to full-time students during the Omicron outbreak, so I would usually head out into central Seoul to explore different areas whilst writing essays and revising in cafés, study rooms and museums. These outings also allowed me to put into practice what I had learned in class. For example, when we learnt about words linked to post, I sent some postcards to my friends and when

Preparing for the final exams, February 2022
we learned about hairstyles, I went to the hairdressers. Unfortunately, the later excursion was less successful, and I went home with hair much shorter than I expected.

As part of the curriculum, we also took short vocabulary quizzes every few days, prepared role plays with other students, and recorded myself discussing topics such as my hobbies or my plans for the following term. Exams were held midway and at the end of term and evaluated our writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills. After the last exam, the teachers invited a calligrapher to teach us traditional Korean calligraphy online.

ACCOMMODATION

KLEC provides affordable accommodation near the campus and, under normal circumstances, access to all the campus facilities. My dormitory was situated in a neighbourhood called Sillim-dong. It is a 20-minute walk from campus or a 10-minute commute by bus. The other dormitory is located closer to the main subway station which is also a 10-minute commute by bus to the campus. Rooms are provided on a first come first serve basis and prices are based on size and occupancy. However, every room comes with an ensuite bathroom and washer-dryer unit.

I choose the most affordable option, a double occupancy room with a bunk bed (approx. £500 for 12 weeks). The room was quiet, clean, and well heated. Most importantly, it was nice to share the room with another student also taking Level 2 Korean. I recommend trying to get accommodation through the language centre if possible. The process is straightforward, the rent affordable and you can pay any outstanding rent in cash once you arrive. However, there are lots of options for private accommodation near the university. More information about accommodation, including exact addresses and links to English-speaking estate agents, can be found on the KLEC website.

Collage created by our teacher Kim Sang Heui for our class with our artwork from the calligraphy lesson. It reads 'For the friends who studied Korean together in Class 2', February 2022.
Beyond Zoom breakout rooms, I took every opportunity to learn about Korean culture. Every day in Seoul was an adventure of its own. I started by visiting key cultural locations in the city such as the Korea National Museum and Bogeunsa Temple. These destinations were open but devoid of foreign tourists. Tour guides and information officers were therefore usually keen to show off their beautiful heritage; I was even given a personal tour of Deoksugung Palace. I especially enjoyed learning about the scientific reforms put in place by Korean kings including the design of rain gauges called cheugugi (측우기) and the mandate of precipitation measurements!

Food is at the heart of Korean culture with many customs centred around eating and drinking. In fact, ‘Have you eaten?’ is often used as a greeting among friends and relatives. I was surprised to find that even during the height of the pandemic and the middle of winter, street food stalls were open as usual. Street food, referred to as bunsik (분식) is made up of a variety of strongly flavoured dishes which famously include: sundae (순대), blood sausage made with rice and rice noodles usually cut into slices and fried, tteokbokki (떡볶이), chewy rice cakes in a spicy but sweet chilli sauce and gimbap (김밥), sliced seaweed rolls made of rice and different fillings including vegetables, fish and meat. My favourite street stall was run by an elderly couple who sold hotteok (호떡), a fried pancake filled with honey, cinnamon, and pine nuts, near the SNU subway station. With my classmates, I also visited traditional food markets, restaurants, and teahouses. These gastronomic outings included eating peculiar foods such as live octopus in sesame oil and soy sauce. I have had the opportunity to sit down for a traditional Korean meal, which can only be qualified as impressive. Customers are seated on the heated floors and served barley tea before the table is filled with an endless array of dishes, side dishes, a boiling pot of stew, and, of course, rice.

Walking around Seoul, I made friends with native Koreans and we regularly went on hikes along the city wall and the mountains surrounding the city. My favourite and most challenging hike was climbing up Bukhan mountain the day following a snowstorm. It was beautiful to see the mountains and skyscrapers covered in a dazzling white coat and fellow hikers wishing each other a happy lunar new year. I was also able to meet a good friend from my undergraduate degree. He helped me live more like a local by taking me to jazz clubs, to a ceramics class, and to eat ramen by the Han River.

