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by Elliot Tombs

How does an English teacher working in a foreign culture respond to unforeseen challenges? As a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in the Republic of Georgia, I find myself struggling to articulate a response to this question even though I encounter it constantly. Lessons do not go according to plan, my Georgian teaching counterparts and I misinterpret each other, and schedules constantly change. At times, I feel like an actor who keeps forgetting his lines and has to resort to patience and improvisation. At this early stage in my service, there is one experience that conveys both the tangible struggles and rewards of being a new English teacher here.

Shortly after the school year started, the Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX), a scholarship-funded program, scheduled rounds of English tests throughout Georgia. Highly qualified Georgian students would spend one year at an American high school on scholarship. Although FLEX is extremely competitive, I encouraged my students to enroll in these tests. Since some of my most talented students expressed interest, we practiced English skills relevant for these exams. As the first test date approached, I quickly grasped the many obstacles that made participation in extracurricular events so difficult for my students.

Upon consulting with my counterpart, I realized that my students did not have a required form of ID for the test. They needed 3"x 4" recent photos of themselves, and the nearest print shop was 25 minutes away. Clearly, there would not be enough time on the morning of the test to have their pictures taken. Furthermore, the school printer constantly malfunctions, especially when an American wants to use it. If they did not have these photographs, it would have meant disqualification from the

test. Given the village's rural location, I realized obtaining IDs might be challenging; however, I did not initially foresee this seemingly simple requirement serving as such a critical barrier for my students. We needed to find a solution immediately or defer this opportunity from my students. Fortunately, my counterpart took photos of the students on her phone and had them printed in a nearby town before the exam.

In addition, my experience with FLEX demonstrated a difference in work styles. In order to secure transportation to the testing center, I had to arrange for a school marshutka (bus) to take us. The driver and I agreed on the date and time several days in advance and made plans. However, he did not recall these plans on the day of the test. For a split second, I thought that I would have to strategize with my counterparts once again. Before I could even start contemplating what to do, the driver changed plans almost instantly and agreed to drive us. What triggered this misunderstanding and its sudden resolution? While I still find the driver's reaction confusing, it is likely the result of a less-structured workplace where plans are rarely adhered to. Even though I was trained to anticipate and navigate the cultural divides, the lack of structure was a most difficult adjustment.

After enduring these near-fatal blows, my students took the first exam and represented their school and community. Out of the seven who initially applied, three advanced to the second round of testing. Today, one of those students is a semifinalist for the FLEX program. Since I helped proctor the exams, I noticed an unsettling trend with the FLEX applicants. The majority of the test takers were from regional cities or towns. Perhaps as a consequence of the aforementioned barriers, my students were among the few "village kids" who participated that day. Indeed, my students' accomplishments are a cause for celebration, but also an occasion to ponder new ideas that will engage them in activities.

Although not the first challenges I encountered during my Peace Corp service, they illuminated the reality that my fellow volunteers and I are in unique positions as English educators. We have come to understand that we can achieve a lot for our students even when the circumstances do not favor us. However, we also know that working in such an unpredictable environment can bring disappointments, and even crushing defeats. As volunteers in Georgia, we must accept these outcomes and say to ourselves, "Ara ushavs" (It's OK).

Left: My village public school, located in western Georgia.
Right: The English cabinet where my counterparts and I teach classes.

Writer's Note: The contents of this essay are mine personally and do not reflect any position of the U.S. Government or the Peace Corps.

Elliot Tombs is from Point Pleasant Beach, NJ, and graduated from Hood College with a B.A. through their pre-law program. After completing language and technical training, he started his service as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Republic of Georgia. Since September 2017, he has been teaching English as a foreign language to Georgian students (grades 1-12) with two Georgian counterparts. He is also working with his colleagues to organize educational projects and activities for students at his school and throughout Georgia.