

**Idea Sharing:  
Lessons Learned Through Hong Kong – Thailand  
English Excursions**

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**Why Having Overseas Excursions for English Students?**

It is often difficult for students to maintain motivation using English to communicate with classmates who all speak the same mother tongue such as Thai or Cantonese notwithstanding the useful tips on motivating language students that can be found in Oxford (1996, 1999), Dornyei (2001), and elsewhere. It is also difficult for students to be sure that native speakers of languages other than their own will understand their local variant of *World English* a term for *English* which is compared and contrasted with *global* and *international English* by McArthur (2004). Overseas English excursions are a good way of helping students from monolingual classrooms to practice using English as a lingua franca. This can help students to experience situations where English is the best way of communicating with speakers of other languages.

There will be occasions when native speakers of languages other than English will need to use English in front of others who share their native tongue such as when at least one other person who does not speak their mother tongue is present. Learners of English in Hong Kong and Thailand will also most likely need to use English in their work or leisure lives at some stage with native speakers of English. Even more likely is that these same students

will need to use English with other non-native speakers of English who do not speak their native tongue which is the kind of thing that Kachru (2005: 19) seems to be suggesting when he states that “regional varieties of English have primarily local, regional, and interregional contexts of use: Singaporeans with Thais, Japanese with Indians, and South and West Asians with West, East, or South Africans and Europeans.” However, the most likely need for English in the adult lives of students studying the language at school and tertiary level now in Thailand is probably with a mix of non-native English speakers with various levels of ability in English and Thai ranging from zero to fluent and native speakers of English.

**Table 1: Who Thais are using English with and why**

<b>Audience: Listeners / Readers</b>	<b>Need for English</b>
Thai natives	Relatively rare & usually unnecessary
Thai natives + 1 non-Thai speaker	Necessary for effective communication & politeness
Native English speakers who don't speak / read Thai	Necessary
Non-native speakers of English	Necessary & very common
Various mixes of Thai, non-Thai Native, & non-native speakers of English	Necessary & most likely

Overseas trips also allow students to gain a better understanding of both their own and other countries' national cultures. This may well also help them acquire *intercultural competence* which is all too easily left as some fuzzy optional extra to tag on after something approaching grammatical accuracy has been gained if ever. Learning through experiencing another culture more about your own culture would indeed seem to have more motivational appeal than the content of many English text books or lessons. Furthermore, far from being fluffy and devoid of 'real' content when compared with regular monolingual (or is it actually bilingual when Thai/Cantonese is so frequently used in our classes alongside English?) classroom activities the cross-cultural contact opportunities provided in overseas English excursions may address

*intercultural competence* (see Byram et al., 2001) which might be taken to cover such areas as *communicative competence* (*linguistic* and *pragmatic competence*), *sociolinguistic competence* (see Ellis, 1994), *linguacultural specific communicative competence* (see FitzGerald, 2003), *strategic competence* (Yule & Tarone, 1990), *discourse competence* (see Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992), and *nonverbal competence* as so memorably pointed out recently by Damnet (2007).

### **Good Destinations**

There are of course many countries where English is spoken as the native language of the majority of inhabitants and many others use English as a second language. These are the countries of Krachru's (1985) *inner circle*. While these countries are obviously good places to find English rich environments, it is probably not a good idea to limit overseas English excursions to these destinations.

There are several reasons why countries in Kachru's (1985) *outer* and *expanding circles* may make better destinations for English language excursions. One of these is of course that for students who lack confidence in their use of English, non-native English can sometimes prove easier to understand. Also, these *World Englishes* of the outer and expanding circles may better reflect the kinds of English students will need to use and understand in their working lives than any one of the inner circle native varieties (see Krachru 2005: 19). And, of course many outer and expanding circle countries are a much more affordable option than even the nearest and cheapest native English speaking countries.

