

Helen Pruzina - Teaching in Helambu, Nepal, Summer 2014

In summer 2014 I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel to the remote Helambu region of Nepal, to volunteer as a teacher for four weeks. This was with Helambu Education and Livelihood Project (HELP), an organisation which aims to improve education in government schools in Helambu. As well as providing new teachers, classrooms and resources, HELP sends volunteer teachers to around twenty schools each year to bring new ideas and creativity to lessons normally taught by rote-learning. Although there is a great emphasis on learning English in Nepal, teachers' level of the language is often extremely low, so the presence of native-speaking volunteers is very valuable to the pupils.

My friend and I were placed at Shree Kyaule Thana Primary School in Gufa village, and once there we quickly discovered that the children's English was practically non-existent. This reassured us, however, that even a few English words from us would be an improvement on their current level. We therefore started with very simple vocabulary lists- for example, "run", "jump", "eat", "sleep," - complete with energetic actions. The pupils, aged between three and fourteen, seemed baffled at our methods, but very quickly joined in with great enthusiasm. Soon we had them crowding round at playtime and after school for "English games" such as clapping rhymes and the Hokey Cokey.

A main problem in the classroom during our placement was the way the pupils tended to copy every word we wrote on the board. Rather than thinking for themselves and working out what they were supposed to be learning from a lesson, it seemed that the children had been taught to copy exactly what a teacher said or wrote, and regurgitate it back again when called to answer in class. Therefore, although it was time-consuming, we devoted much of our energy to making the children write and say original sentences.

One challenge we faced came from the huge range of both abilities and ages in each class. There were always some older students who finished the work very quickly, and others who struggled to do it at all. It was hard to work out a pace and level for a lesson which kept everybody engaged and didn't leave anyone behind. On the other hand, the most difficult students could also be the most rewarding. One of my favourite moments involved a boy in Class 4 (roughly age 9-12) who not only struggled with the work, but stubbornly refused to speak in class. The thought of the day when I was doing "shop" role plays with the class and he willingly came up to join in the fun (and speak a full sentence) still gives me a huge sense of achievement. Even though it had taken three weeks to make him speak, it was I who had taught him that sentence and I who had coaxed him into saying it.

As a student of Social Anthropology, I found the experience of living in an entirely different culture to my own fascinating. We were totally immersed in our hosts' way of life and tried to take note of every detail, whether a similarity to our own or a difference. I was particularly thrilled to be treated by a Buddhist medicine man when I was unwell.

I can honestly say that I enjoyed every single minute of my time in Nepal. There were so many rewarding moments in the classroom and the playground, as we listened to the children putting our lessons into practice. We got to know lots of wonderful people- our welcoming hosts, the helpful teachers, and above all, the eager and good-natured children- and I would return to Gufa in an instant. I am very grateful to the College for supporting me financially for a trip which will remain one of the best experiences of my life.