

# บทความแลกเปลี่ยนประสบการณ์ เล่าสู่กันฟัง

## "PRISONERS OF ENGLISH" -- CULI SUMMER CAMP 1991

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In common with most language teachers, and certainly as a trained speech therapist, I believe that language is the most interesting, distinctive and important of all human activities. It enables us to communicate our needs and to negotiate with others, but even more importantly, it allows us to express our own personality and uniqueness and to develop a deeper awareness of everything around us.

The way we learn our native language involves the total personality and is a creative process. In contrast, the way we acquire a second language is often mechanical and artificial, confined to classrooms and depending on a theory of teaching which often ignores the emotional and non-verbal content of language (i.e. the structural approach -- teaching the grammar of the language through carefully graded sentence patterns with the problems of form coming before meaning). Although grammatically correct, the language learned is often not appropriate to our needs. Even the functional approach is hardly sufficient to meet every contingency -- bearing in mind there are often up to 10 ways of asking for the same thing (such as salt, for example!). It is not, however, the purpose of this article to deal with teaching methods.

Because I am always looking for ways to bring English language teaching out of the classroom and into real, life I eagerly accepted when I was asked to participate in the CULI English Club's Summer Camp. I believed that

this could be an excellent way to create a positive language learning atmosphere -- not unlike that very atmosphere we learned our native languages in -- i.e. as part of a group (an extended family), bound by a common interest, in this case speaking English. I felt that placing language learning into an active context, such as an English summer camp, would provide the caring, supportive background needed for students to try out their English. They would learn by doing and speaking in front of other people, to think on their feet, to take risks, to trust their own judgment and to find ways of dealing with difficult situations.

These beliefs were more than confirmed when in March 1991, the local residents in the vicinity of the River Kwai, Kanchanaburi, were woken not to the noises of Prisoners of War, as in 1941, building railways, but instead to the resounding cries of "Prisoners of English" ... that is members of the CULI's English Club at their annual English summer Camp!

The English Club at CULI has run a Summer Camp for 7 successive years. A team of teachers helped with the major organization of the camp. I specifically use the word 'helped' because in fact a great deal of the organization was done by the students on the committee of the English Club -- a factor which I believe contributed to the success of the camp. The students themselves set objectives and rules for the camp to which they firmly adhered; not least, they



Fig. 1 "Ready for anything" - English camp member 1987 pose for a group photo!

imposed a system of fines for any Thai spoken! To soften the blow, they provided all camp members with a hoard of \$100 to meet such fines - with a prize offered to the person left with the most money at the end of the camp! This is just one small example of the great deal of purpose and commitment and organisation that went on behind the scenes.

Fifty students in all attended the Camp, accompanied by 5 teachers from CULI and 11 Peace Corps volunteers. This young, energetic band of American youth, provided an invaluable amount of enthusiasms and a tremendous impetus also to the students efforts to speak English. The students were divided into 7 basic groups -- with a teacher and/or volunteer leader -- and each group was named after a fish -- after all, this camp was on the edge of the River Kwai! However, the groups were assembled and re-assembled as and when necessary for the various activities, and indeed, flexibility was very much the order of the day.



Fig. 2 Whereever groups were working, teachers and peace corps volunteers were to be found at all levels!

Another great success was the system of 'Buddies and Monitors'. The student committee had allocated a "secret" buddy for every student to look after (to 'monitor') but strict instructions were issued that you were not allowed to disclose who you were looking after. Who was whose 'buddy' and who was whose 'monitor' was only revealed on the last night of the camp. However, as a monitor you had to take care of your buddy by sending frequent, small tokens (a flower, a drink of water, whatever!) and messages -- either written on a whiteboard which was on display 24 hours a day (pen supplied) or through a messenger -- it goes without saying that all these communications were in English! Dry as it may sound on paper, this activity contributed so much to the warmth and caring environment that the camp provided.. and kept everyone guessing right up until the last minute.

The level of English language ability amongst the students was mixed, but it became apparent that language level is clearly not the only factor which determines effec-

tive communication. Confidence is another. Giving students confidence is a vital factor in language learning which is difficult to establish in the ordinary classroom situation. However, building confidence and developing self-esteem were an integral part of the summer camp, through the use of carefully chosen English language activities. I should add that the confidence building was not confined to the students alone, but extended to the teachers as well, as we tried out games and activities previously untried!

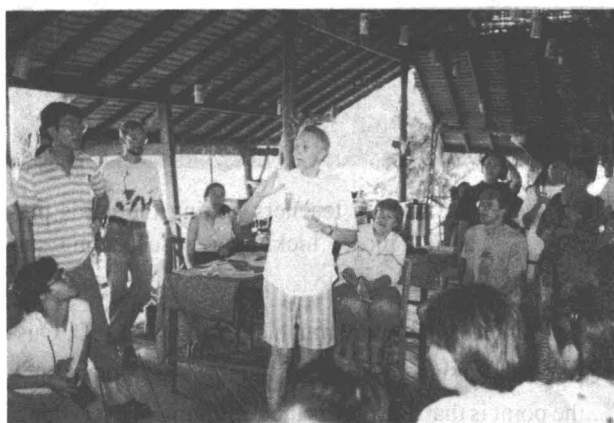


Fig. 3 A teacher tries her hand at mime!

