



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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The Effectiveness of the First-Year Seminar for International Students

Synopsis:

First year seminars are known to be quite effective for student adaptation to college environment. We found that first year seminar classes designed especially for international students, with elements of understanding cultural differences and communication styles, effective learning strategies and useful resources, were very effective to student adaptation to the foreign college environment.

The Effectiveness of the First-Year Seminar for International Students¹

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1. The increase of international students in South Korean universities

The number of international students coming to South Korea has been increasing steadily since 2003, when the official counting of international students began with 12,314 students. Last year, the number has increased 7 times to 85,925². This increase is partly due to ‘Han-ryu (Korean Wave)’, a wide spreading popularity of Korean pop-culture, and also strongly influenced by South Korean government policy of ‘Study Korea Project³’ since 2005. These international students come from various countries, but the biggest portions are from China and Asia⁴. In Yonsei University, more than 700 international undergraduate and graduate students enroll each year since 2010 and intend to accept more international students in the coming years.

The number of incoming international students to Korea and to our institution grows every year but the academic performances of these students are somewhat below our

¹ Includes some Korean students born and educated in international countries

² Statistics from The Ministry of Education, April 2014

³ Through ‘Study Korea Project’, Korean government invited more ‘government scholarship’ international students, is doing more official PRs about benefits of studying in Korea, simplified immigration procedures for international students, and increased opportunities for Korean language proficiency test. The project aims to increase the number of incoming students to 200,000 by the year 2020

⁴ 58.6% of students are from China

expectations⁵ and they seem to have much harder time adapting to college environment than average college students. These results are mostly due to the incoming students' lack of Korean language skills, low level of mutual cultural understandings, difference in educational backgrounds, and little experience and support systems for international students at Korean universities, among other reasons.

2. Purposes of the first-year seminar for international students

College could be a quite challenging environment for not just to international students, and we know that first-year seminars are effective for students' adaptation to college environment. Students learn through the first year seminar what to expect and how to make most of college, be encouraged to broaden their perspectives and engage in many possible experiences. Also, students could get various practical tips throughout the seminar class. These first-year seminars could be divided into two categories: 1) Individual themes first-year seminars: Faculties may choose any subjects from his/her own choice and approach the themes from wide range of methods. A class size is usually small (10-15), class themes vary from reading classical literature to 2) Structured first-year seminars: Institution may decide overall contents and teaching method considering their students characteristics and needs. A class size is usually bigger than an individual themes seminar and several similar classes may be opened.

To alleviate the problems that international students face in our school, a team of academic advisors of Yonsei University - one of the most privileged private university in Seoul, Korea founded on 1885 - developed a structured first-year seminar course

⁵ Average GPA of international student group was 87% that of the whole 1st year student of Yonsei

especially for international students. Our assumption was that if a first year seminar class was designed in consideration of a certain student group's special needs, the overall effectiveness of the course would be enhanced. With different educational backgrounds and diverse cultures, these international students need more specific learning strategies, basic understandings about acculturation process, communication skills beyond language fluency, and comfortable classroom atmosphere they can easily participate in. We tried to design a first year seminar that would serve these purposes.

3. Characteristics of our first-year seminar for international students

Yonsei University's structured first-year seminar, Yonsei RC 101, is a one hour pass/non-pass grading 1 credit course offered to every first year students. The standard Yonsei RC 101 is designed to give our students the opportunity to reflect the nature of the university and the meaning of becoming a college student. It is also designed to help students start successful college life in the residential college educational settings and make well-balanced academic planning for the future. In Yonsei 101 for international students, we blended some key elements of cultural understanding and effective learning to our general Yonsei 101 course.

The specific themes we put in the first-year seminar for international students were;

- 1) Yonsei University heritage in Korean Modern History
- 2) Introduction of some unique Yonsei college cultures
- 3) Resources for international students – in Yonsei and also in Seoul
- 4) How to learn effectively with limited Korean language levels – a success story of

peer international students

5) Personal meetings with professors in students' major fields

6) Making meaningful college life in Yonsei and in Korea-planning your four years.

