

# Teaching English in Laos

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Diana Ang is a teaching apprentice under the Brunei-U.S English Teaching Enrichment Project for ASEAN. After three months of training in teaching methods and techniques at the University of Brunei Darussalam and the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, she was placed in the city of Vientiane, Laos for ten months from January 2015 until October 2015. Diana worked alongside another apprentice at a wonderful and homely public school named Saphanthong Tai Primary School. This essay was written after Diana had returned to her home country Brunei Darussalam and is a reflection of her experiences teaching English to young learners in Laos, with lessons that may be helpful to novice teachers starting out to teach English abroad.

## **Saphanthong Tai Primary School**

The school I was assigned to was located in a residential area. It had a population of only 50 students from grades 1 to 5. There were four teachers in the school and one of them is the school's Director. All four teachers taught all subjects (Mathematics, science, social studies, crafts, etc.) and English was taught by the school Director (from grades 3 to 5). The school facilities included an office, a library, ample space outside for the students to play, several trees for shade as well as climbing, toilets, a pantry, and a hand washing area. My classroom had the basic necessities, two chalkboards, chalk, tables, stationery, windows, two fans and two ceiling lights. The school time went from 8:00 am until 4:30 pm. Our student's ages ranged from 3 until 12 years old. I was assigned to teach Grades 3-5 and my colleague was assigned to teach grades 1 and 2. The majority of my students lived in the area and many walked or cycled to school while others got dropped off by their parents by motorbike. In our first month, my colleague and I would travel to school on tuk tuk (a three-wheel taxi) or walk. It was only at the end of the first month that we bought our own bicycles to commute. It was only 5 minutes by bike and I liked the fact that it was eco-friendly! For almost every event our school hosts, the parents and the village head would be sure to attend and the most noticeable thing about my host school is the feeling of home.

## **Know Thy Students' Language!**

The first thing that hit me was the realization that we lacked a common language to communicate with the local teachers and the students. I spoke not a single word of Lao, and although my school director could understand some English, she had difficulty communicating with us. Naturally, we had quite a bit of trouble. At least we were able to understand our teaching times and that we had to use a textbook (having the textbook was a great help as it gave me an idea of what I can teach and also what the students are required to learn at their particular grades). As I had three grades at once and students with mixed abilities, my inability to communicate with them proved to be a struggle. Yet the students were very keen on speaking to me and they actually spoke a lot. Unfortunately, I



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could not understand a word! And to my dismay, many of them felt sad that we could not understand them either. However, they kept on talking anyway! I really admired their determination. Their enthusiasm led me to want to teach as much as I can to help my new students speak and communicate with me. I also wanted them to be happy to share what they have learned in school to their families at home. In the end, despite the language barrier, I was able to teach them to introduce themselves in English, talk about their age, birthdays, and favourite food. The Direct Method to the rescue!

Needless to say, we quickly found ways to learn Lao. We were also quite lucky that there were some college students who would join us and help us in translating, as they could speak a bit of English. When they were not around, my colleague and I would scurry high and low on Google translate, dictionaries, and phrasebooks to figure out phrases and words! Dictionaries were such a help but you cannot just depend on one due to differences in translation. Often, we would have to translate electronically into Thai because some words could not be translated into Lao, and then ask if it makes sense and if it's too difficult we would skip the word for another day. Not until about two months later, did we start to get the hang of the local culture and language. We had been picking up quite a few phrases and greetings and were able to structure meaningful sentences in Lao. It was a proud moment for us, because this time round we could joke with our students and teachers and also be a bit more relaxed since our students were more familiar with us, too.

### **Make it Fun!**

Realizing that we could not cover as many topics as we had hoped to, my colleague and I designed our lessons more towards fun and games. For example, I incorporated music and movement in my classes and took the students out of the classroom to be free to move as the classes can be cramped. Often my colleague and I would combine classes and we sang many songs together with our students. We found that they enjoyed the activity as they don't have many classes that involve singing and dancing. Their local teachers have taught them to sing their National Anthem, a lovely Lao song (unfortunately I don't know the title) and an English song titled "Hello and Goodbye." Their other favourite English songs taught by us include "Wheels on the bus", "Old Mac Donald" and "Let's go to the zoo"!



Photo: Diana's class

My lesson topics included colours, numbers 1-20, the alphabet, etc. These seemed to be the typical, routine textbook lessons so to make things interesting, I would introduce the students to the topics, for example “colours,” and we would learn in both English and Lao, so for example, I would say ‘blue’ in English and they would say ‘sii fa’ in Lao. The benefit of this was that I learned the language alongside my students and this helped with increasing my vocabulary! After going through that and many reviewing sessions, the next lesson would be about games. My students absolutely loved playing games and I found it stuck with them better as I had many students who were very competitive to win, they ended up reading more! My games included dividing my students into groups of 3 and one by one would have a chance to circle the correct word I would say.

