

Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006

It is the third year after establishing the Tadlo Computer Education Centre (TCEC) in the rural area in southern Laos. We, Daniela Horn (professional Web designer) and Eva Deibele (computer teacher, MA), are writing this final report about our stay in Tadlo and the experiences we had teaching at the TCEC.

Part 1: Journal of teaching

*Preparing for the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 1,
September 4th to 9th*

We arrived in Tadlo at 4th of September 2006 and enjoyed a very warmth welcome by the Laotian project partner Mr. Soulideth Soumpholphakdy and his family. He offered us a room to rent for our time in Tadlo and gave us an introduction to the present situation at the TCEC. We talked about the computer lessons and how to set up the class. Since there is still no own TCEC building and no computers, besides the two we brought with us and Mr. Soulideth's private computer, we decided to ask the local secondary school for cooperation. During our meeting with Mr. Saphanthong, the director of Xeset Secondary School, we offered help with teaching English, too. Finally we agreed that we will teach a computer class to interested students every weekday from 4 to 5 pm (after regular lessons) and that we will assist the local English teacher Mr. Khamphoun at all English classes. The director gave us permission to use one of the classrooms for the practical computer lessons on Saturday.

In the first week of our stay in Tadlo we actually did not teach, therefore we prepared the lessons and fixed some of the computers. At the end of the first week we got the information that the students are interested in the computer lessons, because many of them applied for the class. We received more than 70 applications from girls and boys at the age of 11 to 15 years. We were looking forward to our first class on Monday, September 11th.

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 2
September 11th to 16th*

On the first day we explained the work of the TCEC and introduced ourselves to the students. The days of teaching we also introduced the students to the different computer parts like screen, mouse, keyboard and more.

To make it better understandable we showed them different parts of the computer, explained their function and repeated the new English vocabulary. To make it easy for the students to memorize the new words, we also played a game for which we split the group in half and showed them the parts of the computer. The group which was first to say the right name for that computer part gained a point.

Besides that we used posters and the blackboard a lot to illustrate the theoretical lessons.

At the end of that week we started to explain the difference between hard- and software (hardware: „Things you can see and touch“, software: „Things you can't see and touch“). To make it easier for the students we tried to give them examples of their daily life with similar context like TV (standing for hardware) and TV-program (standing for software).

Our first week as the new computer teachers was quiet turbulent as we had to deal with up to 110 students in a normal sized classroom. Unfortunately the English skills of the students were as diverse as their age.

In this first week of teaching we only held theoretical lessons because on Friday (the day when the first practical class was scheduled) there was no lesson due to the fact that the student had to listen to a speech of the school director.

Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 3

September 18th to 23th

This week we brought the computers (two laptops and one desktop computer) with us to school. This way we were able to catch up with the practical lessons.

Through the week we continued to explain the differences between hardware and software and gave the students a simple definition. We also showed different parts of hardware and a painting program on a laptop in contrast. The students learned a lot more new computer related words in English. Throughout the week we had about 100 to 110 students attending our class.

Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 4

September 25th to 30th

In the fourth week of our stay in Tadlo we explained the students a lot about how to use a computer step by step. To show them the correct way to start a computer session we brought the computer nearly every day with us. We split up the class into two groups. One group was able to work directly with the laptops while the second group was listening to some more theoretical input. As before, repeating the different topics and the vocabulary was an very important part of each lesson.

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 5**October 2nd to 7th*

Unfortunately this week we only held computer lessons twice. Since our visa for Laos was just valid for one month, we had to go to Thailand to receive a new visa.

At school we covered the topic how to use a mouse (for example single and double click) and did a lot of practical training with the children.

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 6**October 9th to 14th*

This week we explained more about the computer desktop and the different parts of a computer window like title bar, menu bar, tool bar, navigation bar and status bar. We also showed the student the functions of the three icons "Minimize, Maximize and Close" which can be found in the upper right corner of each computer window.

This week we had less students (about 40) than before. One reason for that decrease might be, that in the week before the computer-lessons were not very often held (due to our visa run to Thailand).

