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## **Paul & Lynne Spedding – Treak Community Centre, Cambodia**

We (Lynne and Paul both aged around 65) spent four weeks at Treak Community Centre in Cambodia. Both our backgrounds are in education in England: Lynne was a comprehensive school headteacher and Paul worked as a university lecturer.

Treak teaches children aged between around 4 and 13, with evening sessions for a variety, including young adults, although we were not involved in the evening sessions. We were mainly involved in the teaching of English, with some general studies (Lynne) and some IT (Paul). Usually we were acting as classroom assistants, since there was a Cambodian teacher present who introduced and led the lesson, involving us during classwork or group work for the children.

Most of the children attended state school (taught in Khmer) in either the morning or the afternoon, and Treak for the other half of the day.

### **Lynne's Work:**

I was scheduled to assist with three separate, one-hour classes, each of around 20-25 students, for the morning session, working with a young, inexperienced and untrained teacher, Sreyrath, using Incredible English course books; and with one class of 50 young students (aged around 6-8 years) for the whole of the three-hour afternoon session, sometimes using Incredible English, but mainly practising English language skills more generally. Here I was assisting an experienced and accomplished teacher, Chhlat.

My initial role both morning and afternoon was as classroom assistant, just helping with pronunciation, activities, etc. However, the two teachers soon began to ask me to prepare resources and lead sessions.

My contributions to morning classes were well-received by students and teacher alike. I had observed that students were often bored, that there was little appropriate pitch or pace in lessons, with nothing to challenge the more able, many of whom were able to fulfil tasks within a few minutes, then sat bored for long periods. I devised worksheets and activities which graduated in challenge, which provided a variety of tasks and which filled the time even for the most able. The students responded very positively and were obviously enthused not only by the materials but also by the fact that I went round the class marking throughout the lesson – checking, correcting work and giving as much positive feedback as possible. I know that Sreyrath was very appreciative of my input (she asked me increasingly to lead lessons) and I think also that it helped her to imagine new ways of teaching. I felt sorry that she was not receiving more focused and systematic training in school, but fully understood that this was because of teacher shortages and the strain which the already hard-worked experienced teachers were under. I would have liked to have been able to stay longer to assist training her in teaching and learning strategies – she was keen to improve, and was a delightful young woman, appreciative, receptive and helpful.

I felt well-qualified to assist, being a teacher of 35 years' experience, 13 as a headteacher engaged in regular lesson observations and teacher training. I feel that I could have done more had I felt more able to be proactive. As it was, I felt I needed it to be Sreyrath herself who initiated the invitation to me to lead sessions, rather than me suggesting changes, despite what I could see were clear shortcomings in the teaching and learning being undertaken.

**Note from people and places: we believe it is vital for our volunteers to work alongside local staff, which Lynne fully understood, And local staff clearly appreciated this aspect of skills-share.**

In the afternoon, I was working with an excellent teacher with a very large class of around 50 young students, including quite a proportion of boys with behavioural issues. The class was noisy; a number of boys lacked engagement with the work and talked, moved around the room and disrupted each other throughout. There was constant coming and going as children asked and were granted permission to leave the room (presumably for the toilet or for a drink). I found this quite a culture shock! I should add that there were at least half the class who were fully focused, hard-working and wanting to learn!

I understood that this very large class was the result of a shortage of teachers and it is true that in the last week a new teacher began work, who took over a group of the least able from this class, leaving Chhlat with around 35.

However, as time went on I grew very fond of this class. Chhlat, the wonderful teacher with responsibility for the group, once he realised I was able, asked me to work with 10 at a time, on a rolling programme, taking them out to a different room. This gave him the chance to work with a (slightly) more manageable number and for me to experience teaching English to young students with virtually no English-language skills, and myself with just three words of Khmer! There was much sign-language and non-verbal communication involved. Most sessions were positive, with the children engaging and responding well, but sessions with the disengaged boys proved problematic at times. Their attention span was very limited and chatter was impossible to eliminate.

As with Sreyrath, I felt that - as Chhlat got to know me and feel confident in my skills - he was happy to give me greater freedom and responsibility in preparing resources and leading sessions both with the whole group and with sub-groups. I found this most satisfying – I love teaching and it was lovely to see students responding enthusiastically and making progress.

