

Exchanging Ideas: volunteer English teacher training in Southeast Asia

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you. (Aldous Huxley)*

東南アジアで英語のボランティア先生のトレーニング

LAMBERT Nicholas

ランバート・ニコラス



Abstract

This paper discusses the rationale for the provision of volunteer English teacher training programs in the Southeast Asian context by experienced language teachers from Japan and other areas outside the region. It provides evidence of professional and personal benefits both to the teacher trainees and to the volunteers themselves, using informant comments from a sample program by the JALT Teachers Helping Teachers SIG (Special Interest Group). It concludes with

a recommendation for practical implementation of real faculty exchanges and joint pedagogical activities between institutions with official international exchange agreements, as opposed to the signing of non-functioning agreements meant only for school promotion and public relations.

Key Words: teacher training; intercultural communication; volunteerism

Preamble

As I gradually approach the time of my retirement from teaching, like most people I wonder what I will do once I leave my teaching career behind. The dynamic nature of teaching – in which there are always new students, changes in curriculum, the exchange of ideas, and so on – have kept life interesting and even at times exciting. So it fills me with a little trepidation to think that upon retirement I may lose at least part of that vitality which my career has provided me. At the same time, it seems a bit of a shame that experienced teachers (or any other skilled workers) may be unable to share some of the knowledge and skills they have gained over the course of their working life once they leave it.

Fortunately, a friend of mine suggested that I join in some volunteer teacher training programs before I retired and, if it suited me, could continue to do this kind of activity even after official retirement. He himself had already been involved in this type of volunteer work for several years overseas (mainly in the Philippines), in fact being instrumental in the startup of a teacher-training NPO called BOLT (Balsamo Organization of Language Teaching). As I thought about this more, I realized that over the years I had already done some teacher training (in Canada and Japan) and so felt a bit of confidence that I could do such work. Moreover, I came to the conclusion that there are lots of teaching ideas and experiences I have had which might be of some interest and benefit to training and practicing teachers.

To develop this plan further, I have been investigating the various volunteer programs available to English language teachers both in Japan and around the world. The vast majority of such programs are actually not for the purpose of teacher training per se – rather, they are opportunities for direct teaching of language to English language learners. However, my interest is in English teacher training, a much smaller subset of volunteer programs.

The foregoing is a little background into the topic of this paper: the provision of some information on available volunteer English teacher training programs and a description of my own experiences to date in this important area of education. Hopefully this will inspire a few other teachers, whether of language or other fields, to investigate the idea of volunteering to teach or train others in the future.

Volunteering: Reflecting on its value

Researchers have been aware for a long time that social interaction promotes individual mental and psychological development. The social-psychologist George Homans coined in 1958 the concept of *social exchange theory*, which has a number of key elements that are relevant to the issue of volunteering. Two of these that are particularly pertinent are: (1) *social exchange as reciprocal acts of individual giving, rather than as jointly negotiated mutual trades*; (2) *social exchange as the foundation of relatively enduring relationships of repeated interactions between the same persons* (Moln 2016). Essentially, according to this theory, social exchange (underpinned by altruism) is an individual choice that tends to bind people together long after the altruistic activity finishes.

Volunteering may be considered as a form of *altruism*, defined by Batson (1991) as *a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare*. He notes that in the past *advocates of universal egoism... claim that everything we do, no matter how noble and beneficial to others, is really directed toward the ultimate goal of self-benefit* (Batson 1991:2). Even if we accept such cynicism towards motivation, I argue that that altruism has personal value to both the givers (volunteers) and the recipients and therefore is to be commended. Helping others to achieve their dreams is personally satisfying for the volunteer – at least partially because it is challenging. It stimulates the brain, keeps life interesting because it often provides surprises, and of course gives the volunteer a sense of purpose and self-respect. In addition, the people or organizations who receive the support from the volunteer have their own direct benefits: they get free access to experiences and skills that they may not be able to obtain in any other way. Moreover, like the volunteer, they may make personal and long-lasting friendships with their volunteer contacts: “*So often you find that the students you’re trying to inspire are the ones that end up inspiring you.*” (Sean Junkins*)

Naturally, helping others with their career or other goals also has high social value. The links between individuals also may lead to sociocultural and institutional links. For instance, when the Football World Cup was held in Japan in 2002, the towns that hosted visiting teams from other countries “adopted” their visiting team, made longterm friendships, set up joint ventures and programs between towns and teams that continued after the World Cup was ended. Through such linkages and programs, individuals were able to obtain scholarships, cultural exchanges, training, and so on which both enriched the individuals’ lives and those of their social groups. Moreover, by helping individuals to achieve their goals, such volunteerism has helped with social order and cohesion: individual success promotes social happiness. Successful people are usually happier and more supportive of social activities. If nothing else, they are far less likely to engage in antisocial or criminal behaviour.

