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Using a Peace Corps Volunteer in a University Translation Program

I am writing not as a specialist in translation but as an academic administrator. For the last seventeen months, I have been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine, assigned as a Visiting Professor in the Faculty of Applied Linguistics at the Kharkiv National Aerospace University. But prior to joining the Peace Corps I was for nearly thirty-five years a Professor, Department Head, and Dean at an American University. When I look at how Peace Corps Volunteers are used in Ukrainian Universities, I do so primarily as a Department Head and Dean, concerned to make the best possible use of faculty time.

Under the rules agreed to by the Peace Corps and the Ministry of Education of Ukraine, each Volunteer provides his or her Faculty with approximately six hundred and fifty hours of teaching time in each academic year, as well as additional time that can be spent preparing classes, grading papers or tutoring groups of students. The university can also claim much of the Volunteer's time during the summer. For an administrator, the key question is how to use that time, how to insure that each hour spent by the Volunteer will benefit students to the greatest possible degree.

This is a surprisingly difficult problem, and it is one that can only be solved by the Department Head, not by the Volunteer. The difficulty lies in the fact that the Volunteer comes to an organization that is already working well without him. A skilled and experienced Faculty of Translation or Applied Linguistics, staffed with specialists in modern languages, philology, linguistics, the history and development of languages, and language teaching methodology, is fully qualified to produce Russian-English or Ukrainian-English translators, and has done so for many years. When the Volunteer arrives, there is no vacant space for him to fill or immediate, defined need for his services.

The problem is made more complex by the fact that Volunteers themselves bring a diverse set of skills, which in many cases have little to do with language teaching. Every Volunteer assigned to a university has at least a Masters degree. Some have Ph.D.s; others have professional post-graduate degrees in such disciplines as Architecture, Nursing, Librarianship, Computer Science, or Law. Thus while every university Volunteer brings to the university the language skills of a native speaker and significant experience as a student in American higher education, some are not experienced teachers and most are not experienced language teachers.

The Peace Corps Headquarters in Ukraine works to address this problem by providing an extensive training program for all university TOEFL Volunteers. The program includes classes in the organization of Ukrainian universities, lesson planning, and the grading system and standards, and also provides an intensive system of supervised teaching at a local university and a course in grant proposal writing. But the time available for such training is necessarily limited, and thus it is best seen as a foundation for further training.

When the Volunteer arrives at the university, the Department Head faces the problem of building on the Volunteer's Peace Corps' training in a way that allows the Faculty use the Volunteer's skills and experience to maximum effect. The Faculty will have hundreds of hours of the Volunteer's teaching time; how should those hours be used? Certainly the Volunteer can participate in Oral Practice courses. In such cases the Volunteer typically joins the Ukrainian teacher once each week, listens to student's speaking, and corrects grammar and pronunciation while the Ukrainian teacher grades student performance. This approach has some utility; students who pay careful attention will certainly gain some increased fluency over the course of two years. But from an administrator's perspective the effect is limited.

In part this is because of the limited impact on students. In most cases the Volunteer is present for only one class each week, and most students have time to speak only twice during each class. But, in addition, there is a limited impact on the Volunteer. Weekly visits to an oral practice course do not necessarily require that the Volunteer improve his own skills to become more effective. The Volunteer can plan exercises or games, and can prepare readings for student prior to the Oral Practice class, but finally his participation is both too limited and too general.

The Volunteer's effectiveness could be considerably improved if the Head or members of the Faculty created a structure that focused the Volunteer's native speaking skills. The Volunteer as a native speaker brings two primary assets: the ability to hear even the most minor variations in (1) standard American English pronunciation and (2) variations from the appropriate rhythm of an English sentence. These are valuable abilities, but they are in large part passive ones. The Volunteer can recognize errors but in most cases he is not professionally trained to correct them.

