



The Culture Box Exchange Project

by Andy Hockersmith (Toyo University, Japan)



Mae La Refugee Camp

Mae La Temporary Shelter is one of nine refugee camps on the border of Thailand that house refugees who have fled the civil war in Burma. Situated among mountains and jungles on a strip of land approximately 3 miles long and 1 mile wide, Mae La is home to more than 140,000 people, most of them ethnically Karen.

The typical classroom in a Mae La school looks like something straight out of a Peace Corps brochure: bamboo walls, dirt floors, thatch roofs, limited resources, and countless smiling faces. I had my first experience with Mae La about three years ago when I did a two-month graduate school internship at Mae La's Teacher Preparation Center and Mae La High School #1. Since then I have returned to Mae La for shorter stints three times. I go back because I always have a good experience there, and I feel good about the work I do there.

Contrasts: Tokyo and Mae La

Now I work at Toyo University in Tokyo, and the physical differences between Mae La and Toyo couldn't be more pronounced. Toyo's classrooms are modern, climate controlled, and comfortable. The desks are clean and sturdy, and the teachers and students have ready access to just about any material resource they could want. Contrast this with the overcrowded classrooms at Mae La where there is generally no electricity and no access to computers, photocopiers, or other technology that teachers in other parts of the world take for granted.

However, one thing that the students of both classrooms have in common is an enthusiastic and infectious desire to learn. And yes, I realize how trite that sounds; however, all I can tell you is that it is true. The spirit and energy possessed by my students has made the time I have spent teaching in both contexts a joy. The classrooms both in Mae La and in Toyo have already provided enough memories and moments to fill an end of career highlight reel.

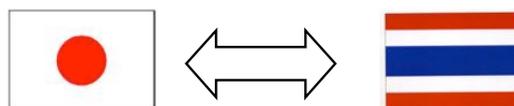
Creating Connections

As much as I enjoyed teaching these groups separately, I wanted to find a way to connect them somehow. I wanted to create a project that would enable my students at Toyo University in Japan and my students in Mae La to share their lives and their cultures with each other. What I came up with was the *Culture Box Exchange Project*.

The Culture Box Exchange

In the *Culture Box Exchange Project* (CBEP), students from Toyo University and from Mae La's Teacher Preparation Center (most of whom were university age students) would collect a series of everyday items that in some way represented their respective cultures, write about these items, put the items and the writings about the items into a box, and send the box to the other classroom. Think of it like a cultural care package.

After setting up the project with *Thraw*¹ Gay Moo and *Thraw* Ywe Ni of the Mae La TPC, and Melissa Leo, a teacher trainer at Umphiem Mai (another camp further north), I introduced the CBEP to two classes of reading/writing students at Toyo University. I told them about Mae La and Umphiem Mai and the students there, then told them that they were going to be charged with the task of introducing Japanese culture to the students of Mae La TPC and Umphiem Mai. One class was matched up with Mae La TPC, and the other class was matched up with the students of Umphiem Mai. Each student would contribute something to the project. The only restriction I put on it was that whatever they contributed could cost no more than 500 yen (I didn't want any of the students to feel pressured to spend too much money).



Japanese Culture Items

Together, the students decided what items they would contribute, then each student wrote a paragraph about his/her contribution, describing what the item was and why it was significant. Among the Japanese items Toyo students brought in were chopsticks, a Freshness Burger menu, print club pictures, *origami*, a *manga*, rice crackers, *umeboshi*, a copy of *Hot Pepper* magazine, a map of Tokyo's metro system, and *taketombo*. Each of these items was interesting enough on its own, but taken together, they began to comprise a kind of collage or patchwork quilt of Japanese culture.

Once all the students had revised their paragraphs and brought in their items, we boxed them up and sent them to the students in Thailand,

¹ *Thraw* is the Karen word for teacher and is used respectfully in the same way that *sensei* is in Japan.

along with my contribution to the boxes: an introduction letter and some disposable cameras. I didn't want the students of Mae La to spend their money or part with any of their possessions. Thus, the disposable cameras, which they would use to take pictures of whatever aspect of their culture they wanted to share with the Toyo students.

Culture Boxes from Thailand

A couple of months after we sent the boxes, I went to Thailand for the Thai TESOL Conference. While there, I was able to visit Mae La again and help the students put together their response. They took pictures of and wrote paragraphs about their classrooms, musical instruments, clothing, flag, important ceremonies, food and other aspects of their culture. We were fortunate enough to be able to finish the project while I was there, so I could take their pictures and words (as well as pictures and items collected by Melissa Leo and the students of Umphiem Mai) back to Tokyo with me.

Unfortunately, my trip to Thailand took place after the end of the semester, and when the spring semester started again, I had different students. However, while I wasn't able to share the Culture Boxes from Thailand with all my original students who had participated in the project, I did organize a presentation about the refugee camp situation in Thailand and used that occasion to unveil the Culture Boxes for Toyo students, many of whom had taken part in the project themselves. Other students have stopped by my office where the pictures and items are on display.

Challenges of Organizing the Project

Even still, I much would have preferred to complete the project in one semester so that every student who had participated could have seen the Culture Boxes from the students from the refugee camps. This points to what was without a doubt the biggest challenge of the *Culture Box Exchange Project*: logistics. Things move very slowly in refugee camps, and it was virtually impossible to

complete this project in one semester. Indeed, if I hadn't been in Thailand myself to help push the project along on that side, it would have taken considerably longer. Moreover, it was quite expensive to ship two good-sized boxes overseas.

Conclusions

However, I can say without hesitation that it was a worthwhile project, both from a language learning perspective and from a cultural sharing perspective. Rather than simply writing an essay that would only be read by their teachers, both groups of students got practice writing for a real audience. What's more, this project gave both groups of students the occasion to think a bit more about what constituted their respective cultures. My hope is that this project helped them realize that culture, even in its seemingly most mundane, everyday forms, is a living and ever evolving thing that informs every aspect of our day-to-day lives.

On a broader level, this project gave my students a very real connection with people from another culture. It personalized the other culture and put names and faces to it. Being able to see and touch concrete relics from a foreign culture was more immediate and memorable for students than simply reading about the culture in a book.

On a final note, I would like to thank the students of Toyo University's Special Course in Advanced TOEFL (SCAT), the students of Mae La TPC and Umphiem Mai, Melissa Leo from World Education, *Thraw Gay Moo* and *Thraw Ywe Ni* from Mae La TPC, and everyone at Toyo University for their boundless energy and help with this project.

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<p>UNHCR < www.unhcr.org ></p>  <p>The <i>UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)</i> works to help the world's refugees. Go to their website to learn what they do, read refugee stories and take a world tour of refugee camps.</p>	<p>Respect International http://respectrefugees.org/</p>  <p><i>Respect International</i> is a refugee education NGO working to raise students' awareness of refugees and to link refugee and non-refugee kids. Join their school exchange program!</p>	<p>U.S.C.R.I. < www.refugees.org ></p>  <p>The <i>United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants</i>, supported by Angelina Jolie, runs a dynamic website with info, data, maps and publications about the world's refugees.</p>
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