

Unique Opportunities Awaiting ESL teachers in Southern India

This summer I was invited to Southern India by a non-profit organization called the *Isha Foundation* to spend a month training language teachers in the new methodologies I use in both my Honors classes and at the *Summer Language Institute* at **Middle Tennessee State University**, TPR (Total Physical Response, created by Dr. James J. Asher) and TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling, created by Mr. Blaine Ray). There is a growing concern in India that there are not enough English educated, computer literate people to handle the huge number of jobs that are pouring into the country from outsourcing in the U.S. and U.K..

One of the many philanthropic endeavors of the *Isha Foundation* is a project called "Rural Rejuvenation," which has been commended by the president of India for providing on-site medical and nutritional aid to over one million of India's rural population. The Center itself feeds approximately 1500 people per day and provides both skilled and unskilled job opportunities in the form of construction work, farming, domestic duties, and crafts. By providing both job opportunities and language training for rural India during this crucial moment in time, the Isha Foundation hopes to improve the lot of millions of people.

Tamil, one of the oldest known languages (second to Sanskrit), is the native language of both the villagers and the tribal people of the region. Not many middle class Indians ever have the occasion to even see tribal people, much less observe their learning processes. Consequently, they sometimes have the impression that the tribal children's ability to learn is inferior to that of children from higher classes. For that reason, I was also asked to pilot a language class for tribal children to test the effectiveness of TPR and TPRS and see how just how quickly tribal children could learn English.

My sixteen year old son accompanied me on the thirty-six hour trip and eventually assumed the duties of the official videographer of the project. It was the most exciting, rewarding experience I have ever had and not unlike those I had only read about in the *National Geographic*.

The *Isha Foundation* has a Center situated about 30 kilometers from Coimbatore, a city in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The Center consists of buildings spread out over several hundred acres which are surrounded by palm trees and a dense forest. The area is a part of the Nilgiris biosphere, a national reserve forest full of not only wild animals but various tribal communities. Rising above the palm trees are the foothills of the Velliangiri Mountains, and although far from any coast, the location has the look and feel of a Hawaiian island. My son and I enjoyed both the South Indian cuisine and the simple, traditional way of living; cold showers, hand washed clothes, meals taken sitting on the floor, no napkins or utensils, only the right hand to scoop things in the mouth. Along side ox-driven carts and plows, there may be mopeds and cell phones. The mixture of first and twenty-first centuries is a charming reality allowing for modern conveniences in a serene setting.

The *Isha Center* has responded to the educational needs of the rural population by launching a project to build and staff 200 schools for villagers over the coming years with English-speaking teachers. The Isha Vidhya School was the first to be built and staffed in June of 2006. In addition, the Center has taken a local tribe, the Thanakindi,

under its wing. Unlike other tribal children living in the forest who suffer from malnutrition, the Thanakindi children receive both food and clothing from the Center.

My job at the Center consisted of teaching a morning class in the tribal school, an afternoon class in a village school, and training teachers in a private school located at the Center. At 9:00 a.m., equipped with camera, my son and I would walk the 1 kilometer through the forest to a clearing where the Thanakindi tribe lived. In a one-room school house that had nothing but a chalk board I taught English for about an hour to some twenty children, ranging in ages from two to ten. Monkeys hung in trees and cattle, goats, and chickens roamed in and out of thatched huts on the grounds outside the classroom. Cow dung is periodically spread on floors for pest control. There are no textbooks or paper in these tribal schools. Each child has a tiny slate and chalk.

The luggage carrying both our clothes and my materials did not arrive for one week, so the hands-on methods I use were essential. For the first five days I used TPR, which consists of giving commands using verbs that can easily be modeled by the teacher. The commands always had the children doing things with objects at hand like the body, clothes, nature, colors, numbers, etc. During the TPR period, I developed their familiarity with “who, what, where” questions by simple “yes/no” or “choice” questions and through an activity called “the three ring circus” created by Berty Segal Cook, the top TPR trainer in the country. By day 6, I was able to present a simple TPRStory containing more advanced grammatical structures and some abstract vocabulary. The children acted out the story and were able to give simple one-word answers to a variety of “who, what, why, where” questions. I found them all bright, attentive, and incredibly fun.

In the afternoons, I was driven to the new Isha Vidhya School to teach a room full of fifty second graders English while the ten new teachers observed. A third school, which is located right at the Center, is a private, residential school for middle class children and provides language classes in Tamil, Hindi, and French. This is where we actually lived.

At the end of our stay, journalists from two newspapers in Southern India, *The Hindu* and *New Indian Express*, attended a small press conference to observe and report on what the Thanakindi children had learned after only 10 days. On August 21, the *Hindu* reported:

These students were from tribal villages scattered in the foothills of the Poondi. They did not know English and some of them had not even heard it being spoken before. Yet, they understood their teacher perfectly. Through actions, pictures, songs and short stories, they were initiated in the world of English.

The day before my son and I left India was August 15, Independence Day. The Thanakindi tribe allowed me the privilege of raising the Indian flag on their newly installed bamboo flag pole. The Isha Foundation has asked me to return in May to give a larger training to more teachers in the form of a residential program at the Center. I encourage anyone who is interested in experiencing a rich and ancient culture while at the same time teaching some of the most beautiful, bright children I have ever met to please contact me, Dr. Shelley Thomas, at: shthomas@mtsu.edu