

Learning Through Volunteering: Translating Letters for an NGO

by Tomoko Sugihashi (Showa Women's University, Tokyo)

Introduction

In this short article, I would like to introduce one activity (*Translating Letters*) from a course entitled *Volunteering in English* offered at Showa Women's University. In order to obtain credit for the course, students are required to do over 30 hours of volunteer work outside of class time for various NGO organizations, including translation of correspondence between Japanese fund donors (sponsors) and overseas recipients (foster children) of those funds. Other volunteer work includes students acting as interpreters between church staff and tsunami victims in Ishinomaki as well as helping with kids' events for Japanese children learning English at an English language school.

The project and the class

This project started in 2004 as part of the *Good Practice* (GP) project application to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The author took up a post at Showa Women's University a few years later and took over this class in 2009.

The class is an elective lasting two semesters and is open to students from any department. It's often taken by 3rd year students majoring in English, with about 10-20% of students from other non-English departments. Students usually have opportunities to be involved in letter translation three times per term and six times in total.

The NGO organization

For this class translation activity, our class works with the organization *Plan International*. According to its website, this was started in 1937 by British journalists and is "an independent child

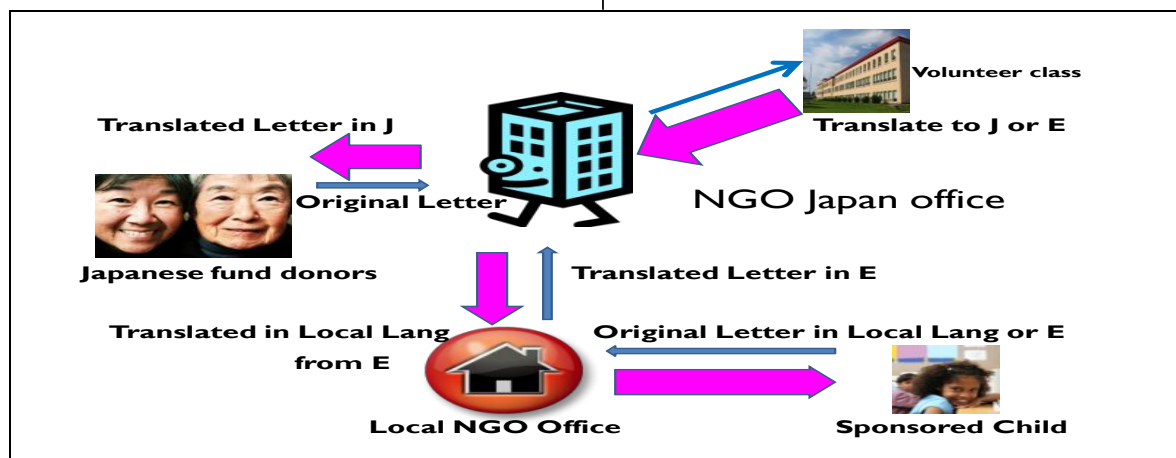
rights and humanitarian organization committed to children living a life free of poverty, violence and injustice." The Japan office of *PLAN International* opened in 1983 and supports children in 51 countries through various programs and activities.

One of these is a child sponsorship program that aids children in developing nations through monetary donations from Japanese nationals. As a token of this relationship, sponsored children exchange letters with their Japanese donors. The letters from sponsored children are collected at the local NGO offices overseas, then sent to the Japan office together with an English translation. The Japan office has over 300 volunteer translators. Our Showa Women's University class, *Volunteering in English*, has been registered as a volunteer translation team for over 10 years. As the number of volunteers has expanded, the Japan office created an online database to regulate the form and translation of letters as well as to aid translators.

Letter translation process

The chart below illustrates the circulation of the letters sent between Japanese donors and their sponsored children overseas. (The images used are not officially related to the activity).

