



# Building an international learning community – and a village school

**Erzsébet Ágnes Békés**

describes an amazing community project with added results.

‘Can you get someone to get you some eye drops?’ I asked Christian. ‘I have some, thanks!’ he replied. He had already been reading out loud each and every word from the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate dictionary for 12 hours. Christian calculated that it would take him about 30 hours to read the 165,000 entries of the 1,460 page ‘lexicon’. His aim was to raise 50 thousand dollars for a US-based non-profit (better said, ‘for-purpose’) organisation called Pencils of Promise (<https://pencilsofpromise.org/>) that has been building schools in Laos, Guatemala and Ghana since 2008 (Braun, 2013).

Christian chose the eve of World Teachers Day in 2020 for what he called ‘maybe the most boring live streaming event in the history of live streaming’ but many of us were mesmerised watching him and clicked on the ‘Donate’ button repeatedly, rejoicing as the total amount got closer and closer to 10 thousand dollars. Seeing how tired he was getting, we were not

sure whether we should cheer him on or beg him to stop. And stop he did, after carrying on for altogether 16 hours. One-fifth of the money was raised, an extraordinary amount in less than 24 hours, but it was below his expectations.

By then I knew Christian Saunders because I had been watching his videos for a good couple of months on his YouTube channel called *Canguro English* (with around 270k followers at the time), so after the extraordinary vocabulary-reading challenge that he set for himself I sent him a message on Facebook saying that he should not stop now: could he not find 400 volunteers from among his YouTube followers and the many members in his Facebook group who would be prepared to put in 100 dollars each so that his school could be built? Perhaps worth a try?

In December 2020, Christian created a closed Telegram group asking future members to donate 100 dollars in exchange for individual or small-

group Zoom chats with him on language issues and freely available activities with other members of the community. The group of the 130-odd volunteers who subsequently signed up included teachers and learners from more than 15 countries (from Latvia through Kazakhstan to Brazil). We created a wealth of language learning activities run by both native and non-native English speaker teachers, emphasising the idea that we are all learners of English at various stages of language acquisition. As one of our experienced non native speaker English teachers (NNESTs) succinctly put it: ‘My English continues to improve. The more I teach, the more I learn.’

So, what is it that is fairly unusual about our project and how could it be adapted by other learning communities?

As for the fundraising side, there is a myriad of education projects supported by crowdfunding but they do not usually involve a sustained effort to go beyond asking for donations and offering some (often symbolic) perks. As opposed to this, we have created a learning community whose members are continuously engaged in genuine communication, often through activities that constitute an interface between classroom and real life.

This brings us to the issue (and value) of learner-centred approaches in English language teaching. The way the *Canguro English* charity group functions can be best related to Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) (Bilsborough, n.d.). The main task is to raise money to build schools by making donations to Pencils of Promise. This is achieved through a fundraising project which creates a lot of opportunities for members to get involved in coordination, collaboration, project management and logistics, using English as a tool for communication.

## The ethos of the group

Many of our members are adult learners who tried to learn English for many years and after numerous ‘false starts’ have ended up watching Christian’s channel, which consistently conveys the same message:

- Learning another language is hard, it’s an arduous journey and there are no shortcuts
- Those of us for whom English is a second language will never become native speakers, but we can become proficient multilinguals
- Communication (basically, by whatever means) is the aim; reaching it necessitates skills such as cross-cultural sensitivity, code-switching and translanguaging
- Adult learners bring a number of special skills to the table that compensate for gaps in their linguistic knowledge

- Building confidence is more important than increasing knowledge about the English language; a change in adult learners’ mindsets can work miracles
- Authentic tasks and playfulness (competitiveness) can push adult learners beyond their (perceived) limits.