However, with some training and appropriate professional reading, the Volunteer can move beyond diagnosis of these problems to actually correcting them. Even a few hours of training, together with the Volunteer's innate ability as a native speaker, are often sufficient to allow the Volunteer to work with an Oral Practice class, diagnose the two or three most common errors in pronunciation, and create a series of drills to improve the pronunciation of, perhaps, a few key vowels, the 't' and "th" sounds, and the "r" sound, the ones that provide the most difficulty to native speakers of Russian and Ukrainian who are trying to learn English.

The advantage of this approach is that both the Volunteer and the students have specific and limited goals. The Volunteer is not charged with the vague goal of improving speaking but with the manageable objective of improving just a few specific pronunciation behaviors. Yet if the Faculty or the Head have chosen the behaviors carefully, the result will be a measurable improvement in the students' overall speaking skills. And because success can be

defined and measured with pre- and post-tests, the work of the Volunteer himself can be continually monitored and improved.

In a similar way, the Volunteer can be used to improve students' skill in the rhythms of the English sentence. As linguists know, communication in a spoken sentence is governed by the stress [or emphasis] placed on specific words. This stress, in English at least, is created by a combination of changes in volume, pitch, speed, and micro-pauses before and after some words. Because the precise nature of the stress will change depending on the structure of the sentence, the speaker's precise intent, and the relationship between speaker and listener, it is difficult to create exact rules for English stress.

The Volunteer himself probably has a limited understanding of sentence stress, but he can intuitively create correct stress and can recognize its absence. Thus he can model and diagnose stress problems in students. With limited additional training by the Faculty, he can also come to understand the components of stress, and begin to explain, model, and correct behavior.

In most cases, these two activities probably provide the most value to a Linguistics or Translation faculty. The Volunteer's skills are focused on very limited and specific goals that are important to the faculty, and the faculty itself can monitor both the Volunteer's and the students' behavior to achieve the maximum result.

However those faculties that want even greater value and have appropriate Volunteers can consider more ambitious plans. In some cases, Volunteers can be given total responsibility for entire courses. Courses in English Literature, British or American Country Studies, Business English, and Technical Communication can be taught very effectively by a native speaker with appropriate post-graduate education. Some groups of Volunteers include individuals with decades of university teaching experience. Each country has its own particular way of both teaching and grading, but it would not be unreasonable to assume that an experienced university teacher could quickly adapt to the Ukrainian classroom.

In addition to formal work in the classroom, Volunteers are expected to take additional activities. University TOEFL Volunteers tutor in schools, work with theatre groups, write grant proposals, and form English speaking clubs. Here too, a faculty can guide the activities of a volunteer to the maximum advantage of the university.

Grant writing is an obvious activity. It would seem reasonable that every university Volunteer work with the Faculty to develop a plan that would provide new equipment to support the faculty's teaching mission. Courses in film and media, in writing and speech, and distance learning courses could all be improved or made possible with additional technology. Student conferences and workshops could also be supported. Success in such an effort requires that the Volunteer understand the Faculty's goals and be able match those goals with the stated goals of funding agencies to create an effective grant proposal. And this too will require careful guidance by an experienced Department Head, but a large number of experienced Volunteers have considerable grant writing experience.

English clubs are less obviously supportive of university goals but with proper planning can be made to support the university. English clubs generally focus on a broad public audience. But clubs can be created to prepare students for any of America's nation postgraduate examinations, including those required for M.S. and Ph.D. programs and programs in law and business. Every university TOEFL Volunteer has done well in at least one of these exams and can teach Ukrainian students to pass it. Volunteers can also teach TOEFL courses and prepare students for Fulbright and Muskie Scholarships. Thus with proper guidance, the Volunteer can give the university considerably more time than the usual twenty hour per week.

In sum, the university TOEFL Volunteer is an asset that can be used with varying degrees of effectiveness. Maximum effectiveness will require considerable planning by the Faculty and Department Head but can result maximum utility to students and as well as long-term gain to faculty.