

Making a Soft Landing into the Thai Culture and Classroom An Orientation Program for Student Teachers

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*You sacrifice some part
of yourself to cultural
adjustment when you go
overseas, whether to
teach or to learn.*

~ Nancy Piet-Pelon & Barbara
Hornby, *Women's Guide to Overseas
Living*

OVERVIEW

If your students intend to become teachers after they graduate, it makes sense to give them as much time as possible in a target classroom setting during their university studies, as they work their way through trials, errors and successes by developing and practicing various teaching and classroom management techniques. But when these students also have a chance to learn these career-specific skills in a different culture, then it is our responsibility to prepare them for this unique experience, in order to help make it as meaningful for them as possible.

In 2004, a joint agreement was established between the English Departments of Bangsai Witthaya Secondary School, in Ayutthaya Province, Thailand, and the Faculty of Education at Iwate University, Japan, with the cooperation of Siam University. This program was termed the Puan Program (meaning 'friendship'), and was created in order to implement a program of on-site training for our Japanese undergraduate students of

Education at Iwate University.

The Bangsai Witthaya School accepts our student-teachers for two-week periods, three times per year. The agreement states that, "Bangsai Witthaya Secondary School will provide participating students with guidance, instruction and the opportunity to teach English to Thai students." Another item in the agreement stipulates, "the Faculty of Education will provide an orientation for designated students about teaching English as a foreign language."

BACKGROUND

The Bangsai Witthaya School, part of the Bangsai District School System, is a secondary school, comprising junior and senior high school grade levels. During their stay, our students usually have the opportunity to teach most of the grades and classes. They stay at the home of a couple who teach at the school, one a science teacher and the other an English teacher, who through their hospitality and generosity endeavor to make the students' stay as comfortable and educational as possible. The Director (Principal) of the school, as well as the teaching staff, are very supportive of the program.

The area our students live and work in is located quite a distance from any urban center. The Bangsai district is primarily an agricultural region in central Thailand, north of Bangkok. The Thai government, wanting to preserve the area's 'greenness,' has limited the construction of any new factories or other industrial works, in order to maintain it as an environmentally-friendly region. The population remains sparse, and many people live under economically depressed conditions. Thus, there are no so-called conveniences nearby that our students might be used to here in Japan, such as shopping centers, convenience stores, vending machines, cinemas, etc. The home where the students stay, located just down the road from the school, has vast rice fields on three sides, and a *wat* or temple across the road. Their day-to-day life is centered in this rural locale.

THE ORIENTATION PROGRAM

As Nancy Piet-Pelon and Barbara Hornby, two people with vast experience living and working in some of the most unique cultures on earth, point out, you cannot learn when you are unreceptive and trapped in your own cultural bubble.

The orientation program we have thus implemented, for our students heading for teacher-training in Thailand, has several objectives, and is comprised of various components. Since not all of our students who will be spending their two weeks at Bangsai Witthaya Secondary School have had experience traveling outside of Japan, their home country, it is necessary to help them understand some of the challenges they might face. In particular, there are changes that for some people may cause cultural anxiety (or in its worse form, culture shock.) Changes in food, daily living habits, climate, sounds, smells, and changes in expectations, can all add up to a stressful situation that can hinder one's motivation to learn from the experience of living and working in a culture different from one's own.

One way we can help students prepare for these changes is by giving them an opportunity to talk with 'veterans' of the program, students who have been to the Bangsai Witthaya School (some of whom have been there more than once). We usually hold our orientation sessions one or two weeks before departure. The discussions typically move naturally from story-telling of personal experiences, to questions about what to expect. Sharing photos and souvenirs at these sessions often help to make the Thai culture a little more tactile for those who have yet to visit there. The topics and stories provide some insight into what the students' day-to-day life might be.

As for what they can expect from—and to help them prepare for—their teaching experiences, we have provided each student with a Puan Packet.

Each folder includes a photo of the teaching staff at Bangsai Witthaya School, a list of rules for students participating in the program, a contact list of local (Thai) and in-Japan email addresses and telephone numbers, a list of daily Thai-English phrases, a regional map of Thailand, and a list of English classroom phrases they can use to help give their classroom more of an English atmosphere ("Good morning, everyone," "Please look at the board," "Does anyone know the answer?," "See you tomorrow," etc.).

Since one of the primary objectives of the English program at Bangsai Witthaya School is to enable students to utilize English in daily life (in some capacity and to some degree) after graduation, the lessons are communicative-based and focus on practical application of the language. We therefore include a catalog of communicative notions and functions that are part of the secondary school English education program in Thailand. These include "Life Application Themes," such as clothing, employment, idioms, the telephone, and the weather. "Communication Functions" include Agreeing, Describing, Offering, Sympathizing, and Thanking.

Regarding their upcoming teaching experience, we give them tips on effective class and lesson management, and include sample lessons they can use or modify, based on practical language use. The sample lessons come from a teaching manual comprised of English lessons, written in both Japanese and English. We introduce our 'teachers' to several classroom techniques that they can use rather easily and quickly to promote communicative (oral) language interchange in their classroom. These activities involve discerning information through listening and then utilizing Wh~ questions among fellow classmates to elicit information.

Also included are pronunciation exercises targeting sounds that may be especially difficult for Thai speakers of English to utter and/or discern. These take the form of minimal pair practice, and then applying the sounds in context (in phrases or in dialogs).

We also ask the students to keep journals of their impressions, experiences, and ideas to help make the program more successful for the next group who will take part. The journals are made available to the students to read and discuss, and provide windows into the culture, and a way to see how their peers have experienced its qualities and its demands.

Edward Hall wrote,

“The best reason for exposing oneself to foreign ways is to generate a sense of vitality and awareness—an interest in life which can come only when one lives through the shock of contrast and difference.”

While a two-week stay in a so-called foreign culture may not seem too harsh a change, it can present some stressful challenges that can adversely affect how we live and work in the new place. We hope that our Orientation Program will continue to help prepare our students for this ‘life experience’ of living and teaching in a unique culture.

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