

Analysis of volunteer period: Sjoerd Franzen

The results presented in this report are based on empirical tests and do in no way assume any true scientific value. They are merely the numerical interpretation of the English proficiency level of a class of students by an individual not trained in any educational field other than for his own pleasure.

Abstract

This paper evaluates the results, effectiveness and lessons learned regarding Boost Foundations first volunteering project. The primary aim of this volunteering project was improving the level of English speaking proficiency in two schools near Galagedere in central Sri Lanka. Over the course of 7 weeks the children were engaged in activities to improve their English speaking proficiency. These activities mainly consisted of singing songs, playing games, reading and engaging in English conversation. Results of the volunteering periods were an average 15% increase in testing grades. During this time current teaching methods were also evaluated with local English teachers. These conversations formed part of the basis of recommendations for further volunteering projects in these or similar schools. The project allowed for a down-up approach in schools and succeeded in connecting with students, children and school staff alike to boost the current level of English education and lay the basis for further projects. To gain the most added value emphasis in future volunteering projects should be placed on teacher schooling, parental involvement and semester-long commitment of volunteers.

1: Introduction

Boost foundation is a non-profit organization that is concerned with offering equal opportunity to children over the world. It is committed to launching 10,000 projects within the next 40 years based on transparency, trust and fun. As its inaugural project a volunteer was sent to Sri Lanka to teach English in two primary schools near Galagedere, Central Sri Lanka. These schools were selected based mainly on the consideration of Mrs. Ramani Smits, who runs FuturCare and has nearly a decade of experience helping less fortunate schools in the area.

The schools involved in the project were Opalla primary school and Kinigama middle school. The former teaches grades 1 through 5 with children's age ranging from 6 to 10 and the latter teaches grades 1 through 11 with children's age ranging from 6 to 16. Primary reasons for choosing these schools were: manageable travelling distance to and from the schools, able and willing staff and, in the case of Kinigama, children preparing for a series of exams including oral tests. Before starting the project, it was agreed that the volunteer would spend 3 days a week in Kinigama and 2 days a week in Opalla. A regular school day in Sri Lanka is from 7.30 to 13.00, however due to heavy traffic it was agreed that 8.30 to 13:00 would be more suitable working hours during the project which was approximately equal to 20 teaching hours a week.

First, the report will start off with a situational assessment of the schools in chapter 2. After the assessment, the teaching methods will be discussed in chapter 3. In chapter 4, the results of the volunteering period are determined. In chapter 5 the interaction between the volunteer and the teachers will be discussed and chapter 6 concludes the report. Finally, in chapter 7 recommendations are given for future volunteering projects.

2: Situational assessment

In this chapter both schools and their respective English standards at the start of the volunteering will be discussed. This will be done by assessing the situation at both schools and looking at the level of English proficiency, teacher capacity and teacher support available at both schools. Opalla will be discussed first and Kinigama second.

2.1 Opalla

The school

Located about 3 kilometres from Galagedere, Opalla is a small village with a pre-school of around 50 children. These children are taught from grade 1 to 5 with ages 6 to 10 after which the children transfer to larger schools in the neighbourhood. Sri Lanka has free choice of education so parents can enrol their children at any school, provided they can pay tuition fees and their children get through selection. These tuitions fees are often very high, leaving parents on the poorer end of the spectrum with little choice but to enrol their children at the local, less prestigious and therefore cheaper schools. Opalla can be considered such a school: children with parents that have little to no financial means, often having single-parent households due to temporary emigration to Middle Eastern countries for employment.

English standard

The English level at Opalla was surprisingly high at the start of the project. All children knew at least several nursery rhymes, could engage in very simple conversation and had a limited vocabulary. For their age group, the children were at most 1-2 years behind Cambridge English levels.

Teacher Capacity

The reason for this relatively high English standard was easily recognized: Opalla has an excellent English teacher with 20 years of experience and a good education. By engaging the children not only in grammatical but also speaking exercises he managed to get the English proficiency of the children to such a level that test scores for scholarships are 80/100 on average. When such a score is attained on average over all subjects, children are given scholarships to be able to attend more costly schools. Gaging the overall level of education was much more difficult, both through not being able to communicate with teachers of other subjects and a limited understanding of the subject matter by the volunteer.