People often say that many of the world’s problems – such as poverty, economic inequality, political and social instability, war, or even environmental degradation – are connected to poor or

lack of education. Less educated individuals are more easily manipulated and exploited by religious or other extremists, since they have deficiencies in knowledge which make them less employable and more susceptible to brainwashing. Unfortunately, a large majority of such uneducated people are women and youth; these have the energy to contribute well to society, but are also vulnerable to frustration due to lack of perceived opportunities. It is no accident that women and children are often victims of social disorder, while young men (and to a lesser extent young women) are the most active in participation in social unrest.

Thus, one of the most valuable functions of any teacher is to help to alleviate educational shortcomings or disadvantages: to facilitate and to motivate learning where possible. As Nelson Mandela* once said, *“Education is the most powerful weapon for changing the world.”* That being so, it is crucial for education to recognize and facilitate the necessary changes in order to keep up with globalization and the changing world. The Japanese government has seen such needs and is actively promoting English educational change – for instance, by copying Korea’s idea to create an English Village for the practice of oral English communication with the intention of raising the level of communication skills for its citizens so as to prepare them for increasing global competitiveness and cooperation.

It is morally incumbent on experienced teachers to share their pedagogical knowledge and expertise for the benefit of new and aspiring teachers, both as a way to ‘give back’ to the community and to revitalize their own teaching. A good starting point for this is to ponder the concept of “experience.” What does it consist of? Moreover, what process does the teacher go through in order to harness or exploit experience? Perhaps the greatest contribution an experienced teacher can offer to less practiced teachers is to focus their attention on the main clients of their teaching, rather than on themselves:

The difference between a beginning teacher and an experienced one is that the beginning teacher asks, “How am I doing?” and the experienced teacher asks, “How are the children doing?”(Esme Raji Codell*)

Teaching methodologies which address this notion are by their very nature democratic and cooperative, partnering learners and teachers in relatively equal positions. They actively encourage learners to explore for themselves, guided and facilitated by teachers rather than directed by them. This active and often task-based style of teaching is currently being heavily promoted in the field of language education, yet conflicts philosophically with traditional classroom dynamics in the Asian context. In Asian cultures it has been the norm for the teacher to be viewed as the ‘font of all knowledge,’ providing students with correct information and directing their actions like a commander.

Many English teachers in Asia have grown up within a school system which supports this tradition, and therefore emulate the same style of teaching once they become qualified as educators. As a result, one of the most challenging aspects of volunteer teacher training is to

find ways to draw teacher trainees 'outside their comfort zones,' so to speak, and develop active learning within a more cooperative, flexible, and less structured classroom environment. Research suggests that this kind of approach encourages real language learning and a more interesting and satisfying learning experiences for students than from traditional approaches. It is, I believe, one of the principal ideas that visiting foreign teachers can bring to teacher training in the Asian milieu.

Naturally, the main English teacher training in all Asian countries is carried out in local colleges and universities through their Education departments. The teacher trainers for such programs are of course not volunteers, though they may be active in university or private charity activities.

Some other available teacher training programs for Asia are organized by big government-supported organizations such as the British Council, JICA, UNESCO, and so on. Truthfully, many of these programs are also not actually for volunteers, as participants often receive salaries or honorariums for their services. Moreover, participation as a teacher trainer is frequently only open to nationals from the organization's home country. Nevertheless, at least part of their activities may involve volunteering.

There are also a number of private companies which offer teacher training. Many of them prepare trainees for qualification certificates such as CELT and may also offer post-certification employment within their own private school system or affiliated schools. These companies do not in general use volunteers as teacher trainers, though they may occasionally offer some special seminars using such volunteers.

BOLT

On the other hand, there is at least one NPO (not-for-profit) organization called BOLT (Balsamo Organization of Language Teachers) which is active in Asia, mainly in the Philippines and Vietnam. It provides volunteer teacher trainers from Japan, USA, Australia, and so on, all of whom are self-funded during the programs. In the Philippines, BOLT organizes English teacher training seminars twice a year in Manila and also in an indigenous tribal region of rural Mindoro island. In Vietnam, BOLT has an annual program hosted by Da Lat University. However, participation as a volunteer in the BOLT Da Lat seminar is by invitation only, making the seminar a bit challenging to join.

JALT-THT

Affiliated to BOLT, one of the most accessible organizations for Japanese-based teachers wishing to volunteer as teacher trainers is Teachers-Helping-Teachers (THT), a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the teacher organization JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teachers). Currently, THT provides annual language teacher training programs to English teachers in

Vietnam, Laos, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, and the Philippines (in hiatus at the moment). There is also an affiliated program in Myanmar. All participating JALT teachers are volunteers paying for their travel expenses themselves unless supported by their own institutions.