In addition, when considering the affordability of various destinations, it is important to look beyond airfares. It may well be more economical to pay a little extra in airfares if accommodation and/or food and transportation costs are lower in a certain destination. It is also important not to lose sight of the main purpose of overseas English excursions: to give students experience *using English to communicate* where there is no other widely feasible choice. Package tours to non-native speaking countries which might at first seem to remove the need to work out your own itinerary are

unlikely to provide many opportunities for students to interact in English. Also, there is little point in paying a premium for a commercial homestay in America, the UK, or Australia if your homestay family and community are not native speakers. In such a case, why not try a homestay in a neighbouring country where students would need to use English anyway as a more economical and educationally similar if not identical alternative? There are after all many English-rich environments outside native-English speaking countries where your students' native tongue is not widely spoken. Conversely, there are many areas within the major cities of the so-called native English speaking countries which are far from English-rich environments.

### **Optimal Excursion Timing**

It is tempting to organize excursions during the long summer vacation. If this is the time you choose, some thought should be given to whether you select the beginning, middle, end, or whole of this period. While longer excursions may seem to make the investment in the airfare more worthwhile, it should be remembered that the longer you stay overseas, the smaller a proportion of the total budget the airfare will consume. Also, during longer excursions, students are more likely to suffer from the negative stages of 'culture shock' or home sickness. Whether for an extended or shorter period, if your excursion commences at the beginning of the summer vacation, you may find it difficult to get discount airline seats on peak departure days and panic as many students struggle to get their passports ready in time. Departing later in the vacation period has the advantage of allowing more pre-departure training time, adequate time for passport application processes to be completed, and if the return is fairly close to the commencement of the new school year, an increased likelihood that students will start the new academic year with fresh memories of how useful and important English can be.

Another factor to consider when deciding upon excursion dates is what season students will be entering. If you decide to switch hemispheres, you will also be switching seasons. While it may at first seem good to escape the height of summer into winter, if much of the class comes down with flu symptoms, the overseas

experience may well prove less than satisfactory. However, if you want to visit a native English speaking country from Bangkok or Hong Kong during the summer, Australia and New Zealand are most likely your cheapest options! The UK and North America will be most expensive, and their tourist attractions are usually most crowded at this time. It is also probably a good idea to select a destination that does not have exactly the same summer vacation period as your home country as it will be easier to find schools, colleges, and universities with students present during term time. This is important as you will want to pair up your students with those in your destination country to maximize opportunities for both formal and informal use of English.

### **Selecting Excursion Participants**

If your school, university, or college is subsidizing or funding your excursion, you will probably not want to allow graduating students to join. This is because any benefit the students gain from the excursion will not help to improve their motivation in your classes as they will be gone afterwards! Also, you will not so easily be able to evaluate any positive influence the excursion may have if you do not have the returnees in your classes the following academic year which may make it more difficult to justify continued funding for subsequent excursions. In addition, there is a greater danger that graduating students will ignore teacher instructions and get carried away with their celebratory sense of imminent freedom, thus increasing the risk of accidents. Students who will be returning for a least one more academic year of study at your school will not be wanting to start the new academic year with a list of detention classes they earned through excursion misdemeanors, and with their minds firmly fixed on university entrance or other exit exams will be far from celebratory and be much less likely to get themselves and others into dangerous situations. On the other hand, students who are too young are more likely than older students to suffer from homesickness on an overseas excursion. Finally, where excursions are being utilized as incentive trips which reward students who have consistently behaved or performed well at school, there is probably much to be said for selecting your

school's penultimate grade level to participate in any initial pilot overseas English excursions.

Care should also be taken in selecting staff to bring along as well as how many will be required, but keep in mind that many education systems will provide a minimum ratio of teaching staff to students such as 1:10. It is probably advisable to make sure that at least one staff member knows all the students well through having taught them for several years or as their home room teacher. This is another reason why selecting first year students as participants in such excursions is most likely ill advised. At least one female staff member should probably also accompany any group of students which have adolescent female student participants. If visiting a non-native English speaking country, although not strictly necessary, a staff member who speaks the mother tongue of the destination may prove extremely useful not only because they can help smooth over any unexpected linguistic misunderstandings but because they will be able to help other staff and students understand important local culture points that minimize the risk of excursion participants unintentionally offending their hosts.

