Team Teaching English with International English Speaking Volunteers at Watphratahatwittaya School

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Abstract

Since 2003, Teachers from PTY (Watphrathatwittaya) and English speaking volunteers from Openmindprojects (Nong Khai, Thailand) have worked together to improve and enhance English teaching for PTY students. (Novices aged 13-18). Volunteers included people of all ages from North America, Europe, Australia and Asia. Teachers, volunteers and students benefit from the experiences. This paper will describe the teaching practices that worked best and enhanced students' performance the most.

Teaching effectiveness increased when English speaking volunteers and Thai teachers planned lessons, taught and assessed student performance together. While language and cultural barriers presented many challenges, working through them together improved the working relationship and resulted in lessons that better served student needs.

The Thai English Curriculum is too difficult for many students and leaves little time for creative teaching. Student performance improved when classes focused more on developing speaking, listening and comprehension skills. English speaking volunteers bring the skills and experience to the classroom that are required to do this. Thai teachers ensure that comprehension skills improve with speaking and listening. Rote recitation and grammar exercises without comprehension are replaced by real communication (verbal and written) with understanding.

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Several student projects were particularly successful in achieving these goals. They included speaking contests, internet research projects, student presentations, email communication, newsletters and comprehension games. Student participation and performance increased with these activities.

In summary, educational reform can be more effectively achieved through creative team teaching that combines the skills and experience Thai teachers and English speaking volunteers possess.

Introduction

Since 2003, teachers from PTY (Watprhra tahatwittaya) and English speaking volunteers from OpenmindProjects (Nongkhai, Thailand) have worked together to improve and enhance English teaching for PTY students. (Novices aged 13-18) Teachers, volunteers and students benefited from the experience. This paper describes the teaching practices that worked best and enhanced student performance the most.

Volunteers included people of all ages from North America, Europe, Australia and Asia. Many were young (19-25) and had no prior teaching experience. Some came with significant teaching experience and/or computer skills. All participated in a 3-day orientation provided by OpenmindProjects Thai staff to familiarize them with Thai culture and provide them with some basic Thai language instruction and teaching practice. In total, PTY has worked with 130 volunteers since 2003. Placements have ranged from 1 week to several months. Volunteers have worked independently and in pairs.

Limitations

The observations and conclusions in this paper are derived from the collective experience of the writers working together at PTY over the course of 6 months. Both are experienced teachers who looked for ways and means to maximize the use of volunteers in the classroom to the benefit of all. Curriculum was examined, adapted and implemented in a variety of ways to search for the most successful methodology. Success was defined by high student interest and engagement, successful completion of the task and effective use of the vocabulary taught in a meaningful way. The experience and lessons learned are offered here as one step in the ongoing process of improving English instruction in Thailand.

Working with English Volunteers

Working with English volunteers can be challenging. Some Thai teachers are reluctant to work with volunteers because they are not confident with their own English skills and are afraid of losing face with their students. Many are shy. Consequently, some volunteers are left to teach alone without any support.

Cultural and language barriers also pose a challenge. The former sometimes lead to misunderstandings and language barriers can make communication difficult.

Thai classrooms and ways are very different from Western ones. Volunteers bring a different set of expectations and approaches that can be very foreign to Thais. They usually don't speak Thai and have no real understanding of student levels and needs. To be truly effective they need Thai teacher support to create meaningful lessons that meet student needs and ensure student understanding. With goodwill and teamwork the challenges of working together can be overcome to the benefit of all.

Thai teachers know their students best. They understand how their students learn, their weaknesses and their strengths. Most important, they know their needs. English volunteers provide Thai students with the opportunity to practice their English skills with English speakers. They also provide a window to another world. Students get to learn first hand about other cultures and ways. Students are always excited to meet English volunteers and their own desire to speak with and understand them creates a very positive learning environment with high student interest and motivation.

When Thai teachers and volunteers work together students benefit from their combined skills and expertise. Team lesson planning ensures that classroom material is relevant and appropriate for student levels. Team teaching ensures that students truly understand what is being taught. Ongoing team evaluation ensures that student needs continue to be met in the most effective way possible. Good teamwork also means any problems that do arise can be quickly identified and resolved.

Working together also benefits teachers and volunteers. Each learns from the other and both find the experience more satisfying. They acquire new skills and methodologies. They find new and different ways to meet student needs. Some maintain contact long after the placement is over. Everyone benefits.

