



USING LANGUAGES IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this issue of *The Language Educator*, we continue our series of articles on different career opportunities available to language professionals by looking at work in the field of international development.

BY PATRICIA KONING

Learning a language can open up a whole new world to people. Many students pursue language study precisely because they want to get involved in making this world a better place. International development has always had a strong pull for language students, offering a chance to travel and experience other cultures while doing good. It is a broad field where one may leverage special interests and knowledge, like health care, law, or business, into a fulfilling and exciting career.

The most common image that comes to mind with the phrase “international development” is the Peace Corps—and it is also one of the best means of entry into the field. Laura Lea Clinton, a human resources consultant for CARE, a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty, recommends the Peace Corps as a way for individuals to gain valuable personal experience and to show potential employers that they are serious about international development.

“Frankly, organizations like CARE don’t want to be the one to send someone overseas for the first time,” she says. “Being in the Peace Corps can have a life-changing impact and it is great preparation for international development or any other field. People considering this field should understand that it is not as sexy as it can seem. If this is the path you want to go down, you should get a taste of what working in the developing world is like. It can be very satisfying, but a lot of frustration—mostly culturally based—comes with that joy.”

Currently the Peace Corps has over 7,600 volunteers in 74 countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe, and the Middle East. Since its inception in 1961, 200,000 Americans have volunteered with the Peace Corps. There is no typical Peace Corps volunteer or assignment, but 89% are college graduates, 93% are single, and the average age is 28.

The Peace Corps application process is very competitive and the number of applicants is on the rise. According to Peace Corps Press

Director Josh Field, only one-third of applicants are chosen. “Knowing a second language is one way to make your application stand out,” he says. “The ability to learn a new language is a key ingredient to the Peace Corps experience.”

Other factors are relevant experience in fields like education, health care, business, environmental management, and agriculture. Leadership skills are also crucial, as is a commitment to community service. “You are making a 27-month commitment to service at a very local level,” says Field. “Peace Corps recruits people who can develop sustainable solutions for issues that local communities face on the ground.”

In 2006, *Business Week* named the Peace Corps as one of its top 50 places to launch a career. “Volunteers live and work in other cultures, make significant impacts on local communities, develop invaluable leadership skills, and learn a new language,” says Field. “These are important experiences for all Peace Corps volunteers to bring back to their home communities and for young people entering the global marketplace.”

The Peace Corps offers a number of tangible, post-service benefits to assist returning volunteers. They can take advantage of a network of over 200,000 of their peers and receive transition assistance related to jobs and graduate education opportunities through regional recruiting offices and the Washington, DC headquarters.

Qualified volunteers may defer repayment of student loans under several federal programs, such as Stafford and Perkins Loans, and are eligible for the cancellation of some Perkins Loans. The Peace Corps’ Master’s International and Fellows/USA programs enable volunteers to use their Peace Corps service and experience to earn credits and financial benefits toward a graduate degree.

Volunteers are also eligible for one year of noncompetitive eligibility for employment in the federal government. This means that if a volunteer meets the minimum qualifications for a position, he or she can be hired—at the employing federal agency’s discretion—without

going through the standard competitive process. "This gives you a leg up in getting a job with the federal government," says Field. "Many returning volunteers work in all sectors of the government."

U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd, five members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Iraq Ambassador Christopher Hill, and a dozen more current and former ambassadors were all Peace Corps volunteers. Other famous alumni are author Paul Theroux, Netflix founder and CEO Reed Hastings, and *Hardball* host Chris Matthews.

One misconception about the Peace Corps, says Field, is that it is only for the young. Sixteen percent of volunteers are over the age of 30 and the oldest to date was 86. "There is no age limit and we appreciate the experience of our older volunteers," he says.

Anyone interested in the Peace Corps should check out the website and then contact one of nine regional recruiting offices nationwide. Volunteers must be at least 18 years of age and a U.S. citizen. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis with no deadline and the process takes 9 to 12 months.

Clinton was a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras in the mid-1990s. She describes herself as a late-blooming college student, graduating at the age of 29. "At that moment, I knew I had options I would never have again. I had no debt and no relationships to determine what I should do next," she says. "The Peace Corps had a profound impact on my life and helped me realize there is a much larger world out there."

