

MY JOURNEY TO TEACHING AT TTC

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It's interesting how life comes full circle. Well that's what I feel at this point in my life's journey. I was born into a family of teachers and once declared I would never be one myself. But on leaving school I sensed God nevertheless calling me into this profession. After doing a BA in English Lit and History, I attended Auckland Teachers' College for a year and accepted a job in a High School down country for the next 5 years or so. It was there that I met my farmer husband and we were married in 1981.

I loved teaching and I always wondered why they paid me for it every month, but now being married we decided to have children and I left full time teaching for motherhood and new adventures in different parts of New Zealand. Underlying my love for teaching was another deeply held desire and that was to serve my Lord Jesus in any way I could. I began to study theology part time by distance, whilst bringing up 3 children. Eventually I made my way into the ranks of Presbyterian minister of the PCANZ. For the next 12 years I pioneered a student church called Studentsoul and once again found myself teaching, training and inspiring emerging adults from 18-24. Following this I became a Co-Pastor at Leith Valley Presbyterian in Dunedin, NZ.

Part of the challenge to any church is to be truly missional rather than simply being a settler church and ministering to one's own. During those years we thought and wondered a lot about doing cross cultural mission and how to encourage young people to step out into a different context with the love of God, whether within their own country or abroad. It was another step then for me and Wayne to think maybe we can go ourselves and stimulate the church to be involved with us. And so, in 2015 we began to explore that possibility and wonder where a connection could be made.

As it happens God was many steps ahead of us and He had it all sorted. The presence of Myanmar nationals in our home church studying theology at Otago University, gave us the necessary impetus at the end of a 6-month trip in 2015, to visit their hometown in the Chin Hills and see what life in Myanmar was like. Then at the random suggestion of Dr Anna Sui Hluan who was showing us around, we visited TTC and the seed was sown that perhaps there were some open doors here for us to help out. It took another 2.5 years for us to finally arrive in July 2018, but there we began our time in Kalaymyo, serving God amongst the TTC community.

God has a sense of humor. For despite declaring I would not be a teacher and then becoming one and despite expecting that I would engage in teaching pastoral care and develop some sort of counseling ministry at TTC, I have again ended up teaching young people between the ages of 16 and 24. Neither did I expect that at this time of my life and career, I would be teaching English again. When I first arrived, I was simply asked to teach 'speaking and listening' as the native speaker. This definitely threw me in the deep end and I had to call upon all of my resources and skills. But my natural rapport and enthusiasm for this age group also surfaced and I was glad to be of service in helping them learn communicative English.



Beginning of 2019 Academic Year

After the initial semester however, I began to understand a little bit of the bigger picture of education in Myanmar and the dreadful impact that a military regime had upon decades of students forced to study by heart and in the process become passive and disempowered in critical thinking and speaking, as well as in actually understanding what they were learning. I have now heard some horrific stories of corruption and abuse of power in the education system that continue to this day. At first, I couldn't believe that students I was teaching could have actually matriculated in English when they could barely understand or speak to me. The sad truth is that only 30% of the country pass English and even then, their standard is very low. I understood then that most of the students were still functioning in the patterns ingrained into them at school and needed a lot of help to make better progress.

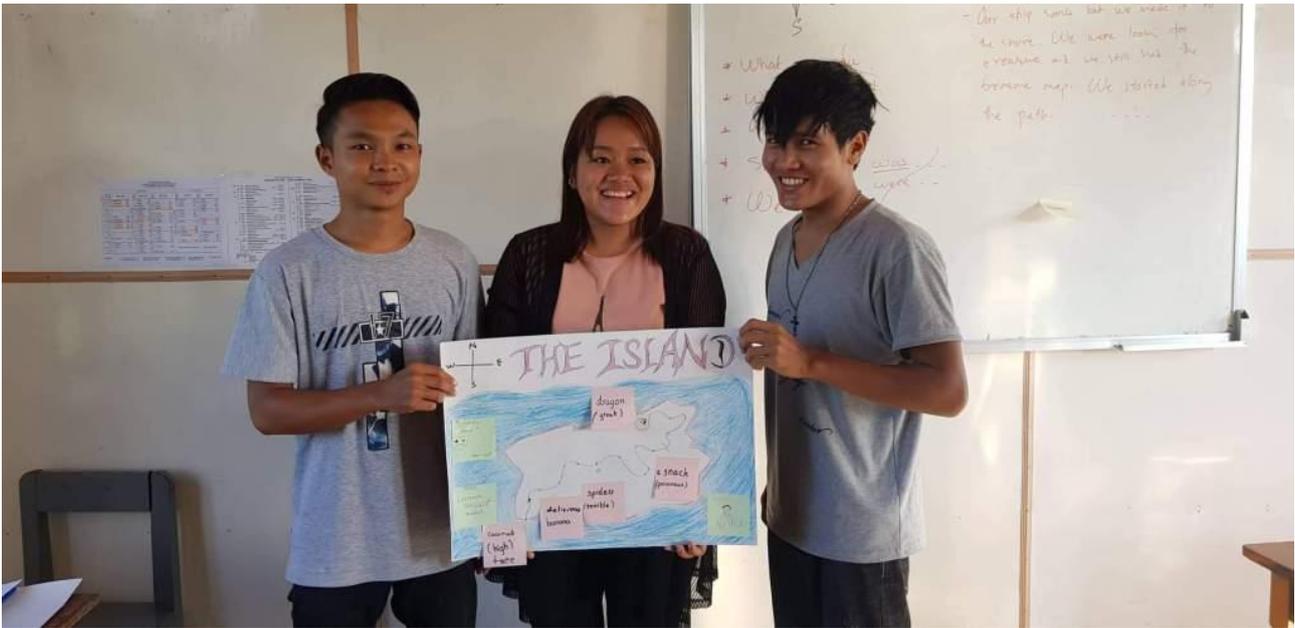
I began to speak about the need to change our methods of teaching so that we could address some of these needs and the faculty in charge of the BA Program trusted me with a different approach. The TEFL training and research that I have done tells me that students learning English as a second language ought to be in an integrative environment. In other words, you don't learn English by learning grammar or any other aspect of language, in isolation, without application. For most people here learning English is simply learning grammar, without being able to apply this into a real conversation. Or learning about novels by reading extracts, not reading the whole book and by 'by hearting' the answers to the questions that the teacher has supplied. In one such 'text' book I read, the answers to the comprehension questions bore no relationship to the text actually supplied.

