

November 20, 2012

Tuesday used to be my second easy day of the week (after Thursday) but I've committed myself to another class with some remedial level 3 students (juniors). These women did not pass the level 2 exam, yet are in the level 3 class. From what I understand, there is a strong sense to keep students with their peers in each level despite their actual academic skills. Unfortunately, this is a common problem in many schools around the world where promotion is not tied to skills. Teachers must accommodate all levels. I told the level 3 "homeroom" teacher that I didn't want the remedial students in my level 2 class, just observing. I couldn't spend time with them and they wouldn't learn any better the second time without practice. I did agree to help a few students each week while the teachers works with all the level 3 students on vocabulary building. This week was Thanksgiving vocabulary and we used the words from a word search that I had given to all the students last week.

Because Tuesday is busy from 9:30 until 6:00 pm, I must use the restrooms at the University. However, none of the four unisex restrooms indoors, have been functioning for the past few weeks. I am not sure of the problem but I have seen some plumbers in and out of one restroom on the second floor. So, what do the students and faculty do? We use the four-stall outhouse in the back yard. These aren't the everyday variety that I'm used to because there is no seat in the outhouse. (There's no seat in the restrooms inside either.) The center floorboard has been removed so there is plenty of space to look down and try and aim toward.



As I understand it, most gers do not have indoor plumbing, so an outhouse located in the yard near to the ger is used. When I mentioned the old Halloween prank of knocking over outhouses during my father's childhood, the questioning looks suggested that there was really nothing funny about that. For water, the families go to a water collection station periodically to fill their jugs. Our tutor told us her family pays 40 tugriks a liter (approximately \$.03n/1 quart) for their water.

I may as well also mention that toilet paper is not common in the restrooms. Each person brings his/her own. And the kind of toilet paper goes from what I might expect in the US to a double ply of crepe paper-like material which is not perforated or very soft. Since I am on week three of a cold, I have become very familiar with different brands of toilet paper. I brought a box of Kleenex with me but am coveting each sheet and treating myself to one expanse every morning of this cold. Toilet paper is also our replacement for paper towels and dinner napkins, so my quest for the right product continues.

Beyond these petty trials of bathrooms and tissue, I am enjoying my teaching activities. Some days I feel like a total failure and other days are full of highlights and rewards. Although the students in my classes do not have high English skills, many of them work hard to learn whatever is asked of them and then risk making mistakes to improve. I've been asking the Juniors to do presentations and have enjoyed learning about Mongolian holidays, musical instruments, and food. In a recent presentation, one of the women of Khazak descent, Marjan, presented information about the instrument, the dombor. This two-stringed mandolin-like instrument is common here and she learned to play it from her father. (Unfortunately, she didn't have one to demonstrate, but the day following her presentation I saw an older man playing one at the pink market, a large pink building with many vendors selling food, pharmaceuticals, paper supplies, and clothing.)

At the end of Marjan's presentation, she was asked by another Khazak student, Mariya, if she knew any stories about the dombra. When Marjan shook her head no, I asked Mariya if she could tell us one of the stories in English. She thought about it for a minute or two and then shook her head. So, I suggested she tell the story in Mongolian and then translate it to English afterwards for my sake. She agreed and began the story. As she started, all the other women (9) moved from their desks to seats closer to her to listen to



the story. (It reminded me of a story hour at a library when all the elementary students move closer to the librarian to see the pictures in the book.) They wanted to hear every word. Half of this class is Khazak and the other is Mongolian so many of the women may not have heard this Khazak tale before. (Photo courtesy of <http://musicheritage.nlrk.kz/uploads/image/dombra.jpg> )

It was lovely to watch and listen to her tell the short folktale with some of the other Khazak women chiming in and repeating her words. Once she finished the story, one of the stronger English students translated it for me. The gist of the story was that the only son of the king was killed while hunting and his servants knew the king would have a problem learning what happened. So, they decided to let the dombra tell the story. After the musician finished the song of the death of the son, the king became very angry and began to throw rocks at the dombra causing a hole in the front of the instrument. This hole still exists in the design of the instrument today. (I'm pretty sure the translation loses some of the passion of the story!)

Instances as simple as this happen regularly and that helps me forget about the days when my English classes require the gathering of all cell phones to prevent unwanted calls and texting and a close monitoring of Mongolian translations between the stronger students who believe they are helping the weaker students who haven't mastered many English sentences in their ten years of instruction.

Woody and I have been called into service this month in a myriad of ways beyond our regular teaching schedules. It's our English skills that draw people to us not our glowing personalities. Woody has helped a number of students with personal statements as they enter a competition for US embassy scholarships for one term of studying in the US. He has also been regularly consulted on English grammar and idiom use in the Chinese-English department. He helps the English club for his department every Monday afternoon. That group has different discussions each week as they practice their English. This week it was Mongolian elections. In addition, his colleagues asked us to make some recordings for their presentations at a secondary-school conference on listening and speaking. After Woody stopped giggling, we were able to record a number of conversations for them.

I prepared a three-hour workshop for the conference but due to the holiday of Chinggis Khan's birthday, the conference was rescheduled at another time and aimag (Uvs) north of Khovd at the last minute. Two of our university instructors presented for all of us. (Not sure how that worked out since my presentation had a lot of activities for the teachers that I didn't explicitly explain because I do them in my classes, but...) Also, the Dean of the Foreign Language Department is preparing to leave for a 2.5 year program in Osaka Japan and wanted help with a couple of essays, so I've worked on those with her. And our Mongolian tutor, Undemaa, is working on her Master's thesis on assessment/ testing and needed to design a number of tests for her non-English majors (scientists and law students who study English). We spent last Sunday afternoon thinking of non-traditional ways (not multiple choice, matching, or true/false) to do this. She has about 10 days to finish her testing and analysis which seems a little crazy if you ask me, but I'm not 23. (Photo of Undemaa courtesy of Woody Packard.)



We have some Thanksgiving plans that include making pumpkin pies with the Russian-English teachers on Sunday and eating an American-Mongolian Thanksgiving with the Russian-English Department on Monday 11/26.