

From Stevenston to Xingyi

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As a teacher of Modern Languages, one is constantly being faced with new challenges such as motivating pupils, using ICT, covering a curriculum, CPD, citizenship, 5-14, and formative assessment. As a teacher and teacher trainer in the second poorest province in China, I wondered if I would be faced with the same thing.

VSO (Volunteer Service Overseas) was something that I had thought of doing for a long time but it never seemed to be the right time to do it. I had reached a point in my life where I wanted to give something back while trying to learn at the same time. I was asked if I would go to China to work in a teacher training college to deliver INSETT¹ to serving teachers and also PRESETT² to student teachers. It would make me reflect on my own experience as a teacher but also a student.

Before heading out to China I was totally in the dark as to what I would need and as to how different it would be. Although China is much more accessible than it ever was, I was not sure just how prepared I was to go into a culture I knew nothing about, work in a language that I was not familiar with and convince teachers that communicative methodology really worked! VSO's main focus in China in the ELT³ programme and INSETT (Methodology) programme is to equip new and serving teachers with the tools to implement communicative methodology and to upgrade their listening and speaking skills.

My placement was in Xingyi in the south of Guizhou province. It is a very rural area and the second poorest province in China and is the size of France. I suppose I had some ideas of what it would be like after talking to other volunteers, but those ideas were soon changed when I arrived. Interestingly, I was the first teacher with a PGCE⁴ to go there. Upon reflection, my 5 years teaching experience gave me a much sounder basis for the work I was to do.

It has to be pointed out that my experience relates only to Xingyi province and not to China as a whole. Given the size of the country there are many differences in approach! My main role was to teach methodology to student teachers and also deliver in-service to serving teachers. The first thing that struck me was the gap in the process. The lecturers at the college where I worked were using methods that I had never experienced but only read about! CPD⁵ was non-existent, co-teaching and working groups were frowned upon, and the sharing of materials and good practice just simply did not happen.

¹ In-Service Teacher Training

² Pre-Service Teacher Training

³ English Language Teaching

⁴ Post-Graduate Certificate of Education

⁵ Continuous Professional Development

Student teachers came from all over the local prefecture to the college and had varying levels of education. The system for entry to teacher training is fairly complicated with courses varying from 3-5 years. I found the attitude from the student teachers strange at first. They had no real concept of what a teacher was or the notion of the impact of language learning however, this was soon put into context when I went out to secondary schools and saw language teaching and learning in action

Teaching in a rural secondary school

The teacher trainers in the college were working within a lot of constraints both from the point of view of resources and politics. I worked in the college four days a week, where I had 30 contact hours with the equivalent of BED students from 1st to 4th year and also postgraduate students.

All students in China MUST learn English and observing these lessons was certainly an eye opener. Class sizes varied from 40 – 120 - a far cry from the 30 we have in Scotland. The usual composition of the class was 70% boys and 30 % girls. The students in the first two rows were very attentive and hung on to every word that was spoken, whilst students at the back were either doing work for another subject or sleeping because they had been up before school working in the fields. Like a lot of our students here in the UK, they could not see the point of learning a foreign language, as they could not see a practical use for it. Being from the second poorest province in China, their opportunities for a concrete use of the English language were limited. Despite a lack of resources I watched teachers desperately trying to use a variety of materials but with little or no access to textbooks or technology this was always going to be an uphill struggle. I was delighted to see that some of the textbooks that were being used promoted a more communicative approach to language learning and a shift away from the grammar-translation method. However many teachers had no confidence with these books and often opted for the direct translation method of teaching. English was not used as the classroom language either and this all stemmed from a lack of confidence from the teacher.

On the other hand, I was amazed by the amount of vocabulary the students learned. They did not have dictionaries to rely on and therefore had become accustomed to retaining a lot of new words quickly, which they did by means of writing out the words many times. Unfortunately, they could not actually pronounce them properly and tended to understand words in isolation. This then had a knock on effect on their understanding at times, as they would be reading for comprehension of each word as opposed to the sentence or paragraph.

