Introduction to Teach and Learn in Korea (TaLK)
Stella Cho

The Korean government scholarship program Teach and Learn in Korea (TaLK) is currently recruiting its ninth term of applicants for the August 2012 semester. TaLK, a program tantamount to an international teaching internship, invites native English speakers to teach English at a rural elementary school while learning about the different facets of Korean culture.

The TaLK Program is administered by the National Institute for International Education (NIHIED), a central government organization under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST). Inspired by President Lee Myung-bak in 2008, the program’s mission is to strengthen English education in the rural areas by providing a chance for young children to interact with a native English speaker. Similarly, TaLK participants have the chance to learn about the traditional customs still valued and preserved in small, rural Korean communities.

“Although some might not enjoy working at rural areas due to various reasons, I personally like these kinds of circumstances because I truly believe that rural areas offer more complimentary teaching atmosphere than anywhere else in the urban area,” commented Ho Gun Che, second term TaLK Scholar from Canada. Che taught at Bangweol Elementary, a school of 32 students located in a small town in northern Ulsan Province. “Since everyone knows each other very well from kindergarten to [the] six grade, the friendship between each kid are very profound, as they all care one for another.” Che, who had originally signed up for six months with the TaLK Program, extended his contract because he wanted to continue doing what he loves.

This past August, TaLK accepted a total of 595 fifth term applicants. Like Che, nearly half of those who were accepted were participants who successfully extended their contracts for at least another six months. Program participants, or “TaLK Scholars,” have the option of signing a six- or 12-month contract, and may extend their stay in the program for up to two years based on their performance at the designated school.

Unlike other English teaching programs in Korea, TaLK allocates ample time for professional and personal growth. Classroom instruction takes place 15 hours a week, during and after which scholars have reported feeling more confident about their teaching abilities and satisfaction in being a role model for young children and community members.

“As the first and possibly sole native English speaker many of these students will ever know personally, the students’ attitudes and perceptions towards foreigners rely heavily on my approach and actions,” wrote Jason Taehee Lee, USA. Lee teaches in Jangpyeong Elementary, a school of less than 150 students in the Gangwon Province. “I still spend my mornings as well as evenings planning for the next day. Whether this includes PowerPoint presentations, role-play scenarios, or games, preparation is key for a smooth class.”

Though planning lessons consists of a part of the TaLK Scholar’s life, non-teaching hours are generally dedicated to sight-seeing, and picking up hobbies and playing sports that are prominent in different regions of Korea. One TaLK Scholar, Katherine Fourie, a third term TaLK Scholar from South Africa, not only taught in two Busan schools, Bong-sam Elementary and Taejongdae Elementary, but also found the time to join social groups to fulfill personal interests.

“If you want to learn about Korean culture, particularly contemporary culture, getting involved with Korean clubs through your sporting activities is a fast-track way to do this!” wrote Fourie in a farewell essay for the program. “I have been whisked off on mad typhoon surfing missions with the locals from the Songjeong Surf Club, adopted by the Busan Sports Climbing Centre, and have been blown away by people’s kindness and propensity to share. I’ve had old women offer me their prized seats on the subway because I had heavy bags; climbers I don’t know from a bar of soap have invited me to eat ramen and kimbab with them; and perfect strangers on walking trails have stuffed handfuls of bamboo salt candy into my pockets. Coming from my country where you tend to look after yourself first, this is awesome behaviour!”

Through TaLK, young adults from around the world have met and found an exciting new way of exchanging languages and cultures to further develop a global mindset. Among the many benefits provided for joining the TaLK Program include: a monthly stipend of 1.5 million KRW (approximately 1,275 USD), a round-trip economy class airline ticket, accommodation (i.e., studio apartment, home stay), health insurance, sponsored trips to experience the Korean culture, a teaching partner (Korean university student) during classroom
instructions, and more. Upon arrival in Korea, all TaLK Scholars will undergo an intensive month-long preparatory orientation, during which they will receive training focused on topics that include, but are not limited to, teaching methodologies, child psychology, classroom management and adjustment to life in Korea. In addition, a basic Korean language course will be offered as supplementary support for effective classroom management.

Scholars are placed upon acceptance in the program in rural elementary schools in the designated provinces of Busan, Chungbuk, Chungnam, Gangwon, Gyeongbuk, Gyeongnam, Jeju, Jeonbuk, Jeonnam. Under the jurisdiction of the Provincial/Metropolitan Office of Education (POE/MOE), the TaLK Scholar will receive post-orientation support and counseling, and opportunities to attend cultural trips organized by their POE/MOE Supervisor.

Within two years of its establishment, TaLK has successfully recruited, trained and managed over 1,500 participants from seven English-speaking countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the U.K. and U.S. Of the current participants, 61.5% are undergraduates from accredited universities and colleges in the aforementioned countries, and 38.5% are graduates.

In order to qualify for the program, applicants must be a citizen of one of the aforementioned English-speaking countries, with the exception of Korean Nationals, who must have permanent residence in one of those countries. In addition, applicants must be enrolled in an accredited university and in their second year of study, or have obtained an Associate’s degree. Overseas Koreans in their first or second year of study are also eligible to apply.

In order to apply, TaLK applicants must complete and submit the required documents found on the TaLK Web site (www.talk.go.kr). Applicants are chosen based on their English language proficiency, educational background, teaching-related work experience, enthusiasm to learn about Korea, and ability to adapt to a new environment. The Korean Embassies/Consulates and the Seoul TaLK Office administer the initial and final screening of candidates, respectively. The screenings are comprised of interviews and detailed evaluations of the required documents.

All successful applicants are required to obtain one of the following visas applicable to the applicant: E2-2 visa for teaching in a public school in Korea, D2 visa for exchange students, or F4 visa for qualified overseas Koreans. Furthermore, successful applicants must attend the four-week preparatory training in February 2011 before they begin instructing at the elementary school in March 2011.

For more information about the TaLK Program, or to apply, please visit www.talk.go.kr. Browse the “Apply Now” section to find the nearest application office in your region. To contact a TaLK Office representative, please call 82-2-3668-1399, or e-mail talkkorea@gmail.com.

The National Institute for International Education (NIIED) is a Korean government organization established in 1965 to support and solidify education and cultural identity for overseas Koreans and to enhance international exchange and cooperation. As an executive agency under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), the NIIED plays a leading role in strengthening national competitiveness by developing international human resources among overseas Koreans, exchanging students under national government scholarship programs, and providing educational administrative services.