Teaching support

The children all receive basic clothing, a backpack, writing material and books through the FuturCare foundation. This foundation also assists in supplying the school library and as such has donated a large amount of books. The school owns one computer which is not used for educational purposes. The main teaching material the teachers receive is the syllabus from the ministry of education that is updated every few years.

2.2 Kinigama

The School

Located about 5 kilometres from Galagedere, Kinigama is a middle-sized school supporting around 120 children with grades 1 to 11 and ages 6 to 16. During recent years it has seen growth that has doubled its number of students. It is by no means a prestigious school but children attending have had good grades over the past couple of years and perform well in sports tournaments at neighbouring schools. The children attending Kinigama have parents that on average have a little more financial means than at Opalla.

English standard

In contrast to the level of English at Opalla, children at Kinigama could hardly speak any English. This could be due to the children not having the capacity or the confidence to engage in English conversation. Only the older children in grades 9 to 11 could speak limited English. The first impression was that they memorized sounds or sequences of words and reacted with the most appropriate answer available to them.

Teacher Capacity

The two English teachers at Kinigama did not have a very good command of the English language. In them, the fear of making mistakes was as deeply ingrained as in the children. As such, it was difficult to engage in conversation and establish their opinion and look for ways to move in a positive direction.

Teacher Support

As in Opalla, the children at Kinigama receive a lot of their basic necessities through the FuturCare foundation. Books for the library are similarly provided by FuturCare based on requests by the teachers and principal. Similarly to Opalla, the teachers receive a syllabus from the ministry of education that has to be taught to the children in full.

2.3 Observations:

In both schools teachers were present that focus solely on the subject of English. The English proficiency at first seemed to depend mostly on the skills of the English teacher(s), rather than the presumed intelligence of the children. Both schools have the same syllabus and therefore it is hard to put all if any blame on the syllabus for teaching the children, seeing as the level of the children was so different across the board when comparing the two schools.

The disparity in the qualities of English teachers seems to really have a great impact on the proficiency level of the children. Therefore acquiring good teachers and improving the level of current teachers is very important, as teachers change schools after an 8 year tenure. This means that, whenever a trained teacher leaves a school, he or she will take that knowledge and spread it amongst schools in the vicinity of the old school thus making a *regional* impact.

3: Teaching Activities

Before the start of the volunteer period preparations were made for a good teaching start as the volunteer had no real education experience with minors. To help define a teaching method a number of lesson plans, nursery rhymes and exercises were explored to get a good grip on the requirements for a successful lesson. In the beginning these were mostly used as a general outline and only a handful lesson plans were planned before the teaching period. The main reason for this was the unknown English proficiency of the children and therefore not being able to gauge a good difficulty level for the children.

In addition a focus was placed on ways of communication with the children as to encourage them and try to have as much impact as possible. To accomplish this, an almost solely positive feedback approach was chosen in which positive reactions are reiterated and a focus on negative answers is minimized.

3.1 Introduction, testing and classes

After being introduced to the children and creating a positive atmosphere, immediately testing of the English proficiency took place. This testing was done 1-on-1 with visual aids from Cambridge English Starters, Movers and Flyers tests in the Young Learners program. Due to the large number of children (140), only the highest grades of the children in Kinigama were tested, the reason for this being their imminent oral exams at the end of the year. These children came from grades 9 to 11. The grades obtained were very poor, in clear contrast with the children in Opalla. After testing, the first week of teaching consisted mostly of getting familiar with all classes. In total, 11 classes were taught during the entire volunteering period. 4 of these classes were in Opalla and 7 in Kinigama.

3.2 Teaching

In Opalla, lesson programmes were frequently discussed with the aforementioned excellent English teacher. The lessons here focussed mostly on creating a positive environment for practicing English speaking by building on the taught programme of the teacher by additions made by the volunteer. As the English level was relatively high, this was considered to be the best approach to have maximum impact during the volunteering period. The lessons in Opalla focussed mostly on basic vocabulary, singing of nursery rhymes, games that place an emphasis of listening to English, reading and elementary conversation. This amplifying of the material taught by the local teacher created a sense of recognition in the children which, accompanied with bi-weekly repetition, led to a positive learning environment.

In Kinigama, lesson programmes were implemented more independently from the present English teachers as their presence was minimal and while communicating with them it was often difficult to establish a common ground other than teaching the given syllabus.