She had an undergraduate degree in business with experience in the banking sector, so she was a Peace Corps volunteer with a savings and loan cooperative in Honduras, and worked with the employees to put systems in place to track deposits, pay interest, and take care of other banking activities.

LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE KEY

Language skills are extremely important at ACCION International, a microfinance and microlending nonprofit organization dedicated to giving people the financial tools they need to work their way out of poverty. According to Human Resources Specialist Linda Huynh, 98% of ACCION's staff speak a second language and many speak at least three.



Hannah Henderson, principal director of communications at ACCION, visits MiBanco client Estela Herrera at her dairy farm in Peru.



Photo by Peace Corps

The Peace Corps sends volunteers all over the world, including the West African country of Benin, shown here.

She adds that while language skills generally are required for field positions, they are also important in the back office. Huynh draws upon her knowledge of French for her role as the relationship manager for the African subcontinent (she also speaks Vietnamese). "It can be difficult to hire someone who speaks French, for example, specializes in microfinance, and understands risk management," she says. "Finding qualified people can get very complicated."

While language skills are important, says Clinton, you need to combine that knowledge with a technical skill to get in the door with most non-governmental agencies (NGOs) working in international development. Common areas of expertise are business, public administration, and public health.

One entry-level position at CARE is a program officer, which requires both international field experience and a technical skill. In public health, a program officer might start working at CARE's headquarters in budgeting and grant making. Eventually, that person could advance to overseeing projects in the field, where language skills and the ability to operate in the developing world come into play. Because much of CARE's work is centered on Africa, the most critical languages are French, Portuguese, and Arabic.

Clinton offers anyone considering a career in international development this advice: Remember that NGOs are still run like businesses, even if the objective is not to turn a profit. "There is a perception that nonprofits are a completely different animal," she says. "We have revenues and the bottom line to consider. Nonprofits are more principles-based and decisions are usually made according to those principles."

Huynh says that beyond hard skills like proficiency in a foreign language and technical expertise, she looks for candidates who are pro-active and self-motivated. "This goes for entry-level and seasoned positions," she says. "Our staff travel a lot, so no one is going to babysit you or hold your hand."

In interviewing candidates, she asks scenario-based questions to look for these traits. And then there is also how someone behaves in the application process: "Are they prompt and thorough in replying to requests? Do they follow up? Do they behave and dress professionally in the interview? We pay attention to all of these things."

A good piece of advice for all job seekers is to consider any contact with a potential employer as part of the interview process. Huynh treats all correspondence, including thank you notes, as writing samples. "If it's a tough choice between two candidates, you can lose the job because you were rude to the receptionist or showed up for the interview in a wrinkled shirt," she adds.

Caryn Sweeney worked in the study abroad office at Boston University as a student and after graduation, and then began her own career in international development with Academy for Educational Development (AED), a nonprofit organization working globally to improve education, health, civil society, and economic development. Along the way, she has developed some advice for those seeking careers in the field.

"There are scores of nonprofit, international, and non-governmental organizations around the country (and world) seeking employees that are educated, culturally competent, and able to work collaboratively and as equals with locals on everything from HIV/AIDS prevention to water management education," she says. "The organizations vary from small community-based offices to organizations with locations and staff on six continents."

She recommends that college students volunteer or intern for local internationally focused organizations, study abroad, and travel. "But don't discount any experience," she says. "Babysitting for a Colombian neighbor, spending every Friday at an Ethiopian restaurant, or exploring the local culture while on spring break in Mexico are all opportunities to become a cultural being—the first step toward a successful international career of any type."

Do not assume international assignments go only to more experienced, older staff, who in fact may be weary of such assignments. "As a junior to mid-level staffer, you are a lot cheaper to send," says Sweeney. "In my first five years with my organization, I was sent to seven countries for work."

At the same time, newbies will have to pay their dues. "There are ways to pay them faster by volunteering early and often for grunt work," she says. "And learn as much as you can about the regions in which you want to work by seeking out those around you who work in those areas. When they need some help, they'll think of you."

