



Foreign Languages through International Volunteer Work

by Warren Decker (Momoyama Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan)



Introduction

In February 2010, I traveled to Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. At that stage of winter, the temperatures don't rise above the freezing point. Water vapor in breath rises in a white plume and quickly freezes into ice crystals on eyebrows and wool hats. It is not the peak travel season.

I went there to participate in an international volunteer work-camp. I worked with volunteers from Japan, Taiwan, and Mongolia for two weeks to teach English and culture at the Child Care Center of Mongolia, an orphanage on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. This project was organized by three non-profit volunteer organizations: *NICE* in Japan, *VYA* in Taiwan, and *MCE* in Mongolia. Although I'm originally from the United States, I joined this project as the leader of the delegation of volunteers from Japan.

Volunteer Life in Mongolia

For the duration of the work-camp, all the volunteers lived together in a two room apartment. We were responsible for cooking our own meals, for diplomatically sharing the precious hot water of the single bathroom, and for working together to fight the tide of entropy that arises when more than 10 people live together in such proximity.

Each morning we drove to the orphanage where we gave a two and a half hour English lesson for a group of about 20 students, ranging in age from 8 to 13. The class members had a core of reliable attendance, but shifted on the fringes each day, with some students missing and some new students turning up. The objectives and curriculum of the class were completely up to us. The students had studied formal English in school, so we were encouraged to give them a chance to practice conversationally. We were also welcome to teach about culture, but the medium of instruction would still be English. As with almost any group of 20 students, there was a wide range of attention spans, motivation, and ability levels. Some students sat quietly taking careful notes in neat hand-writing, while others amused themselves by pulling the chairs out from under the careful note-takers.

In the afternoons, we'd plan for the next lesson, set our objectives and prepare materials. When we felt ready for the next day, we took some time to explore the frozen country around us.

At any given moment in the orphanage, the apartment, or during excursions, you could hear a constant cacophony of Mongolian, Japanese, and Chinese. However, English was the only language we could all use to speak together. Furthermore, English teaching was the focus of our work. It was an incredible opportunity for language learning. It was also a great chance for me, as an educator in Japan, to observe the Japanese volunteers' experiences of learning English.

Shoveling non-existent snow

I had never thought of volunteer work as a language-learning opportunity until I experienced it firsthand. Back in Japan, in February 2009, I traveled to Gifu Prefecture as a volunteer to shovel snow for the elderly residents of Takane Village. This was my first time to participate in an international work-camp, and my introduction to *NICE*, the NPO that coordinated the Japanese volunteers for the project in Mongolia.

In Takane, there are usually such enormous quantities of snow in winter that the sheer weight of ice can cause structural strain to the houses. It's essential to shovel the snow off the roofs and into piles which surround the perimeter of the house. This in turn must be shoveled away from doors, creating slot canyon entrance ways that can even be taller than an individual standing upright.

According to the locals, that's what happens most years. In 2009, however, there was an unusually warm winter, and hardly any snow fell. Our hosts knew we were excited to shovel snow, and managed to find a few places for us where the snow had accumulated in northern shadows, but in fact, snow removal was hardly essential that year.

I was initially disappointed. I had taken two weeks away from my family, intent on 12 hour days of snow shoveling. I quickly realized that the actual physical work of snow removal was secondary to the emotional work of having positive interactions with people around me: the elderly residents of the village, the broader local community, and of course the other volunteers. The medium of this interaction was smiles, laughter, and language, mostly Japanese. As a result this two week work-camp proved to be an unanticipated and intense language study opportunity for me. While the experience did not meet my expectations of relentless and altruistic physical exertion, it did open my eyes to the great potential for language learning that exists through international volunteer work.

Melting water pots

Let's return to Ulaanbaatar of February 2010. I was in the living room talking with some of the Taiwanese volunteers about the following day's English lesson when Rieko walked in, holding the electric water pot and looking upset.

"Hey! Don't put this pot on the stove!" she said.

The bottom of the pot looked like a writhing white octopus, tentacles of molten plastic curling in the air. The smell of burnt plastic radiated out of the kitchen, pushed along by a blast of cold air. Someone had opened the window to the frigid Mongolian night to dissipate the smoke.

We all jumped up and ran to the kitchen to see what had happened. In the kitchen we found the acrid stench even stronger, the air even colder, and remnants of white plastic bubbling on one of the electric coils of the two-burner stove. One of the other Japanese volunteers also came into the kitchen looking very embarrassed, and expressing his apologies to everyone in English.

When I met Rieko on the first day of the work-camp, I would have never imagined that she would be able to deliver this English admonition about the water pot, in a clear confident voice to a room full of talking people. Her English ability was very good, but initially she was a cautious speaker, with long pauses in her conversation as she formed perfect sentences in her head before opening her mouth. By the end of the work-camp, she was using English to make jokes with our relentlessly sarcastic Mongolian leader, to converse with the Taiwanese volunteers, and to confidently regain the focus of the 20 Mongolian children when they were at their most unruly.

