

Teaching Experience: Tbilisi, Georgia—Summer 2016 Paul Almonte, English Department

“They were studying English together, taking a course that Nada hopes will eventually get her a job, and maybe a chance at a new life. When her friend talks about this, Nada offers a fleeting smile, and looks, if only for a moment, like any other young woman her age setting out into life – confident, happy, free. Then something crosses her mind, and her eyes go grey and dead once again.”

– Janine di Giovanni, *The Morning They Came for Us: Dispatches From Syria*.

This past summer I had the opportunity to teach in an English language immersion program in Tbilisi, Georgia being established by LCC International University for refugees from Syria and Iraq as well as internally displaced people (IDPs) within Georgia. Based in Klaipeda, Lithuania, LCC has a long history of working with needy and at-risk students in post-Soviet bloc countries, including Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Georgia, and Lithuania (where they founded the school as Lithuanian Christian College in 1991). The intention of this specific program is to help ready students for university study at American, Canadian, or European institutions. In partnership with NGOs, UN groups, and humanitarian organizations, LCC is identifying “students from the Middle East whose opportunity for study has been disrupted by war and violence for support and entrance into this program. Students from minority and under-represented groups (including women) who have little or no likelihood of returning home, or who have limited opportunity to study elsewhere in the region because of their identity,” are a priority. LCC also works with religious groups within Georgia as well as the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories in identifying, enrolling, and supporting Georgian IDPs.

In this inaugural semester, I taught reading comprehension to English as a Second Language (ESL) students, at both intermediate and advanced levels, integrated with concurrent courses on grammar, writing, and speaking. This is not a “teaching tip” *per se*, but simply a record of my experience—and, most importantly, what I learned—during my

time in Georgia and which I hope some might find useful for their teaching among our own diverse student population.

As I prepared to meet my students in what were less than ideal teaching conditions (LCC is renting and renovating space in a local community facility: a complex housing a nursing home, youth activities program, and a neighborhood interfaith religious center, but which had poorly equipped classrooms and spotty electricity, let alone reliable internet), I admittedly struggled with typically first-world complaints. My first day (hard upon an 18-hour trip and only a few hours sleep before our first classes) came with just a short briefing as to who our students were and what levels of English proficiency they had. Indeed, I was quick to learn that due to a lack of instructors the “intermediate” group would actually be a mix of relatively conversant English language learners and some with no English at all. This, coupled with the fact that local Georgian television would be covering the opening of our program, made for an anxious start to my work. After a good deal of coffee and quiet bemoaning of the lack of things many of us take for granted (dry erase markers, internet access, consistent electricity), I began my classes and entered into what became my own relearning of what teaching is and can be.

Happily, despite the relatively Spartan conditions (at least as I viewed them) and often severe language barriers, most all the students—international refugee and local Georgian alike—were quick to embrace us and express a genuine desire to work together: to read and work on the materials we presented them and participate in the kind of small group conversations (both during class sessions and informal settings) we were encouraging. Those living at the center were the easiest to get to know (as we were sharing meals and communal spaces, and quickly came to explore the local neighborhood together). Most all the “local” Georgians were actually commuting close to two hours each way to our school

(including lining up at a village taxi stand, subsequent drives to the city Metro, transfers to a bus or mini-van after the Metro trip, and a final walk to our Center) and were juggling jobs as well as their own high school or university studies while participating in this program. Hearing these commuting stories—told *apologetically* when students came late to our first week’s morning sessions—very quickly woke me from my own discomforts and had me listening more intently to their lives and experiences. While I had traveled a long distance to get here, these students’ journeys—physically and psychologically—were exponentially longer, greater, and more hard-fought than anything I was enduring. Indeed, after hearing the descriptions of what students were dealing with just to get to class (let alone what most of them suffered previously as IDPs: home villages destroyed or now under Russian occupation and to which they cannot return without submitting to a lengthy and not guaranteed visa process), readying myself to listen to their perspectives became my daily mantra: as a way to become better attuned to their ways of seeing and learning and what they needed and wanted (as opposed to what I expected to provide) while also being careful not to push too hard for them to talk about their more traumatic life stories.