Letters are sent to our class from the Tokyo office of *Plan International* which is located near the university. Students translate both Japanese letters written by Japanese donors into English as well as English letters written by recipient children into Japanese, then deliver these to the Plan office. Students' translation drafts in both languages are checked by the class instructor before being finalized. As students are not familiar with typing letters, the arrangement of spacing and balancing of the letter



on the paper is also checked and adjusted. The NGO requests that both the original letter and the translation be returned together as a set to their office within three weeks of the initial arrival date. One of the class rules is that the last student to hand in the final translation is assigned to deliver all the letters to the Plan office. This gives the students an incentive to adhere to the "due date" requirement, as the Plan office is a 15 minute walk away from the campus.

Letters from overseas usually have two sheets stapled together: one from the sponsored child written in the local language and the other a translation into English by local volunteer staff in that country. Children sometimes draw pictures such as flowers and animals on the back of the paper or on a separate sheet as a small gift to their Japanese sponsors.

The contents of their letters are often about the weather, family, local and school events, and daily life, with an expression of gratitude for the support and response of the letter they received. Unfortunately, the attached English translations, done by the local communal staff, are not always specific or grammatically correct, and sometimes students are uncertain about the precise meaning. Although letters are sent to Japan from many developing nations, these are particularly numerous from the following countries:

- **Asia:** Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam.
- **Africa:** Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia Zimbabwe
- **Central and South America:** Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico.

Letter content and format

The Japanese sponsor letters are usually about the weather and climate where Japanese donors live, as well as their daily lives and some introduction to Japanese culture. Some letters include questions and encouraging messages to their foster children, such as "Study well!" and "Help your parents with house work".

Letters are usually short, although they tended to be more expansive at the time of the Tohoku earthquake in 2011. Many letters at the time included descriptions of the aftermath of the quake and tsunami and attached related newspaper articles. Apparently, the NGO stopped requesting new translation volunteers due to fewer letter exchanges. The organization's website also encourages Japanese donors to send letters by e-mail directly to the local offices overseas where foster children are registered if that does not present a language problem.

Culture and translation

Students' mistakes from translating Japanese letters were often due to a lack of geographical or sociological knowledge of Japan. There were also English grammar errors, which are often observed as mistakes in SLA, such as confusion of articles, singular/plural nouns, synonyms, and direct translations. The following are some examples:

- * 1. A pyramid is one of the world heritages that I want to see.
- * 2. My favorite fruit is an apple.
- * 3. One day I wish we meet each other.
- * 4. From now on, it is a crop season of rice.
- * 5. In our house, we have many persimmons. (instead of "The persimmon trees in our garden have a lot of fruit").

Translating English letters from abroad, however, raises students' international awareness of overseas cultures, by learning about events such as *Dasain* (a Hindi festival), sports such as cricket, things such as latrines as well as foreign greetings including religious expressions that the Japanese language does not have. The following are just a few examples from the English letters received:

- 6. They are sending you greetings of Bangla New Year 1422.
- 7. May God give you a lot of joy, good luck and success in your everyday life.

While students may lack confidence in correctly understanding and writing English sentences, they usually find writing in Japanese harder. This is because they don't have many opportunities to use Japanese honorifics, or even to write letters, so unexpected mistakes occur. Some students use *katakana* to spell out words rather than render them into *kanji* characters, a habit that might have come about by their familiarity with the overuse of *katakana* words in Japanese fashion magazines.

Student responses

Every year, at the end of the course, students' feedback about the class was collected. The following extracts show some of the feedback with regard to the letter translation activities. Most of the comments reproduced here are exactly as they were written in English, with the author adding some words if the meaning was not clear.

I had no idea how I could translate, but thinking about it helped me grow. It was great experience and I learned a lot and enjoyed the work. I felt I could be a bridge connecting people to people.

Difficult from English to Japanese, as I had to use correct Japanese with honorifics. The biggest thing I learned was the child's (overseas) life. In the letter, they wrote about their hobbies and schools. I learned how they live and study, and what (the NGO) does in these countries.