Because of limited experience with teaching English and teaching in general, a similar approach to the one in Opalla was chosen: creating a positive practicing environment and starting out with very elementary English. One of the reason for this was the synergy with which the same grade classes (3, 4 and 5) at both schools could be taught. Because Kinigama was visited thrice a week and Opalla only twice, this provided opportunity for the Kinigama children to catch up to the level of the Opalla children. For the higher grade children the same approach was used but with a higher learning curve, which meant being able to use the available material and programs at first but a necessity to come up with new material for lessons afterwards. This was done mostly by searching for adequate material on the internet, limited discussions with the English teachers and drawing from personal experience.

Because the higher grade children at Kinigama were very engaged in sports, part of creating a positive teaching influence also consisted of participating in their games, of which volleyball was a favourite due to the volunteer himself having played at a high youth level. This enabled coaching not only in English but also *on* volleyball. This meant that by practicing their English, they could improve their volleyball. Due to the competitive nature of sport this became a valuable motivator for the teenagers, it was found.

4: Testing

Due to lack of time and both theoretical and practical know-how of oral testing only grades 9-11 were tested on their English proficiency. These grades were chosen based on the fact that the grade 11 children will be the first in Sri Lanka to take oral exams in December that partly determine their academic future. These children were therefore deemed the most critical to the success of the project. The tests were based on the Cambridge English Young Learners programme with tests focusing on the Movers and Flyers levels.

Typically, these tests aim at children at ages 8-11 and 9-12 respectively, with a sufficient grade in Flyers tests corresponding to A1 level speaking proficiency according to the Cambridge English Framework. The tests were executed at the very beginning and very end of the volunteering period to act as a measurement of the effectiveness of the volunteering project. When interpreting the test results one should be careful to consider the bias that arises through these tests. Because the students are speaking to an unknown English speaking person (the volunteer) during the first test, the children are performing worse due to a new and uncomfortable situation and their fear of failure. After getting to know the volunteer their confidence level has improved and with it their English speaking proficiency. Unfortunately no separate test could be conducted with an alternative person to control for this effect.

The children also received English throughout the volunteering period conducted by local teachers, however this teaching focusses mainly on writing and grammatical aspects of the language and will therefore have little to no impact on the testing scores but should be considered nonetheless. Both tests focus on spoken English engaged through discussing aspects of a series of pictures. In these tests up to 10 points can be scored. The children that scored a 6 or higher on the first test did the flyers test instead of the movers test, because their level improved beyond the Movers test. In figure 1 the results for the test and the subsequent Movers test is given.

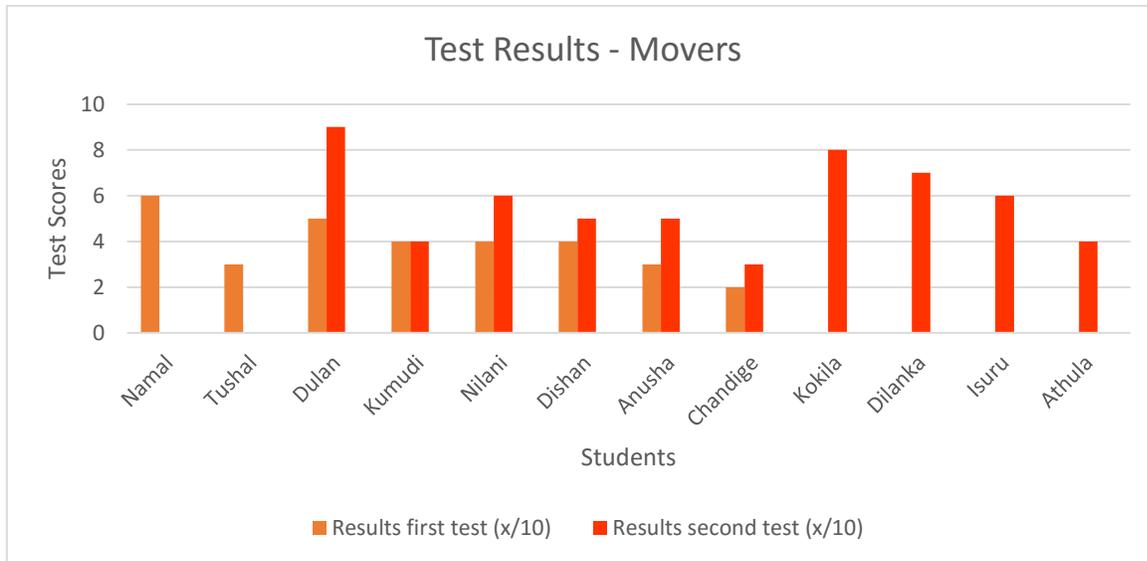
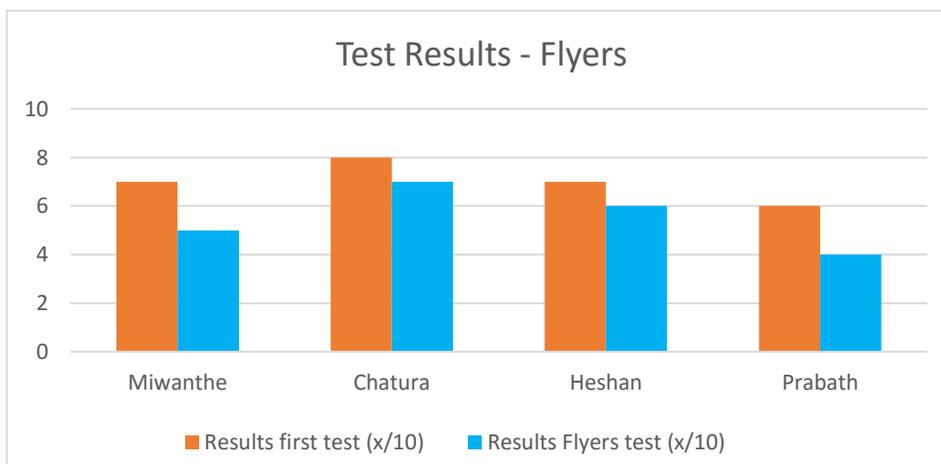