### **Selecting Host Institutions**

Since educational systems differ between countries, it will not always be possible or even desirable to select a host organization that is the exact equivalent of your own overseas. This is especially the case in senior high school and the early years of tertiary education as some school systems have just five years of high school before university such as Queensland State in Australia, while others have up to seven years of high school education which is still currently the case in Hong Kong. There is also some variation in the age at which students are streamed for university preparation or vocational preparation programs with some of the latter even offering degree programs.

However, several factors can usefully be taken into account when selecting appropriate host organizations. These might include: age group of students, relative English levels of students, how well your excursion will fit into host students' curriculum, and where the mutual benefits of the excursion for visiting and host students

will be maximal. The host institution must also have students and staff who are enthusiastic about hosting a group of students from abroad. One way to reduce the possibility of burn-out on host organizations and to develop a better idea of which host organizations are your school's best fit is to arrange to be hosted by two or three different kinds of educational institutions on any pilot excursions. This both provides more variety in the program and helps both sides to maintain higher levels of enthusiasm.

If the English levels of your students are not so advanced, it may be most motivating to visit students from a non-native speaking country where students have similar levels of English. Paying the extra money required to visit a native English speaking country where your students cannot hope in a short time to catch up with native speed communication could not only demotivate your own students but also leave host institution students feeling frustrated and less willing to participate in future programs. After all, even if native English speaking students can benefit from practice in adjusting their English pronunciation, lexical and vocabulary usage, and delivery speed to communicate better with various kinds of non-native English speakers, they are probably less likely to develop this skill as hosts in their own country than as visitors to a foreign land. So, it could be that non-native speaking hosts are a better choice and role model all around unless your students have very advanced levels of English.

### **Accommodation Options**

There are various options here which can enhance informal English exchanges between your own students and those of host institutions as well as their families. From this perspective homestays probably offer the best opportunities for maximum use of English. Another alternative may be having host students join your own in an English camp environment. However, it is worth remembering that this usually reduces the available opportunities for visiting students to communicate in English with the parents and families of host students. Finally, there is always the option of having your students stay together with you in a hotel. In order to keep costs down, alternatives to hotels such as guest houses should also be considered, but keep in mind that as the size of your group

increases, this limits the number of cheaper accommodation options that will be able to take you in. Also, be aware that as many of these cheaper accommodation options cannot be booked through travel agencies, good local contacts will prove invaluable if this is one way you plan on keeping costs down.

If hotel or guest house accommodation is selected for senior high school students, while you will almost certainly be putting boys and girls in separate rooms, you may also like to carefully consider how many are put in each room. It is probably to be recommended where possible that three students are always put in each room. Where boys and girls are known to be dating, it is most likely prudent to ensure they are put in a room with at least two other roommates as chaperones. Also, if students (often those who are dating) insist that a room is 'haunted' and beg to be allowed to sleep six to a room, be sure to confiscate the keys to the 'haunted room' if you agree to such a request to avoid any possibility of its becoming something of a teenage 'love nest'! In multistory guest house accommodation, it is best to make sure teaching staff have the rooms closest to the entrance so that any students who might be tempted to sneak out and party late at night will be less likely to think they will get away with such an adventure. Obviously, considering the natural curiosity of teenagers, it is best not to ban students from particular areas or activities as this may simply advertise their existence and increase their 'contraband' allure. Instead, fill your itinerary with lots of wholesome, interesting, fun, and educationally sound activities and insist on a strict evening curfew reminding students that they need their energy for the following day's activities. Free time should also be strictly limited and restricted to clearly defined areas such as within Siam Square or other relatively safe and delineated areas and not overlap with sleeping time. A lights out policy at a specific time, although difficult to monitor and enforce, may prove a good way of making sure students don't sleep through morning activities. A lights out policy will also give you a reason to call or knock on the door of students' rooms whose noise may be disturbing other guest house/hotel patrons late in the night. If you have a clear policy, you will not need to bother entering their rooms. A quick call or knock will easily reduce them to silence, and usually sleep after a busy



day despite their urge to discuss endlessly the days' events with their peers in their native tongue which is sapping the energy they will have to use English with host students on the next day!

