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BANILAD: Reflections on a Volunteer Teaching Initiative in the Philippines

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to raise awareness toward a recent volunteer teaching initiative that occurred this past August in a remote mountain village on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines. The program was jointly developed by the BUKID foundation (a non-profit fund-raising organization based in the Philippines) and members of “Teachers Helping Teachers” (a non-profit volunteer teaching organization based in Japan). Through

participation in this unique program, participants were able to learn about the formidable challenges faced by indigenous communities in the hinterlands of the Philippines. This report will start by illuminating the background of both non-profit organizations that were involved in this program and offer a first-hand account of the salient events that occurred during this teaching workshop. This report will also outline future directions and implications for volunteer initiatives in this area of the Philippines. It has been felt that a growing awareness amongst university-level students in Japan about the plight of an indigenous community within the country of one of their Asian neighbours is currently serving to enhance educational aid efforts in this hitherto neglected region. These efforts are reaping significant results for both the indigenous people on Mindoro island and the self-determination of a new and growing wave of student volunteerism occurring throughout university campuses in Japan. This report not only encourages this movement, but calls for more institutional support from universities throughout Japan to further realize the educational benefits and advantages of such volunteer initiatives.

Introduction

This past August, a group of teachers from a Japan-based English teachers' organization known as "Teachers Helping Teachers" (THT) participated in a special volunteer program initiative in the Philippines. THT was originally conceived as a "grassroots organization" by members of the Himeji City Chapter of JALT (the Japanese Association of Language Teachers) in 2004. Since its inception, THT has been committed to assisting fellow educators and students in the developing nations of the Asia Pacific region. Before this latest program, THT has provided seminars in Bangladesh (2005, 2006 and 2007), Vietnam (2007 and 2008) and Laos (2007 and 2008). The main avenue for this assistance has been through offering teacher-training seminar workshops that demonstrate the most current approaches to English teaching and learning methods practiced by English language teachers and other educational professionals. The THT/Philippines program was unique in that it was comprised of two distinct sections: 1) A two-day conference (Aug 23-24) in the town of San Jose del Monte near Manila and 2) a three-day volunteer teaching initiative (Aug 25-28) working with teachers and children in the rural mountain village school of Banilad on the island of Mindoro. The focus of this report is on the second section of the program in an effort to bring attention to the recent educational efforts being made toward a largely neglected indigenous village tribe in the Philippines.

Program Background

BUKID Foundation

“Buhay At Kinabukasan Development Foundation Inc.” (the BUKID Foundation) was founded as the fund-raising arm of the San Lorenzo Ruiz Learning School in the city of Calipan on Mindoro island. The school was founded in 1990 by Ms. Rosalina Valenton. Ms. Valenton first gathered support from the Catholic Church and then from a Catholic organization (Manos Unidas) to build the school and operate it for the Mangyan school children living in a nearby mountain village.



THT participants and students at the San Lorenzo Ruiz Learning School in the city of Calipan on Mindoro island.

... By the year 2000, the school was financially struggling. With the outside help of a former Philippine teacher and educational aid volunteer worker, Amclita “Baby” Matsushita, her daughter April, and a Japanese NGO volunteer, Ms. Kumiko Kawamoto, the seeds of the BUKID foundation were firmly planted. The foundation’s vision was originally focused to provide educational scholarships to the Mangyan school children to continue their elementary education. Since then, the program has significantly expanded to include a lunch program to address the students’ nutritional deficiency during school days, a livelihood program focused on self-sustaining farming on the adjoining land of the school, and a Philippine Study Tour designed to invite teacher trainee students to volunteer in the school. As more and more university-level students from Japan began to get involved with the program, the THT organization was invited to act as an educational teacher’s training communiqué between Japan and the BUKID foundation.

The THT Participants

The Banilad section of the August 2008 THT Philippine program was comprised of a group of six English university-level teacher-participants and an additional Japanese volunteer helper who were all professionally based in Japan. The group’s main goal was to try

and assist their fellow Philippine English-teaching colleagues on the most current Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods used in teaching English to non-native English language learners. The Philippine teachers involved were from the San Lorenzo Ruiz Learning and Formation Center in the city of Calipan. These teachers are volunteers themselves as they share in travelling up to the village to teach the Mangyan children and assist local Mangyan teachers. The Philippine teachers were all qualified elementary-level teachers who were fluent in both Tagalog and English. Their assistance in translating and acting as a conduit between the THT teacher-participants and the Mangyan village people was an invaluable asset for the program. Since all of the THT teacher-participants were university-level English language educators, a degree of trepidation was jointly felt amongst this group in terms of adjusting language learning methods and activities for a much younger audience. Nevertheless, it was felt that some of the more elementary English language learning activities and lesson plans that these teachers had developed and successfully used in Japan for their university students could be adjusted to a younger audience in the Philippines.