How to create authentic tasks in language teaching is an issue that has been debated for decades (Pinner, 2019). One aspect is the authenticity of the task that is set for the learning community, namely, how ‘real’ it is. In the context of our project, the degree of authenticity is understood as offering a variety of different activities on a spectrum from largely language-oriented activities at one end to fully authentic, real-life events at the other. In Resources Online you will find a table which illustrates the continuum from ‘classroom authenticity’ to the authentic realisations of the self (Pinner, 2019: 18–23).

## Combining the four skills for authentic activities

Many of our activities are designed in such a way that they enhance all four language skills. For example, *Cooking Fun* requires the sending ahead of the list of ingredients, the session itself is the combination of practising speaking and listening skills, while sharing the recipe afterwards involves a specific writing task. This activity has also led to ‘vocabulary on demand’ type requests, because participants realised that they lack the required ‘kitchen vocabulary’ which, in this case, is not a list of words out of context, but one that is related to, for example, a specific dish (e.g., empanadas).

Once the community decided that out of the three countries where Pencils of Promise are building schools, we would like ours to be constructed in Laos, we set up a Guest Speaker event, where a Dutch couple told us about their travels in Laos. Our next Guest Speaker was an English teacher, who lives in South Africa but is still running a language school in her home country (Madagascar) allowing underprivileged female students to join classes for free. Our latest Guest Speaker, a Slovak businesswoman, Anežka Boriová recounted how she built a village school (also in Madagascar) using her own money and how she had 120 second-hand bicycles shipped to the same remote community to help the movement of goods and people.

Guest Speaker events are *par excellence* communicative activities. There is a genuine information gap, the guest and the host, as well as the viewers are negotiating meaning and English is used to convey a message rather than focus on accuracy; there is an immediacy that pushes learners beyond the barriers of their proficiency.



Houay Loa School, Laos before rebuilding



## Outcomes

You may be curious to find out how successful the fundraising effort ultimately was. The project started in December 2020 and by May 2021 we gathered the USD 50k for the first school.<sup>1</sup> In early autumn 2021, about half of the members participating in the first cycle decided to stay together to raise money for a second school.<sup>2</sup>

But, of course, it is not exclusively about money. Our members have a lot to say about how they think they have improved their language skills and proficiency in the past 15 months. One of the participants, who lives in Latin America and has only recently joined us, considers education ‘a powerful life-changing tool’:

*‘I firmly believe that education is the best investment that you could ever make. This was the main reason why I decided to join this amazing project. Besides that I have the fortune of finding a group of amazing people. Teachers incredible and diligent students. On top of this... all of them are kind and conscious people, with a strong commitment to education. They have made me feel comfortable since the first day and they have pushed me to overcome my fear of making mistakes while speaking. ... Today, I’m feeling completely different about my English skills. I’m sure I still make a lot of mistakes however I see and feel my mistakes as a great opportunity of improving.’*

This is a perception that is echoed by another member of ours, who comes from Colombia and is now living in Madrid:

*‘I have improved a lot in all my language skills in English. I am using the language and that makes the difference. Each day I go forward even if is only a little, but in the end, I understand more and better reading and listening and I am able to speak and write more. My vocabulary is wider and I’m feel something like an intuition while I’m in an English conversation.’*

Like many of our members, Johann<sup>3</sup> is a mature learner, in fact, he retired from work a decade ago:

*‘I took part in a lot of sessions [...] So a lot of speaking practice and some writing practice via chats. So I’m more experienced and have more confidence in myself. Can express myself more variably, however I’m not really satisfied. It means, a lot has still to be done ... ‘Canguro’ should have started 10 years earlier at the beginning of my retirement... But I want to be grateful that this is now possible.’*

Sasha belongs to a younger generation; he is someone for whom attending sessions is not that easy. Since he lives in Kazakhstan, he is five hours ahead of group members who live in Europe. In spite of the logistical challenge, he has also experienced positive changes:

*‘I cannot say my language skills jumped forward in several steps, but it has been improved significantly. I have no doubts about it, because everyday practice should bring its results anyway. However, the biggest effect from our group and Canguru English I have got in building of my confidence as a speaker. I continue make a lot of mistake and I know that my vocabulary is far from required, but I don’t shy or afraid it more.’*

Our member from Slovakia, who acted as a ‘goodwill ambassador’ when we set up the Guest Speaker event with her compatriot, Anežka Boriová, has probably advanced farther than she expected:

*‘At first I had to translate almost all the messages. But with the support of all the great teachers and other members in this group, my English is slowly improving. And it is unbelievable to me, that our dear teacher Chris motivated me so much that I started writing poems in English last year, and I still continue on that. I never wrote poems in my native language. And the best of all, my fear of speaking is getting smaller and smaller. You, dear teachers, believed in us more than we believed in ourselves.’*

Veronica left an audio message instead of written feedback, so some of her comments have been transcribed:



‘English has become the way we live ... Little by little we think more time in English, and I could say even we dream in English more often... Entering English world with interesting, respectful, kind and unique people with endless things to learn is creating in turn a world of personal enrichment.’

In summary, members of the community feel that their speaking skills have improved, but beyond that, they have gained confidence and their attitude and perception of making mistakes have changed profoundly.

## A new beginning

In October 2021, Christian and another teacher from the original group, Matt, started *Canguro English Academy* (<https://canguroenglish.com/academy/>) with all its profits going to Pencils of Promise. Many of the activities for their subscription-based course have been tried and tested in the charity group, others are brand new, such as *Slow English* for beginners or the sessions for solving crossword puzzles together. Interestingly, it is not only some of the teachers from the original project that now run sessions in the *Academy*, but some of our learners as well. For example, the *Off the Cuff* activity, which promotes spontaneous communication about a multitude of topics, is led by one of our members who has, by now, not only gained enough confidence to act as the host, but is quite comfortable with the occasional mistakes that she might make.

## Takeaways

When we are making an attempt to suggest ways how other learning communities might adapt what has been outlined here, we need to take into consideration the specificity of our experience, which constitutes some limitations as well. I have described a fully online, non-classroom project whose members are adults (often middle-aged and above). They have self-selected themselves into a group that is characterised by a higher than average level of social motivation.

However, it is not impossible to devise a similar project at classroom/school level, in fact, many of the fundraising teams for Pencils of Promise are schools. Our learners can be rallied around educational charity projects, because they are increasingly aware of global issues (Maley & Peachey, 2017). Watching the TED talk of Pencils of Promise founder Adam Braun (2013), reading his book (2015), getting in touch with organisations and asking their coordinators to talk to a classfull of learners, setting up fundraising teams and choosing a target amount, creating fundraising events like storytelling or spelling competitions are not very difficult to envisage.

The fundraising and language learning effort has brought our members together so much so that they treat each other as friends and family, a community that has helped under the extraordinarily difficult circumstances of Covid-19 – and then the crisis in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Our learners of today are the agents of tomorrow. The more we create the opportunities for them to engage with not just a global language but global issues as well, the greater the chance of seeing the global citizens of the 21st century take responsibility for their actions and learning.

## Notes

1. The school in Laos is going to be built in a small rural community called Houay Loa. They broke ground in November 2021 and expect to finish the school by the end of 2022. You can read more on the project here: <https://pencilsofpromise.org/canguroenglish-houayloa/>
2. Should you wish to contribute to the fundraising project, here is the link to our team's page: <https://fundraise.pencilsofpromise.org/team/336595>
3. All names have been changed to protect our participants' identity
4. By the fifth day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the group had a fundraising page set up, there was a new, closed Telegram group for all Ukrainian members to share confidential information as well as a group to discuss the crisis on Telegram. The registering of offers, such as free accommodation and help with travel costs started, and there was a vocabulary-intense 'Have Your Say' session on the situation in Ukraine, too. We had a special counselling session on coping with stress and anxiety delivered by a child development psychologist in the group.

## References

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