It took much more time than I expected because it was difficult to explain their own culture in another language, but I felt joy that they read letters I translated and I was involved in exchanges between Japan and other countries. I learned how to start and end the letter. Also keeping the original letters with care and typing children's names carefully were good practice.

One difficulty was that there were unfamiliar words in the letters. For example, Ramadan and Eid. Expressions in English such as "greeting through the distance" was difficult to put into Japanese as we usually do not use these expressions. I first thought that translating into English was (would be more) difficult but putting ideas into beautiful (sophisticated and adequate) Japanese sentences were more difficult. I learned cultures and improved my grammar.

I had to choose the words carefully and think a lot how I translate to tell their messages well. Sometimes very difficult words such as god's names also bothered me to translate. However, these works were very worthwhile for me. Also I learned about developing countries and children.


Final thoughts


This course has been one of the most successful the author has experienced due to the nature of the activity; students need to participate to finish the course and be actively involved in various events. Unfortunately, postal letter exchanges are decreasing and being overtaken by online messaging. According to the *Japan National Tourism Organization*, more than 20 million tourists visited Japan last year, but college students' exposure to international

experiences whilst in Japan is still limited. Letters can be costly, high-maintenance work compared with online messages, but what letter translation exercises can give students is priceless. Students can enjoy and learn about other cultures as much as possible through this activity as well as acquire practical skills such as typing letters and using Japanese honorifics.

Sugihashi, T. (2015). *Learning through volunteering: Translating letters*. Talk at 41st Annual JALT International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning, Nagoya, Japan.

Sugihashi, T. (2012). Outcome of 10 Month-long "Volunteering in English" Class. *International Association of Technology, Education and Development (IATED) EDULEARN12 Proceedings CD*.

<p>Tomoko Sugihashi Showa Women's University E-mail: <tomotomo@swu.ac.jp> University website: <swu.ac.jp/en/></p>	
---	---

	<p>Plan International https://plan-international.org www.plan-international.jp</p>
<p><i>Plan International</i> is a non-profit charity that works in Africa, the Americas and Asia to improve the lives of children. Its headquarters are in the UK with national branches in 21 countries including Japan. It was founded in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War in order to assist children affected by war. It focuses on issues of education, health, water, sanitation, disasters and economic security. Its programs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an overseas <i>child sponsorship program</i> that supports children, their families and communities in more than 50 countries worldwide ▪ a <i>Because I Am a Girl</i> campaign which aims to end gender discrimination and empower girls and young women around the globe 	

<p>Shin-Eiken Association <www.shin-eiken.com></p> <p style="text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">新英語教育研究会</p> <p><i>Shin-Eiken</i> is a dynamic high school English language teachers group based in Japan that works to promote global awareness, peace education, international understanding and humanistic education. Check its Japanese website, subscribe to its magazine or attend one of its regional events in Japan.</p>	<p>"Shin Eigo Kyoiku" (New English Classroom) Magazine Sanyusha Press <www.sanyusha-shuppan.com></p> <p>A variety of articles on global themes appear in each month's issue.</p> <p>Issue # 569 (January 2017) Theme: <i>Self Expression</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Teaching Bob Dylan: "Blowin' in the Wind"</i> (Kazuko Sakuma) ▪ <i>Reading the Convention on the Rights of the Child</i> (Takiguchi) ▪ <i>Promoting Acceptance of Cultural Differences</i> (Reiko Maruyama) ▪ <i>EFL Lessons for Intercultural Understanding</i> (Mana Kurosawa) <p>Issue # 570 (February 2017) Theme: <i>Intelligence through EFL</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Integrating Peace Education into EFL</i> (Atsuko Akamatsu) ▪ <i>The Sadako Peace Crane Project for Primary School</i> (Eriko Seno) ▪ <i>Reading: Emma Watson's Speech at the UN</i> (Koji Yamamoto)
--	--