

SamoengPittayakom School

Final report by Ben Loth,
Volunteer teacher
Period May and June 2013.

Who am I?

My name is Ben Loth,
From The Netherlands, 66 years old, retired teacher
Taught different levels during my career,
elementary school,
high school subject: social science
and teachers training college
teaching field: education

I got my TEFL certificate and decided to apply at this school
to be a volunteer teacher for a period of two months.

Why this school?

I got to know the school because my mother supported the school.
She was born from a Thai mother and has been living in
Chiangmai with my father and eldest sister since 1983
I looked back at my past visits with great pleasure
Samoeng is a nice friendly village, situated in a wonderful valley, near Mae Rim
The countryside is very enjoyable, so is the climate

The school

Samoeng Pittayakom School is a small high school.
It has 700 students from mattayom one through six.
80% of them are from hill tribe origin and a minority lives at the school ground
in dorms, 30 boys and 100 girls. An unknown number found housing in the village.
Around 30 teachers take care of them. About 23 of them are living at the
school ground as well. A certain number of them is also responsible for the dorms
The atmosphere is very friendly. Teachers and students behave nicely. Everybody is
helpful, although there is some bullying and once in a while some fighting.
The buildings are situated around a large grass field. There is quite a difference between
well equipped and neat schoolrooms and others which are depressing by ill maintenance
or age. Special buildings are equipped to teach Thai Culture, music, agriculture and
physical education. The school has a canteen, a school shop and its own bank. SPK
participates in a project The Happy Toilet. The toilets certainly look neat and nice!
There is at least one teacher who likes to teach outside under the trees. She teaches Thai
handicrafts
Every morning at 8 o'clock the flag ceremony. The school band is always there for the
national anthem and the king's anthem. I appreciate these moments as highlights of the
day.
Then the lessons start at 8.30. A regular school day has 7 periods, each 50 minutes, four in
the morning, three in the afternoon and in between a one hour's break. Period 8 is for
special activities: scouting or social and cleaning activities.

What I liked about this period.

As I mentioned earlier, the staff and teachers were very friendly and relaxed. I was always welcome to visit classes. In the classes there was much laughing and smiling. Students were invited to react. Most of the time they reacted collectively, to a lesser extent there was an individual approach. Learning by doing is a much heard slogan. I think in general that is a good and effective teaching philosophy, but for Thai students in particular it works out well. They love games and learning by experience is very suitable.

I saw a collective approach with team teaching for mo 1 and mo 4. Both grades are faced with the need to do teambuilding as the students stream in and don't know each other. I experienced a lot of enthusiasm both by teachers and students. It made me feel very happy to be a witness.

Waaï Kru was a teachers day where students paid honor and respect to their teachers, an emotional event.

Twice I was invited to dinner by the principle. I liked the possibility to share with others on our experiences, enjoying our meal in a local restaurant.

Preserving Thai culture and passing it on to the next generation is a high value. I enjoyed to see students play children home games in class, weaving under the trees or making flower decorations for Waaï Kruu. Every Friday students and most teachers come to school in traditional dress.

School took care of lodging and granted me money for food (3000 baht per month). I liked that gesture.

My schedule:

I started out with 14 periods a week. After a week and a half school had to accept the fact that a teacher was not coming back to teach, so school asked me to do the regular teaching according to the curriculum for 20 weekly periods. But after another two weeks a new teacher was appointed. He took over my classes. The last lap my workload stopped at ten

You can imagine that the students and I had problems in finding and establishing a line and continuity.

Sometimes it happened that I didn't know about school activities students were supposed to attend instead of their regular lessons. I could find my students in the hall where there was a meeting on drugs, or students making flower decorations for Waaï Kruu or somewhere else where they were needed for activities related to the school shop or for an explanation of the rules concerning hairdo

These problems grew because of a lack of communication about the schedules. Students came according to old schedules, and I was waiting for classes which didn't come because they didn't know.

Finally there is a (school) cultural thing. Students come to class late, due to school ground distances, to other teachers who don't stop in time, to them giving priority to take a snack in the canteen or visit the restroom. I doubt if possible sanctions work out effectively.

My teaching.

Maybe you think that I am drawing the conclusion that this was a bad period and I am going advise other volunteers to make another choice, that is definitely not the case.

At first I tried to meet the schools expectations of reaching a level according to the curriculum. I should limit my lessons to either reading and writing, or listening and understanding, or grammar, or conversation.

I found out that this didn't work for me. My style of teaching is, start where the students are and cater for their needs. Besides I like to pay attention if possible to all skills in one period.

From the notebooks for mo 6. one could get the impression that students level is o.k., but then you notice they can't write a single sentence in a correct way, neither grammar nor spelling.

So stop with feeding frustration for students and teacher. Tune in on their real level and keep it light an rewarding for them to put effort in learning English

What I did:

Start with a topic, for example Body parts, play games, sing songs, make them draw, make them speak , enrich their vocabulary, take a grammatical difficulty, for example regular simple past tense and do exercises with it, including all possible gestures and movements by the body parts

In another class we worked on propositions. I bought at the market plastic boxes including lids and little flowers. In a practical way of handling these objects they learned about propositions, using and repeating standard sentences.

Last example: The teacher gives information about a drawing. Students make the drawing. Their understanding is immediately clear. Funny how a typical Thai problem about pronunciation occurred.

Story about a girl and sheep.

She sits against a tree. About half of the students drew the girl standing up. A number put her leaning against the tree. But some students produced a sheep with its back against a tree. She and sheep are apparently difficult to discriminate. Both teacher and students had a jolly good time. I noticed that some students wanted to make a nice product, like in art class, so at a certain point they stopped listening to the instruction and produced a drawing that didn't match the original one.

What worked out well is an item each lesson: Teacher helps students, students help teacher. They are the experts on Thai language, that makes them feel pride, and consoles them. The teacher has a problem with Thai, to the same extent as they have with English

Visiting other classes or events was fun. It was also useful socially. We met in another setting . And besides we could talk English about a shared experience.

Conclusion about the teaching part.

I enjoyed it very much. Students generally are willing to learn, some of them are even eager and ambitious. If you do enough games and singing with them, that activates and motivates. I didn't stress them. Homework was not part of the deal, as I copied from another teacher in the English department

Their reactions were touching when they heard I was going to leave

My other activities

The school participates in a contest among a number of schools. In the district. I helped two girls on listening and speaking. Very rewarding and a pleasure for all three of us. Finally: four times in a row teachers had a training on conversation. Most of them really wanted to learn. It is a good investment. If teachers are positive on using English and self confident in speaking, it is motivating for their students.