

Burnt Tongues and Other Lessons: A Scrapbook Chronicle of a Peace Corps Service

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Kyrgyz Republic 2005-2007
American University - Education

I have written this chronicle not as a freshly returned volunteer, but at the end of a master's program in TESOL, the finishing touch on my degree, the conclusion of a separate journey of understanding the mistakes I made as a teacher, as a language learner, and as a person. If I could go back to Kyrgyzstan now, I would not be the same person that I was when I began nor the same person that I was when I left. I would have liked to have incorporated the things I learned in my graduate classes.

For example, Curriculum and Materials Design taught me the importance of doing a needs assessment, of organizing plans according to goals and objectives, and not simply according to the activities I found to be the most “fun.” I would have talked with my students and my community to find concrete ways that using English would have benefited my students—communicating with tourists, entering university, understanding English media—and I would have built my goals and objectives around that.

In English Language Teaching I and II I learned that PPP is not the only way of organizing lessons, and found solutions to my problems with long explanations of rules and menial exercises through task based teaching. I would have incorporated more tasks and not simply games. I would have substituted explanations for listening and reading activities that lead students to rules inductively, and would have moved students from more to less controlled, more simple to more difficult by asking them to complete increasing more difficult tasks.

In Language Assessment, I learned ways of creating more effective tests, ways of assessing my students more authentically, and the critical importance of having objective and clearly explained standards. I would have outlined my criteria more specifically and I would have assessed their oral and written production more frequently than I had.

Teaching Pronunciation and Principles of Linguistics to a lesser degree opened my eyes to a whole realm of language that I had up till then almost entirely neglected. I used a lot of songs, but I would have capitalized more on the power of rhythm. I think my students would really have enjoyed learning about stress, rhythm and intonation, playing with rubber bands and clapping their hands, memorizing jazz chants and performing them at assemblies and village concerts. I wish I could go back and teach them now.

Structure of English made me more knowledgeable about the language I was teaching, where it had been, why it was the way it was, and where it was going. I wish I could have brought that same knowledge to my classes and to our teachers' seminars especially. Second Language Acquisition helped me to see that mistakes are not always mistakes, that they are sometimes part of a developmental process. It gave me more theoretical basis for the way I organize my lessons, something that would have helped me enormously in my instructional planning. It also taught me strategies I could have both used for myself as a language learner and could have passed on to my students.

Lastly, Cross-Cultural Communication moved me beyond the simple heuristic devices we'd been given by Peace Corps in our cross-cultural "boot camp." I do feel that I made leaps and bounds of progress towards identifying with my students and negotiating the intricate power struggles that had been invisible to me, but I still remember so many ways that I could have been more respectful and understanding of the incredible people I encountered.

I know that I cannot go back to that time, but that I can look back. I can reflect upon my experience and know that the measure of how much I would change in doing it all again is in fact the exact measure of my growth. As I embark on my teaching career now, master's degree in hand, I can only hope that in the years to come I will just as soon be able to look back on my early years as a fully fledged TESOL professional and find new points that I would change, new and exciting ways in which I will have grown and progressed.