

Fall 2016

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Recommended Citation

Ketkar, Neha P, "Short-Term English Instruction as a Mechanism for Economic Growth" (2016). *Summer Research*. Paper 278.
http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/278

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Short-Term English Instruction as a Mechanism for Economic Growth

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Abstract

The rise of global volunteer tourism in low and middle income countries around the world has given foreign tourists an alternative means of visiting traditional travel destinations. Volunteers generally work outside of popular tourist areas to engage with local communities. The types of volunteer opportunities are numerous, from medical to educational and there is an opportunity awaiting any proactive foreigner. In Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, the rise of the volunteer tourism economy has brought foreign tourists to rural Thai communities. In Thailand, English lessons are an especially popular volunteer activity. Whether the volunteer desires to work with schoolchildren, adults, or even monks, there is a wide variety of volunteer programs available. Typically, these foreign volunteers serve for short periods of time, usually, less than a month. This project aims to gain a deep understanding of the potential benefits and limitation of the effectiveness of short-term volunteer English instruction in Thailand.

Intro

Thailand's pristine beaches, Buddhist temples, and subtropical rainforests have become standard flare for travelers but nowadays Thailand's tourism has evolved to be a hub for volunteer tourism. Whether it's students taking a gap year or families looking to revitalizes their yearly vacation, volunteer tourism has grown to be a lucrative and ever-expanding industry. Middle-income individuals from around the world flock to Thailand to participate in volunteer tourism programs. The combination of culturally enrichment activities and fun tourist adventures are appealing alternatives to traditional adventure-tourism. Volunteer tourism provides safe guided tours of Thailand along with heartwarming feelings that volunteering provides.

Proponents of volunteer tourism argue it is a means of cultural exchange while opponents argue volunteer tourism sensationalizes poverty stricken communities. Interestingly, of the volunteer tourism activities in Thailand, English instruction is among the most popular. Given that volunteers are, usually, unqualified and have little to no experience teaching English language. The volunteer tourism organizations promote English language instruction as a means of economic growth for rural Thai people. Does English teaching provide a significant economic advantage for Thai students or is it a form of new-age cultural imperialism disguised as altruistic cultural exchange? This paper attempts to understand the fundamentals of English volunteer tourism abroad through interviewing volunteers with the volunteer tourism organization, Friends for Asia (FFA).

What is Volunteer Tourism?

Volunteer tourism has been defined as volunteer activity during a vacation period that might aid or alleviate poverty of some group in society (Callan and Thomas, 2005). Volunteer tourism is an expanding field and an activity for people of all ages, although predominantly utilized by young adults of college-age. The booming volunteer tourism industry has provided opportunity for foreigners to explore different areas of the world through cultural exchange programs. Simple in concept, volunteer tourism involves travel to different countries for the purpose of simultaneous volunteer work and tourism, usually with a charity or organization. Volunteers work on projects and experience local culture simultaneously. The duration of programs ranges from a few days to several months. Volunteer tourists are typically middle class individuals that can participate in various volunteer activities from English instruction to hospital work. Volunteer programs have received both positive and negative assessments. Advocates of volunteer tourism argue that programs provide foreigners a deep understanding of the

destination's culture. Additionally, volunteer tourism can boost the local economies and facilitate cultural exchange of communities served. Conversely, volunteer programs have been criticized for being narcissistic endeavors that place unqualified volunteers among sometimes vulnerable populations (Vodopivec, 2011). Moreover, volunteer tourism often, but not always, commercializes upon poverty stricken communities. While many volunteer tourism organizations mitigate the challenges of volunteer selection by utilizing an application and screening process, there is no guarantee that volunteers have the qualifications necessary to provide meaningful service to communities.

Volunteers generally work outside of popular tourist areas to engage with local communities. The types of volunteer opportunities are numerous, from medical to educational and there is an opportunity awaiting any proactive foreigner. In Thailand, the rise of the volunteer tourism economy has brought foreign tourists to rural Thai communities. In the northern province of Chiang Mai, Thailand the volunteer tourism organization, Friends for Asia hosts foreign volunteers to work on a variety of different projects. One of the most popular volunteer activities is English language instruction. Volunteers can work in public with schools with children and even novice monks. Volunteers serve for a short periods of time, usually, two weeks. Friends for Asia claims that English language instruction is among the most meaningful volunteer opportunities as English instruction can boost economic opportunity for Thai people.

