

Language and Libraries: Encouraging English Learning through Book Reading

Kosovo

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While English is taught in all public and private schools in Kosovo, there are not many opportunities to further interact with the English language outside of the classroom if one cannot afford it. The goals of my project were to promote English learning through book reading and to create more equitable access to educational resources in English for all students in Suhareka.

To accomplish these goals, I organized a four-week immersive language course in the public library 'Hajdin Berisha' in Suhareka. The course was focused on the four basic language learning skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The course held meetings five times a week, four hours a day from the 22nd of June to the 22nd of August. The age of participants in this course ranged from 5 to 25 years old from all ethnic groups of Suhareka.

Prior to the start of the project, the City Library had a small number of books in English. Most of them were donations from community members. Lack of books in the English Language was a problem that students of different ages are facing. As an alternative, they turn to piracy websites that often violate copyright laws. I used a part of my project funding to donate over 250 books in English to the library. The books were of three categories: for beginners, classics of world literature, and books for preparatory tests like SAT, GEC, and Toefl.

Throughout the project, we had over 120 readers with over 160 books checked out. We organized the book reading similar to a book club. After reading the book, the participants would return it back with a short-written commentary on it. Then, my project partner from Kosovo Fjolla Kukaj, and I would further discuss the book with the students so they could practice speaking and listening in English. To further encourage book reading, I organized a competition where top readers would get a chance to pursue an English course for a whole year after the project finishes and continue organizing the book reading classes that we started. As a result, we had four winners with a total of forty-five books read throughout the project and a significant improvement in their English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Initially, we planned to hold a closing ceremony but were unable to do so due to the rising number of COVID-19 cases and the subsequent tightening of lockdown measures by the government.

In addition, the project partnered with an associate from the NGO 'Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians' whose mission is to support the RAE communities in areas of education, employment, advocacy, and representation. This NGO supports the RAE community by providing extra classes for pupils of grades 1 through 9. The library registration from this community was very low due to their financial constraints. I used part of the project funding to pay the annual library registration fee for these pupils.

Lastly, the project donated 543 books to the elementary school 'Edit Durham' in Mushtisht. Mushtisht is the most populated village in Suhareka but unfortunately, due to county legislation, has an inactive library because it doesn't have enough books to have a librarian. Our donation initiated a process that will qualify the library to get a librarian, a process that will be monitored by myself in the future. The librarian will be able to serve students who are currently unable to check out books due to the inactivity of the library.

The project has found great support from the local community. The municipality of Suhareka has promised to always welcome and support projects like Language and Libraries: Encouraging English Learning through Book Reading in the future. I'm thankful to the city library 'Hajdin Berisha' for giving us a space to implement our project. I was also very happy to meet the principal of my former elementary school 'Edit Durham' who gave me a warm welcome and promised to make a commitment to founding the first reading club in the school. While we found great support from the community in making this project a reality, no other fund-raising efforts contributed to the project.

For me, English has been an important tool for success throughout my childhood growing up in Kosovo. I was among a few other students who pursued English private lessons, and since then I was able to come across different opportunities that helped me fulfill my goals. This project gave me the opportunity to

share my UWC and college experience and provide guidance to many youngsters whose dreams are to study abroad.

My project is a modest contribution to Kosovo's development efforts to consolidate stable economic prosperity for all its citizens. Kosovo's long-lasting conflict with its neighboring state Serbia has created economic instability, which is affecting most of the population, especially the youth. The continuous efforts for a final peace agreement between Kosovo and Serbia should be based on building long-term healthy communication between different ethnic groups. Learning English is the first step to facilitating communication and economic development.

I chose Kosovo specifically because it is a place where English serves as a bridge between communities that do not speak each other's languages. Promoting the English language is paramount to the reconciliation process between these communities that have been part of an ethnic conflict for decades. For Kosovo's young population, knowledge of English improves the potential for socio-economic development. The demand for English speakers is on the rise as foreign companies look into new outsourcing opportunities in Kosovo. English learning can be used as a tool to fight Kosovo's high unemployment rate.

Peace for me is when the communities share similar problems and solving these problems together makes it easier than trying to solve them separately.

This project changed me in many ways. Since I left home to start my UWC journey, I felt that I lost the connection with my local community. Throughout the project, I got the chance to meet amazing people from different ethnic, cultural, and political backgrounds. It also helped me identify the gaps between what services currently exist and what is needed in my community. Identifying different needs in the community has inspired me to start making plans for future projects that I could implement once I return to my home country.

My project was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to minimize the risk of covid infections, I had to scale down the parts of the project that involved interacting with the local communities. Initially, I planned to hold reading sessions with 20 pupils at a time at the elementary school 'Edit Durham'. Because the school was closed during summer, the only other place where we could implement the project was the city library 'Hajdin Berisha' which had strict COVID-19 protocols in place. Another impact of Covid-19 was lower participation than expected due to the fear of contracting the virus.

"This project reassured me that it doesn't take a whole lot to make a positive change"