During public holidays and weekends, I also ventured beyond Seoul. In December, I stayed overnight at Daegwangsa Temple in Gyeonggi province to learn about Korean Buddhism.
Although it was difficult to communicate more subtle points, I immensely enjoyed speaking to the monks about their approach to dealing with difficult situations in life. In January, I took the train to Busan, the second biggest city in South Korea. There, I saw the famous Gwangalli Bridge and hiked part of the Haeparang trail. In February, I travelled to Jeju Island. I climbed Hallasan, the tallest mountain and volcano in South Korea standing at 1913m above sea level and picked the island’s famous tangerines.

Interacting with government and health officials was also part of my day-to-day life. I communicated with officials during my initial quarantine on arrival at Incheon airport. I needed to register my vaccines with my local health centre to access public spaces and arrange for my third vaccine dose. I also had to make quarantine and visa arrangements when I unfortunately contracted Covid on Jeju the day before my flight back to the UK. This time, I needed to give my medical history and update nurses on my health status whilst staying at a quarantine centre on the island. While these situations were challenging, I was proud to put my studying to use.

In summary, I cannot recommend extra-curricular activities enough. Not only were they a great help in improving my fluency but also motivated me to study harder in class and make the most of my time in Korea. If you are staying in South Korea for a similar length of time, I also suggest joining a local sport or hiking club. Members are usually very welcoming and it’s a great way to practice Korean and learn more about Korean culture and etiquette in a friendly setting.

a) My tour guide and I at Deoksungung, December 2021
b) A traditional Korean meal, January 2022
c) Namsan tower and Eight Sided Pavilion, December 2021
d) Sillim traditional market, December 2021
e) A street near my dorm in Sillim-dong, December 2021
f) Gwangalli Bridge from the Haeparang trail, January 2022
g) Seoul Fortress Wall at Inwang mountain, January 2022
h) Picking tangerines on Jeju island, February 2022
Outcomes and next steps
결과 및 다음 단계

My time in Korea has first and foremost immensely improved my Korean skills. When I started this journey, my experience practicing Korean had been limited to a calm classroom setting and patient interlocutors. I was easily flustered by conversations with native speakers that required me to speak more than a couple of simple sentences. I can now confidently communicate my intentions and be understood, even over the phone. More fundamentally, I feel more confident in myself. I can learn, adapt, and even thrive in new and unfamiliar situations.

My fondness for the Korean language has only grown and inspired me to start a new project. Whilst I was travelling on the subway system, I noticed that stations put up poems from famous poets but, in most cases, from residents who entered their poems in an annual competition. The subway, being very efficient, gave me little time to read the poems before the next train came along. I therefore photographed a poem at each station I entered. When I returned to the UK, I started to translate them and publish the translations online (www.instagram.com/seoulsubwaypoems). Although the poems are often hard to understand, I always feel moved reading the hardships and joys of the people I commuted alongside with.

Most importantly, my newfound language skills have allowed me to access online climatic and meteorological databases and reports that were previously far beyond my understanding. I am now applying my methods to this new study area and will hopefully generate engaging discussions with other academics and policymakers. This experience has also allowed make many friends and grow my professional network with Korean academics and researchers in industry. I’m looking forward to future collaborations, whether it be during my doctoral studies or in the steps following my PhD.

This year, countries across the world saw rainfall records broken, leaving millions of people homeless, thousands dead, and trillions of dollars lost. Precipitation extremes are only set to increase in the future. Even countries with progressive policy approaches, such as South Korea, have more to learn if they are to successfully adapt to climate change. Nevertheless, I believe, more than ever, adaptation is possible and that research and international collaborations are key to overcoming this global challenge. With that in mind, I am excited to resume my Korean education by taking Level 3 Korean with the UK Korean Education Centre in September.

Snow in Gangwon province, January 2022
Acknowledgements
감사의 말

Firstly, I would like to thank the AJ Pressland Fund for their financial support and the opportunity to write this report. I am also grateful to my Korean teachers: Dr Harker Mihye, Dr Choi Gyeongyoon, Lee Jangmin and Kim Sangheui. Thank you for sharing your passion for the Korean language and culture. Thank you to all my friends in Seoul for making this experience so special. Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents for helping me this trip a reality.

A gate inside Bogeunsa, a Buddhist temple in the centre of Seoul, December 2021