Figure 1 Test Results - Movers level

As can be seen not all kids have been tested twice. This is due to absence on the testing days. The tests in figure 1 are of similar level so the increase in scores is solely based on improved performance. The average level of the first test was 3.9 and the second test 5.4 constituting a 1.5 point or 15% increase not discounting for the children that did the advanced tests and whom are not accounted for in figure 1. In the actual Cambridge tests, when children score 2/3 or above they are encouraged to move on to the next level. Applying this to the results above 5 out of 11 kids should move on to Flyers, which constitutes A1 or Basic English speaking Proficiency. Should the students not taken into account for the results have been included, then the results would have been an even higher average increase in grades.

4.1 Flyers Test

The children that scored 6/10 on the last test were tested on a Flyers level rather than a Movers level. The results for these tests can be seen in figure 2. All secondary test results are below the results of the primary test. This is expected, otherwise the children would have completed more than a level of English over the span of 7 weeks with only 3 hours a week extra English lessons. Nevertheless, two out of four students seem to be ready for the next level of English, moving their proficiency from A1 to A2. The other two students are also close but should continue this level of English teaching for some time before moving on.



4.2 Test Results

The results achieved during the two testing moments suggest a noticeable improvement in the English proficiency of the higher grade students. All but one of the students improved on their primary tests and several students even progressed almost an entire level over the span of 7 weeks.

While the rest of the students were not tested on their speaking proficiency, their level increased in such a way that should they have been tested, at least similar results should have been possible. This however, is something that should be done during a future volunteering project.

5: Teacher's opinions and analysis

During teaching, the volunteer engaged in conversation with the local teachers to get an idea of their opinions regarding the educational system in Sri Lanka. Topics included the general curriculum, the students and their backgrounds and facilities available in schools. The availability of a volunteer was seen as beneficial by the teachers, both for the students and for the teachers. It opens up another source of English, a different opinion and even culture that makes discussing worthwhile and interesting.

Outcomes of conversations with teachers often expressed dissatisfaction with the syllabus handed down from the ministry of education. Teachers are forced to teach this syllabus, which they think has little regard for practical English use and consists mostly of grammatical exercises. Through an emphasis on trying not to make mistakes the children are set up to fail and this in turn leads to the children not daring to speak English: you can't lose if you're not playing.

The syllabus supposedly encompasses the entire curriculum and this results in another detrimental effect: students are not exposed to other sources of the English language. Hardly ever does any student get an English book from the school library, despite there being ample material present. When speaking with teachers they indicate wanting more material to teach with, however it seems that this is rather a request for something they can use on top of the compulsory syllabus. This request is hardly odd, but seeing the library filled and hardly any of it being used, it is more an indication of the teacher's quest to find something useful or practical to add to their repertoire and not being able to find it.

