



At 18 years old, having just finished my A-levels, my motives for choosing to volunteer to teach English in India were varied. I wanted to travel, to meet new people, and to change my perspective on my—frankly very comfortable and easy—life back home. I had never thought about teaching before, but, with my ‘geography-student’ head on I signed up, strongly believing that education is fundamental to social and economic development.

Arriving in Kerala

Embarking on the trip meant a number of firsts: my first flight alone, longest trip away from home, and furthest distance I’d ever travelled. Thrown in with the idea of staying with a group of strangers, for three weeks, I was a little apprehensive at first!

Once the stress of airport security, baggage, transfers and customs had been overcome, I could enjoy my flight, viewing the beauty of Kerala from above. Huge expanses of green, palm-tree forest woven with curling backwaters, tiny chaotic towns and settlements, strips of golden sand on the coastline... It was dazzling!

Down on the ground, the serenity of the flight immediately evaporated. Turn the volume up on Kerala and it’s a clutter of sounds—from the wailing fish seller at six in the morning to the constant beeping of car horns, children’s singing at school to the clamour of monsoon rains.

The State of Education in Kerala

One of the first things I found out about education in Kerala is that appearances can certainly be misleading. The first time I visited the school where I’d be teaching, the children were so smartly dressed in their uniforms and looked to be happy and healthy like any other school children. So I was completely unprepared for how I felt, seeing the slum where many of them came from. The makeshift houses are just metres away from filthy, unsanitary water which floods the area during monsoon season and can spread diseases.

Though they are fortunate enough to go to school, the children simply do not receive the kind of education that many more privileged children in India receive. Their standards of speaking English are far below what they should be, to the extent that the national curriculum does not align with their abilities. This made teaching a real challenge at times!

I remember one of my most successful lessons was with a little girl, where I was teaching her verbs. She was a student who was incredibly good at arithmetic, so I’d made her a bunch of matching cards with pictures on such as ‘sitting’, ‘clapping’ and ‘running’. She responded so well to the game, remembering the pairs and enjoying counting them up at the end. (She always won against me!) I think one of the most rewarding—and unexpected— aspects was discovering each child’s individual talents and using them to create lessons which were exciting, engaging, and drew upon what they were good at.

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Learning English with visual aids



The Value of English Lessons

Another thing that I learnt during my trip is the value of being able to speak English in India. A small part of me was initially uncomfortable with the whole concept of teaching English in an area where they have their own language. What right did I have to enforce my culture on them? I felt that I was dismissing the value of their language by teaching my own.

Yet it quickly became clear to me how important it is to know English, in order to get a good job in Kerala. It not only broadens young peoples' job opportunities to the whole of India (where Malyalam, the local language, is not widely spoken), but allows the young generation to connect with the ever-increasing global community. So, I managed to dismiss my initial doubts and see that the work I was doing was for the good.

The second school I taught at was a local catholic school. The children here tended to have a higher ability of English speaking. However, the main problem here was a diverse range of abilities. Whilst some children could speak quite fluently, a few could scarcely speak a word of English. This made catering for mixed abilities a real challenge!

I remember one really shy little boy, whose friend cheekily whispered in my ear, "he doesn't speak English!" when he couldn't respond to a basic question. Through lots of repetition, and overhearing his friends talking, he began to build confidence. For some children, getting them to say a few words feels like a huge step. Yet the cliché really is true—half the struggle of language learning is confidence.

Leaving India and Returning Home

And so when my three weeks were up, having to leave all this behind was horrible. I felt like I was abandoning them! All the progress I'd begun to make was being left behind, along with all the children I'd grown close to. There are so many things I miss about India. Everything from Masala tea (delicious!), to being able to catch a bus for 10p, and of course, the wonderful group of volunteers and staff I met out there. But most of all I felt a sense that I left my work unfinished—that I left just as I was beginning to make a difference. It's the teaching, and the children who make it so enjoyable, that I will miss most of all.

I just got back from India a few days ago, and to say I'm missing it is an understatement. Kerala is truly unique and unlike anywhere I've been before. Being able to volunteer in such a beautiful, vibrant town has made me feel extremely privileged! The three short weeks that I stayed there were not nearly enough, and sometime in the future I am certain that Kerala will lure me back for more. Watch this space...



Getting creative in the classroom

Frances Carruthers