

## Students and Learning

It turns out that the Chief doesn't usually drive the *songtaew*, he was just filling in the day I arrived. The parents of the half-Thai student operate the service - her Thai father driving and Burmese mother loading the various produce into the back, collecting the fares, and tending the small children sent travelling alone. They are comparatively well-off; they have two vehicles, three houses and the youngest daughter (my student) is soon to go to a good high school in a faraway town.

She is fortunate - she has Thai citizenship. This means, in addition to the social and work privileges, she can travel. Most of the students - born on Thai soil to foreigners of ill-defined status (refugees? illegal immigrants?), have plain ID cards that simply categorise them by what they are not, and restrict them to the district they inhabit. Some people on reaching adulthood brave the restrictions and dodge the ID checks to seek better economic climes, but it does not come without cost.

Although three houses sounds a lot, a big house here has only four or five rooms, and the *songtaew* family have children, and brothers and sisters-in-law to accommodate. The parents work long days - the first journey starts at 0530 and the last one ends about twelve hours later. In the freezing dawn, Mother is the perfect travelling companion. She has a melodic lilt to her voice and always chats away enthusiastically - warding off the dark, dank night 'til the sun comes up.

One hot day, about noon, on a return journey from Mae Hong Son we pass a woman carrying a near-newborn baby with a toddler walking beside her. They don't hail the *songtaew*, they are going to walk three kilometres to the next village, but the driver pulls over and tells them to climb in. When we drop them off, the woman tries to hand over a few coins, but Mother tells her not to worry about it, and ruffles the toddler's hair.

The oldest student in the school is twenty-one. Classes here do not really suit her needs but she doesn't have a viable alternative. Working full-time in the dispensary of the local clinic and studying open university courses during the weekends, she has neither time nor money to take English courses elsewhere.

The Dispenser is studying to be a tour guide. Sometimes, she brings her university work to school and, after class, I explain the parts she doesn't understand and check her work. There is little actual teaching involved on my part, more guiding her to the answers her long-distance tutors are expecting. At times, I am almost doing the work for her. This does not particularly bother me as the formulaic exercises are dated, unrealistic and largely irrelevant, employing the kind of language likely to attract strange looks and patronising arrogance from tourists. Unlike many of the people I've met working in the tourism industry in Asia, the Dispenser is already competent enough in English; she doesn't need

the qualification to improve her skills, she needs it to help her get a job in the field.

The students in A Class don't have coursebooks, only notebooks and pens. There is a lack of coherence to their education further accentuated by the different periods of time they have been in the class. It's difficult to know which student knows what. I decide to get them to write personal profiles - the myriad aspects of life and varieties of sentence structures in such a composition give the students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. It should separate the men from the boys.

Of course it separates the girls from the boys (three new boys joined from B Class). Descriptions of family and personal details are achieved simply enough; recounting daily routines proves more difficult to produce well. As an exercise, however, it doesn't take too long to teach the key language; life tends to be the same for each student: study, work, study, sleep.

On my second morning I had ventured in the direction of the next village and plantation. Having walked no more than fifty metres uphill, I espied a girl walking the other way. As she neared I was sure I recognized her from the previous night's class and called out a greeting. She replied with a smile and kept walking. That evening in class I asked about her day. She missed school to work on the plantation in the morning, and made four kilometre round trips in the afternoon ferrying fruit to the village, during one of which she met her English teacher - he, twenty-eight years old, fresh from sleeping until ten o'clock, wearing sun hat and glasses, grimacing at the heat; she, thirteen, up since six o'clock, carrying a bag of perhaps ten kilogrammes of fruit over her shoulders, smiling.

The eleven and twelve year olds are the most motivated students - running around at breaktime, chasing conjugations and clauses in class; fearless. By thirteen or fourteen, the extra work they take on with their families reinforces the reality of their routine, although they remain good students.

But there is one thing all the students have in common. "What do you want to be?" is a question familiar to school-age children all over the world. Movie star, football player, jet pilot we used to say. Aside from one nurse and one writer, these students all put teacher or tour guide in their profiles - the former a position of respect and responsibility within their community, the latter their best chance to explore, and meet other people, albeit without leaving home.

