

Volunteer Educational Network

English Workshop in Thailand

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Introduction

In summer 2002 I volunteered for the English teaching workshop held in Sakaeo organized by C.A.N.H.E.L.P Thailand.

Like many others, I am concerned about the uneven distribution of wealth worldwide and what I can do to help other people in Asia. I teach in an environment with abundant material richness. I always remind myself how lucky I am to have access to diverse English educational materials in Tokyo. Is giving out food or money the optimal way to guarantee sustainable growth? What is the best way to help?

The best way, it seems, is to help provide education to the young people. If children know how to read, write, calculate and think logically on their own, they can become good citizens who can make rational choices for their own societies. This kind of help takes effort and time. And the result does not show immediately. I firmly believe, however, that giving the people the ability to support themselves is much more effective than giving them food to survive for the meantime.

In this paper I will introduce the history of the volunteer teaching workshop

program, its future plans, my experience observing Thai schools and giving a teacher training workshop in Sakaeo.

From CHT to Volunteer Educational Network (VEN)

C.A.N.H.E.L.P. Thailand (CHT) is a non-profit organization established by a professor at Nanzan University in 1995. He visited one of his students in Thailand in 1990, and was saddened by the condition of children in the poor regions. He established the scholarship fund with his colleagues and founded C.A.N.H.E.L.P. Thailand at the end of the year. The program continues to provide scholarships for Thai students, school lunches to remedy student malnutrition, exchange programs, improvement of school buildings, and sending children's books to the northeast area of Thailand.

CHT has a building program with about 300 student volunteers helping out for three weeks to build schools in Sakaeo. On the first day of my visit to Sakaeo I had a chance to talk to the volunteer students. They had arrived there on the previous day, but they did not stay in a hotel like we did. There were only two rooms in the building that they stayed, one for the boys and one for the girls. They had to bring some water in buckets to take a morning shower. The boy who sat next to me complained that their breakfast looked like gruel boiled in Thai curry. He added some white substance

that he thought was salt, but it turned out to be sugar. So he could not eat breakfast at all and worked in the heat all morning!

Despite the hardship, I think that the building program is a great experience for university students. It is a great way to contribute to Thai people. Often college students in Japan wish to study in America, England, or Australia, but not in Asian countries. A month in Thailand helping to build schools in Sakaeo would be more valuable than spending a vacation sightseeing somewhere else. It is a vacation spent with a purpose.

The new government educational policy requires English education from the first grader in all the elementary schools in Thailand. The shortage and poor state of teacher training became a serious problem, especially in the agrarian regions (Kubota, 1992; Mackenzie, 2002). Thus, the English Workshop was started by CHT in 1996. Thai provincial governments reeducate non-English teachers to be able to teach English. With the help of the Educational Board, CHT sent experienced English teachers from Japan every year and gave teacher training workshops for Thai English teachers. The English teaching workshop program separated from CHT in fall 2002, became an independent organization and now it is called Volunteer Educational Network (VEN). In the future the English workshop program can be organized in places outside Thailand

and expand as a volunteer network worldwide. The workshop used to be held once a year in summer; however, there is a possibility to do it in February, in addition to the summer program.

English teachers in Thailand

I heard about the English teaching program from my teacher at Teachers College, Columbia University. I became interested in the program immediately, because I wanted to contribute to the world using the skills I acquired at Teachers College. Another reason was my friend who has been involved in the volunteer project with Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) to build libraries for Karen refugee children in northern Thailand since last year. Although I was unable to visit her in Mae Sod, I would like to do so someday.

From July 28 to August 4, 2002, I visited Sakaeo, Thailand to work as a volunteer teacher trainer for CHT. On July 28 at the bus terminal in Bangkok I met coordinators and other volunteer teachers. There were 12 teachers coming from Japan to volunteer for the English Workshop. To my surprise, I was the only Japanese national, except three Japanese university students who worked as teaching assistants.

Thai culture interested me even before the workshop started. Linguistically, Thai language is related to Chinese, and it is a tone language. Its religion is 95%

Theravada school of Buddhism, and historically the country was under strong influence from China (Morrison, Conaway & Borden, 1994). My first query was to find similarities and differences between Japan and Thailand. Thai people smiled at me when they talked, and I immediately liked them. I have to admit that Japanese people are expressionless compared to them.