Overall, on reflection, I feel that my skills were useful and that I probably did contribute positively to the students' learning experience, but I know that only a very limited amount can be achieved in just 4 weeks (within which occurred a 3-day holiday). Our understanding and sympathy was with the school, particularly Dara, the recently appointed headteacher. I sincerely hope that my skills and expertise were indeed positive for the school, despite myself being just one volunteer! I know that I found it all a wonderful experience, despite its being at times very hard, both physically and mentally. The sheer relentlessness of the heat, humidity, dust and noise can be a challenge, although in theory we were prepared for these!

### **Paul's Work:**

During the three morning lessons (8:00 to 11:00), I was scheduled to help the IT teacher. These were small group sessions (7-12 students) using Treak's set of (second-hand but useable) laptops. In fact this worked out slightly differently.

The IT teacher, Sameth, had produced excellent teaching materials in the Khmer language (mainly MS Word and Excel) and he taught in Khmer, so my involvement was limited. Although the teaching materials were largely in Khmer, I was able to read enough of them (as the command words etc were in English) to judge that they were very well written. Observing the students during the sessions it was clear that they had a good understanding of the material being covered.

Consequently I spent some time during mornings in the staff room exploring the teaching materials previously produced or downloaded and stored on Treak computers. I found there was a large amount of teaching material distributed among staff laptops, the office PC and the network. Much of this was undoubtedly extremely useful - and used - but there was a proliferation of seemingly ad-hoc material, which would be hard to locate in the future.

After consulting with Michael Horton and the headteacher, Dara, I spent a good deal of time trying to catalogue this and make it more accessible while being careful not to remove or move anything which might be in a location familiar to one of the staff. I believe this was reasonably successful .

My afternoon sessions were more conventional. I helped Dara with three one-hour classes of different ages, using the Incredible English set of books and other teaching materials. Dara often asked me and another volunteer from P&P, (Chris) to lead parts of the lessons and on one or two occasions I (or Chris and I) took the whole session when Dara was not able to be there. I also produced worksheets etc. I think Dara is an excellent teacher, and his teaching methods were quite modern, with limited rote learning and chanting – something the children were obviously used to in state school.

### **Preparation and Orientation**

We received plenty of information from Treak before we set off though slightly more information about classroom methods etc might have been useful – what was expected of us, what materials it might have been useful for us to bring etc.

Our orientation session with Michael Horton (the Director of Concert Cambodia who is People and Places' link in Cambodia), included a session on safeguarding and a brief history of Cambodia and was excellent.

In addition to our welcome meal all the volunteers were invited to a tapas meal each week which gave us the opportunity to get to know other volunteers whom we didn't see on a daily basis. This was really good.

We both feel that P&P is a professional, ethical and well-run organisation. We thought the selection and matching process was very strong. References were taken up and support was given to us throughout the months before our visit.

### **Comments on the Project**

We were enormously impressed with the Cambodian teaching staff at Treak: the dedicated staff do an excellent job of teaching the students while creating a caring and friendly ambience. We were particularly impressed with Dara both as a teacher and a headteacher.

One thing which we both felt from a personal point of view was that the project was very hard work. The teaching environment was hot, noisy and crowded. We are not young and have been retired for a few years. By 4:00 when classes finished we were exhausted and very ready indeed to cycle home to the guest house, have a shower and have a beer!

### **Accommodation / Food / Leisure Time:**

We stayed at the Victory guesthouse throughout our time in Siem Reap. Victory is good basic accommodation and certainly not expensive, (\$15 per night for both of us with AC, would have been \$11 without). It's family run and the staff are very helpful and friendly. There is good wifi. The only downside from our point of view was the breakfasts – adequate but unexciting! A great thing about Victory is that other volunteers also stayed there, making it pleasant to relax and chat over our different experiences. We had considered paying slightly more for accommodation but in the end we were pleased we hadn't.

Siem Reap is obviously a tourist centre. There is absolutely no shortage of good places to eat (ranging from very basic Cambodian cuisine upwards) and the proximity of Angkor Wat and other attractions makes it easy to enjoy weekends. There are two excellent museums in Siem Reap, and we enjoyed a Cambodian cooking course! We were there for the annual water festivals which was fascinating.

### **Future Volunteers**

We would recommend P&P and Treak to anyone. We found the project fairly tough but the rewards were immense. You have the opportunity to work in a fascinating country with a great staff at the school. One thing that we both felt was that sometimes there was little challenge for the stronger students. It could perhaps be a specific area a suitably qualified future volunteer could explore.

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