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 7**October 16th to 21th*

The number of our students did level off at an average of 35 students. This week we started to explain the different kinds of data types and how to create a file. We also introduced our students to the topic of the computer password and user name. Since we were using two computers with Linux as the operating system the need of a user name is particularly important.

We explained the differences of a file and a folder and that different files are stored together in one folder. To show the students how this works, we played a little game at which the students had to sort out which files belong in which folder. (E. g. "Letter to Soulideth" had to go into the letter-folder and picture of Keomany belonged into the picture-folder.) Besides that we repeated the different parts of the computer desktop and the method of "Drag and Drop" to sort files into folders. After that we started to show the students the different keys on the keyboard and their function. Since this topic is very important to practise properly we offered a lot of practical training and brought the computer with us quite often. We handed out paper copies of the keyboard as well.

This week was half point of our project time so we reviewed a lot of the topics we did the weeks before and on Friday we held a little examination. Of course, we did not give marks for that test, it was more for us, that we could see, how the students could follow our lessons. After the short examination we organized a small lottery for the students and each child got a little prize (like a notebook, a ruler etc.).

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 8**October 23th to 28th*

After we explained a lot of computer basics the weeks before, our plan from now on was to focus more on the software applications.

First we started with the computer painting program Paint, because we knew from our experiences in Germany, that children love to draw colourful pictures on the computer. In the following days we introduced the computer class to the writing program Word (for Linux it is called Writer) and showed them basic text formatting commands like “Bold, Italic and Underline”. We also explained the three icons “Cut, Copy and Paste” and their functions. Again we did a lot of practical work and every day we brought the computers with us. This way the students were able to practise a lot and learned by doing. When the computer class felt confident with these commands we went further on and showed them how to change the font, the text size and -colour and the position of the text.

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 9**October 30th to November 4th*

This week again we focused on the work with text applications. We continued to explain the application window with icons like “New, Open, Save and Print”. Fortunately we had a small printer coming with one of the laptops and were able to print out the small texts our student have been writing. Of course this was a great thing to do for the children. Together with our Laotian project partner Mr. Soumpholphakdy we installed the Lao font on each computer and the student were able to write their names in their common font. All the children wrote their name and some sentences, did some text formatting and printed the paper. We cut those little texts into slips of paper and very proudly our students took them home and showed their parents and siblings.

*Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 10**November 6th to 11th*

After we offered a lot of practical training in the last weeks, we started to explain a bit more how to save a file and to find it again. We explained the tree structure of the file system and compared it with a real tree. To give a better understanding of this topic the students created different kinds of files and together we searched for them in the file system. Since we are were using different types of computer operating systems (Microsoft Windows and Linux) the file systems were looking different, of course. This fact was quite hard to understand for the children until we gave them an example of their daily life. We compared the two computer operating systems with two different kinds of cars: both can drive but look different.

This week we had less students than before. After a while we found out why: after school the children had to help in the school garden and water the plants. Therefore the students joined our

computer class very late or did not come at all. From that day on we started our lessons some minutes later but unfortunately we could not wait for all the students since it was getting dark outside around half past five.

Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 11

November 13th to 18th

Due to the work in the school garden the number of our students was reduced. An average about 20 children attended our daily computer class.

This week we started to explain computer networks, what they are used for and why computers could need a network. To start with that difficult topic we played a game which is called "The Gordian knot". With the help of that game we explained the basics of a network, that there are links between different points. Again we gave examples of their daily life like a street network in a village or a telephone network. Talking about computer networks we gave the students a definition of the different types and levels.

Teaching the TCEC computer class of 2006, week 12

November 20th to 25th

In our last week of teaching at the Tadlo Computer Education Centre we introduced our students to the World Wide Web (www). Even if we had no connection to the internet at Xeset Secondary School we considered it as a very important topic. We wanted to give the computer class a short introduction because surfing the web will probably be one of the first things our students will do on their own. We started to introduce them to the use of a web browser and explained the functions of a website and e-mails. To give our students an idea how to navigate within a web browser we had some downloaded websites which we could show the students. This way we were able to practise the use of a web browser even if we were not connected to the internet. Further on we explained how a www-address looks like, e. g. that there are different endings for the different countries a website comes from.