Hearts of Kindness: Dispatches From Banilad

This section will offer journal excerpts representing the views and reflections from one THT participant during the three-day teaching initiative in Banilad. The purpose here is to briefly chronicle the volunteers' experience in the village. It is hoped that these journal excerpts on the initial impressions of the village and the teaching workshop will form a more vivid picture of the life and conditions in Banilad for any future volunteers who may become involved with this worthy pedagogical project.

***[Editor comments have been added in parenthesis
for purposes of clarification.]**

Initial Impressions

Arrival at Banilad: Most of the village residents were there to greet us today with a charming ceremony. The village chief organized the reception and thanked us in his native language for our efforts to try and help teach the children of the village.



Opening ceremony and surrounding organic gardens

The village seems to be very well organized with lush gardens of fruits and vegetables. The residents live in small huts on the mountain hillside. Although the huts seem to be basic, they are well maintained and structurally sound. The school is fittingly in the centre of the village and seems to serve the additional purpose of being a meeting centre for the community. [We are to find out later in the day that much of the orderly appearance of the village is due to the efforts of the BUKID foundation alongside some generous donations from the Rotary Club of Miyoshi Chuo, Hiroshima, Japan. The donations were used to actually fund the building of the school. Donations from Manos Unidas of Spain were used to buy the materials for the housing project. The housing project was run similar to a “Habitat for Humanity” scheme where the Mangyans themselves contributed their own labour to the building of the new village].

... We are staying in a type of staff house that is well fitted with mattresses, mosquito nets, blankets and pillows.



The Staff house



View of the compound from the staff house

After dinner, our group planned activities and went through lesson plans for the following day’s teaching program. We are expecting to teach in pairs. The schedule tomorrow is quite demanding: we are expected to wake up at 5:00 and begin teaching at 7:00. There will

be three block teaching periods consisting of three hours in each block. Within each teaching block period, our teaching partners will switch classes after the first 90 minutes. It is expected that each teacher will teach every class in the village at least once. All the teachers are a little nervous not knowing exactly what to expect [in terms of student language ability and general willingness to engage in the lessons]. From our experience today at the opening ceremony, the children do seem to be very friendly and enthusiastic. We'll know more tomorrow...

Teaching Workshop

Day 2: A tough but rewarding day from start to finish. The first time any of us have taught in what seemed to be 90C heat. We are now half-jokingly referring to this workshop as “extreme THT”. The language abilities of the students here were surprisingly higher than what we had expected. Perhaps this is an indication of the great work the Philippine teachers from Calipan have been doing in this village. Most students had competent listening comprehension abilities and were very responsive to all of our activities.



The Banilad teaching workshop

We did have to rely on the teachers from Calipan to help translate some of our instructions from time to time. This was especially the case when it came to explaining rules of the games we were playing with the students. We tried a variety of basic English lesson plans relating to count and non-count nouns, vocabulary building games and songs. One unique experience for all of us was the realization that we had to be very sensitive as to what kinds of examples and vocabulary we were using (it was challenging to do a lesson on count and non-count food items using an image of a refrigerator on the chalkboard in a village where there is no electricity or running water).

... Student numbers curiously dropped down during the afternoon session. When we

asked about this, one of the Philippine teachers told us that a major incentive to the education program in the village is the free lunch offered to all students who participate in the lessons. Students who sit in on the classes are eligible for the free lunch that is offered from the BUKID foundation every day. In other words, the actual classes are a sideshow to the real issue at hand: adequate nourishment. It is easy to see that malnourishment is a reality in this village. Some of the less fortunate children in the village have evident physical signs of hunger as well as being generally lethargic. I found this ironic since the land surrounding the school seems to be so fertile. There are several gardens full of vegetables and scores of small orange and banana trees. [We find out later that one of the main challenges of the Banilad project is encouraging the community to feed themselves adequately to improve and maintain their nutrition standards. Agricultural volunteers have been actively involved with the Mangyan people to teach them effective ways to farm and plant in an attempt to make the village more agriculturally self-sustaining. One of the main problems here is persuading the villagers to abandon their centuries old practice of hunting and gathering for food on the mountain hillsides: a practice that has greatly diminished and depleted many of the natural food supplies around the area since little is done to plant or replenish any food that is taken from the mountain].