### **Deciding upon an Itinerary**

First and foremost, you must always remember that the itinerary for an English study tour should enhance opportunities for communication between your students and those of your host institutions. Safety will also be a major concern. So, many things that you might love doing on your own holidays may not be the best choice on a school study tour. Swimming is best avoided unless staff with appropriate and relevant up-to-date first aid qualifications are available. Where swimming in rivers or the ocean is included in an itinerary, some staff will also need to be aware of dangerous local fauna and flora and what steps to take in the advent that a dangerous mishap with any of these occurs. It is also important to note the exclusions in any travel and accident insurance you undertake (and you *must* make sure that *all* excursion participants are insured) and keep these in mind when deciding upon itinerary items. Of course, it is easier to know what the exclusions are if you arrange the same insurance policy for all excursion participants.

Excessive travel between points of interest should be avoided where traffic conditions are heavy, and where possible it is a good idea to make getting to destinations an experience in itself. Alternating bus/van transport with train, skytrain, subway, and ferry travel can also help to make getting there as interesting as the destination itself especially if students have a task to complete during the journey which requires the active involvement and assistance of the local students necessitating the use of English.

Avoid visiting large unshaded areas from midday to mid afternoon during hot weather. This is the time to slot in an air-conditioned department store or museum. Visit outdoor markets only in the early morning or evening, and save large palace and temple compounds for the relative cool of morning. Alternatively, travel via water and visit riverside temples where you can be sure of a cool breeze even on the hottest days. Small and unimportant these details may seem at the planning stage, but after a pilot study

tour you will see what a difference such small things can make to the general energy levels and enthusiasm of teenagers in particular.

### **Pre-trip Tasks**

Pre-departure briefings can help to maximize the educational benefits of any overseas English excursion. They can also be used to negotiate trip rules, important local taboos, points of local etiquette, and to help avoid pitfalls that have been experienced on any similar previous trips. For example, on one excursion from Hong Kong to Bangkok in 2006 parents were told their children would call them at a certain time on the first night, but traffic conditions made this difficult and many of the students' phones inexplicably wouldn't make overseas calls. This meant teaching staff were obliged to allow several students to call home on their own personal phones which without any simple means of reimbursement almost doubled the cost of the trip for these staff. On subsequent trips it was, therefore, decided that parents would be informed that students would not be allowed to use staff phones to call home except in absolute emergencies and warned that the phones they provide their children with may not be able to call home whatever their telephone provider may have insisted.

If students will be making power point presentations, or other kinds of formal presentations it is imperative that these are well prepared before the trip commences. Otherwise, an action packed day will easily extend into the early hours of the morning as students struggle spending all their spare change paying Internet fees searching for the photos and other information they need to complete their presentations. This can all too easily make teenage students overtired and irritable the following day. It is also essential that you negotiate with host organizations to make sure that the necessary facilities exist for the kinds of presentations your students intend to make and warn students early on what kind of facilities will not be available in various presentation venues.

Although formal cultural presentations have their place, more interactive types of tasks can also be given before the trip. One which works well is to provide each student with a photo or postcard from the host country. This is best if it contains something

which is fairly unique to the host country and which is easy for host students to explain but difficult for your students to find information on simply by doing a quick Internet search. Tell the students that their assignment during the trip is to ask students and other locals they come into contact with on the trip about their picture and to take notes and/or make video/sound recordings which they should edit into a post trip explanation on their picture. This gives students a reason to initiate conversations with the host students around them in otherwise 'dead time' transferring between venues. Once students return home, they can follow-up their in-country research with Internet and library work before making a formal presentation about their assigned picture.

### **In-trip Tasks**

These should encourage the use of English communication between visiting and host students. It is best to include a variety of formal and informal activities. For example, many markets lend themselves to 'treasure hunting' games where mixed groups of visiting and host students must compete to buy the most interesting mix of products with a limited sum of money. They can then make short group presentations on what they bought and what makes it interesting. Another favorite is to have mixed visiting-host student teams compete in a quest to answer a list of questions by orienteering their way through a museum or theme park like Muang Boran (Ancient City).