At the end of this week we asked our students to give us a feedback in the form of a short questionnaire. To thank them we gave out certifications for successfully attending the TCEC computer class of 2006. Finally we arranged another lottery to give a small price to each student.

Part 2: Teaching private English and computer lessons

Besides the daily computer class (which was not held on Sunday) we were teaching English at Xeset Secondary School, too. These English lessons were part of the normal school routine and we worked closely together with the local English teacher Mr. Khamphoun. Each Wednesday, Thursday and Friday we held at least two school lessons of English class in all three grades attending the Secondary School. During this time we followed the topics of the Laotian English book and added our own ideas like some vocabulary games and more. We enjoyed these classes very much since we got in contact with all students.

Besides the English lessons at school, we taught a couple of adults, too. In the beginning of the stay in Tadlo our project partner Mr. Soumpholphakdy asked us, if we could teach some English to his wife and brother-in-law. Of course we did and after a while some more adults joined these private English classes which were held three times a week.

Finally we had another computer class: three times a week three students came to our guest house in the evening and we taught them some more English and computers as well. The reason for this special class was the following: to make our work at the TCEC sustainable we wanted to train some tutors to continue with the computer class. Our students in the evening class were Keomany, It (who attended the daily computer class at school as well), Panya (a young man who is already attending high school) and finally Bounchan (who is working as a waiter and tourist guide in Tadlo). This evening class was great because we were able to build up a very close contact to these students and learned a lot about Laos and how people live there.

Part 3 Conclusions

Certainly we had some problems while we were teaching at the Tadlo Computer Education Centre: appointments were not kept, our students had a lot of other tasks to do (like watering the plants in the school garden) and the big issue of the language barrier. But besides every problem we struggled over I came to the conclusion that the work of the TCEC plays an immense role in this rural area. The students showed a huge interest in the computer class and were eager to attend lessons even if it came with some problems like a long way home at dawn.

Around Tadlo there are almost no educational facilities after the secondary school close by. Since the education at the TCEC is for free it offers a great chance to the students to increase their knowledge. Without the work of Mr. Soumpholphakdy and the ASA scholarship holders they would never be able to get the knowledge of how to use computers.

With this opportunity to be part of the project for about 3 month I learned a lot in this time. Not only that it takes time to acclimate to the foreign country and the culture, but that you can learn and work together, even if you don't have the same language, but one project- in our case the computer lessons. I taught the first time of my life in front of so many students, without knowing their mother language, and without knowing how much they can understand. We saw a different view, and how many aspects you have to think of, when you want to reach such an aim like the computer school.

It is not only the idea, you have to think of how you can finance such an project, who can continue the project, how can the people there be trained to keep the computer school alive and who could be their teacher in the future. And a lot of times we thought about if it's really necessary, do the people there really need such a computer school or don't they have more important problems to think of.

But it was so enriching to see that the kids had fun and were so eager to learn even in their free time, even if it was very difficult for them to understand us and the new technologies. We became very aware of the lack of educational opportunities in this area and that it is very hard for the kids to attend a higher education than secondary school. With the TCEC they have the opportunity to gain knowledge besides the usual school lessons.

Part 4 The Future

We recommended the TCEC project again for the ASA Programme 2007. In this recommendation we put the focus on teaching more English, to set up the base for the understanding of the English vocabulary which is so important, when the students have to work with the English Software.

And gladly ASA confirmed our project, so that two new participants can visit Laos in 2007 and continue to work at the computer school. The new participants will be supported from Eva Deibele- she is the contact person for 2007 and will help them to prepare for the project at the two preparation courses in March and June 2007.

The TCEC still needs financial and staff support, but we had positive feedback from the former ASA participant Minh that the expected delivery of the computers finally arrived in Laos, so that the new participants 2007 will have more computers to teach with.