The volunteers' perspectives

Rieko and the other four Japanese volunteers were all university students and they all had very different experiences of language learning in Mongolia. During the work-camp I recorded several hours of interviews with them on the subject of English language learning. At the start of the work-camp, I asked some specific questions about their feelings and motivation, and had them express their answers in percentages or ratios.

All five of the volunteers came with different ideas and expectations about English. For some it was an obstacle, for others it was an opportunity. Some considered English language learning to be a primary objective, while for others it was secondary or not an objective at all. Nevertheless, they all experienced an increase in their confidence and motivation, and learned valuable lessons about the English language.

As time went by, I took a different approach in my interviews. Instead of eliciting numerical answers, I simply asked permission to turn on the MP3 recorder whenever the conversation came around to English. Even without my prompting, the subject came up frequently. I also observed what was happening and tried to consider the specific conditions of the volunteer work-camp that made it so effective for language learning.

Motivation

During the work-camp, volunteers were motivated to speak English out of sheer necessity. Everyday there were important questions to be answered. When the cooking group was a three person team with one member from each country, cultural cooking styles and tastes had to be navigated in English. How much rice do we need for 12 people? What's the fastest way to thaw out this enormous block of lamb in the freezer? Should we make *miso* soup tonight? Do you want to try this Mongolian fermented horse milk?



While three people were cooking, the other nine were usually discussing the lesson plan for the following day. English was both the medium and the subject of the discussion. What English should we teach? What activities should we use? Who wants to be the lead teacher? Do we have enough Taiwanese candies to give to every student? What can we do when Anhkibileg and Jiguur start throwing markers at the girls?

Even after answering these essential questions, we still never ran out of topics to discuss. We talked about the smell of lamb and the coal fumes which permeated the air of Ulaanbaatar soaking into our clothes. We talked about Mongolian hip-hop videos, Buddhist temples, snarling traffic jams, and sacred rock piles on desolate mountains covered in blue flags. English was the only language we could all use to communicate about all that we were experiencing.

Lessons Learned

Through discussions with the Japanese volunteers, I noticed that one of the most important aspects of their language-learning experience was the profound realization that imperfect English could still be used for effective and meaningful communication. Even those who understood this idea abstractly were impressed by their actual experience. The volunteers who were

initially frustrated by the difficult Mongolian and Taiwanese accents came away from the work camp with an increased motivation to study world Englishes and non-standard English pronunciation.

One of the Mongolian volunteers was in the habit of saying “I t’ink so.” She was the only resident of Ulaanbaatar that actually stayed with us in the apartment for the entire duration of the work-camp, and as a result we all turned to her with our innumerable questions. “I t’ink so,” we all soon came to realize essentially translated to: “Maybe, but I really don’t know.” By the end of the work-camp, all the volunteers were saying “I t’ink so,” to each other. It was not perfect English, but we all understood the meaning perfectly well.

Conclusion

For Japanese students, an international volunteer work-camp abroad is an incredible experience for language learning and much more. For students of both Japanese and English, an international work-camp in Japan is an excellent opportunity, too. Organizations such as *NICE* have numerous work-camps each year. There might be a great opportunity for you or for your students.

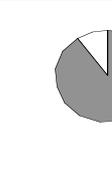
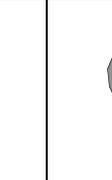
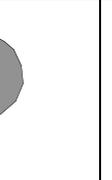
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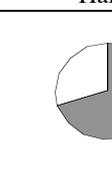
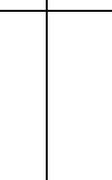
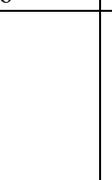



NICE (Never-ending International Work Camp Exchanges) was founded in 1990 by 7 youths who had participated in volunteer workcamps abroad. Its first workcamp was held in Japan at the foot of Mt. Fuji. NICE works to meet the needs of communities for targeted projects and motivated volunteers.

Note: Parts of this article appeared in *The Language Teachers' Newsletter* at Momoyama Gakuin University, and should appear in the JALT 2010 Pan-SIG Conference Proceedings. The volunteers’ names have been changed out of respect for their privacy.

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Before coming to Mongolia, how did you feel about speaking English as an international volunteer? ▪ Ratio of positive excitement to negative nervousness. White = excitement Black = nervousness				
Hiroaki	Haruka	Naoko	Rieko	Atsushi
				
<i>I wasn't nervous at all. I was completely excited.</i>	<i>I was 90% nervous and 10% excited.</i>	<i>Before coming I was 90% nervous and 10% excited.</i>	<i>I was 30% nervous and 70% excited. I was really excited!</i>	<i>Before coming I was 70% excited and 30% nervous.</i>

How important was English language learning when you decided to participate in this international volunteer work? (English learning expressed as a percentage of total objectives) ▪ White = English Language Learning ▪ Black = Other Objectives				
Hiroaki	Haruka	Naoko	Rieko	Atsushi
				
<i>I want to speak English with a friend in France, so English learning is 70% of my motivation.</i>	<i>Maybe about 30% I guess.</i>	<i>I studied English so I could participate in this work camp. I didn't come to study English.</i>	80%	20%