

## THA Award: Report

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This summer I spent one month teaching English at the Manasarovar Academy in the Boudhanath region of Kathmandu, Nepal. I taught three lessons a day with another volunteer to children aged 8-13, and in the evenings I ran rehearsals for a production of *The Wizard of Oz* with the oldest children. The placement was organised through Cambridge University English Language Studies for Tibetans (CU-ELST), a local charity which aims to empower Tibetan refugees through education.

The Manasarovar Academy was founded in 1999 by three inspirational women (two of whom continue to manage the school today) with the aim of educating children from families of Tibetan refugees. Initially, 8 children attended the school, but during the last decade the school has grown exponentially so that at present, 324 children are educated at Manasarovar, most of whom live in Boudha, the Tibetan quarter of Kathmandu. However, the school does cater for 30 boarders who come from the more rural areas of Nepal. The school relies heavily on charitable donations from two European NGOs, and as a result the majority of the children at the school are only able to receive an education as they have a foreign sponsor assigned to them who pays their educational expenses. It was quite startling to realise that education is a luxury in Nepal that not all children are fortunate to receive; this was particularly emphasised to me as I passed a metal workshop each day during my walk to school where young boys would hammer metal from 5am until 8pm at night.



Morning assembly at the school

Each day I would arrive at the school at around 9 o'clock when assembly was held. This was a more disciplined procedure than the assemblies that I was used to in the UK: the children would stand in regimental lines and sing a variety of traditional Tibetan songs to drum beats and flute music before enthusiastically marching off to their classrooms to begin the day's lessons. During the day, I would teach one lesson to each of Class 3, 4 and 5, the oldest and most able children in the school. Although class 5 had only twenty students, class 3 and 4 had thirty-

five and thirty-eight students per class respectively. The children were squashed into small classrooms but this never diminished their eagerness to learn. Indeed, on my first day I was astounded by the high level of English that these children already possessed. I therefore had to quickly scrap my lesson plans for teaching basic vocabulary and formulate some more complex exercises. Although at first I was nervous of teaching children with a higher level of English than I expected, I quickly found the children to be friendly, helpful and enthusiastic about learning. Of course, more complex lessons did require more planning each evening than if I been teaching more basic classes, but it allowed me to cover a range of topics with the children including punctuation, prepositions, story writing, poetry, advertisements and newspaper articles. My style of teaching also differed somewhat from what the children were accustomed to: usually the children would learn by rote and repeating spellings in

unison as a class was common practice. However, both my teaching partner and I tried to encourage more individual thinking, group activities, and competitions which the children responded really well to: I was incredibly impressed with the high-standard of entries we received when we ran a poetry-writing competition with Class 5. Learning games also proved popular with the children; I created a game similar to *Articulate* which the children were so eager about that I was persuaded to continue it for a short time in the following lesson.



*Articulate* with Class 5

After the lessons had finished each day, I ran rehearsals for a production of *The Wizard of Oz*. The school receives two volunteers each year through CU-ELST and it is only when these volunteers are at the school that the children have the opportunity to put on a play. This was both one of the most difficult tasks I undertook during placement, yet it was also one of my most enjoyable experiences. Having never acted before, nor been involved in theatre in any way, I found directing a play, albeit a small school production, a challenging experience. Organising twenty energetic children whilst trying to determine the best means of staging the play and practicing each scene, meant that the hour and a half rehearsals were quite demanding. Furthermore, my friend and I spent many hours in the evening editing the script and making costumes with the limited resources we had access to. Despite how hard I had to work and how tiring organising the play could be at times, I loved every minute of it as it was clear how much the children enjoyed rehearsals for the production. I would receive constant excitable questions about what we would do in the following day's rehearsal, what their costumes would be like, if they were doing things right etc. When the final performance eventually arrived, the children gave such a good performance that I felt so proud of them all for working so hard.



Performance of *The Wizard of Oz*



The cast of the play

During my spare time in the evenings, I helped two monks from a local monastery to improve their English skills through formal lessons as well as engaging in conversation with them. I learnt a great deal about life as a monk, something I found fascinating as they lead astonishingly different lifestyles from that of my own. This was particularly emphasised to me when it became apparent that one of the monks was 19, my own age. He had joined the

monastery when he was just 9 years old; it was curious to consider our contrasting childhoods. Teaching the monks was, however, at times quite challenging: the elder of the two monks had a quite a basic level of English and therefore it was often difficult to clarify meaning. Despite such difficulties, lessons were a very enjoyable experience, often with both teacher and student falling into a fit of laughter!



Patan Durbar Square

The placement at the school ran from Monday to Friday each week, and therefore at the weekends I had the opportunity to explore a greater portion of Nepal. I visited Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur and Nagarkot which not only allowed me to appreciate what a beautiful country Nepal is with a rich cultural heritage, but at times did highlight how underdeveloped it is. Nepal lacks greatly in infrastructure with poor sanitation, road networks and electricity supply: for example, during my stay the electric would be cut for up to eight hours per day.

During my stay in Boudha, I got to know many people in the community very well. The Tibetan people were some of the warmest, most genuine and welcoming people that I have ever met and they regularly went out of their way to make me feel part of their community. For example, on the last night at the school I was taught how to make *momos*, a traditional Tibetan dish. It seems so unjust to me that such kind-hearted people have suffered such hardships and have been deprived of their own nation state. Therefore, when my placement at the school eventually ended I was very sorry to bid farewell to some amazing people, and I was honoured to be presented with a traditional Tibetan silk scarf and other gifts from the teachers, children and monks. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Nepal and I feel that I learnt so much both about Tibetan culture and my own language through teaching it to others, as well as gaining countless skills which will be invaluable to me in the future. Of course, at times teaching was challenging: organising both lessons and the play was more exhausting than I ever could have imagined and trying to convey meaning to a class of blank faces could sometimes take multiple attempts and require great patience, but I felt that I met these and other challenges to the best of my ability and that overall I positively aided the children's education. However, I think what my time in Nepal has shown me more than anything is that so much of what I take for granted in the UK (easy access to education, sanitation, communications and healthcare) is so rare in other parts of the world, and although it may be somewhat of a cliché, I think I have learnt to appreciate how lucky I am.