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著者 : Roger Palmer  
著者所属 : Hirao School of Management, Konan University

## THT Seminar in Kyrgyzstan: Teacher Education as a Blueprint for Development

Roger Palmer

### **Abstract**

Teachers Helping Teachers (THT) is already well-established as a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). By holding annual teaching seminars in Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam, THT assists educators and students in developing countries. The main support offered is to provide teacher-training workshops that exhibit practical, student- and teacher-friendly approaches to language education informed by current research in the field. Hence the sharing of knowledge and expertise inherent in professional development works as the catalyst or blueprint for wider development in countries starved of funding and resources. This report describes the expansion of a seminar in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, now in its second year. Issues arising from the seminar are considered by looking at the framework of the seminar, its impact on participants, and future directions.

### **Keywords**

developing countries, language education, professional development,  
teacher-training workshop, teaching seminar

### **1. Introduction**

The second THT professional development seminar in the Kyrgyz Republic was held at Bishkek Humanities University (BHU) from September 13<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010. To put in perspective the risks taken by the delegates just to arrive in Kyrgyzstan and the problems facing the host institution

in holding the seminar, some brief background is instructive; for this year's event took place under a cloud of uncertainty, following a revolution earlier the same year which deposed the former president of the republic, who fled the country. Thousands of victims were reported in the southern city of Osh alone amidst inter-ethnic tensions, and the incoming provisional government was said to have been left with the state finances in a parlous condition.

Economic disadvantage and political instability frequently go hand-in-hand with lack of access to education, and it is no coincidence that the countries in Asia which THT is active in include Bangladesh, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam. Indeed, abandoned to its own devices in the post-Soviet handover, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan struggles to provide enough jobs and feed its people, let alone expand its educational base and broaden opportunities. Measured by the yardstick of the UN Human Development Index, which attempts to compare and rank development on a global scale, Kyrgyzstan places at number 120 (United Nations, October 2009). The exceptional willingness of BHU to implement a program of professional development thus needs to be viewed in the context of the nation's geographical and historical isolation, poor infrastructure, uncertain political situation, and need for greater investment. Without external assistance of the kind offered by THT, with its self-funding model and experience in running seminars, there are relatively few avenues to explore.

## **2. Framework of the seminar**

Given the obstacles described above, it was encouraging to note that the scope of the seminar had increased dramatically in the space of 12 months, from only two presenters in 2009 to eight presenters and concurrent sessions in 2010. This created a much larger and varied program offered by the seminar, but at the same time brought a number of challenges to overcome. Some of the problems faced were organizational, in respect to providing enough classrooms and the right kind of equipment in an institution unaccustomed to running a seminar of this nature and on such a scale; and others were logistical, in terms of flying eight presenters in from Japan on different flights to a country with a limited infrastructure and no direct flights.

There are a number of ways that THT tries to respond to the demands of organizing a seminar. From its own ranks, it provided a delegate leader (Brent Jones) and assistant delegate leader (Roger Palmer) to liaise with BHU. They had been to the University in 2009 to set up the inaugural seminar, and thus had some firsthand knowledge of the country and local issues. To ease the burden on the host institution, delegates did some or all of the following: printed handouts for their presentations in Japan and took them with them; donated resource books and new textbooks relevant to professional

development and current teaching methodology; carried their own laptop computers with them; provided their own portable projectors for Powerpoint-style presentations; and covered all of their own living and travel expenses from Japan to Kyrgyzstan and during the stay.



**Figure 1: Greg Rouault, THT delegate, in front of BHU, September 2010**

In regard to logistics, BHU helped enormously by having one student with a car at the disposal of the delegates to fetch them from the airport and take them around town whenever necessary. The delegates tried to lighten the load by arriving on the same flights to avoid multiple airport pick-ups, which was a challenge given the scarcity of flights to Bishkek, and the fact that delegates live and work in different parts of Japan. On the whole, this effort to tread carefully and be aware of local sensitivities worked out well and adhered to the blueprint of trying to help fellow educators with no strings attached.

Appreciation of the local context and culture and flexibility are part of the THT design. The seminar schedule was changed many times even at the last minute to accommodate as many sessions and welcome the participation of as many local teachers as possible. A number of extra workshops were added after arriving at BHU in response to heavy demand, and interestingly these included one session conducted in Japanese by an American scholar of Japanese literature (Steve Wolfe) on the subject of haiku.