THT was founded by the Himeji City chapter of JALT in 2004, and the late Bill Balsamo was instrumental in its initial programs. According to its website (tht-japan.org), "*THT is dedicated to the aid and assistance of fellow educators and students in and around Asia. We fulfill this mission by providing teacher-training conferences, seminars and workshops that exhibit practical, student and teacher-friendly approaches to language education and are informed by current research in the field.*"

In addition to its training programs, THT publishes a research journal (*THT Journal*) which provides the overseas teachers a forum for their research development as well as for participating volunteers from Japan.

The THT-Philippines programs have been transferred for the moment to the BOLT organization which is carrying on two or more teacher training seminars per year (usually in February and August). In the Manila area, there are presentations for 500 or so language teachers from elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools in Pasig City. Following this large program, smaller groups of teachers receive seminars in Quezon City. In addition, a number of volunteers then proceed to an isolated mountain village on the island of Mindoro called Banilad. There, they give English in-service teaching (of various subjects such as Social Studies, Physical Education, Science, and Mathematics, in addition to English) of indigenous children in the local elementary school.

Volunteers in these programs have all raved about the enthusiasm of the Filipino participants and the personal satisfaction of the volunteers in helping local development of English and enjoying the Filipino cultural experience. The children in Banilad are particularly excited to experience lessons from foreign teachers, since many of them have never even seen a foreigner prior to the program. Volunteers have stated that *playing* with the children is the key to program success. As Jim Henson*, the creator of the famous Muppets once noted, "*[Kids] don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are.*"

This is in line with the current language learning trend that emphasizes "Learning by Doing." One of the main ways that visiting teacher trainers can introduce – whether in the Philippines or elsewhere – is the notion that *active* learning is central to language development. The famous American educator John Dewey* commented, "*Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn: ... the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, [so] learning naturally results.*"

THT-Vietnam 2015

1. HUE

During the month of August 2015, I joined the THT Vietnam program, which consisted of two

related events. The main program was held at the Hue College of Foreign Languages on August 7-9, and there were 17 volunteers from Japan – a larger group than normal as it was also a celebration of the 10th anniversary of the program. Following this seminar, 6 of the volunteers including myself attended a smaller seminar at the Da Nang University of Foreign Languages. The next section of this article will discuss these seminars as an illustration of the opportunities, benefits, and limitations of volunteer teacher training.

For the Hue *Seminar on Activities and Motivation for the Language Classroom*, most of the teacher trainers came from Japanese universities (although one had retired from working in Japan and was now living in Vietnam). These volunteers were originally from several countries including Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, UK, and USA. Therefore, Vietnamese participants were exposed to a great variety of English accents and teaching styles.

An unusual feature of the program was that each visiting volunteer was assigned a local English teacher or graduate student as a “facilitator,” whose task was to provide support for workshop activities as well as to act as a local guide. It was also very helpful for the volunteers to have excellent English speakers acting as advisors and guides. The relationship of facilitator and volunteer in most cases rapidly became one of friendship and a sense of family, despite the often big age gap between them.

These connections were cemented by the willingness and enthusiasm of the facilitators to show off the local tourist sites in Hue after each day’s workshops had ended.

In addition to the regular workshops, the Hue College of Foreign Languages held a welcome ceremony that included performances of local folk dance and song by program participants in Vietnamese *ao zai* costumes, followed by a karaoke party which helped to unite the visitors and locals quickly.

As a Vietnamese participant, commented,

The THT teachers are great!. They are friendly, humorous, well-interacted with the locals and always energetic. They are extremely enthusiastic in sharing the ideas and experiences in the seminars (Ha)



Facilitators and volunteers socializing to promote trust and cultural understanding

The intention of the program was to provide very practical workshop lessons that could be used



“Learning by Doing” workshop

directly by the local teachers in their English classes. According to local participants, these workshops were quite valuable:

I was extremely amused about intimate and humorous professionals and useful information of workshops. The information of the workshop was so helpful that I regretted that it was not known widely among [Vietnamese] English teachers. So I think THT should require the extension of participants. (Quynh)

Personally, THT gave me an opportunity to meet almost the best professors coming from several universities in Japan. I learned new interesting things regarding Japanese culture as well as people there. I also get useful knowledge when participating their

seminars. To other participants, I think they also learned a lot through sharing sessions. They can know more about teaching experiences and technique as an TESOL teacher. In spite of the differences in the classroom contexts and situation between Vietnam and Japan, talking and sharing new ideas also a good way so that the Vietnamese teachers gain experiences from foreign professors. The differences can bring the surprising and interesting things. (Ha)