From a teaching perspective, I came to repeatedly remind myself that the reticence or silence students sometimes showed was not lack of understanding but simple and rightful caution on their part. When I was better able to realize that, I believe communication and learning—on both our parts, students *and* teacher—began. I felt as the first week progressed that I was starting to see beyond the abstraction of “typecast refugees” and engaging the students more directly as individuals (with particular learning needs and skills rather than simply a collective group of non-English speakers to be drilled with basic vocabulary or rudimentary sentence structures). For those with ESL backgrounds what I am saying is perhaps obvious: the lack of English language skills often does not mean

inability, but simply means all parties in the learning process—students, teachers, and school personnel—need to find other means and opportunities to communicate, to understand one another. In the case of my work with the “intermediate” group (which, as I mentioned, was actually a group composed of students with a wide range of English ability: from next to none to just below the more “advanced” level), it was often a matter of relying on the higher-level students to translate between English and Georgian and look for shared interests (like the Euro-Cup football that was then in action) that could spark conversation.

The structure of the program did provide numerous opportunities to interact and communicate beyond the classroom: communal lunches and breaks between classes were times where students and teachers talked more freely. Afternoon study hall (technically an hour where I was to help students with “homework” from their other classes) also became a place for conversation, often about the differences among North American, European, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern educational styles (i.e. lecturing versus discussion, make-or-break exams). These sessions felt most valuable as the students and I were able to talk about ideas (politics, history, literature) while also focusing on language and practicing academic and conversational skills they would need going forward.

The opportunity for dialogue was also very valuable to me personally, in terms of helping me learn when or even if to ask about the students’ experiences as refugees or displaced persons: i.e. whether it was appropriate to brooch certain subjects, or wait for individuals to choose to (or not to) open up. Some students very much wanted to talk about their prior lives, taking especial pride in talking about where they came from, in their cultures and families; others were more reticent and withdrawn. Not surprisingly, the informal settings were where the students felt most comfortable in sharing stories. And many of the stories were extreme: a young Iraqi woman, Sundas, whose father was killed in 2006 and

whose whole family had to leave the country because the mother was considered too “Americanized” (and who subsequently began abusing Sundas); another Iraqi, Zaid, whose family lost everything when Mosul was overrun by ISIS and who will have to wait at least five years before his sister, who made it to the U.S., can apply to bring him here; and Milad, a Syrian, who was perhaps the most anxious about improving his English language skills as LCC was preparing to accept him into their main university in Klaipeda if his TOEFL scores were high enough, and thus allow him to resume his university studies (and see a future for himself) that has been brutally interrupted by the war. Hearing and understanding what to do with these stories was a sensitive task, as there was a good deal of acting out, of behavior we weren’t fully equipped to handle. The chance to talk with individual students outside the classroom (again, in informal settings like having lunch or walking to a market for groceries and then cooking dinner together) did help to a degree. But the experience has reminded me just how valuable student support services are—and how necessary.

As I’ve returned to these thoughts while drafting and revising this essay (especially the hardships the students were and are continuing to endure), two things repeatedly come to mind: from a strictly pedagogical standpoint, the most notable being the hard work that is ESL teaching. All this gave me a greater appreciation of the barriers associated with English as a Second Language: learning it *and* teaching it.¹ I’m learning not to take anything—language, meaning, or even gestures—for granted. From this experience and what I hope to employ in my continuing work at Saint Peter’s is to slow down my conversation: to express ideas and look at language more deliberately, to continually look for synonyms, not just as

¹ In this regard, I’d like to thank Alicia D’Amato, the director of our Center for Learning Acquisition and Culture (CELAC) for taking so much of her time this past spring to tutor me on finding and teaching level-appropriate readings as well as share with me her expertise in the ESL classroom. As always, too, I can never say enough about my friend and colleague, Dr. Robin Gingerich, who directs the program in Tbilisi and has dedicated the past 15 years of her life to LCC International University and English-language instruction.

matters of basic vocabulary, but as ways to find common ground, if not in direct experience but in ideas and values and help students explore the English language through use and discussions of their own (in the case of my time in Tbilisi, Georgian, Russian, and Arabic).

The second takeaway is the awareness of a real fine line between a kind of normalcy one finds among all students, the genuine similarities of all late-teens, early-twenties students (posing for and taking selfies at the drop of a hat, “sometimes” not doing homework because of a “late night” out and, talking about exams, jobs, goals, and dare I say, *futures*) that made our classroom work and meal times together comfortable and the moments when these particular students’ despair returns; when the gulf reappears because the hopelessness does or the painful memory (the loss of a parent, the limbo of being a person without a country, of having to rely on the kindness of others, of, pardon the reference, of “strangers”). Again, I find what I’ve written here less a “teaching tip” to or for anyone else and more an acknowledgment of what I need to remember personally, to remind myself of as I encounter and engage with our own diverse students: where they come from, what they are dealing with now and what daily worries and memories impact their lives. And also, if I may say, I offer this as a paean to both ESL educators and to those people who always put their students first no matter the difficulty of the circumstance.