It is also often a good idea to have a mix of authentic task locations such as markets, temples, or other local attractions and controlled environments such as theme parks or shopping centers. It is worth remembering that shopping venues such as shopping centers offer protection from excessive heat and rain which in the tropics is probably more likely in the afternoons. More authentic locations, on the other hand, are often intrinsically more interesting. However, there are also a number of cultural theme parks which offer well managed and safe environments and a range of activities which should interest most teenagers.

**Table 2: Various excursion venue types around Bangkok**

Venue	Authentic	Controlled	Pros	Cons
JJ Market	YES	LITTLE	Interesting	Hot & Crowded
Temple of Dawn	YES	SOMEWHAT	Interesting	*
Grand Palace	YES	SOMEWHAT	Interesting	Hot & *
Shopping Centers	YES	SOMEWHAT	Air conditioned	\$
Muang Boran	NO	YES	Safe	Possibility of rain
Rose Garden	NO	YES	Variety	Getting there

*\* Believe it or not some students and staff actually refused to enter because of 'fundamentalist' religious objections to statues of religious images. Considering the cultural importance of these places, it would however seem unfair to the majority of staff and students to exclude them from an English study tour itinerary for this reason alone.*

*\$ Care should most probably be taken to limit time in expensive shopping centers where wealthier students may go on a crazy shopping spree that may leave less well off visiting and host students feeling left out.*

### **Post-trip Tasks**

Debriefing sessions following an overseas trip can help students to integrate what they have learned while abroad into their post-trip lives. This may also help to sustain any improved motivation to study and use English the trip elicited. Besides this, post-trip activities can help to reassure sponsoring bodies, parents, and school authorities of the benefits of your overseas English excursion within your school's extracurricular program and help to ensure its continuation in coming years.

### **To Host or Go on a Trip?**

There are certainly clear benefits to be gained either through embarking on or hosting an overseas English excursion. Overseas English excursions can help to reinvigorate the motivation of both students and staff alike. However, should the opportunity arise, hosting a group of visiting students on an English excursion can present most of the excursion's educational benefits such as opportunities to use English for communication with peers who cannot speak your mother tongue without the considerable cost of foreign trips which are beyond the budget of many schools and parents. As already mentioned, it is also worth remembering that it may well prove both more economical and more appropriate educationally to visit a neighboring country rather than a native English speaking country even for an overseas *English Excursion*. After all, English is used internationally in so many native and non-native varieties and can facilitate communication even when it may be less than perfect in a 'traditional standard inner circle' sense. This of course is not to say that 'native inner circle' varieties of English don't have their place or that 'standard inner circle' registers don't have a place or even that native English speaking teachers haven't and won't or shouldn't continue to play an important role in developing the English speaking skills of many non-native speakers of English wherever they may be. It is simply to insist that practice and proficiency communicating through and across various world Englishes is also an important and motivating skill for our students to master. Neither should this create an unnecessary and unproductive rivalry between native and non-native English teachers. Both have their role and should complement rather than compete with each other. Indeed after all, one of the writers in this discussion article advocating that more English teachers consider non-native speaking countries for their overseas English excursions is a native speaker of English.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to express our gratitude towards the students and staff of Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Intrachai Commercial College, Sattahip (Thai-Austrian) Technical College, and Ho Ngai College (Sponsored by Sik Sik

Yuen), and staff from Tanyaburi Technical College, for making the excursions this discussion paper arose out of possible.

### **The Authors**

Kenneth Murray and Sujitra Pathumlungkar have worked together on a range of projects over several years. Their collaboration began when Kenneth was teaching English at Kanchanaburi Vocational College as part of the Australian Volunteers Abroad (AVA) graduate program over a decade ago when Sujitra was an English Language Supervisor at the then Department of Vocational Education (DOVE). Kenneth currently teaches English in a Hong Kong secondary school as part of the NET program, while Sujitra is now an English Language Teaching Supervisor in the Bureau of Vocational Education Standards & Qualifications (BVESQ) at the Thai Ministry of Education. Besides working together on English excursions, they have recently been working with a large group of teachers from across Thailand and abroad developing English language test materials for certificate and diploma level students of colleges under the Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC).

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