

Student Missionaries *and* English Language Learners

Seventh-day Adventists strongly believe in service to others. Thus, service learning has become an integral component of the curriculum at all educational levels in the Adventist school system. At the university level, “the opportunity to serve as a student missionary is one of the distinguishing marks of Christian education.”¹

For example, Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU) in Keene, Texas, sends out 10 to 20 student missionaries each year. Like the volunteers from other Adventist colleges, SWAU students have served in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Pacific Islands, and South and Central America, and generally apply for a one-year assignment. After a brief introduction to the culture and customs of their host country, students assume a variety of responsibilities. A number of student missionaries are teachers of English language learners (ELLs). As they fill this role, they must attempt to meet the instructional needs of ELLs at different proficiency levels.

Let’s listen in as three former student missionaries (Lindsay Hong, Michelle Otis, and Priscilla Valencia) are interviewed



Student missionary Lindsay Hong with her Cambodian students.

concerning their life-changing stories of teaching English language learners.

How did you become interested in serving as a student missionary?

Priscilla: I heard about it at a vespers held by student missions at Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska). My cousin had decided she was going to go and serve. I talked to my parents about her decision, and they got so excited. They

thought it would be perfect for me to go as well. I prayed for guidance on what to do. At our next school chapel, I saw an ad to go to Palau as a kindergarten teacher, and after a bit of coaxing, I knew that was my call.

Michelle: I got interested in student missionary work because someone planted the seed in my mind by telling me about their experience as a student missionary. As I thought about the idea that I could serve as well, things began to fall into place for me to go as a student missionary from Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan).

Lindsay: I always wanted to go overseas and do mission work. During Missions Week at Southwestern Adventist Uni-

BY CAROL CAMPBELL WITH LINDSAY HONG, MICHELLE OTIS, AND PRISCILLA VALENCIA

versity, I was excited by the student missionary presentations and displays and decided to apply.

What assignment did you accept?

Priscilla: My three choices were for Palau, just different grades. Eventually, I received word that I had been accepted as the 2nd-grade teacher at Koror Seventh-day Adventist Elementary School in Palau.

Michelle: I accepted the call to go to Cambodia Adventist School.

Lindsay: I also went to Cambodia Adventist School.

What type of orientation or training were you given after accepting your assignment?

Priscilla: On July 30, I flew to Hawaii for a three-day orientation. It was basically a crash course made up of three or four seminars in classroom management, first-day impressions, how to build a relationship with God, and how to deal with homesickness. The only glitch was that most of us hadn't slept much prior to arriving in a different time zone, so it was hard to stay awake and retain anything that was being presented.

Michelle: I was part of a community college at the time, so I went online and downloaded a pamphlet that dealt with culture shock, being a missionary, what the Bible said about it, and

some other things. I was required to read the chapters, answer the questions at the end of each chapter, and e-mail them to an individual at Andrews University.

Lindsay: There was a one-week orientation, which included an introduction to the culture and classroom learning strategies, when I arrived in Cambodia.

What were your responsibilities while serving as a student missionary?

Priscilla: I was the 2nd-grade teacher of 21 students. I assumed the responsibilities of teaching, grading, counseling, and tutoring. I also helped out with the Sabbath schools and preaching. Most importantly, though, I was a friend and role model for my students.

Michelle: My responsibilities were to teach English to kindergarteners, English grammar to 11th and 12th graders, and science to 8th graders. I was also the yearbook editor.

Lindsay: I taught language arts and math to 7th graders and English to 9th and 10th graders.

Describe the students in your classroom.

Priscilla: They were so small! I had 21 students in all, and they varied from being very quiet and shy, to comedians, to squirmy. I had some students who were so far ahead they could



Student missionary Priscilla Valencia provides one-on-one help for a student in her class in Palau.



Michelle Otis with her 11th-grade yearbook staff in Cambodia.

have easily been in 3rd grade, and others who surprised me they were in 2nd. But the thing I remember most was that all of them wanted to be with “teacher.” They were so loving and caring, and would do anything to help you.

One little girl started the year not even knowing her letters. By January, she could read me a story by sounding out all the words by herself! I was so ecstatic I could barely sit still! At the end of tutoring one day, before she ran to catch her ride, she stopped, gave me a hug, and said, “Thanks!” I was a bit confused and asked, “For what?” All she said was, “For teaching me to read!” And you can imagine all the tears I had to hold back at that moment.

That was the turning point for me. I realized then, that even though it seemed that sometimes the students weren’t paying attention and I thought they weren’t learning anything, with God’s help I was actually making a difference, even if it was only in the life of one little girl.

Michelle: I would like to tell you about each one of my students, but that would take too long. They each had their individual strengths and weaknesses. Overall, they were very respectful of me. Even though student missionaries come and go each year, they were still very loving and kind to me. They went out of their way to help me carry things. Some students

invited Lindsay and me to go on camping trips with them or to go to their house and visit with them. They made my heart swell with joy. I miss them all very much!

Lindsay: Every student was different and had different needs; they could not all be met the same way. Despite the fact that there was a variety of developmental levels in every class, the students all wanted to succeed.

How did you initially communicate with the students?

Priscilla: They all spoke English, so communicating wasn’t really a problem. But since English was their second language, reading and writing were a challenge for them.

Michelle: Most of my students understood basic English, so communication wasn’t a problem.

Lindsay: Some students were very proficient in English and could communicate well; others struggled to understand and express themselves in English.

How did you address the needs of the English language learners in your classroom?