Getting Started

Deciding what to teach and where to begin is always a challenge. The Thai English Curriculum is too difficult for many students and leaves little time for creative teaching. The text, Super Goal 1-6, provides stories and examples based on American experience that Thai students have trouble reading and understanding. The grammar exercises are needlessly complicated and confusing. They make students even more reluctant to speak and write English. Teaching from the book often leads to endless rote recitation without understanding and out of context grammar drills. Neither helps students achieve the basic mastery of the language that helps them understand what they hear and make themselves understood.

Together, English speaking volunteers and Thai teachers created English lessons that focused on developing the speaking, listening and comprehension skills that students

need to use the language for real communication. Topics were selected based on student interest. The goal was to give students the language they need to say what they want to say, understand what they hear and use English in a practical way. It was hoped that this approach would improve student performance and maintain high levels of student interest.

Once basic vocabulary was taught, students were asked to use it in a meaningful way. For example, after reviewing the language used in first meetings students created dialogues and skits of first meetings that they performed for each other. Similarly, students were encouraged to pose questions to volunteers to learn more about them, their home and their families. All successful lessons included speaking, listening and comprehension components. A variety of means was used to test understanding and reinforce learning. Every attempt was made to give students whatever time they required to complete the given task.

Several student projects were particularly successful in increasing student participation and improving student performance. They included comprehension games, email communication, newsletters, research projects with student presentations and a speaking contest. For clarity, each will be discussed separately.

Comprehension Games

Comprehension games proved particularly effective in testing student comprehension before and after a unit. Thai students love to compete and these games always resulted in a high level of involvement. Students stayed focused throughout and had a lot of fun doing so. These games also made it easy for volunteers and teachers to assess what the students knew and what they still needed to learn.

Comprehension games were created using picture cards, questions and verbal instructions. (See Appendix 6 - for a general description of games) Usually, students competed in groups. They had to describe what they saw, answer the questions posed or respond to verbal instructions. Extra points were rewarded for speaking clearly and, where appropriate, answering in complete sentences. Sometimes students were asked to demonstrate a particular activity while the others had to describe what they saw. (E.g. One group would act out cooking a meal and the others would shout "cooking".) These games can also be made into a race. Usually time ran out long before students lost interest.

E-Mail Correspondence

Corresponding with English volunteers through e-mail provides Thai students with a wonderful opportunity to practice and develop English skills. PTY students were excited to try it and some have continued to correspond with an English volunteer. Unfortunately, overall, it had limited success. Most students' mastery of the language was too limited to support ongoing dialogue. Students also found it difficult to understand the responses they received even though they were written by a

volunteer teacher who took pains to keep the language simple. It was clear that successful, ongoing e-mail communication requires sufficient mastery of the language to support basic conversation.

Advanced students who have acquired such basic conversational skills would benefit enormously from such a program. There are many pen-pal programs matching students from one country with those from another that could be used as a model. Intermediate students could also benefit from it provided they had ongoing teacher support to help them compose letters and read the responses. They need more time to practice and develop the skills they need for independent communication. Controlled e-mails with a teacher using vocabulary recently taught could also be an effective first step.

Newsletters

Creating newsletters on the computer was another student project with a lot of potential. The volunteer created a sample entry about himself that included pictures and brief biographical information. (See Appendix 7) Students were then asked to create their own about themselves. (Student samples are also provided in Appendix 7) Students were eager to do so but needed more help than had been anticipated. While some completed the task very well showing a lot of creativity, others found it very difficult to compose the text. Once again, limited mastery of the language interfered. Varying computer skills also affected success. Nonetheless, all students were enthusiastic about the project. It gave them the opportunity to not only use their English skills but to use their computer skills as well. Integrating the two always resulted in increased levels of participation and interest.

This project was completed on a very short time frame. It would have been more successful if more time had been allotted to teach and review the vocabulary and computer skills required before creating the newsletter. This would have made it easier for students to complete the task independently. More time at the end of the unit for students to present what they created would also have been beneficial. Such presentations give students the opportunity to practice their speaking and listening skills. This helps them develop the confidence they need to speak English in public.

One possibility considered but not tried was to have students make ongoing entries in their newsletter throughout the school year at the end of each unit. A first entry about themselves would be followed by updates of each topic studied. For instance, a unit on food might involve an entry on the foods the student likes and doesn't like to eat. At the end of the school year, each student would have a book that reflected what he had learned throughout the school year.