Something that was not directly concluded during conversation but rather as reflection on the teacher interaction was the fact that teachers have a low opinion of themselves when comparing themselves to a volunteer from a western country. Even though a particular teacher has had an excellent education and 20 years of experience in educating local children, he or she will immediately defer judgement on the effectiveness of a teaching method to a volunteer with hardly any experience. This seems to be based on the belief that any education in a western country is that much more advanced so that any product of that education, the volunteer in this case, has all the more knowledge of conveying knowledge. Similarly, when talking to principals about the way they stimulate teachers, a similar effect takes place where the volunteer is perceived as all knowing. This is of course remotely the case, but does provide insight into a structural issue.

If teachers gain more self-worth with regard to their teaching skills, it will be easier for them to trust in their own judgement when educating. As the person closest to the students after the parents, a teacher is the one person that can make a difference when unlocking a student's potential. If Boost foundation is able to provide aid to these teachers, they can improve their level of education and in turn improve the level of education in these local schools for years to come.

5: Conclusion

From the previous chapters the following conclusions can be drawn. Kinigama and Opalla are two similar schools in catering to students from a rural area with parents that have none or little financial means. Both schools employ specialist English teachers that follow the syllabus handed down by the ministry of education. Looking at the level of English education, the difference between average and excellent teachers is directly visible. When a volunteer is present in such schools it provides students with a novel way of learning and a completely perspective. While this is motivating, once the initial boost is gone it is imperative for the volunteer to follow up with a well-structured plan. Coordinating with local teachers does not only provide a platform for further programmes, it also lets the volunteer teaching sync with the curriculum taught by the local teachers. Using a positive feedback method works really well in an environment where children are afraid to make mistakes.

All but one of the children tested improved their English speaking performance after the volunteering period was nearly completed. This suggests that the volunteering period can be assessed as moderately successful at least. Key elements that helped the children improve were speaking to a native level speaker of English, mandatory dialogue in English without help in the native language, alternative teaching methods that engaged the children in a playful way and not strictly adhering to a syllabus for material.

Interaction with teachers indicated low level of self-worth regarding their teaching capabilities. This often led to deferring of judgement to the volunteer in spite of a good education and years of experience. Improving the self-esteem that teachers have of their teaching abilities can provide an enormous impact. Not only will this allow the teacher to engage with more English material, it will also help him or her judge the effectivity of these methods.

6: Recommendations

Volunteering itself and facilities provided

While the volunteering project can be considered successful, multiple factors can still be improved on in later projects. Smoother transitioning to educational tracks can be achieved by having access to pre-made material instead of needing to develop it alongside teaching. This helps the volunteer develop his teaching style by using his or her own twist on existing material while reducing the time and need for inventing the wheel each following project.

Another simple way of increasing the effectiveness is using longer volunteer periods that can help achieve a more significant educational result. While the results achieved during this period are noticeable, the effective teaching time was only about 5 weeks discounting for introductory, testing and farewell periods. By increasing the volunteering period to 3 months (a standard educational period in Sri Lanka) the effective teaching period is increased two-fold for only a little more than one added month of volunteering.

Teaching methods

When teaching volunteers should use a variety of teaching methods. One of the most important ways is through reading, preferably out loud. This accomplishes several things: it lets students become more familiar with English material, it allows expanding of vocabulary through association and it lets students practice speaking in a controlled environment. Not only can this be done in schools, but handing out books and letting children read at home amplifies this effect. The focus here should be on involving parents, who are often very willing to help, but do not know how exactly. 15 minutes of reading each day will have a large impact over 3 months and give parents a very easy way of helping their children.

Teachers

Perhaps the single most important finding during this volunteer period is the fact that excellent teachers provide excellent education. Very logical, but a powerful lesson nonetheless. Considering the fact that teachers stay at a school for 8 years before moving on to the next, teachers will have an impact at about 4 or 5 schools in a region during their working life. Helping these teachers gain more confidence in their own teaching abilities by providing seminars, coaching and additional material will ultimately have the greatest impact on education in these rural areas. To establish this support it is important that knowledge should not only be gained from local teachers, rather educational institutions or other organizations who are similarly invested in improving education for children worldwide. The reason for this being that teachers themselves often don't know what they want. By providing an own "care-package", Boost can reflect together with teachers what suits them best and iterate this process until a balanced support system is found.