Priscilla: I started from a logical beginning, the alphabet. We went over the alphabet every day, then we switched to the sounds each letter makes, followed by naming things that went

with each sound. I had after-school tutoring to help with spelling, reading, and homework. I gave any time I had to help them succeed. And as an answer to prayer, I was able to get a college student to come in two days a week to assist students who needed extra help.

Michelle: For the kindergarteners, I had their homeroom teacher with me to help explain some English words. To increase understanding, I would point to the object or act out the word. For the 8th, 11th, and 12th graders, I would ask some of the students who understood the lesson to explain it to those who didn't understand English as well.

Lindsay: I required the students to use English to express themselves during class discussions. We did many extracurricular activities, including the students practicing their English.

Were there specific activities that you found promoted their reading and writing development?

Priscilla: At the beginning, I had a lot of read-alouds with big books. As the year progressed, I continued the read-alouds with other books, while adding as many books as I could to the classroom library. We also had small groups that would read together from our textbooks, a form of guided reading. The students lacked confidence in writing, so I incorporated the use of journals across the curriculum. I encouraged them to sound out words, so they could be more independent. We would also write letters to my home, telling my parents what we were doing. Another thing we would do was to play games to practice the phonics or spelling lesson of the day. I also developed a word bank, writing words on the side of the board that the students used frequently or words that were tough to spell.

Michelle: I tried to use different activities to make the lessons more fun. In kindergarten, we sang lots of songs with actions. The 8th graders read aloud, pausing at the end of paragraphs for someone to explain what they had read. We had competitions in the 11th and 12th grades. For example, I would write nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., on small slips of paper, mix the words in a hat, and pass them out. The students had to decide what their word was and go to the corner that had its description (noun, verb, etc.). Then we would go over it together and say "agree" or "disagree" and why.

Lindsay: I divided our reading time into three parts: before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities. The main goal before reading a story was to find a way to relate the story to the students so they would be interested. For example, sometimes I would ask them if they had ever had a similar experience. If there were new vocabulary words, I would show them pictures that went with the words. I had the students read the text in a variety of ways. At the beginning of the year, I usually

read to them, pausing to let them read words that were familiar. As the year progressed, the students began to read more independently or in pairs. Sometimes, we would adapt a story for a reader's theatre, which the students really enjoyed. We also spent time discussing stories after reading them.

What was the most important thing you learned while working with the ELLs in your classroom?

Priscilla: You can't rush them. Before school started, I had completed two weeks of lesson plans. I found out on the first day of school, however, that most of my class couldn't read or spell. So I basically had to throw out all my lessons and start from scratch, focusing on the areas they needed help with the most. As their skills developed, I brought in more challenging material and began using the textbooks.

Michelle: I learned three very important things: God is the foundation that can always be there for us; there are many ways that God can use people to witness for Him; and I love teaching.

Before I went as a student missionary, I would turn to God as my last resort whenever I had a problem. I would first try to do things on my own power and would find out that I couldn't



Student missionaries Michelle Otis (front) and Lindsay Hong (back left) with their roommate in Cambodia.



At the school in Palau where she served as a student missionary, Priscilla Valencia listens attentively as one of her students reads.

do it all. For example, when I was teaching in Cambodia, I struggled sometimes with how to teach a topic. I would stress about it the night before. Then, the day that I needed to teach the subject, I would pray about it in total despair, knowing that I couldn't do it by myself. About an hour before class, God would give me a great idea about how to teach the concept and a game to apply it with.

Sometimes, I would also be homesick and sad. When I read my Bible, one of the verses would strengthen and encourage me to focus on each day and the goodness of my students and the people around me.

Lindsay: Students learn differently and at different rates. I also realized that teaching is a full-time commitment.

What recommendations would you make to others who are considering a similar assignment?

Priscilla: Do it! You won't regret it! But most importantly, don't give up. Someone once told me that being a student missionary is the hardest, yet most rewarding thing you will ever do. And I totally agree!

Michelle: Go! There are so many good memories that I have gained from my experience in Cambodia. It is an experience that everyone should have, whether it is in the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa, or elsewhere. This is a time to step out and trust God to take you where you need to go. You will learn so much and be blessed by your experience and the people you meet.

Lindsay: You need to have an open mind as a student missionary and be ready to adapt and change to meet the needs of the individuals you are called to serve.

These three accounts of student missionaries' experiences teaching English-language learners demonstrate the commitment of our young people to serve others. Placements and responsibilities vary as young people are sent out as student missionaries, but often they find themselves in positions in which they must provide instruction or support for individuals for whom English is not their first language. Therefore, planners should empower the student missionary with the neces-

sary strategies to be successful in serving the needs of these learners.

Liz Regan² provides an annotated list of 20 ELL teaching tips that could be easily adaptable to the student-missionary experience. The list includes the following topics:

1. Pairwork/Groupwork
2. Reading Aloud
3. Checking Understanding
4. Pronunciation
5. Speaking to Other Students in English
6. Guessing Answers
7. Stopping an Activity
8. Feedback
9. Dealing With Vocabulary Queries
10. Monitoring
11. Error Correction
12. Eliciting
13. Checking Together
14. Reading Before Writing
15. Brainstorming
16. Personalizing
17. Translating
18. Pacing
19. Concept Checking
20. Using Dictionaries

As our institutions continue to train and send out student

missionaries, we must give careful consideration to their training and orientation. In particular, a handbook of teaching strategies could be developed to assist those working with English language learners. Our young people are excited about fulfilling the commission to serve others; let's make sure they have access to resources that will make this challenge a life-changing experience. ✍



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