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WOMEN'S INITIATIVE



2019 FINALIST FOR EAST ASIA

YEON JEONG CHO

SAY Global - SOUTH KOREA

www.sayspeaking.com

**“Korea has one of the world’s fastest ageing populations,
but many people stop work as early as 55.”**

Anyone who has travelled to South Korea knows how tricky it is to speak Korean. Most foreigners who come to benefit from the country’s flourishing economy will rarely have received lessons back home. Even when they have, finding conversation classes outside Korea is not easy. Yeon Jeong, a Korean national whose family moved to the United States when she was 11, knows only too well how hard it is to learn a new language. On her first day of school in the US she was bombarded with questions, but spoke virtually no English.

SENIOR TUTORS

Perhaps this is where the idea was formed for SAY, the online Korean language platform she founded in January 2017. Born from a project that connected students of Korean at Princeton University with native speakers, SAY, which stands for Seniors and Youth, is a service with a twist: here all the tutors are retirees to whom Yeon Jeong offers a new lease of life.

“Korea has one of the world’s fastest ageing populations, but many people stop work as early as 55,” she explains, pinpointing a practice whereby employers send many workers into early retirement, reluctant to retrain them. Rising levels of poverty among the elderly due to low pensions and insufficient savings are also a major concern. “There is not enough support for the elderly, both financially and socially,” Yeon Jeong explains. “People invest 20 or 30 years into a career then find themselves isolated from society. They can even be rejected for work as unpaid volunteers.”

AMBASSADORS OF KOREA

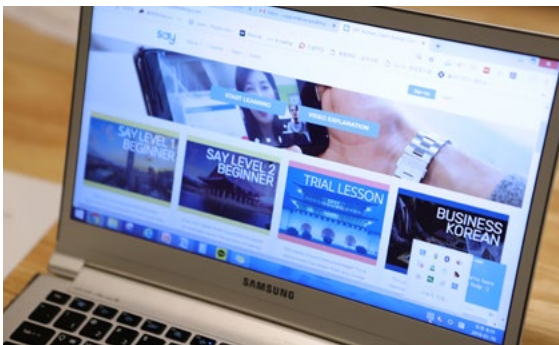
To turn them into tutors, SAY provides in-house training tailored to their needs, with simplicity and user-friendliness throughout the online and smartphone platforms they use. Tellingly, financial gain is not the primary draw, most are driven by the desire to stay active and useful. The impact Yeon Jeong senses among the tutors is tangible. “They love seeing themselves as Korean ‘ambassadors’, teaching their culture to foreigners. They truly appreciate being in touch with the world. Many stop by the office to say hello and bring us food, much to our delight!”

Students benefit from an easy-access on-line platform that matches them to a teacher, provides one-to-one video classes and offers an integrated curriculum designed by SAY’s team. This gives the company a strong brand image in terms of quality control and service. Typical students are Americans seeking to work in Korea and needing to pass the TOPIK exam (Test of Proficiency in Korean), but SAY also receives high interest from countries such as Vietnam, where it plans to develop its next market.

“I never felt 100% ready to launch my business. If you try to prepare for all the potential challenges, you would probably never get started!”

Yeon Jeong was always tempted by the idea of running her own start-up. “I decided that if I was going to take this risk at some point in my life, then I should start while I’m young!” The biggest challenge she feels her business faces is to scale up while maintaining its social mission to employ seniors. With K-Pop music attracting global fascination, the numbers of foreigners in Korea growing by 8% each year and 300,000 candidates for TOPIK in 2017, there looks to be big scope for SAY to make a lasting impact on both seniors’ and students’ lives.

“I chose to create my own start-up because I knew that I would learn things that I would never be able to learn elsewhere.”



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