Volunteer Tourism's Educational Puzzle

The research for this project will take place in Thailand. In Thailand, volunteers and Thai residents can participate in cultural exchange and gain knowledge of one another even if they do not speak the same language, as communication is not exclusively based on advanced knowledge of a language in common. Specifically, it is interesting that many tourists come to Thailand to

volunteer and teach English, given that most volunteers have no qualifying experience in English language instruction. The organization, Friends for Asia provides English teaching opportunities for volunteers with school children and monks. Friend for Asia claims that English language instruction boosts the economic opportunities for Thai students. The organization's programs are generally two-week long with the potential for additional weeks if desired.

This research will seek to address the following questions: how do short-term English volunteers provide substantial language instruction to Thai people? What are benefits and limitations of a short-term English instruction given volunteer's lack of prior training and short-term presence? Additionally, if the purpose of English education is to provide economic opportunity how can that goal be realized by the constant cycling of new volunteer teachers? Does English teaching provide a significant economic advantage for Thai students or is it a form of new-age cultural imperialism disguised as altruistic cultural exchange? Volunteer tourism companies rely on reviews from volunteers to stay in business and that the reviews of this organization have been overwhelmingly positive. What are the mechanisms that the company uses to ensure that volunteers have the best possible experience and do these mechanisms come at a cost to Thai English learners?

Goals

The goal of this project is to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanism by which English instruction from volunteer tourists leads to economic opportunity for Thai students. To understand the potential benefits of English teaching, the background of the volunteers and the Friends for Asia employees must be learned. Current academic sources and discussions lack a deep understanding of the perception that volunteers have of their agency in service work and their perception of Thailand prior to volunteering. Improvements to volunteer tourism can be

made through first understanding the discrepancies between volunteer perceptions and the impact on Thai communities. Volunteer tourism will only increase in the future, so volunteers and organizations must create mechanisms to increase efficiency.

The educational puzzle in English instructional volunteer tourism is if language instruction for Thai people does or does not provide economic opportunity? What are the benefits and limitations of short-term volunteer English instruction? Given that most volunteers rotate in two week intervals how does the constant cycling of new instructors benefit or hinder the prospects of economic growth for Thai people? This project's purpose is to gain a deep understanding of the perception that Friends for Asia and its volunteers have in regards to the benefits and shortcomings of English language instruction. By understanding the discrepancies between perception and actualized economic growth opportunities for Thai people, volunteer tourism can be improved to provide meaningful opportunities for volunteers and rural Thai people.

Methods

To research these questions, ethnographic interviews were conducted with volunteers of the volunteer tourism company, Friends for Asia. The quantitative aspects of this study were knowing how long the volunteers were teaching English and any previous years of instruction experience. Qualitative analysis sought the perspective of the volunteers and during their service work, what implicit understanding they have of their service work and how it impacted Thai students. Interviews were semi-structured with specific questions along with open ended questions for volunteers to reflect upon their service.

Orientation

One of the preparatory exercises that English instruction volunteers was participate in an orientation lead by the Friends for Asia(FFA) owner and staff members. In this orientation the

FFA staff members presented on local Thai customs such as bargaining and cultural norms. Of the many norms they describe was how in Thailand it is considered rude to point with one finger. Staff offered the suggestion of using your entire hand to signal direction. Other things that were taught in orientation were basic Thai language words and how to stay healthy. The orientation demonstrated that FFA was cognizant that volunteers may unintentionally behave in an inappropriate manner. This into into the Thai culture was necessary for FFA because volunteers represent their organization in the duration of their stay. FFA is better represented in the community if volunteers behave in a culturally appropriate manner. Once the general orientation was over, the owner met with volunteers in groups depending on their service project. For the English volunteers, the owner went over teaching skills. The FFA owner is a former Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand and has experience teaching Thai students. The owner taught the volunteers the Thai education system structure and educational games that could be played with the students. During the discussion, the owner also went over tips and suggestions for teaching students. The owner made it clear that English teaching is a hard but rewarding experience.