Research Projects

M6 students worked in pairs to complete independent research projects in English. They researched their topic online, prepared a report about it and presented it to the entire

student body. The first project was on a country of their choice. It was the first time they had attempted such a project and the students turned out exceeding everyone's expectations. In fact they were so excited about it they asked to do a second project as soon they finished presenting their first.

Since they had never attempted such a project time was spent up front discussing what information they would be asked to find and present. Care was taken to make sure the questions were simple enough that they could find the answers and create the necessary text themselves. Students were also directed to a specific internet site, (www.theodora.com/maps), where they could find the information they needed fairly easily and shown how to use Google images to find some pictures of their country. A question sheet was developed to guide their search and they were taught how to compose answers grammatically using the language in the questions. Once the projects were completed time was set aside to practice their presentations. In total the first project took 2 months to complete.

Originally, students were expected to create their projects using Microsoft Word. Instead they all turned out preparing Powerpoint presentations. They were being taught how to use this program by their Thai teacher while they were working on their projects and chose, independently, to use this new found skill for their country presentations. Students were so excited about this project that they were often found working on it in their spare time

without any teacher being present.

The second project was on a topic of their choice. Topics included Mountains of Asia, Tourism Attractions in Thailand and Wonders of the World. They used Google images to find pictures and created their own text based on them. Teachers provided general advice to keep the projects to a manageable size and the general rule "Mai kao jai, Mai pood" (If you don't understand it, don't say it) was used to guide the writing. This project was completed more quickly than the first and with less teacher help. Once again, student engagement remained high throughout and all were very proud of what they had accomplished.

Speaking Contest

The most successful project undertaken was a school wide Speaking Contest. Participation in the Contest was voluntary and students were given a variety of topics to choose from. Grammatical pointers were provided to help them write their speeches and English volunteers helped them practice their presentations. M6 students presented their second project. Several prizes were awarded. Teachers selected the top three speeches in two categories; M1-3 and M4-5. They also selected the best M6 presentation. Students selected their favourite presentation in each category. Everyone enjoyed the event enormously.

Teachers and volunteers were surprised by the extent of student involvement. Each day, more students chose to participate. In fact, some chose to participate on the day of the event. Students who had never before at-

tempted to speak in public did so during this Contest. There was much laughter and good cheer throughout. Never before, had anyone present seen so many students totally engaged in an event.

It was clear to all that this was a project that should be repeated. It was also clear that it would have been even more successful with more lead time. A much longer window of opportunity, such as three or four months, would give students the time they needed to write their very best speeches and present them to the best of their ability. An in-house contest could also be followed by one involving several schools. PTY hopes to do both this school year.

One final lesson learned was that the success of any project or unit was often a function of the time provided to complete it. When students were rushed they did not do their best work and some were left behind not having completed the task at all. This was especially true when students had to present their work. They needed time to find the language they understood that made their meaning clear. They also needed time to practice and remember the words until they truly mastered them. Otherwise whatever they learned was quickly forgotten.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the experience of team teaching with English volunteers at PTY has demonstrated several means for improving English instruction in Thailand.

1. English volunteers help Thai students and teachers improve their speaking, listening and comprehension skills.

2. English volunteers need Thai teacher support to be truly effective.

3. Team lesson planning, teaching and student assessment maximizes the benefits gained from using English volunteers in the classroom.

4. Language and cultural barriers can be overcome with goodwill and effective teamwork.

5. Curriculum should be focused on acquiring the speaking, listening and comprehension skills students need to use the language in real life settings.

6. Rote recitation and needlessly complex, out of context grammar drills do not give students the mastery of the language they need to say what they want to say, understand what they hear or understand what they read.

7. Comprehension games based on speaking and listening are an effective tool for assessing student needs and reinforcing learning.

8. Written assignments that force students to use English in practical ways such as e-mail communication and personal newsletters are most effective in developing the commu-

nication skills students want and need.

9. Providing students with many opportunities to practice speaking in public through presentations, speeches and performance helps them develop the confidence they need to actually use the language. It also develops listening skills.

10. Integrating English teaching with computer skills increases student interest and participation.

11. Student research projects based on topics of their choice are very effective in developing every aspect of language acquisition.

12. School wide speaking contests can be enormously successful in eliciting student participation and giving students the opportunity to use the language skills they have acquired.

Acknowledgement

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