Clinton agrees with this advice. "You need to be true to yourself, and find what you really want to do," she says. "Then you need to actively seek out networking opportunities, new experiences, and challenges. You can't sit back and wait for your organization to provide those for you."

Finally, a career in international development does not mean consigning yourself to a life of poverty. "You won't get rich, but if you have skills that are in demand, you can do quite well for yourself," says Sweeney. "NGOs and the federal government recognize that they need to compete with the corporate world for the best people with fair pay and good benefits."

One misconception, according to Huynh, is that ACCION and similar organizations only hire international development specialists. "We have an array of jobs—accountants, writers, marketing specialists,



Photo by Peace Corps

A Peace Corps volunteer in a classroom in Mongolia.

designers, administrative support, and other back office support," she explains.

LIFE IN THE FIELD

Sweeney started with AED doing administrative and support work, but soon began managing university exchange programs and then became a research associate, monitoring and evaluating research projects. She spearheaded the study of primary education investments by General Electric in India and Brazil and ran an HIV/AIDS prevention initiative in South Africa, among other projects.

"My work often consists of short-term projects that typically last a few months. I often work like a consultant but with a stable employer and good benefits," she says. "I love the variety in my work. I have a lot of different skills and interests that I am constantly developing."

She studied French in high school and college and Spanish in graduate school (also at Boston University). She has drawn on her French knowledge for projects in Africa, while she has had less need for Spanish in her particular niche. Language skills are often a requirement for AED's positions, with the same language scale employed as the Foreign Service. One way to prepare for a career in international development, she says, is to study a "colonial" language like French, Portuguese, or Spanish, as well as a specialized language to carve a niche for yourself. Or, a person could choose to study an emerging language like Arabic or Chinese.

Of course, through an NGO or the Peace Corps you can find yourself in a region that speaks a language you have never heard of before. The best preparation for learning a new language is having done so before—just ask Michael Christopher. He studied Spanish in high school, but wound up serving in the Peace Corps in the Philippines in a region that speaks Ilokano and then in rural Paraguay where the sole language is Guaraní. At least when he went to Angola a few years later, his Spanish knowledge provided an entrée into Portuguese.

Sweeney says that to succeed in international development, you must embrace the unexpected. "To thrive in this field, you need to be adaptable and willing to change course on a moment's notice," she

says. “The areas we work in are unstable, so you can’t be too fixated on routines.”

Christopher studied international relations and history at Michigan State University, and after graduation he decided to join the Peace Corps to work in international affairs while doing good. He was initially placed in the Philippines to specialize in rural water programs. A few months into that assignment, he was quickly withdrawn for security reasons. Next, he found himself halfway around the world in Paraguay on a new assignment, also centered on rural water development.

He spent two years in Paraguay and then stayed with the Peace Corps for a third year as a health sector coordinator. His responsibilities included selecting sites and training volunteers and helping them manage projects. Language was a key part of his success in the assignment.

“If you want to be effective, you must be able to communicate with the locals in their language,” he says. Learning Guaraní was not easy—it is far removed from Romance languages—but his knowledge of Spanish and experience with Ilokano made the process go more smoothly.

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STARTING AN INTERNATIONAL FOCUS EARLY

In 2006, students at the Metropolitan Learning Center in Connecticut traveled to Egypt as part of a reciprocal exchange program.

“Through the study of language, travel, and international experiences, they understand how interrelated the entire planet is.”

MLC students take either Spanish or Chinese and must attain a 6 on the ACTFL scale to graduate. Linda Darcy, chair of MLC’s World Languages Department, says 80% of students will finish four years of a language.

Another goal is for all students to visit other countries. Each year, about 100 MLC students travel abroad. Most go on short trips, lasting from 10 days to three weeks, to European countries and more far-flung places like China, Japan, Senegal, Egypt, Thailand, Brazil, and Argentina.

McKernan says the school encourages students to work with other agencies to facilitate travel. Last year, a pair of students traveled to Africa through Rotary International. Another student spent six weeks doing intensive language study in India through a State Department program. Each year, MLC families host approximately 7 to 10 exchange students, a practice that often results in travel abroad opportunities. In 2006, a group of students traveled to Egypt to visit exchange students who spent time in Bloomfield previously. Hosting exchange students is one way students can meet the school’s service learning requirement.

