

Numbers (Teacher copy of story with prompt questions)
By Matthew Scranton, Peace Corps Volunteer/China 2006–2008

***Accompanying text of story are teacher suggestions while reading. When writing numbers on board, right margin adjust them (ie. 1,300,000,000) to help students “visualize” pattern and numbers.*

15,000,000
16,000

We use numbers in every part of every day of our lives. Everything from setting our alarm clock to handling money involves numbers. It's hard to think of anything we do that doesn't involve numbers and math in some way. We take the meaning of them for granted though, don't you think?

In small quantities, we can see the difference between two numbers easily. You quickly learn that if you ask for 10 peaches rather than one, you get a lot more than you wanted. **(Use fingers, or actual peaches, to illustrate difference between “10” and “1”)**

And with weight, we can easily see the difference between a 100-pound person and someone who's 300 pounds—because of numbers, right? **(Ask student what 100 lbs. person looks like compared with 300 lbs. person, draw or sketch on board)**

But what about higher numbers, like say 50,000? It's a huge number, but when we go to a football game or watch one on TV, we can see the definition of 50,000 and immediately recognize the magnitude of such a number. The power and intensity of 50,000 screaming and cheering people is evident. You instantly know for sure that 50,000 is a lot of anything. **(If have large sports stadium nearby or in the state, have students visualize or show video clip)**

So what about 1.3 billion? The number is so big it's inconvenient to express how big it really is. We never express it as "one billion and three-hundred million." **(Write “1.3 billion” and “1,300,000,000” on the board)**

Can you conceive of 1.3 billion anything? I can't. I've heard people say that when you get over 1 million, it's hard to conceive of the differences. But 1.3 billion is a thousand three hundred millions. That's certainly a lot more than a million, to say the least.

I would be a liar if I said I had a solid concept of 1.3 billion anything. But here, in China, where I'm serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer, there are that many people. 1.3 billion people—can you imagine! What power, what potential! For comparison, that's about five times the population of the United States. Of all 6 billion people on this planet, 1 in 5 are in China. **(Illustrate with students: group them into groups of 5, explain that one would be Chinese)**

Before I came to China for the Peace Corps, I tried to wrap my head around this idea. How can I possibly do Peace Corps in this country? Is it my job to try to help all these people?

The answer is decidedly no.

And the city I live in—Chongqing, the fourth-largest city in China—am I supposed to help all 15 million people here? **(Write “15,000,000” on board)**

No, certainly not. Can you imagine me, a big, tall, blond American who immediately sticks out anywhere in this country, running around trying to help all 15 million people here? It's impossible.

My site, my village, my home is my university. And even here, I will most likely not make an impact on all 16,000 students. **(Write “16,000” on board)**

Here, I am simply an English teacher. I teach spoken English to my students in class, and try to be a good friend to them outside of class. I organize English movie nights, English book clubs, and hang out with my students. They are the reason I am here; they are the focus of my Peace Corps experience. **(Ask students to think of other ways to teach English to someone who does not speak it)**

I'm sure every Volunteer in China, and many other countries, has had this moment, this serious and sobering moment when you think to yourself, "How can I possibly make an impact here? This university, this town, this country will continue to operate in the same manner after I leave as it did before I arrived. So what am I really doing here?"

I'm starting to realize that this answer can be found in the smallest percentage of China's population. Out of 1.3 billion people here, the Peace Corps is about 0.0000001 percent of that population. My Peace Corps experience is about my students, my fellow teachers, and the other students I meet in my community. **(Draw pie graph on board showing**

miniscule sliver “.0000001” represents or give other analogy)

Who knows, one extra conversation, one extra tutoring session, one extra question could make a world of a difference to an unmotivated student. One shared idea could make a world of a difference to a fellow teacher. And one daily smile and "Hello!" could make a world of a difference in another person's opinions about Americans.

And isn't that what the Peace Corps is all about? Thousands of Volunteers around the world, making a world of a difference, one person, one interaction, one smile at a time. And let me tell you, those single people we affect add up over time to some big numbers. And as you know, big numbers have a lot of power to make change. ***(Ask students who is “one” person who has big effect in their lives)***