It was the Japanese department, in fact, that had enabled the seminar to take place, for the first contact with BHU had been between delegate leader Brent Jones and a Kyrgyz postgraduate student attending his class in Japan; and it is to the credit of Steve and the other delegates that they managed

to respond to the needs of fellow educators, whether English language specialists or otherwise. The key is that the THT seminars, while conducted mainly in English by English language teaching professionals, is not confined to helping only language teachers or teachers of the English language; nor is it led only by native English teachers: it is a cooperative endeavour enriching educational development for fellow instructors, in this case Kyrgyz teachers of English and Japanese.



**Figure 2: THT delegate Steve Wolfe, BHU, September 2010**

Delegates affiliated with four universities in Japan prepared a program of plenary sessions, attended by all participants, and workshops, targeted at smaller groups.



**Figure 3: THT delegates relaxing at the end of the seminar, Bishkek, September 2010**

Below is a list of 2010 BHU seminar delegates and their affiliations:

Eric Gondree	Hirao School of Management	Konan University
Brent Jones	Hirao School of Management	Konan University (Delegation leader)
Patrick McCoy		Meiji University
Roger Palmer	Hirao School of Management	Konan University (Assistant leader)
Greg Rouault	Hirao School of Management	Konan University
Richard Silver	Hirao School of Management	Konan University
Marian Wang		Kwansei Gakuin University
Steve Wolfe		Ryukoku University

### **3. Impact on participants**

Participants attending the seminar represented both BHU and other colleges in Bishkek. There were also a number of teachers from elementary, junior high and high school institutions, as well as from private language schools.

The participants were able to attend a professional development seminar in their own country for a nominal fee. The majority of those attending lacked the opportunity or funding to go overseas for training, and had limited resources and experience in hosting their own seminars. Thus their

development as a teacher was being held back by these obstacles, and their students in turn were suffering from a learning deficit, starved of the latest research methods, course books and resource books. Unable to advance in their profession, teachers stated that their peers tended to drift out of education into better-paying jobs; and the 'brain drain' was exacerbated by the promise of more lucrative employment in other Russian-speaking areas of the former USSR. Thus THT represented one way to open the door to the influence of teachers trained in the latest techniques and with a global view of the profession. Moreover, the networking possibilities for the participants were hugely expanded by the chance to interact with the delegates and each other. If in any way the seminar can impact on the teachers and help to keep them in their chosen career then it can be termed at least a partial success.

### **3.1 The program and its effects on participants**

There was an enormous breadth of content reflecting the research interests of the team of professionals recruited for the seminar. Steve Wolfe led a session on *Using Cultural Parables for Critical Thinking*, another on *Combining Haiku and Photography*, and one more workshop called *A Walk on the Creative Side* in which he introduced haiku poetry and encouraging participants to express their innermost thoughts and feelings. Participants were stimulated to change how they perceived their classes as a result of the ideas presented. Patrick McCoy came from a different angle in giving practical advice concerning the challenges of *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes*, offering activities that could be used immediately via a *Warm-Up Activities Workshop*, and discussing *Using Comics In The Classroom* from a motivational and theoretical standpoint. Greg Rouault looked more deeply at brain-based learning and its implications, introducing research drawn from experiential learning theory and training design outlining the role of *The Teacher as Facilitator*, as well as an examination of Gardner's theory in *Using Multiple Intelligences to Teach the Way Your Students Learn*. Richard Silver focused on a research interest in learners and their place in education, discussing a pilot program he conducted on *Autonomous Learning Groups: Why Students Need Them and How They Work*, student-led presentation-discussions in *How Devolving Power to Students Fosters Leadership*, and the often difficult transition from high school to university life in *Helping Students Adapt to Higher Education*.



**Figure 4: THT delegate Richard Silver, BHU, September 2010**

Marian Wang, looking more at skills from her experience of teaching English for academic purposes (EAP), examined *Vocabulary Retention through Lexical Chunks*, the issue of *Encouraging English Use in the Classroom*, and from her experience teaching in Taiwan, *Motivating EFL Students to Write Clear Compositions – Looking at Learner Reflections*. Similarly, Eric Gondree used his experience in an EAP program to reach out to participants teaching similar courses, outlining ideas on *Re-Reading Charts as an Integral Part of Writing*, *Free Internet Resources for English Teachers* to sort through a proliferation of often confusing websites that are hard to evaluate, and *Editing for Unity in English Paragraph Writing* to help students become independent writers and better judges of writing.