Technology offers another means for experiencing the world. “We teleconference

with students all over the world,” says McKernan. “Sixteen days before the Iraq War broke out, we talked with students in Iraq. We had another teleconference a few weeks after President Bush declared ‘mission accomplished’ in June 2003.”

Service learning is also focused internationally. This year students are raising money to make microloans to female entrepreneurs in Kenya, to support a school in Haiti, and to help Brazilian street kids.

MLC is already tremendously successful in terms of graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and test scores. In 2004, MLC won the Goldman-Sachs Award for Excellence in International Education and was named a Magnet School of Excellence for 2008 by Magnet Schools of America. The Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (CONNCAN) recognized MLC as one of the top 10 performers for African-American student achievement on state standardized tests.

McKernan reports that a high percentage of graduates have gone on to study international relations, international business, and political science in college. MLC graduates also have a high rate of international travel. With the first graduating class just finishing college, it is too early to see any career trends among MLC alumni, but international development might be a safe bet.

The Metropolitan Learning Center (MLC), operated by the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), in the Greater Hartford region of Connecticut is a public interdistrict magnet school with a global and international studies theme. Students in grades 6–12 study the core school subjects, but with a decidedly international approach. American government, for example, is taught as a comparison of emerging civil societies.

MLC was founded in 1995 in response to a pending lawsuit concerning segregation in Connecticut schools. In the 1990s, the CREC began operating a number of magnet schools were created as a way to integrate city and suburban students. The theme of international studies was chosen in part because one of the founding superintendents lived near the Bradley International Airport, the only international airport in the state.

The school’s first students came in 1998 and the first class graduated in 2005. “Our goal is for our students to develop an appreciation for global dynamics and a world perspective,” says Principal Anne McKernan.

EDUCATION PROGRAMS

For many careers in international development, higher education is a requirement. Many people in the field hold a Master's Degree in Public Administration (MPA). Michael Christopher earned his MPA in International Management from the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) in Monterey, CA, after returning from Angola.

MIIS is a unique institution in that a second language is required for all programs. "International is part of our name," says Renée Jourdenais, dean of the MIIS Graduate School of Translation, Interpretation and Language Education. "We believe language skills are essential to succeed in international endeavors. With language skills, you can communicate and gain an understanding of other cultures—so you can provide the help that is really needed, not simply impose your own ideas."

MIIS language classes are designed to be very topical and are not typical literature and grammar courses. Students may take courses on non-proliferation in Russian, on green business in Spanish, or on human rights in Chinese. About half of the MIIS student body speaks three or more languages and a third are international students. Nearly all American students have experience working or living abroad. Currently 16 Fulbright scholars are enrolled at MIIS.

MIIS students tend to come into the program with work experience; the average age is 26.5. "There is a strong linkage between academics and career interests. We want our students focused on a career track as quickly as possible so the academics can provide reinforcement," says Tate Miller, dean of Advising, Career and Student Services. "MIIS graduates have a reputation of having an immediate impact in the organizations they join."

About 80% of MIIS students will spend time abroad during the course of their studies, usually during the winter or summer break. International study is not a requirement; many MIIS students enter the school with international experience already under their belt and



Photo by Jonathan Axtell

Jonathan Axtell, a graduate of the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MBA '08) with village children in Zambia, where he manages operations for an NGO.

the school is a popular choice for returning Peace Corps volunteers. In fact, the director of International Student Programs at MIIS is Peter Grothe, the man who coined the name "Peace Corps" while working as Senator Hubert Humphrey's Foreign Relations Advisor in 1960.

MIIS is part of the Peace Corps' Master's International program in which volunteers can earn graduate credits while serving in the field. Participants spend a year at MIIS, then two years on assignment with the Peace Corps before returning for a final year at MIIS. Scholarships are often available for the final year of the program.

Of particular interest to language teachers is the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) MA, which is offered as a Master's International program. MIIS also offers the MBA, MPA, and International Environmental Policy MA programs through Master's International.

