

English Classes at Long Dat

I'd already planned a trip to Vietnam to catch up with some friends, when Kathryn Gow asked me to do some English classes with teachers from the Long Dat Vocational Training School in Phuoc Thanh village. Five teachers are expected to come to Brisbane later this year to do some training, but their English first needed some practise.

When I arrived in Ba Ria, Mr Cao (vice director of the school), met with me and made arrangements for classes – 2 hours x 2 evenings during the week, and day classes on Saturday and Sunday for 2 weekends (3 hours in the morning and 2 hours afternoon). Mr Cao's driver transported me for each class. At the weekends the students took me to lunch each day, and between the weekend classes I had a room "to rest" (it's customary to have a 'siesta' in the afternoons). For the first class I was



Vietnamese teachers doing English training at Long Dat

accompanied by Mr Cao, a representative from the Peoples Committee, and an interpreter. They stayed for the first hour, but did not appear for any other classes.

My plan was to teach 'functional English' to the five teachers who would be going to Brisbane. Unfortunately, the teachers have not yet been selected, so I had a class of 25, (male and female), for the first lesson, and the class numbers fluctuated (ALMOST HOURLY) between 5 and 25, as the teachers had other commitments during the time. This made any sort of continuity impossible. One student attended every class, there was a group of about 6 who attended most classes, and the rest of the class was made up of those dropping in and out, between their own teaching and other 'reasons'. The use of English ranged from elementary (almost nil) to reasonable with a strong "accent" (one teacher). Most could read much better than their use of English indicated, but their pronunciation was poor and very difficult to understand – this became easier as I got to know the teachers and could 'think around their accents'.

In the first class I introduced myself, and asked each teacher in turn to introduce themselves. The response was very limited, but at least I got a name from each of them. I tried to get them to use name tags, but most seemed very reluctant, so I didn't push it. When I asked if any had questions they'd like to ask, I got the usual – my age, marital status, number of children. Also 'do you know Mark Viduka?' (Australian Soccer player) and had I been to Hue? This gave an opening for a bit of discussion in English, though most was via the interpreter or the one teacher who's English was a little better (she <Miss Liu - unsure of spelling of her name> was



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also most helpful during the following classes, though at times I needed to ask her not to help as wanted the other teachers to have more time to think of a word they needed).

As the classes were to teach Functional English, I used mostly Role Play, Show and Tell, and Presentation with questions and answers. I also needed to use 'pantomime', pictures and diagrams on the white board, and occasionally the dictionary. My original teaching plans had to be changed considerably due to the lack of useful English, the fluctuating number of students in the class, and also the fact that most of them would not be going on the trip to Brisbane, and I did not know those who would be going. Most of the time the class was at a very elementary level.

We turned the class into a **town** for 'asking directions', 'buying at a shop', and 'placement'.

The desks were moved about, to become **buildings** (labelled 'bus stop', 'railway station', 'bank', 'post office', 'supermarket', 'pharmacy', etc, etc, etc). The spaces between the desks became roads. The class asked each other directions from one point of the **town** to another, and followed the directions given by another class member (across the road, round the second corner, etc, etc). They made purchases and transactions, and ordered snacks. At first it was difficult to get them to participate, but once started, they all seemed to enjoy the activities and became very enthusiastic/responsive. This type of lessons not only teaches direction (eg Where is the?), but also placement (to the left/right, across from, next to, between, behind, opposite....etc), and general conversation (in the shop.... "Good morning, how are you today"...."What can I do for you?".... "How much is that?"....etc). Conversation while waiting for a bus/train, or while waiting on a queue (which is also a new experience for Vietnamese), everyday "informal chatter", and what to buy at which shop.

For Show and Tell, each person brought an item to the class and was asked to describe it. What is it, where did you find/get it, what it is made from, what it is used for, size, shape, colour etc, etc. This stimulates conversation/discussion and leads to many questions and answers. Most of the class needed much help with this, but they learned new words and the use of description. For one class they each brought along an item to do with their teaching trade and I became the student. They were asked to teach me the use or purpose of the item. Most were ELECTRICAL items, but there were two related to COMPUTER and one related to TAILORING. They did labelled diagrams on the board, and also used their text book and dictionary, and we managed to find most of the 'technical' words needed.

I also used pictures for Show and Tell - each of the class had a photocopy of the same pictures, and related/talked about.... what is happening, why do you think it's happening, what are they doing, have you ever done/been involved in something similar, etc, etc.

For one class I used short paragraph/stories. Each pair of students had a copy of the story to read, then retell it in their own words. Later, in pairs, they were given a topic, 5 minutes to prepare, then present about their topic.....A day at the beach, Shopping in the market, Traffic in HCMC, a Train trip to Hanoi, a visit to a museum. Some swapped topics to have a second go.

Even those who had started with very little English were able to do a short presentation with lots of prompting from classmates. We often resorted to pictures/diagrams on the whiteboard, but only occasionally the dictionary. They also each did a short presentation on "who am I", "where I come from", "where I work/what I do". During this presentation, we drew a map of Vietnam on the whiteboard and each person marked their birthplace and told me something about the area. This lesson went about ½ hour over time as they became very involved in discussion and description of their home towns.

On the last day, the teachers wanted to take me for an outing. They had suggested this before, but as I had other arrangements with my friends in Ba Ria, outside of class time, this was a bit difficult. After much discussion, we decided that the last class would be an outing, on condition they continued to use English as the main means of conversation. Mr Cao's driver decided on the destination, and the final class (8 teachers, the driver and me) relocated to Binh Chau hot springs. We bought the makings



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of a picnic along the way, and had lunch in one of the "gazebos" at Binh Chau, with much conversation about "making a sandwich" (slice, cut, spread, etc), "boiling eggs" (soft, hard, medium, egg shells, peeling, cracking, too hot, etc). Then we sat around one of the thermal pools with our feet in the water (hot, cool, splash, make waves, etc), and a lesson on the use of the sound 'R'..... "Round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran".

We stopped at Ho Coc beach on the return journey. Had a drink and a discussion about seafood and the sounds 'S' and 'Sh' "She sells sea shells by the sea shore". A very hot and tiring day, but most enjoyable and productive.

Jill Manuel, AVVRG Member