A Change of Plan

Day 3: We were originally scheduled to do another half-day of teaching in the village, but the teachers have requested us to pay a visit to the San Lorenzo Ruiz Learning School in Calipan city. It seems that they want us to share our various TEFL methods and teaching strategies with their other colleagues. This appears to make sense as other teachers from the school will be posted in Banilad from time to time. We are slightly disappointed that we can't spend more time with the children of Banilad, but as a consolation we will be able to arrange to meet them in the natural swimming pool at the base of the mountain river later in the day. This has served both as a place for early evening relaxation and more practically as a place to bathe over the past three days as there is no running water in our village.



Natural pool



Banilad students at closing ceremony



Rice fields

Calipan is about a thirty-minute drive from Banilad. The school we visit is a considerably more modern educational institution. We pretty much did our routine over again from yesterday with this new audience. The discrepancies between the urban and rural teaching contexts are evident within the first 5 minutes of teaching. Students here would be considered fluent English speakers (in an EFL context) and the feeling is more like teaching primary classes in our own native English countries. Again, students here were very receptive and cooperative during the lessons. No evident signs of malnutrition or fatigue here...

... As promised, we are able to meet up with most of the village children for a late afternoon walk and swim. Despite the relative poverty in the area, there is a genuine beauty to this place that transcends what most of us consider as merits of “progress and development” in our own cultures. Just to see young children walk freely about at dusk with none of the modern worries of violence or abduction that occur in most of our cities back home is very impressive. We are all sad that our visit here is coming to an end tomorrow and sincerely envious of our fellow Japanese volunteer intern development student, Daisuke Kishimoto. He will spend another couple of weeks here helping when students from Kanda University show up for their volunteer initiative...

Current Directions and Program Initiatives

Through the great efforts of the BUKID foundation, successful results for the Banilad community are being achieved. Japan's assistance and aid in this endeavour has been and is presently highly valued and appreciated. A particularly intriguing aspect of the continuing development of this foundation is the growing amount of grassroots support it is getting from university-level Japanese students. More and more Japanese university students are traveling to this region in an effort to help the manifold improvement objectives of the BUKID foundation: namely in the areas of nutrition, infrastructure, education, hygiene and sanitation. Members of the THT recognize and are eager to promote this new wave of Japanese

university-level volunteerism for the sake of the Banilad residents and the positive personal growth and development of Japanese students themselves. The AIESEC (*Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales*) committee based in the Philippines (University of Philippines Diliman) is working with the BUKID foundation to encourage students from all over the world to visit the Philippines and get involved in one of two distinct programs: 1. Management trainee with a company (with allowance) and 2. Development trainee with an NGO (volunteer status with no allowance). The following report offers reflections from Daisuke Kishimoto, a Japanese university student who was recently involved in the AIESEC development trainee program. In his report, Mr. Kishimoto qualifies and highlights the inherent nature behind volunteer work and internship programs. He also details how he became involved in aid work and offers his thoughts and feelings about his experience in Banilad:



Daisuke Kishimoto

名 前：岸本大輔

学校名：関西学院大学総合政策学部

年 齢：19 歳

団体名：特定非営利活動法人アイセック・ジャパン

関西学院大学委員会

僕がボランティアをしようと思ったきっかけ

最初に言っておくと、僕はアイセックという学生 NPO 団体に所属しています。この団体は、国際的な舞台で活躍し世界の平和に寄与する人材を輩出するために海外インターンシップを学生に対して提供しています。僕はこの海外インターンシップという形で Banilad の子供たちと生活を共にしていたわけです。正確に言うとボランティアとは少し違います。(説明すると長くなってしまっているので、詳しい説明は割愛させていただきます。)

僕がなぜ海外インターンシップに参加したのかといいますと、大きく 2 つの目標がありました。

1 つ目が、貧困問題に対する自分なりの関わり方を見つけること、2 つ目が、貧困地域の人が必要とする支援は何かを探ることでした。僕はもともと貧困問題に興味を持っていました。きっかけは高校の時の世界史です。ある授業で生まれた場所が違うだけで人生が大きく異なるシステムがあることを知りました。僕はたまたま日本に生まれたから、特に不自由なく生活できています。自分の夢に挑戦することができます。しかし、アフリカの難民キャンプで生まれた人はどう