**Figure 5: THT delegate Eric Gondree, BHU, September 2010**

From his experience in establishing and overseeing university English programs, Brent Jones gave an introduction to managing macro-level curriculum and micro-level tasks in *Instructional Design 101*; he offered a blueprint for faculty development via Framgames in *Fast, Fun & Furious*; and expounded on service learning as both instructional strategy and motivational tool in *Service Learning in a Content-Focused EFL Program*. Roger Palmer attempted to harness participants' eagerness to find out about ICT in his plenary on *Transforming Education through Blended Learning*, and addressed their concerns on shifting teacher and learner roles in *Considerations in Classroom Management*. He also sought to move learner participation and student agency into the mainstream in *Bringing Sociocultural Theory into Classroom Practice*.

### **3.2 Classroom Observations**

Participants from within BHU expressed an interest in having delegates join classes and observe classes, and as a stimulus and motivation to students and teachers alike this seemed to work extremely well. There was, however, some confusion about the role of the delegates in the classroom: were they there to assist the teacher, observe the teacher, ask questions of the students, or teach the class?



**Figure 6: Classroom observation (and participation), THT delegates, BHU, September 2010**

Observations had some positive repercussions for dialogues between the delegates and BHU faculty. The idea of having instructors from the same department and teaching context observing each other's classes was seen as important for ongoing faculty development. Furthermore, there was an effort to have faculty from different departments observing each other. This was a principle that had been established the previous year during the inaugural BHU seminar, when teachers from the English, Japanese and Korean departments observed each other for the first time. In terms of a 'washback' effect, it is noticeable that within (but not limited to) the Japanese university system, it is unusual for colleagues in the same university department, and even more so across different disciplines, to observe one another in the classroom.

Other than establishing a stricter rationale for the purposes of classroom observations, one other issue arising from them involved the timetable at BHU. Mid-September coincided with the first week of the new semester and a long holiday weekend, and thus there was virtually no opportunity after class to meet with the instructors to discuss specific classroom issues with them. One suggestion was to arrange observations formally according to a schedule in the same way that the workshops are arranged, with clearly defined aims and outcomes.

### **3.3 Panel Discussion**

The final element of the seminar was a panel discussion involving all delegates and participants. This was part of the winding down of the seminar, culminating in the closing ceremony

in which participants were officially awarded their certificates of attendance and completion. It was a chance for everyone to reflect on how far we had come and what still needed to be addressed.



**Figure 7: THT delegate and panelist Marian Wang, with fellow panelists, BHU, September 2010**

Questions to the panel indicated a heightened awareness of the role of the seminar in the development of education in Bishkek, with implications for elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan, and a request to expand the program beyond BHU from participants working elsewhere. Encouragingly, when viewing the seminar as the first step in teachers (the delegates) helping teachers (the local participants), there was a keen interest expressed by participants in taking a more active role in THT seminars, including leading presentation and workshop sessions. This was seen as a necessary function of the work of the seminar and evidence of its success, enabling teachers to offer the benefits of their experience to others in their careers. It would be expected that when those local teachers help themselves to develop professionally, they have the chance to better assist their current and future students as well as other teachers in their country.

One issue that came up repeatedly was how participants could follow up on the work of the THT seminar in the 12-month break until the next seminar. One suggestion was for participants to make use of the THT website (<http://www.tht-japan.org/>) and read the downloadable newsletters. Another was to use the lessons of the THT seminar to run regular professional development meetings in BHU. Delegates donated some useful resources for teacher training to help in this regard

(Harmer, 2007). This was not to oversimplify the challenges facing BHU and other schools in Bishkek. Even within BHU, the structure of university education appears to encompass two separate groups of teachers working independently of each other, but both in English language education. This might be akin to the situation in a Japanese university where, for instance, one group teaches English as part of a literature department, another group teaches it as general compulsory education across all departments for first-year students, and yet another group is hired by a specific department to teach it in a specialist area, such as commerce or political science. Perhaps in this regard, bringing teachers together in the panel discussion to engage in dialogue and find areas in which to work together is an encouraging development. There are some important conclusions to be drawn from this in the area of faculty development which are as yet to be tapped fully.

### **3.4 Feedback**

Some of the comments received from participants (reworded slightly for clarity), included ‘I was glad to communicate with you during the seminar and I hope for its continuation the next year’; ‘I really liked your Blended Learning method. I recommended it to my teacher and she wanted to try your method at once.’; and ‘I’d like to say many thanks for your coming and sharing your methods with us. That’s a really unforgettable experience for me.’ It is sometimes necessary to take a step back and appreciate that what may seem ordinary and commonplace to the delegates - attending a professional development seminar - is a first-time experience for a number of the participants, and may prove to be a groundbreaking step in their professional career.