The next day it was Monday so volunteers went to their assigned schools and classrooms. For the first day of volunteering, the FFA staff escorted volunteers to their respective schools introduced the volunteers to the teacher they were working with. One volunteer worked at a school in the Old City of Chiang Mai. It was a two-story public school was attached to a Buddhist temple, there was a courtyard for physical education and a small food stand on the property. The volunteers was introduced to a Thai national that taught English. Once the class was in session, the Thai teacher introduces the volunteer to he classroom and she was thrown into the front of the class to start a lesson. There was a basic outline provided of the topic for that day, colors. The volunteer engaged in games and repeat-after-me style teaching. Interestingly,

the volunteer was thrown into teaching with no guidelines by the teacher. The volunteer was able to keep the class engaged for an hour then would go onto the next hour session with a break between lessons. The volunteer expressed their nervousness to teach given that the lack of discipline which made them feel that they had to shout while teaching. By the end of the 7-hour teaching day she understandably exhausted. She expressed that she was excited but a little scared for the upcoming two weeks of volunteering. After the first day of work I interviewed the volunteer to learn about why she chose English instruction to which she said,

“I think that I was planning to go for longer than one week, I genuinely didn't even think of doing anything else. I'm not a native-English speaker so, but I think I speak English good enough for people here I can actually give them some of my knowledge. And I thought it would be pretty interesting to actually see a different world especially. To actually see because in Europe and in America we all complaining about how our life is hard because we have to study all the time but here children are actually happy they are learning new things. I also wanted to get maybe a new view on things about like general thing, to see like, oh my god, they really have different standards here.”

In her understanding of how the Thai Students would benefit for English instruction she said,

Well I really, I'm teaching in public school but I don't know what this really means...at least a hope that they really start to learn English and they go to another country to study English...I hope that the teacher are organized enough that they can use us volunteers that some separate, so I hope that the next one will not teach the same thing that I did and I'm sure that they had many volunteers before I came.”

This volunteer was from the small, landlocked European country of Slovenia. The next interview with a new volunteer was with an individual from Denmark after her first day as well. She had this to say about her time,

“I have no idea what I have gotten myself into but that’s the fun of it...I feel like I choose two months so I could get close to the children otherwise it’ll just be superficial. I was told back home, from the organization, in Denmark, that you shouldn’t be going if you are trying to save the world because that’s not what you are going to do. You should go because to benefit yourself as well so I guess my goal was to do something crazy for myself and I guess I can do some good for others too.

Another individual interviewed was a Hong Kong national that taught English in Chiang Dao, a small town about 2 hours away from the city of Chiang Mai. During the duration of his volunteer service he lived with a teacher at the school. Some of his students didn’t even speak the Thai language but rather the indigenous language of Karen. He shadowed an English teachers and would follow her lead. He had the opportunity to both assist in teaching and lead class lessons. He believed that the students would benefit from English if they wanted to leave their village someday. In regards to making a difference, “a little bit... but the teaching is still going on after I left but I think at least I give some energy to the teacher, teach more games more interactive.” In regards to why students should learn English he said.

“I don’t know but mostly the students are Hill Tribe. I have asked some teachers what they will do after they graduate. She said most of them would be a farmer, then I was think that learning English they don’t have to be a farmer but turns out I visit the village last week that probably after they were taught to speak English, they will still be a

farmer. But at least they get a chance to be a farmer or go to city, at least they get a choice.”

All the volunteers had different motivations for participating in a program to teach English and different understandings of how English teaching would benefit Thai students. Volunteers took different approaches to answer the question of how English benefits Thai students but to some extent, all volunteers said that English is a business language and will help Thai students as adults. A college-age German volunteer had the strongest belief that English is the world’s lingua franca, this can be observed when she said,

“I think it’s very important for the future of the children because they get a better job because English is the international language and when you don’t speak English its hard to find a good job and I think it’s very, very important...because there are a lot of jobs you need English and here the tourism is very big so I think there are a lot of jobs in the tourism aspect and yeah you need English.”

Another volunteer interviewed was from Germany, she had been teaching novice monks for six weeks. Oddly, the cultural norms between females and monks did not apply in this scenario, the volunteer was a female and was teaching male novice monks. When asked about this cultural discrepancy she explained that she didn’t know why it was allowed but she was happy to be teaching. This volunteer had previous experience teaching and was a little more prepared for the coming weeks than some of her fellow volunteers. In regards to the organization.

“I was a bit skeptical about everything...they only want to make money I don’t know I was very skeptical when I first came here. I really feel they do volunteering here but I’m still a bit skeptical because I try to figure out what I paid for.”

Discussion

The volunteers paid per week to volunteer and teach English. The price per week varied depending on if the volunteer had used an organization in their home country or contacted Friends for Asia directly. One volunteer from Denmark used a Danish organization to put themselves in contact with FFA and paid 700 euros a week to volunteer. However, a volunteer from Germany contacted FFA directly inquiring about volunteer opportunities paid 550 euros a week to volunteer. Clearly there is a higher cost when going through a middle-man versus the organization directly.