In actual fact we learn best when reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as grammar, vocab and pronunciation, are all being integrated together. How can you write or speak without grammar? But grammar on its own is repetitive and boring. Subsequently, we re-tested all our students to find their actual level of ability in English and reorganized the classes to enable each student to be learning at their own level and then added the Inter-Change textbooks as a framework for bringing all aspects of learning language together. It was a vastly different approach for many but it worked a bit better.

A new academic year dawned in June, 2019 and I now found myself Head of the BA program at TTC. I also had 2 full-time teachers and several part-time staff. There were 30 students in 4 year groups, at many different levels of English skill. (Over the year, 3 young men were married and left the program and the 3 in their final year graduated.)



Workload increased with responsibility for staff and students, as well as developing curriculum and new syllabus. We continued to develop the program with the integrative methodology that I outlined above. We found excellent Myanmar resources, in English, for minor subjects such as Gender Perspectives, Social Science and Planet Earth BBC, from Mote Oo Education in Yangon, which the students really enjoyed. The Learning Skills Manual was particularly helpful. All these resources and many more can be downloaded online for free or bought for a very reasonable price from Mote Oo. Strangely enough they were developed by a fellow New Zealander in conjunction with local Burmese educators. During the semester break, I and a fellow teacher from NZ undertook some teacher training with my staff and 8 others from other schools, a first for TTC and a sign of things to come maybe. Alongside Phonics training, we trained them in teaching reading and literature as well as writing skills. As a result we have brought creativity and colour into the classroom, as well as group work and some self-directed learning.



My role continued to be biased to teaching 'speaking' and over the year I developed a Phonics syllabus tailored toward ESL learners. My belief is that if a student knows how to pronounce the sounds of English they will both speak and read aloud with confidence. As a result of Burmese teachers who themselves are not confident in English speaking, most students never practice speaking. Hence the major aims of the course are to develop understanding and confidence in public speaking, reading fluency and confident conversation.

As I write now from lockdown in NZ, I can say I have used my time well to marshal all my ideas and resources into 3 printable manuals for beginner, intermediate and advanced Phonics. This represents a lot of research into the efficacy of phonics in teaching English, as well as searching for suitable resources for ESL learners. There are multitudes of resources for Kindergarten and Primary age learners, but what if your students are 16+ and mostly male? I am now looking forward to being able to train more teachers in using these manuals and improving their own pronunciation and speaking skills.



In summary, what sustains me and truly engages me in Myanmar, is the simple joy of teaching, doing something I love, and then the joy of starting to see these students blossom. Not just in language skills, but as young men and women who with a bit of encouragement, a little prodding and better ways of teaching, plus a few life skills here and there, will become confident adults, leaders in their own fields, ambassadors for Myanmar and for their faith. The BA Program with the right people, beyond my input, is a critical oasis in a complex environment for piloting a better style of education. I am blessed to be a part of it and to be fulfilling what appears to be my life calling: helping young people in that often-neglected stage of life and transition, from 16-24, neither fully adult but no longer child, forming their own opinions and learning how to be safe, independent and productive young men and women of whom we can be proud.

Things have changed though. As modern-day missionaries to a foreign land, we face an uncertain future. How will the results of a global pandemic affect our return there? We don't know yet. We don't know how soon the schools will open up again in Kalaymyo either. But what I do know is that the staff on the ground do have a solid base of skills to operate on their own. It may not be perfect and need more years of experience, but the idea of teaching differently ie, no longer just from the perspective of grammar, has taken root. They have modern resources to work with to develop this and the students are very keen to come back. Online methods give me some capacity to keep in touch and maybe help teach and I feel confident that this program will continue to go from strength to strength.

As a final addendum, my hope and prayer is that when I return I can recruit 3-4 more staff as probationary teachers. In the long term to train them with the help of other kiwi teachers, and then to expand the program with quality staff, modelling what integrative and participatory learning is all about. Please pray with us for this increase.



Here's a few of the BA students and the BA Coordinator with me at the recent graduation, March 2020. All of these students, plus another 16 are returning.