Classroom atmosphere is also a very important factor of positive outcomes of a class. These students are usually not fluent in Korean language and tend to hesitate to speak out in classes. In this first-year seminar, students get chances and encouragements to express their opinions freely and at their own pace. There are several team assignments for the students to promote more active communication between themselves and more in-class participation experiences.

4. Contents of the first year seminar for international students

The table below summarizes the contents of both our general first year seminar class and class for international students. The core themes that we teach to every first year students and specific themes for international students can be also recognized.

<Table 1> Contents of the first year seminars

Themes	General class	International students class
Specific	Understanding University and 'Yonsei'	Understanding Acculturation
	How is a university different from high school? Why Yonsei? (Yonsei spirit)	Cultural adaptation and integration Group meeting and greeting
Core	Changes through college experience	Changes through college experience

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	Development goals of a college student Workshop: understanding yourself	Development goals of a college student Workshop: understanding yourself
Specific	Learning in college: part 1 Why we study liberal arts? Understanding your major	Resources for international students How to use Yonsei library Useful resources for international students
Core/ specific	Learning in college: part 2 Workshop: Your learning style	Learning in college Practical learning tips from peer international students
Core	Time management SMARTER goals for effective time management	Time management SMARTER goals for effective time management
Core	Ethics for college students: part 1 Basic research-learning ethics	Ethics for college students: part 1 Basic research-learning ethics
Specific	Ethics for college students: part 2 Ethics in college-life sphere	Understanding your major Meeting with the professor in your field Presentation about your major
Specific	Mature relationships in college How relationships change in college	Understanding Yonsei and its culture Visit Yonsei's historical places Join the annual festival (Yon-Kor Match)
Core/ specific	Your college life and beyond Meeting with alumni	Your college life and beyond Meeting with alumni (former international students)
core	Planning your four years in college Factors to consider before your planning Presentation about your college life plan	Planning your four years in college Factors to consider before your planning Presentation about your college life plan

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5. The effectiveness of first year seminars for international students

International students actively participated in the first year seminar class. They expressed their thoughts and opinions comfortably, didn't hesitate to ask questions, did team projects together and made presentations in front of class. The student assessment at the end of the semester showed that this special first-year seminar was effective. The overall satisfactory level of the first year seminars for international students was 10% higher than the average satisfactory level of our general first year seminars.

<Table 2> Course assessments by the students (1~5 scale)

	General class	International students class
Overall satisfaction	4.0	4.4

Also, students gave some written feedbacks that illustrate how the course helped them adapt to college environment that is not familiar and foreign to them. Those comments were;

- 1) Essential information for a successful adaptation and understanding Korean college life are provided at the right timing
- 2) The sessions were proceeded in moderate speed and the Korean language used in class was fairly understandable
- 3) The team projects and presentation assignments gave enough opportunities to express thoughts in Korean and enhance the ability to communicate in Korean with people from different cultures and work styles

- 4) The chance to meet an excellent international student role model hiked the self- motivation to study hard in Korea

For teachers/advisors, the first year seminar was a useful channel for academic advising. International students are usually in heavy needs of advising and information, and regular meetings within the weekly seminar class were valuable source for those advising, information, and feedbacks on college life at the right timings.

With growing number of international students, South Korean universities are developing formal/informal curricula to help them adapt to foreign educational environment. In this paper, the first year seminar for international students of Yonsei University is presented as an effective class for basic understandings of Yonsei's college life and specific strategies to learn better in Korean speaking environment. The seminar class also served as advising sessions for the first year international students on regular basis. The next step for us would be the education of Korean students to benefit from the growth of international student composition - by raising awareness on the relativity of Korean culture and standards to understand cultural differences and to broaden perspectives on global level.