The American University School of International Service (SIS), located in Washington, DC, also offers a TESOL program through Master's International. SIS is the largest school of international relations in the United States. The school offers eight programs of study in Comparative and Regional Studies, Global Environmental Policy, International Communication, International Development, International Economic Relations, International Politics, Peace and Conflict Resolution, and United States Foreign Policy.

SIS offers graduate international dual degree programs in which students earn two Master's degrees from two schools in two years. Currently, the program is offered with Japan's Ritsumeikan University, Korea's Sookmyung Women's University and Korea University, and Costa Rica's University for Peace.

After returning from the Peace Corps, Laura Lea Clinton earned her International Master's in Business Administration (IMBA) from the University of South Carolina's Darla Moore School of Business, which offers both Master's International and Fellows/USA to volunteers. Moore IMBA students choose either a language track that combines business training with intensive language study, or a global track which is designed to prepare students to work anywhere within the global business community. A distinguishing feature of Moore's IMBA program is the required 20-week internship with a global employer, usually overseas. No other international business program requires an internship of this length.



Photo by Beryl Levinger

Monterey Institute of International Studies graduates Pete LaRaus (MPA '04) and Ravi Dutta (MPA '09) doing post-tsunami relief work in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, October 2008.

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A week after he returned to the United States from Paraguay in the summer of 1994, Christopher found himself headed to Guantánamo Bay, where tens of thousands of Cuban and Haitian refugees were interned awaiting immigration decisions. He describes it as a crazy time, which probably helped prepare him for his next adventure working for the International Medical Corps in Angola.

Christopher was the site manager for a medical base that provided medical care, vaccinations, and training to locals. His responsibilities included security, communications, procurement, transportation, and liaising with the local government, which was deep into what would become a 30-year civil war. Life in the field, he says, was difficult and exhilarating at the same time. "Every day you know you are making a tremendous difference in the world," he says.

Today, he is a marketing specialist for the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), a branch of the World Bank, and he works in Washington, DC. Despite the size of the World Bank, Christopher says MIGA has a small group environment in which everyone wears many hats. He has developed MIGA websites on foreign direct investment (*fdi.net*) and the Political Risk Insurance Center (*pri-center.com*). He also travels to Latin America to provide training, usually in Spanish or Portuguese, on using the web to promote investment opportunities.

The World Bank employs a diverse staff of over 10,000 employees from over 160 countries, two-thirds of whom work at the headquarters in Washington. Among the staff are economists, educators, environmental scientists, financial analysts, and managers, as well as foresters, agronomists, engineers, information technology specialists and social scientists, to name a few. In general, one needs at least a Master's degree, a second language, and field experience to work in a professional capacity at the World Bank.

"One of the best things about working at the World Bank is the amazing cultural diversity," Christopher says. "There are people here from every country you can imagine, who've had every kind of experience working in the field."

For everyone who works in international development, a thrilling part of the job is not knowing where you might end up in six months or six years' time. Christopher says he misses field work, but he is also married now with a 2-year-old daughter. Some day perhaps the whole family will head out on an adventure together—anything is possible.

Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California. She covers education for the Livermore Independent and has written for numerous local publications on the wine industry, small business, and lifestyle topics.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Academy for Educational Development
www.aed.org

ACCION International
www.accion.org

CARE
www.care.org

Center for Advanced Study of International Development,
Michigan State University
www.isp.msu.edu/CASID

The Darla Moore School of Business,
University of South Carolina
www.moore.sc.edu

Habitat For Humanity
www.habitat.org

InterAction, the largest alliance of U.S.-based
international development and humanitarian
nongovernmental organizations
www.interaction.org

International Rescue Committee
www.theirc.org

Mercy Corps
www.mercycorps.org

Monterey Institute of International Studies
www.miiis.edu

Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
www.miga.org

Oxfam International
www.oxfam.org

Peace Corps
www.peacecorps.gov

Save the Children
www.savethechildren.org

School of International Service at American University
www.american.edu/sis

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
www.usaid.gov

World Bank
www.worldbank.org