Red	black
Pink	yellow
Blue	green
Pink	brown

*Figure 1.* Example of the Colour game

The box in Figure 1 is an example from a game I would use in class, in this lesson we learnt about colours. Each group would have the same words but jumbled up and they would have to circle the correct colour mentioned and gain a point. It was an effective technique and my students were very keen on asking for games every class. Although there was copying from each other, it does get the students very pumped up to try their best. They were very determined to get better at the end of the game and after the end of each class they would request for another game session for the next day. We also had many reading and pronunciation classes with spelling and writing alongside with the games, so to me it was a fun lesson and student approved.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, my colleague and I would combine all grades for an outdoor activity and play games together. I also taught my students a song “Top of the world” and they adored the chorus and movements my colleague and I taught them. They also enjoyed dancing to the very infamous ‘chicken dance’. I was very much close to tears when a handful of my students from grades 4 and 5 sang the song in full for me, and to be honest I didn’t expect that my students could sing all the words to the song as we only had one hour for five days to practice. It really was a proud moment for me as an educator. We also organized a school Fun Fair, where we had games in English including bowling, spoon and egg race, face painting, pass the ball, and musical chairs. They were a big hit!

Making the lessons fun also helped with keeping the class in order. In the classroom, there were bound to be challenges and wonders made by children every day! So I always kept some worksheets on hand. Sometimes my students finished too quickly and to avoid letting them disturb their classmates I allowed them some colouring activities and also listening to some songs from my laptop, as I kept many nursery rhymes and children’s songs in it. If everyone finished their work and we had plenty of time left, I would take them out to the courtyard and do some music and movement activities.



Photo: Diana teaching in class

### Enrich the Students' Learning Environment!

Other than enriching our students learning of the English language, my colleague and I were very determined to contribute more than just English lessons. So we made labels in English and put them up in our school; such as the office, library, classrooms, etc. We also had a library and a computer room, which was hardly used but we had many books donated by our sister school, Vientiane International School (VIS) but due to lack of manpower (our 4 teachers had so much work to do and had barely enough time after daily lessons) the books were never sorted and the library was in need of dire attention. So my colleague and I took the chance to help clean the library, sort the books into English, Lao, and bilingual books as well as reference books. We even made a reading corner and painted the walls to make the room cozier and child-friendly. Our teachers and students loved the finished product! We had hoped that our students would enjoy reading more now that there's a nice corner for them to relax in.



Photo: The Completed Reading Corner!

### Living in Laos

One wonderful thing about Laos was the adventure of exploring! Not just in other provinces but also in Vientiane. There's plenty to see and do in town and I've found it particularly important to learn the way of life of people in the city as well as those in other provinces and villages, the schools in different districts, the temples and religious beliefs as well as festive celebrations and getting immersed in the culture as part of ASEAN. I've found there were so many similarities in norms and culture just like in Brunei and it was very reassuring that it truly felt like home. I think its human nature that we always look for things that are similar to have that sense of closure and I've surprisingly found that in Laos – noting that it was also my first time living and working abroad.

During the water festival in April, a wonderful friend of mine took me to join in the festivities of 'pouring water on the Buddha statues' in 9 temples in Vientiane. It was a very insightful experience and to see how different countries celebrate their New Year holiday was a treat. I learned the reasoning behind the water festival, the norms and culture of the weeklong celebration, and why everyone looks forward to it even tourists!

During the children's day holiday, I was invited by a good friend of mine, who was a Director of a private school in Vientiane, to join her and some students to plant trees in the forest near a temple outside of Vientiane. We joined many other schools and students as well as members of the public to plant trees in the forest. I felt proud and very fortunate to be able to plant a tree in Laos soil as this event only happens once a year and I was told that the trees represented the children and the hopes of them growing up big and strong to build their country and keeping it beautiful.

Laos has an eating culture very much like Brunei and my local teachers are always feeding us local delicacies and even taught us how to make the very famous papaya salad and *piZZa-lao* (sticky rice with egg). I do have to say Lao cuisine is very unique and I very miss all the good food, and I am very thankful to have had the chance to taste majority of the must-eats in Laos!

In closing, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the University Brunei Darussalam, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brunei Darussalam, East West Center, and those involved in this project for allowing myself the experience to venture out into the world and do so much more on education for the community in ASEAN. I would also like to thank the Embassy of Brunei Darussalam in Laos for guiding and taking such good care of the ETA Laos team during our ten month stay. They have been exceptionally kind, wonderful and I feel very blessed and thankful that we could make our small community lively during our short time there.