

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Leadership-in-Action

Leadership-in-Action Project Report Kaohsiung, Taiwan

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1 September 2026

Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action experience was based in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, where I worked with Taiwan Love and Hope International Charity to increase access to English education through their annual summer camp. I chose to work on this project primarily because of the Taiwanese government's push to incorporate English as the second official language of Taiwan by 2030. Given the short timeline, and the gap in educational resources between Taipei and the rest of Taiwan, I wanted to provide manpower and resources to students outside of Taipei to hopefully provide them a foundation in English test-taking that will be helpful as they grow older.

The main goals I had for the project were:

- Develop 6 weeks' worth of English lesson plans before I land in Taiwan, including worksheets, visual materials, and presentations.
- Find at least 3 other volunteers who are interested in teaching before I land in Taiwan. These volunteers will help with lesson plan creation, classroom management, and grading.
- Deliver 15 English lessons to the children as part of their established summer camp program, using the materials prepared in advance.

Though I was quite confident going into this Leadership-in-Action project, I quickly found that the biggest leadership challenge I would face was balancing my personal expectations with what output would be possible with our resources and timeline.

Challenges Faced

The biggest challenge I faced during this project, with regards to teaching English, was overestimating the base level of the students' English when creating my learning resources. In Taiwan, Mandarin is taught using a phonetic system called "Zhuyin", which is different from Mainland China, where the phonetic system "pinyin" uses the Latin alphabet. As a result, many of the students are not completely comfortable with reading in English. Though I initially asked the organization about the students' current English level and had all my materials approved by them, it seems like the organization also overestimated the English level of the children.

As a result, we had to completely redo the lesson plans on the fly, shifting to very basic lessons about the alphabet and simple words, whereas our previous lessons were full blown reading comprehension tests designed to prepare them for a standardized exam they would take at the end of grade 6. Though it was a struggle to finish the lesson plans while juggling teaching, we eventually got it done.

Because of this, I had to redefine what success in my Leadership-in-Action meant to me. Originally, I had hoped to teach the kids enough English to be able to take a simplified version of the standardized test they would have to take in grade 6. However, given the base skill of the classroom, I had to readjust my expectations. Instead of focusing on building their test taking skills, I wanted to make sure the kids had a basic foundation in

simple words and had fun while learning English. As a very ambitious person, this was quite hard to accept, but I think shifting my mindset on what constituted a success in my Leadership-in-Action helped me bring forward a more positive attitude to the project.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

The main leadership skill I demonstrated through my Leadership-in-Action was problem solving. In the first week of my project, many different things went wrong: I had an issue with my accommodation and had to get a hotel last-minute, the lesson plans were too difficult for the kids to keep up with, and there were a lower number of volunteers than promised by the organization. Though I felt incredibly defeated by the sheer number of things that was going wrong, I did my best to pivot at every point possible and accept the spontaneity with as positive of an attitude as I could, something which I typically don't have to do in Canada.

Teamwork was also another skill I developed significantly during my experience in Taiwan. Since I was working with several other volunteers, I struggled to balance between giving the volunteers work without burdening them too much. Though I initially felt awkward assigning work to other volunteers, especially since I am younger than them, they volunteered to help with different tasks, making me feel more at ease with assigning things to people. This was important in my journey towards better teamwork, especially in assigning tasks rather than taking on all the burden.

Ethical Considerations

The biggest ethical consideration in my project was how punishment was enacted in a classroom setting. Having been raised very Western despite growing up in South-East Asia, I am very against any form of punitive action, including yelling, hitting, and withholding food. However, it is still quite common in many Asian countries, and I saw someone within the organization withhold food from some children because they were misbehaving. Personally, I think withholding food is quite cruel, and something I would never do. However, because the person was one of the co-founders of the charity, no one could stop them from doing it.

It was a tough situation, since no one had the authority to override the person's actions, but she did something that I believe is a violation of a person's basic rights. It's a kind of disagreement that goes beyond simple cultural differences. I elected to simply never do anything similar when I had authority over the classroom, instead opting to disallow children from getting prizes at the end of class if they were misbehaving.

Another ethical issue that arose in my project was racism directed at the volunteers from someone in the charity. In a meeting, the person insulted the volunteer's accent when speaking English and stated that she should speak "without an accent" like I do, in reference to my supposedly "standard" North American accent.

This made me incredibly angry and shocked. It was an odd situation to be in, because it was the first time in my life that I was perceived as North American rather than Asian. Of course, not in the literal sense, but the person who made this racist statement expected me to agree with her elitist takes on the English language because she perceived me as North American, and not South-East Asian. I also felt sorry for the volunteer, as she felt that she could not speak up against this racist criticism.

During the meeting, I shut down the statement and told the person that the volunteer's accent didn't matter since she spoke perfectly fluent English. Having the conversation with her about accents was quite ironic too, as she spoke English with a Taiwanese accent. It was clear that she disagreed with me, but the conversation was cut short as we were sent off for lunch. Though I am not unhappy with how I dealt with the situation, I wish I stood up for the volunteer more, especially since my position (as someone who is perceived as North American by the people I worked with) put me in a better position to speak up against the person who made the remark. It was an overall unpleasant experience and solidified my resolve to call out racism in a better, firmer way the next time I witness it.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

I mainly worked with two Taiwanese volunteers and three Filipino volunteers, all of whom were a pleasure to work with! Though I initially struggled to connect with the Taiwanese

volunteers because I'm not completely fluent in Mandarin, they were incredibly kind and helped me when I struggled with classroom management and classroom equipment.

The three Filipino volunteers I worked with helped me with a bulk of the English classes. They helped me make lesson plans and worksheets and continued the lessons when I had to leave Taiwan and return to Canada. My experience with them allowed me to learn how to trust others and remind myself that delegating tasks is not placing a burden on others, but rather an opportunity for them to engage with the work in a more meaningful way!

Conclusion

Overall, my month in Taiwan taught me a lot about the kind of leader I want to grow into as I end my undergraduate degree. I aspire to be someone who is adaptable, who can pivot when things get bad and still try their best to progress even when things feel difficult. I aspire to be someone who can build good relationships with those I work with, even when cultural or language barriers may pose a challenge. I aspire to be someone who sticks up for people in my team, even when faced with someone in a higher-ranking position than me.

Though I have held many leadership positions before, nothing challenged me quite like living in a foreign country where I am unfamiliar with the land and the people, where everything seems to go wrong simultaneously and it feels like I am incapable of bouncing



back from it. I am not in a rush to enter such a challenging situation again, but I am excited to apply all the leadership skills I've developed as a part of this journey in the endeavours in my last year of university!

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation, Professor Joseph Tiangco, and the University of Toronto Laidlaw Scholars Programme, all of whom sacrificed time and resources to make this project possible.