でしょうか？ その日の命をつなぐことしかできず、とても自分の夢に挑戦することはできないと思います。そもそも夢を考える時間がないかもしれません。すべての人類が共通でかる等しく持つ財産は「時間」です。しかし、生まれた場所が違うだけでこんなにも時間の使い方が左右されてしまうのかとすごくひっかかりました。そして、その時間を奪うものが貧困であるのではないかと自分なりに考えるようになりました。こういった形で貧困に対して問題意識を持ち、自分に何かできることはないかと思いました。しかし、僕はずっと日本で生きてきたわけで、途上国の現状を目で見たことがありません。得ていた考え方や知識はすべて誰かが言っていたことでした。

やはり、貧困の現場を見なければ自分が今後貧困問題に対してどのように関わっていけばいいかなんてわからないし、貧困地域の人が何を求めているのかなんてわからないと思ったので、実際に貧困の現場を見る機会として海外インターンシップの参加を決めて、上記の目的を設定しました。

感じたこと

マンギャンの子供たちに対して僕ができたことは、マンギャンの子供たちを笑わせること、一瞬一瞬の幸せを共有したことだと思います。正直、今の僕にはマンギャンの子供たちが苦しく貧困のシステムをぶち壊す能力はありませんでした。専門的な知識もまだまだないし、一学生の方では到底無理な話でした。だけど、子供たちと心を通わせて一緒に楽しむことが僕ができる唯一のことだったし、僕らしい貧困問題との関わり方だったのではないかと思います。それに、一緒に楽しむこと、幸せな時間を素直に幸せであると表現しあうことがマンギャンの子供たちが求めていることだと思います。究極的な貧困解決の知識ではなく、あの子達が求めているのは同じ時間を共有することでした。もちろん直接的な解決につながるとはいいいませんが、貧困問題に関わっていく上で僕が忘れたくない考え方です。それにマンギャンの子達は心が豊かです。友達を心から大切にすることができます。友達がいるということがどれだけ大切なことなのかを彼らに教えてもらいました。本当に大切なことはシンプルなことなのだと。

僕はマンギャンの子達と一生関わって生きたいと考えています。向こうに永住することはできませんが、毎年顔を出して一緒に遊ぼうと思います。マンギャンの子達も僕のことを待っています。僕もあの子達に会いたいです。

一生絶えることのない絆を得ることができました。これが僕の海外インターンシップの答えだと思います。

Future Implications

For Japanese students currently studying English (and in particular planning to use their education to become English teachers), there is a call for a more content-based approach to

studying English within Japanese educational institutions. One particular objective of the BUKID foundation is to further encourage the study of languages within the rural community of Banilad. Japanese universities would benefit from promoting volunteer study abroad initiatives where students can actively use their English skills in a very worthwhile and productive manner. The value of such initiatives broadens the concept of learning a language to a more functional level merging “particular content with language teaching aims” (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989). Seminars created to facilitate this educational passage can encourage students to become more active in language learning with the result of building more motivation and self-confidence. Such a syllabus design could also encourage students to actively “participate in determining the content of their course so that what they do in class gives them the tools to cope with and change what they will encounter outside of the classroom...” (Graves, 1996). This will not only directly benefit the more economically disadvantaged members in our Asian community, but also benefit participant-students’ sense of educational incentive and purpose. In these bleak and uncertain times, such “hands-on” pedagogical directions should be pursued or at least explored.

Conclusion

Although the main pedagogical objective of this most recent THT program initiative was assisting teachers and young learners in developing effective English language teaching and learning methods within an indigenous community in the Philippines, the overriding humanitarian goal is to further promote and encourage a general sense of volunteerism in less developed regions throughout Asia in any capacity. This is a movement that is already seen to be occurring amongst a number of Japanese university-level students throughout Japan. As English language education often is a reality for university-level students in Japan, a practical and functional framework for learning and using a second (L2) language could further enhance enthusiasm and motivation for English language learning as a whole. Such enthusiasm and motivation may prove to be infectious, as today’s students become tomorrow’s leaders and educators in society. The positive benefits of study abroad programs have been linguistically and culturally clear in the past through countless interviews conducted on returnee students in Japan. Refining the context of such programs may offer even more of a clear and noble purpose to language teaching and learning efforts as a whole in the future.

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