On the first day of camp a timetable was given to the students informing them of the names and times of activities. The teachers conducted morning and early afternoon sessions. The names of the activities were designed so as to arouse the students' curiosity -- 'Mission Utopia', 'Paradise Resort', 'Saddam's Bunker', and so on. The range of activities included pairwork, small group work, large group work, quizzes, discussions, improvisation and role-plays -- the camp had all the makings of an ideal workshop!

One extremely successful activity was called "Every Picture Tells a Story" (from the Resource Book for Teachers series titled "Drama Games" published by Oxford University Press). A collection of pictures of small groups of people (3 - 6 people), was shown to the students. They had to select a picture and then form into groups of the appropriate number of people, and devise a one- to two-minute drama, *ending* with the group in the positions suggested by their picture. Students had to take in as much from the picture as they could about the personalities of the people portrayed and interpret the situation. There was a great deal of discussion (aided by teachers and volunteers) and co-operation amongst the students. After about 15-20

minutes, each group presented its drama to everyone. Their final poses were captured on a Polaroid camera, and at the end the closest to the original was judged most successful. It was interesting to note that the final outcome was not of much interest to the students -- indeed, it was interesting to note throughout the camp that the pleasure of participating seemed to far outweigh the pleasure of winning.

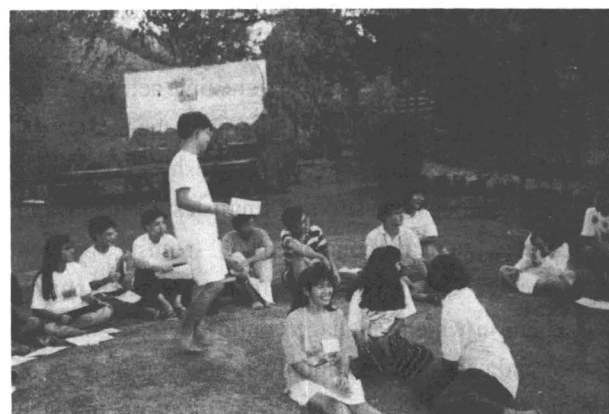


Fig. 4 "Time to let off steam" - When the sun was less fierce, students were ready and eager for action outside!

The organization of the late afternoon activities and evening entertainment was taken over by the students themselves -- and these efforts demonstrated a great deal of forethought and planning. There were excellent ice-breaking activities on the arrival day, sports events (preceded by a cheerleaders competition, which was highly successful) and entertainment. There was a nightly "News" programme, with up-to-day reports on the day's events -- which everyone looked forward to -- followed by variety shows. It was encouraging to see how the students took every opportunity to use new vocabulary and idioms gleaned from the day's activities -- especially the idioms. The 'in' expressions were "dressed to kill" and "I smell a rat!" -- expressions which I have no doubt will be used appropriately for life by all those who attended the camp this year!

I could go on at length describing the many and varied activities of the English Club Summer Camp. Numerous photos and a brave attempt to video some of the activities can only begin to reflect the wonderful spirit of co-operation and eagerness to pursue a common aim -- to improve performance in English. In *The Critical Survey*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Winter 1971, R. Wilson wrote :

"There is no convincing evidence to show that teaching a pupil *about* language does anything to improve his performance in it. On the other hand, there is abundant evidence to show that constant practice in talking and writing, especially where the pupil's experience, interest and imagination are involved, significantly improve performance."

The CULI English Summer Camp provided opportunities for all students to try out and improve their English skills. It provided varied and interesting activities and created a caring environment, so that even the most nervous students gained confidence in English. There was a willingness amongst the stronger English students to help the weaker, without any condescension. It must be pointed out, however, that in order to create a relaxed, caring atmosphere in which language confidence can blossom, detailed and careful preparation was necessary. A lot of time and effort was spent preparing for the camp, from the finding of a suitable campsite to meet the budget, down to the detailed planning of activities. and preparation of

materials. But in my opinion the reward of seeing the students develop English language confidence more than compensated for that time and effort.

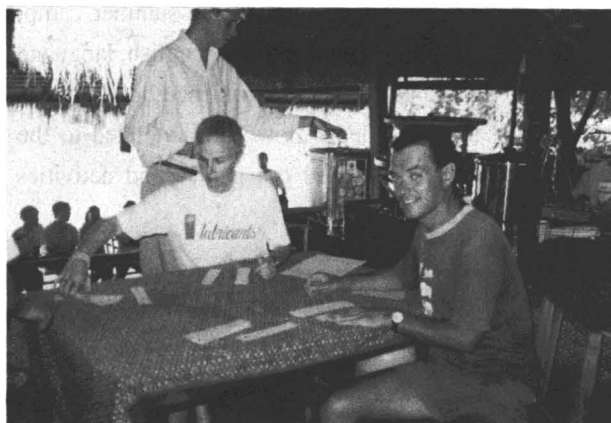


Fig. 5 Two foreign teachers getting the cards pre-pared... more "hicks" for unsuspecting students!

I left the camp very much agreeing with P.D. Ouspensky, a Russian mystic and author, who commented "...the point is that a 'group' is the beginning of everything. One man can do nothing, can attain nothing. A group with a real leader can do more. But a group of people can do what one man can never do."



Fig. 6 No matter which way you look at things the English Summer Camps are fun for all!

## Reference

R. Wilson. *The Critical Survey*. Vol. 5, No. 3, Winter 1971.

P.D. Ouspensky. *In Search of the Miraculous*. Paul Routledge & Kegan, 1950.