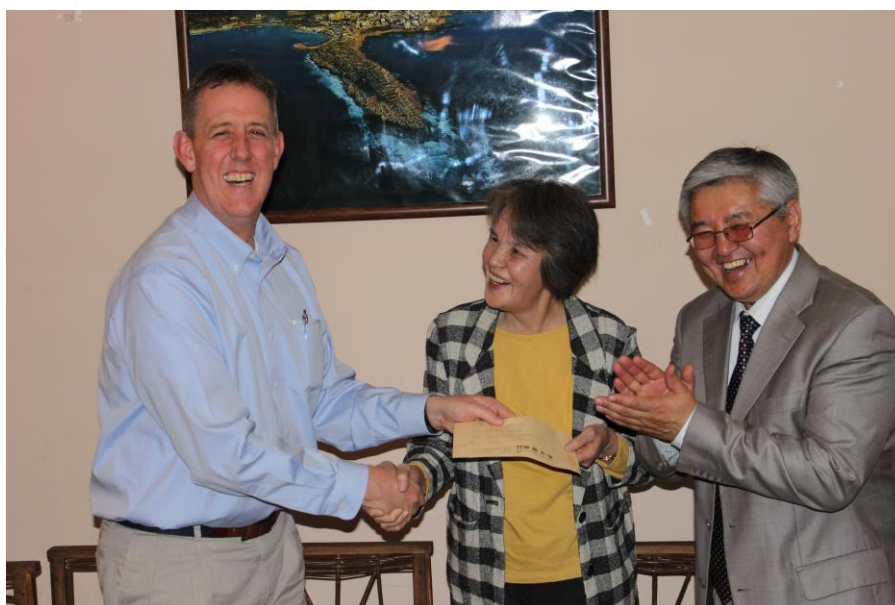
### **4. Future directions**

THT is by its nature made up of a group of teachers who come together to give their time and energy to support fellow educators in the region; it relies on the goodwill of the volunteers and the host institution. It is important that it continues to broadcast its appeal and keep to its roots. By expanding from Bangladesh into Vietnam, Laos, the Philippines and Kyrgyzstan, it has to grow its membership base and numbers of active participants in order to be able to support more seminars and more teachers across Asia.

One important theme going forward is to gain the involvement of students as teachers. Already, a number of Konan University students from the Hirao School of Management have been to the Philippines on a service-learning project to assist in the language education of minority children, with important repercussions for the teachers in that part of the country. It is hoped that in

2011 onwards, given a calmer political situation in Kyrgyzstan, that service-learning can be applied with equal energy and success in Bishkek, to the great benefit of the students there including those studying Japanese in the relevant department of BHU.

Another important strand is to maintain the size and quality of the delegation, whilst widening its appeal and influence outside teachers who attend the seminar in BHU. There has been a strong demand from other universities in Bishkek, as well as at the primary and secondary level. Given the fact that teachers are starved of the kinds of workshops run by THT, and appear to desperately need some outside help, it would seem to be a positive and natural extension of the work already being done. To return to one of the earlier themes of this discussion, the obstacles may prove to be organizational and logistical, but hardly insurmountable providing there are enough teachers volunteering.



**Figure 8: THT delegate leader Brent Jones, handing over the Balsamo scholarship to BHU, Bishkek, 2010**

A final strand is for educators to realize the privilege it is to do their job and to want to share opportunities for mutual learning and growth with colleagues regardless of borders and ethnicities. Founder Bill Balsamo was fond of saying in relation to THT, ‘We’re not just an organization, we’re an idea, a concept.’ True to that spirit, a fund named in his honour now provides scholarships for deserving students in countries such as Kyrgyzstan.

## **5. Conclusion**

The second THT professional development seminar in the Kyrgyz Republic managed to grow massively in quantity and scope, from two delegates the previous year to eight; yet by all accounts it managed the difficult task of maintaining the high quality of workshops established in the inaugural seminar, while retaining the personal touch often missing from large conferences. In many ways, despite the enormous challenges of carrying a seminar overseas and running it there in toto, it met or even surpassed the expectations placed on it. The challenge will be to continue to satisfy rising expectations by keeping to the blueprint expounded upon above, while bringing in local teachers to help their peers in their own environment through their own efforts. Sharing knowledge and expertise in that sense engenders a sense of participation, common ownership, and broadly-based educational opportunity.

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