There was a lot of writing done and great attention was actually paid to handwriting. Coming from a language system that uses characters, specific attention has to be paid to the formation of letters and some of the most beautiful handwriting I have ever seen was in these classes. The students were taught different constructions and an attempt was made to teach them how to manipulate and use the language in other situations. It was however

very "situational" and not particularly flexible. However, on the whole I was really impressed with the standard of their reading and writing ability.

Listening and speaking should go hand in hand but is still proving to be a difficult aspect to cover in the classroom in China. The emphasis on speaking just simply is not there if the teacher does not feel confident enough in their own English. I observed some teachers who were trying to use communicative methodology and trying to engage the classes into some paired speaking or group work. This was a massive step for the teachers, as in China, more often than not, lessons are teacher centred and to shift into a more student centred type of lesson was a big leap in the dark for both the teacher and the pupil. Students were not entirely convinced of the different approach but seemed far more responsive if I took the class as it was expected that the foreign teacher would do something a little out of the ordinary.

Teachers were under a great deal of pressure with the sheer size of classes and this impinged on their teaching styles. It was also very hard to monitor and assess in this situation and I found that having a mass reading assessment at the end of the term was not conducive to producing communicative practice or testing the students on their ability to communicate in the foreign language.

I think one could see that the students were used to being fairly passive in the lesson but more proactive at home. It was not unusual to see students walking through the playground first thing in the morning revising. They valued the importance of language learning but not were unaware of varying learning styles that they could use. The students have a phenomenal capacity to learn but in my view, this was not being properly exploited by the teacher trainers.

The four elements of language (speaking, listening, reading and writing) were all taught separately. This then made it quite difficult to try and link the receptive and productive skills. Classes were also given in blackboard writing and intensive reading. There were no professional studies classes or formal methodology classes so I could begin to see where the fear of new methodology stemmed from.

The first thing I had to do was get the college lecturers on my side: we started off by setting up a programme of observations where I could go and observe my colleagues and they could come and observe me. We then did feedback sessions (although I spent most of the time explaining the rationale for communicative methodology) I gave each of the lecturers a task to use in a class each week and slowly and surely they began to use communicative methodology in their own classes. As the lecturers' confidence increased, their methodology began to change, as did their attitude towards having someone else in the class. They began to get away from the notion of giving a performance to students to making their lessons more student centred. Asking teachers to share good practice with each other seemed like a very strange idea but when they began to do so it was like switching on a light. Suddenly they realised that collaboration was going to save them a lot of

time and effort and also maybe give them new ideas. The student teachers in turn noticed the difference in the way they were being taught and responded accordingly.

As my time in Xingyi was coming to an end I went out to secondary schools to assess some student teachers whom I had taught methodology too and I was delighted to see that they were attempting to use some of the methods that we had discussed and used in our classes in college. They had initially been met with some resistance from other members of staff but had persevered and it was beginning to pay off in that the students were speaking more and communicating far more effectively and with greater confidence. They even looked like they were enjoying it! Getting other members of the school staff on board was difficult but we delivered a day's in-service on speaking and listening skills and ways of teaching to engage young and old learners.

Chinese teachers face the same problems as we do but in very different conditions. More often than not, they are under pressure to get students through exams and are paid accordingly. There were some schools that paid teachers according to the performance of the students.

Having been lucky to have taught in well equipped schools with highly experienced and motivated staff, going to a rural college in China was certainly an eye opener. It was a major learning curve that really made me take a look at my own style of teaching and reflect on what worked and what didn't. While teaching in China, I did not have the same level of accountability to the college that I would have in Scotland, due to the fact I was viewed as a "foreign expert". !

How has the experience affected me?

Well I find that I have renewed enthusiasm for the job and paying far more attention to my classes and the way in which I am teaching. I was privileged enough to watch teachers in schools accessible by horse only, motivating classes of 120 with very little resources...I am sure that I can manage to motivate 30 armed with a Smart Board.

With all that experience, it can't fail to have a positive effect on my teaching and development. It has also made me much more aware of citizenship in the curriculum and in particular, the teaching of citizenship through modern languages.