

(Yonhap Feature) Native-language classes connect multicultural students to their heritage

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By Bryan Betts

SEOUL, Nov. 20 (Yonhap) — Whenever she visits her hometown of Ulaanbaatar on the vast Mongolian steppe, Seoul-resident Jadambaa Nasanjargal makes a point of returning with children's books written in her native language. At home, she reads the traditional folktales to her daughter, translating into Korean as necessary, to introduce her 7-year-old to the language and culture of her homeland 2,000 kilometers away.

But for all her efforts to raise her daughter to be bilingual, Nasanjargal has found, like countless parents before her, that teaching one's own child is easier said than done.

"When I've tried to teach her, she thinks of me differently as her mother, and it seems like she listens better when it's another teacher," she said, noting that, besides herself, almost everyone in her daughter's life, from her husband to kindergarten teachers, communicates in Korean.

Fortunately for Nasanjargal, she now has help.



Students focus on a worksheet during a beginner-level Mongolian-language class at the Seoul Global Center in central Seoul on Nov. 10, 2019. (Yonhap)

Since March of this year, her daughter Kim Ji-woo has been attending a weekly Mongolian-language and culture class at the Seoul Global Center, an organization set up by Seoul City Hall to provide counseling and other services for foreigners.

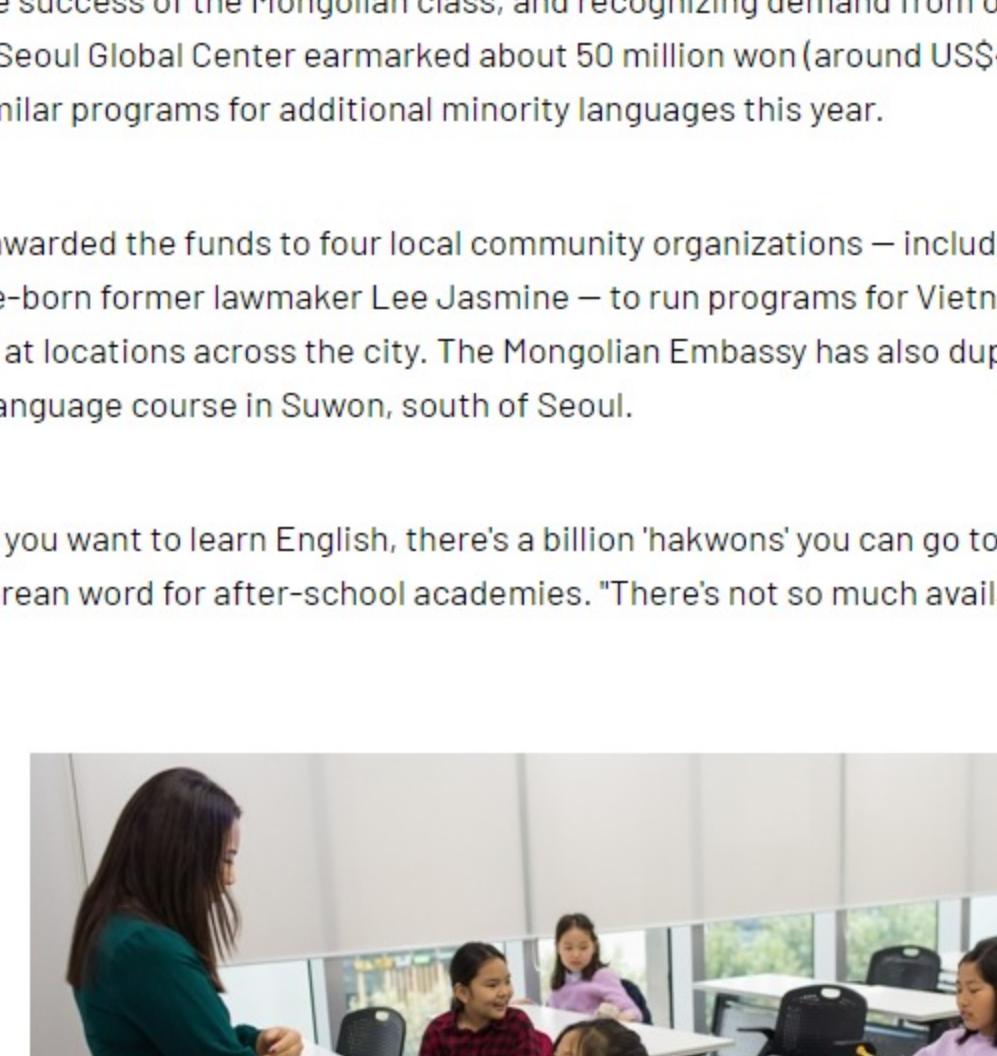
The program, now in its third year, aims to help students of Mongolian heritage, in particular those from multicultural Mongolian-Korean families, learn their foreign parents' language and culture in a country where that can be difficult or even discouraged.

"The idea is, if they get the opportunity to go back to Mongolia and visit their extended family, they'll be able to carry on a conversation with grandma," Paul Carver, director of the Seoul Global Center, said.

Until a few years ago, Carver said he would hear of in-laws that pressured foreign-born mothers to assimilate completely to Korean culture and use only Korean with their children. Some families have reportedly feared that a child who learns two languages might speak neither fluently.

But social attitudes toward bilingualism seem to be changing as South Korea becomes more cosmopolitan, according to Carver, with 2.37 million foreigners living in the country as of last year.

"(From our point of view), we want children to obviously fully adapt to Korean society but also celebrate that they have this whole other side to them that they got from their mother or from their father, and be aware of that," he said.



A puzzle in the shape of Mongolia, with pieces representing the country's provinces (Yonhap)

The Seoul Global Center's native-language program has its origins in a town hall meeting that the Mongolian president held with Mongolians residing in Seoul during a 2016 visit, Carver said. The participants told the head of state that they wanted a class where they could send their kids for Mongolian lessons.

The request jump-started planning and led to the current arrangement under which the Seoul Global Center furnishes classroom space and the Mongolian Embassy provides the curriculum and teacher to run the course.

On a Sunday morning earlier this month, 10 students in the beginner-level course sat in a classroom in central Seoul and watched as their teacher, speaking Mongolian interspersed with Korean, showed how to write Cyrillic letters in the correct stroke order. The demonstration inspired an ebullient "Aha!" from 7-year-old Nomun Erdene, seated in the front wearing a pink Disney dress.

"The class is a little hard, but my daughter can meet other Mongolian kids like her and study Mongolian with them, so she wants to go and likes the class," Tsogt-Ochir Tungalag, Nomun's mother, said.



Seven-year-old Nomun Erdene takes a pen from her teacher's hand to finish a worksheet during a beginner-level Mongolian-language class at the Seoul Global Center in central Seoul on Nov. 10, 2019. (Yonhap)

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Keyword

#multicultural students #Mongolian class

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Tsogt-Ochir Tungalag (L) and Jadambaa Nasanjargal (R) pose for a photo with their daughter, Nomun Erdene and Kim Ji-woo, respectively, at the Seoul Global Center in central Seoul on Nov. 10, 2019. (Yonhap)