It was evident that a sense of equal partnership between volunteer and local teachers, combined with the well-planned workshop lessons and the camaraderie of the social events, contributed to a feeling of trust. This attitude underpins all successful teaching: “*Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. it’s the foundation principle that holds all relationships.*” (Stephen Covey*)

One of the consequences of this sense of trust was that the sharing of teaching ideas and experiences became a two-way street: volunteers learned as much from the Vietnamese teachers as vice versa. One facilitator noted that hosting the annual THT seminar also gave her college a PR boost: prestige for the carrying out of international research and exchange. By the same token, some volunteers felt that this international program also benefited their own Japanese institutional prestige, regardless of whether they provided volunteers with financial support or not.

Despite all these positive points, not every aspect of the program was perfect. Because several

workshops were scheduled concurrently, some participants felt frustrated that they could not attend every workshop. They suggested that in future each workshop should have a different time slot, allowing participants to attend all of them if so wished. From a practical point of view, though, this would be impossible to arrange: most workshops were designed for a relatively small audience of 20-50 people.

2. DA NANG

Following the conclusion of the three-day Hue seminar, a few of the volunteers travelled to Da Nang where they participated in a smaller one-day program at the Da Nang University of Foreign Languages. The workshops there were duplicates of those they had presented in Hue, but the local participants were quite different. Since the university has just hosted a TESOL conference a week before, there were few local English teachers or graduate students available to attend the THT seminar. Instead, most of the participants were undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education.

Since THT had never held a seminar before in Da Nang, it was unclear to the organizers about audience size and needs prior to the event. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese student participants were enthusiastic and receptive to the workshop presentations. It was fortunate in retrospect that workshops were very practical in content, as in all probability a focus on pedagogical theory would have been either irrelevant or overly challenging to the youthful audience.

Another difference from the Hue seminar was that in Da Nang volunteers were invited to a private English language school for children – which resulted in the children having a chance for real conversation with native speakers of English for the first time and social play with the visitors. It was a gratifying chance for the teacher trainers to observe Vietnamese teachers applying their workshop methods in a local school.



Using English to interact at an English language school

Conclusion

Looking back on my own experience as a volunteer teacher trainer overseas, it is apparent that this kind of activity should be expanded. One of the overall goals of such endeavours ought to be the empowerment and professional development of the local teachers so that they can become more confident of their own language skills and more knowledgeable of language teaching pedagogy. In effect, it should be the ultimate aim to terminate the need for visiting teacher trainers. This can be achieved in the short-term by expanding the opportunities for experienced teachers to provide overseas teacher training, through the provision of both governmental and private support and encouragement for this kind of work. Rather than spending most or all of the available foreign aid funding on education of the students, a higher percentage of it should be applied to teacher training and to financial assistance of volunteers. After all, there are undoubtedly many professional language teachers who would be delighted to participate in volunteer teacher training, yet are unwilling to pay everything from their own pocket for their participation. If support could be found at least for airfares and accommodations, that would go a long way to encourage more volunteering.

It is also clear that using local volunteers as facilitators or assistants is an excellent way to give visiting teacher trainers insights into the local educational and cultural systems. Furthermore, it helps to build an interpersonal mentor relationship that may continue long after the training workshops have been completed. In that respect, it can be a long-term partnership of mutual benefit on both professional and personal levels.

Having now participated in a volunteer teacher training seminar firsthand, I am humbled by its effects on me. I feel revitalized, energized, and stimulated by the cultural experiences I have shared. In addition, it has been a great pleasure to work – even if for just a short time – with the Vietnamese teachers and teacher trainees: they are enthusiastic, respectful, and talkative. Regardless of their level of English proficiency, they tried fully to share their thoughts, humour, and teaching ideas, to give volunteers real insights into the local culture, and to make each of us welcome and cherished.

It has been my impression over the years of my teaching career that universities or teaching staff from rich countries like Japan and Canada struggle to hide a sense of smugness or superiority over the quality of their facilities and educational programs in comparison to those of developing countries. Despite this, I have learned that educators throughout the world have much to offer each other both professionally and personally. For this reason, it is my hope that more universities will actually encourage and carry out the faculty exchanges and joint educational activities which their international agreements allow, rather than using such agreements only for student exchanges or to promote on paper their institution's supposed "internationalization."

References

(*Quotes that are starred are retrieved from the *goodreads.com* website.)

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Further information about these volunteer teacher training organizations can be found on their websites:

BOLT: balsamoo Outreach.org

JALT-THT: tht-japan.org