At the front of the class is an angelic little creature. Eleven years old, her head barely reaching my elbows, her weight is seemingly doubled by the multiple layers of clothing she wears. The Angel has an intriguing look - more intense than a gaze, less impolite than a stare, backed up by a cat-like licking of the lips when called upon to speak. She seems out of place here; the smart, white coat adorning her shoulders suggestive of a more affluent background. She stands

out also because she produces better written work than spoken. Not shy, as seen by her interaction with students outside the classroom, I wonder if she is a little disinterested. Nevertheless, I resolve to adopt or kidnap her when I leave.

The gap in ages is matched in abilities, though not correspondingly. The most able student is also just eleven years old. About average height and slim, she is elusive behind her thin-framed glasses. She reminds me of the girl Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like most smart children, she uses her speed of thought and tongue in ways often more cheeky than lesson-oriented. It is progressive, but when Scout uses her superior ability to poke fun at other students, I can see the danger of over-indulgence in their expressions.

One evening I walk up to the big classroom. Benjamin has the students lined up outside. I ask what is happening.

-One boy did a big shit... [the students laugh] ...and didn't flush.

There was no water in the tank and the boy concerned didn't bother to fetch some, so all the students have to fill up the water tank in the toilet as punishment, one bucketful of water each.

Every evening the students prepare the school - cleaning the blackboards and dusters, and sweeping up and collecting the leaves in plastic bags. There is no formal rota and, inevitably, some students don't do their share, but they number surprisingly few and the tasks are completed without much fuss.

-I tell them they get this school for free, and books and pencils. So they have to take care it.

Benjamin surveys the activity behind the comfort of a cheroot.

-Education, education, education, I tell them. Never stop learning, I tell them. You are still learning, they must learn; can never stop learning.

He pauses.

-Me, I'm too old to learn.

Some students don't do their homework; the boys have an habitual problem that takes a week of lost breaktimes to cure. The weakest girl in the class has a problem too, though hers is less one of inclination. She has a semi-maniacal laugh which is a little irritating, but is also how she conceals her concern at her lack of progress.

One Monday I'm preparing to give her a telling-off for not doing the weekend's homework. I ask for an explanation. She tells me she spent Saturday and Sunday cutting in the fields, and Monday transporting and selling bamboo with her mother. I look down at her hands - they are worn, the palms marked by small cuts from the bamboo. She didn't go to school that day, but still came to English class in the evening. I relent and remind her to finish it later.

Lessons are unusually long. I worry that the students' attention will wane, and

vary activities as much as possible. However, the opposite is true - they always have energy to spare.

Students start arriving half an hour before school starts. Before class and during breaktime they spread out over the property. Some watch television in Benjamin's living room, some eat snacks (Benjamin and his wife sell crisps, sweets, iced lollies and instant noodles from a small store), some play cards in the classroom, and others run around crazily.

There are usually two or three running games in operation involving groups of similarly aged children. The youngest play tag or hide and seek. The ten to twelve year olds play something far more interesting. One student - "It" - has to try and go from one side of the playing field to the other, the other students (usually three or four in number) have to tackle and wrestle "It" to the ground. "It" can use arms in a windmill-like motion for protection, but must have closed eyes. To make the game more interesting, they play in the classroom.

The participants vary, but there are three girls and two boys who are hard-core players. The Angel, to my surprise, is one of them. She is rarely "It", but gets stuck into the wrestling, sometimes positioning herself under the desk to avoid the flailing arms and get a good grip on the legs.

Everyone gets a turn at being "It", but I can't help but notice one student in particular has more turns than the others. In fact, if she had her way she would take every other turn. Glasses off, she can barely see up close anyway, yet her eyes stay firmly closed. One of the boys is more difficult to put down than she is but, wiry and determined, she struggles the longest - even trying to get back up from under three bodies. This is, of course, Scout. I can see what she is trying to prove, but I wonder to whom?

The children sub-divide into small groups, but there do not seem to be cliques here. Such teasing as there is appears good-natured, familial. There is little light; the students play among exposed roots, washed-away steps, or wrestle between blackboard and desks. But during my time here there are no injuries, save a few bruises, and no tears.

The Nurse is Scout's best friend, and they spend as much time together as possible. Theirs is a violent love, rather than a love-hate, relationship, involving teasing, wrestling and sharing (of snacks). Although not as quick, the Nurse is probably a better student than Scout - more diligent, a better listener, and less error-prone. But she is also quieter, hesitant to answer questions, lacking a little self-belief.