One of the many surprising things about the volunteers that I shadowed were that out of 12, 11 individuals were non-native English speakers. Everyone that was a non-native English speaker was from different European countries that utilize their own common language, Slovenia and Denmark for example. The only volunteer that learned English through their entire schooling process was the volunteer from Hong Kong, who learned English and Mandarin Chinese. Interestingly, volunteers when asked, do not typically use English in their daily life. The use of English as their lingua franca however is obvious. Did the volunteers knowledge of English influence their perception of the benefits of English instruction? Not surprisingly, volunteers did believe that English was a useful skill for the Thai youth to have. Given that nearly all the volunteers would not have been able to participate in the program had they not known English. In their perspective, English instruction will benefit their students because of Thailand's large tourism industry and their students may go into that industry one day.

Throughout the interviews every volunteer mentioned that they wanted to have a meaningful experience. When volunteers described how their experience was meaningful it was because they were able to connect with people they wouldn't have otherwise. By seeking seeking out

meaningful experience, volunteers were participating in the phenomenon of the moral economy, “a tangled circulation of money, people, labor, and emotions that creates a complex webs of possibility and connection but which also contains points of friction and disillusionment” (Sinervo, 2011). In this moral economy framework, volunteers actively sought out a meaningful experience through authentic and intimate experiences. Volunteers did not want to be associated with the standard tourist because they were participating in an alternative program where they could engage with in an aspect of Thai life they wouldn’t be able to otherwise. Instead, “volunteer tourists instead wish to bear witness to the real lives of locals unfolding in backstage settings” (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2016). Through teaching in school, volunteers gained an understanding of Thai culture that they wouldn’t have otherwise. Teaching was an authentic and intimate way to engage with Thai culture. Although, for critics “this notion of intimacy, it is argued that while volunteer tourism tends to be positively, and more importantly, intimately experienced, the focus on intimacy overshadows the structural inequality on which the encounter is based and reframes the question of structural inequality as a question of individual morality” (Conran, 2011). Regardless of how authentic and intimate the volunteer experience was, they still promoted inherent neoliberal structural inequalities. Inequalities through teaching because. “English-language voluntourism’s celebratory promotion of English (particularly in the name of development) may be read as a mechanism through which neoliberal prerogatives are maintained, naturalized, and expanded” (Jakubiak, 2012). However genuine volunteers’ motives were, they were participating in an activity that promotes unequal Global North power structures that position English as the world’s lingua franca.

The precarious Global North and South relationship has been used in rhetoric given that the industrial, Global North countries dominate the economic and political sphere of the world.

However, maybe volunteers can help change this dynamic between the two regions, given that volunteer tourism “tend to attract young, globally conscious individuals who have cultural and economic capitals well as interests in social justice participation” (Conran, 2011). Volunteers who come to teach English were under no illusions about their power to change the world. Most agreed that while they enjoyed their experience, they were not saving anyone from anything. English teaching alone cannot improve structural inequality between the North and South. The promotion of multiple levels of development may benefit Thai people. Given that, English knowledge alone will not remove someone from poverty.

Ultimately the business of volunteer tourism is simply that, a business. Volunteer tour organizations has to support their operation cost and to do this they charge large sums of money for their programs. The main benefit to volunteers is that these organizations arrange the logistics of volunteer activities. However, the volunteer tour companies are not a non-profit with economic development goals. When English instruction volunteers go to school they are placed for short periods of time. FFA is interested in placing volunteers not supporting the long-term English literacy of Thai children. The volunteers are no ignorant to the fact that their experience was expensive and in interviews multiple volunteers questioned what exactly the money their was going toward. If volunteers had done service work with an NGO or a non-profit organization maybe they would have been required to stay longer. Additionally, not-for-profit organizations there is usually a mission and goal that is trying to be achieved. FFA was not attempting to achieve any long-term goals through their volunteer placements.

For anyone looking to participate in short-volunteer tourism opportunities there are many options. However, for any volunteer they should do research and decide on what kind of experience they want. Whether that is heavily tourism based or goals oriented. At its best

volunteer tourism can promote cultural exchange but at its worst it is a neo-imperial endeavor that promotes global power inequalities. Volunteer tourism as a sector of the tourism market will continue to grow as more individuals seek to engage in authentic experiences. The volunteer tourism market can be a bridge of cultural exchange while simultaneously promoting the Global North value system. Volunteers can serve as a messenger for the ethically conscience. Volunteer tourism will continue to grow and anyone participating in these programs should do research as to the kind of work there are doing to prevent harm to local communities.

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