The most striking thing about the Thai experience was that wealth does not correspond to the students' psychological stability, morality and politeness. Japanese students now have access to computer facilities, CD players, DVD and other technologically advanced equipment at school for learning English. Despite the material richness, they are suffering from lack of discipline, decent manners, and respect for teachers. Gakkyuhoukai (class destruction with disobedient students) is becoming a serious problem in Japanese primary schools. Thai schools that I visited had simple and modest facilities. One school did not have glass windows, and the raised floors had cracks and holes. The students there were all smiles and greeted us warmly. The students and teachers were both eager to learn as much English as they could while we were there. The lack of dictionaries and textbooks did not stop the motivated teachers and students. Thai students showed respect to teachers by greeting in Thai style. In contrast some Japanese students seem to forget even how to greet

teachers. Thai students reminded me of something lost from Japan. If it was the effect of industrial growth, sacrificing the children's education was serious mistake.

I met a teacher who was doing an M.A. while teaching high school. I sympathized with her, because I was doing the same for the past three years. Her school seemed relatively big and well managed, but she said that she wanted to obtain English picture dictionaries for her students. I promised to send them to her from Japan. Right after observing my team-teaching, she immediately adopted the activity I did in her class. Her eagerness, motivation and talent in teaching impressed me.

There are many ways in which Thai and Japanese educational systems are similar. One aspect that I noticed during the school visits was the greeting at the beginning and the end of English lessons. Thai students have sets of greeting they are trained to practice without thinking too much, just like Japanese counterparts in junior and senior high schools. For example, at the beginning of each lesson:

A student: Stand up. (All students stand up.)

Teacher: Good morning, everybody.

Students: Good morning, teacher.

Teacher: How are you today?

Students: I'm fine, thank you. And you?

Teacher: I'm fine, too, thank you. Please sit down.

At the end of each class:

A student: Stand up.

Students: Thank you, teacher. See you tomorrow.

Teacher: See you tomorrow.

I have to remind my Japanese college students that they are not supposed to say “fine” if they are sick; however, they automatically say, “I’m fine, thank you. And you?” because of the six years of training. I used to believe that it was only a Japanese phenomenon, but it was happening in Thailand, too.

During the English teaching workshop, I taught a group of about 40 primary school teachers with three other volunteer teachers from Japan.

Even though we planned and prepared for the workshop in advance, one thing we did not expect was the lack of dictionaries among the English teachers who attended the workshop. The problem was especially serious for me, who was used to resorting to Japanese when I had to explain something abstract to my students in Japan. I could not speak Thai, and I could not explain things well in simple English. Next time I go there, I should buy at least five Thai-English, English-Thai dictionaries from Bangkok. But most importantly, I should make the habit of not using translation to teach my students. I did not realize it until I went to Thailand.

The teachers who attended the workshop had different levels of English competency. They also differed in their experience of teaching English. Their linguistic abilities, however, were relatively low. They came to the workshop not only to learn how to teach English, but also to brush up their English speaking and listening

skills.

The workshop took place intensively for three days straight from 9 to 5, because many Thai teachers were commuting from far away. Some teachers from schools near the Cambodian border attended the seminar. These schools suffer from the overflow of students coming in from Cambodia. “Cambodian students come to Thai schools to eat lunch, because they are so poor,” one of the teachers complained. “There aren’t enough teachers there.”

For the first two days, four volunteer trainers including myself demonstrated different ways and techniques to make the children’s classroom more active and interesting. We introduced board games, Jazz Chants, songs, activities using balls, cards, stickers and so on. On the last day, the Thai teachers prepared a lesson from their textbook, English is Fun in groups and demonstrated it in front of everyone. The teachers modified the tasks from the textbook to more interactive ones. Because of the intensive nature of the workshop, it was exhausting for both teachers and students. Nevertheless, I think the teachers were able to master the basic skills to plan their classes based on their textbook.

Conclusion

As Asian countries under the traditional Chinese influence, Thai and Japanese

cultures are more similar than different. They share the culture of modesty and shyness. The societies are group-oriented, male-centered, and hierarchical based on seniority. Thai and Japanese people avoid confrontation at all costs and never say "No". When they laugh for no apparent reason, they are usually embarrassed. The government types are constitutional monarchy. Thailand and Japan both have centralized government-controlled educational systems. In Japan English will be compulsory from primary school level in the near future. Japan can learn from the Thai experience of introducing obligatory English classes at primary schools.

As a workshop coordinator for the primary school level in VEN, I plan to become more involved in the volunteer English teaching workshop in the future. I taught elementary school 4th graders' class at the Gakushuin Kasumikaikan English Seminar this summer, and I investigated how much autonomous learning they could handle at that age. As far as the goal setting was concerned, they were able to write down clear, achievable purposes for themselves. They had different preferences for learning and were aware of their learning styles. Thai and Japanese English teachers can cooperate with each other to find a better way to teach English to Asian children.

Reference

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