The Writer is the fruit transporter. In her profile she also puts that she would like to study modern art through the Open University. Try as I might, I cannot imagine her as a writer - she doesn't have access to reading materials to develop her

mind, misses a lot of school, is often inattentive (yet produces decent work), and looks exactly like a 3/4 version of the village housewives smiling as they go about their work. She tells me that she wants to write about her life in the village; and then it occurs to me that she could probably do a better job than I.

Along with the Nurse, the pick of the students is one of the tour guides, the Writer's friend and desk neighbour in class. The first week her work is not particularly good and I wonder about her ability. However, she excels after that. Some students take a little time to adjust to a new teacher; it took me until halfway through the second week to get her name right.

Opposite her is Tarzan. A strapping lad of thirty-seven kilogrammes (one learns interesting things doing comparative adjectives in class!), I assume he is about fourteen. He is ten, the youngest of the class. His level is well below the others', but he is methodical. Given enough time, he can get through the work reasonably accurately.

All too soon my time is up. But I don't want to leave. I know that the students were doing well before I arrived. I know that they will continue to do so after I leave. I know that, given their particular needs, exposure to a variety of English speakers is preferable to one long-term volunteer teacher. I know that there is so much more I could do for them.

Scout's elder brother has been in A Class for three years, Scout for one. She is already the smartest (if not the best) student in the school; he struggles to see a role in the class for himself, and thus value in being there. It would be possible over time to help him establish one, but he needs to find it himself. He only comes to class once or twice a week.

Boys in general take longer to convince to do the work - not because they don't want to do it, but because they don't want to do it badly. And it takes time to adjust to a new teacher. It takes the boys the first week to see that I'm not a soft touch - work has to be done. It takes them the following week to find and understand where they're supposed to be at and what they're supposed to be doing. One more week to see that I'm actually trying to help them; and, finally, another week to see that they can actually do this and believe in their ability.

By the time I leave even the weak boys are making good progress. Their comprehension still lags behind the girls' and they work slower, but I'm able to trust them to work alone. They can finish the work without my guidance, and they do finish it.

Village life - without the daily farm work for me - is pleasant and relaxed. I tell myself were it not for the financial implications of volunteering, I could happily stay longer. But perhaps that is easy to say when one knows one's stay is limited. How would I feel knowing I would have to sleep many more nights on the

same lumpy mattress in the same hut, listening for the mice in the rafters?

During the penultimate afternoon I visit the village noodle shop. It's five o'clock, quiet before dinner. Scout is there alone, sitting at a table copying her work into a new notebook; intent, quiet, small. I scrape some stones with my shoe, scattering them across the road. She turns, smiles hello. She is surprised to see me, despite me telling her I would come. We talk about what she is doing - the binding on her old book broke, hence the copying - and then she tells me about her family's shop. As well as noodles, they sell tofu and small balls made of donut mixture. Some of the balls have amusing shapes. There are eight left. I tell her I'll buy them all. Her mother comes out to see who the customer is. She doesn't speak English but Scout prompts her to say "Good evening" and "Thank you". They don't want me to pay even though I've blatantly ordered too many. I insist, but still they charge me just a token price - five baht. I thank the mother in Thai, and then Scout. Later, I share the donuts with the early arriving students.

At the start of the final lesson, the Writer stands up and asks:

-Today, Teacher, can we learn about you?

I think it could be a little boring, but we play a True/False game. The students each ask me a personal question and in their teams guess whether my answer is true or false. They try to make their questions count, teasing information out of me beyond the usual "How many brothers or sisters do you have?" And they're difficult to fool with my answers.

The girls want the boys to sing to me - a traditional song. The boys are embarrassed, and sit looking at each other. If one starts, they'll all sing, but the longer the silence the harder it is to start. I tell them it's okay; they can save it for when I come back. I want to tell them how wonderful they are, but the native speaker teacher cannot find the words. When home time comes, they don't want to leave. I tease them that they'll have to sleep in the classroom and they say they want to.

I will take the 0530 *songtaew* the next morning, so Benjamin's family and I say farewells that night. He says that it's too soon, and wishes I could stay longer. I'm not certain he believes me when I say I'll return.

It's cold the next morning in the *songtaew*, hot on the bus to Chiang Mai. Ten hours after I set out I arrive back in Chiang Mai. I didn't have any food with me on the bus, and am tired and dusty to boot. That night I buy some small gifts to take back, and pack my luggage, preparing for an immediate future in the UK. But, like all volunteers leaving Tomato Village, my mind is elsewhere.