

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PJW-20
Peace Corps Language Training

Bururi, Burundi
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

With the recent concern about the food crisis in Africa, the U.S. Peace Corps has launched a program called the "African Food Systems Initiatives". The objective is to dramatically increase the number of volunteers in Africa working on food-production issues. The Peace Corps has won support for this program because they have been able to argue that the Peace Corps is the most effective expenditure of U.S. Foreign assistance funding. In addition, the numbers of applicants for the Peace Corps has shot up dramatically in the past year, in response to the massive publicity about famine conditions in Africa and about the twenty-fifth anniversary of Peace Corps.

A major ingredient of Peace Corps success is the training given to the volunteers. This training is often considered to be the only way for Americans to gain the experience and language skills necessary to qualify for other overseas jobs in international development. This training is, thus, a major reason why some people join the Peace Corps.

Recently, I had the chance to participate in a month's worth of Peace Corps language training, and some other associated activities. Although I have been using French already for a couple of years in Africa, I had decided that I would like to polish up my speaking abilities. I had learned that the Peace Corps language school located in nearby Bukavu, Zaire, sometimes took non-Peace Corps trainees if they had space in their programs. Fortunately I was able to spend a month there this fall. After returning to Burundi from Zaire, I also participated in a week-long Peace Corps language program in Kirundi, the national language in Burundi.

While these experiences certainly don't make me an expert on Peace Corps language training, I found they provided interesting insights into how some volunteers become introduced to learning another language -- and gave me a chance to reflect upon my own language experiences.

The Peace Corps training center in Bukavu is a full-time language and technical training center. Formerly a dormitory for a boarding school for Belgian children (in colonial times), the center sits right on the edge of Lake Kivu. On the opposite peninsula is one of the many homes of Zaire's President, Mobutu Sese Seko. It is quite a lovely setting. The center has several classrooms, a dining hall, individual small rooms for the trainees, showers with hot and cold running water, and usually electricity 24 hours a day. In front of the center is a large demonstration garden and a small livestock enclosure, where rabbits, chickens, ducks, and pigeons are raised.

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As there is no danger of bilharzia (a snail-borne disease common in most lakes and rivers in Africa), the center also has a swimming dock on the edge of the lake.

The center has facilities to accommodate a couple hundred trainees, and will be operating at full capacity for most of 1986. Our group of trainees, however, numbered only 19: twelve Peace Corps trainees, five missionaries, another outsider, and myself.

Prior to beginning our French classes, we were given a general orientation to the training program in English, and then tested for our level of French. Peace Corps language training stresses learning how to learn another language. The trainees are not expected to be fluent when they complete their language training, but capable of surviving and equipped to study and learn the language further on their own. Consequently, the language training emphasizes "total immersion" in the language, with a stress on proper pronunciation and learning of basic grammatical structures. Peace Corps also uses local instructors, so that trainees learn the local accents -- thus learning, for example, "African French" as opposed to "Parisien French". At Bukavu the language instructors are all professors at the local teachers' college, Institut Supérieur Polytechnique, who have received special training in teaching French and local African languages as foreign languages.

As we were so few, initially we were divided into six different classes and as time went on, eventually nine classes. Most trainees had no prior French, so they were placed in classes of three or four. One trainee, born and raised in France, began immediately with Swahili lessons rather than French. The language abilities of the Peace Corps trainees was fairly typical. Although generalists fluent in languages are common, it is usually difficult for Peace Corps to find technical personnel, e.g., foresters, mechanics, or fish or livestock specialists, with much language training.

Our immersion in French was designed to be "total". Classes were conducted entirely in French. In addition to six hours of classes per day, we were to speak only French outside of class as well -- at meals and in the dormitories. The first week was a fairly quiet one, as most trainees' vocabulary was severely limited. People played a lot of chess, as that did not require any talking.

French language training was frustrating for novice speakers. While some trainees were able to pick up the language quickly, and were discussing various subjects by the end of the second week, others were still grappling with understanding simple questions, like "How are you?" and "What's your name?", or at the dinnertable, "Please pass the salt". Some trainees, normally very vocal in English, were unable to express much of anything intelligent. Gradually, however, even slower learners began to improve. When total immersion in French became too much, some wandered into town in the evening for a beer, and let out their frustrations in English.

As the most advanced French student in the group, I was put into a private class. Although I found the undivided attention of my instructors for six hours a day quite good for my French, I also found it mentally

exhausting. Occasionally by dinnertime I found myself all "talked out" and unable to converse further in French.

My frustrations were of a different sort than those of the other trainees. Outside of class I had few people to talk to, as the other trainees could not yet speak French. I discovered how difficult it is to use correct French grammatical structures, yet express ideas in such a way that nonspeakers of the language could understand -- thus gaining much appreciation for the skills of our trainers.

I also became a bit frustrated with my own progress, thinking that I should be advancing more quickly than I was. Progressing in languages is a geometrical rather than a linear process: once you can already express basic ideas, it is difficult to learn more sophisticated means of doing so. After my instructors had quickly paced me through a review of basic grammatical structures, they were at a bit of a loss as to how to proceed, in order to meet my particular needs. After a bit of trial and error, however, we agreed to focus on reading and discussing selected texts on African societies, issues of development, and traditional uses of forests. I found our discussions (in French) on traditional uses of the vast humid forests in northern Zaire particularly interesting, especially in comparison with what I knew of forest use in the semi-arid West African Sahel region.

Every Wednesday no lunch was prepared at the center, so the trainees were given money and sent into town to buy their own lunch, practice their French, and wander around. Some trainees checked out a local hotel's pizza the very first week -- as it was one of the things they missed most since leaving the States. Other activities included sessions on tropical gardening and raising small livestock, conducted in French.

We were given occasional respites from French, when the technical and cross-cultural training sessions were conducted. The technical training sessions for the cattle production program focused on veterinary technical skills and cattle diseases. The trainees had varying backgrounds in working with animals or studies of animal science, and one is a veterinarian. The group's first field trip was to visit a local slaughterhouse: from reports later, I was just as glad to have missed the trip.

Cross-cultural training sessions dealt with topics such as appropriate behavior and dress for women and men in Zairian society, and commonly-held stereotypes about Americans and Africans. As all the trainers are Zairians, the trainees were also encouraged to ask them questions privately.

The Peace Corps medical officer gave a series of health sessions on basic first aid, common types of diseases found in this part of the world and appropriate treatments, and elementary nutrition, based on locally-available foods. Trainees were taken on a shopping expedition to the local market -- to practice their French and see what foods were available -- and a Sunday-morning class in preparing Zairian cuisine on a charcoal fire. Among the foods prepared were "sombe" (a sauce of pounded manioc, or cassava, leaves and palm oil), dried beans, sliced plantains fried in palm oil, a stew of meat, local mushrooms, onions, and hot peppers, and fresh tropical fruit, like pineapple and strawberries.

Right before I left Zaire, the motorcycle instructor arrived at the center. Many Peace Corps volunteers are based in fairly remote locations and have small motorcycles available for transportation. They are given basic training before being turned loose with their bikes.

When I took a week of Kirundi lessons in Bujumbura, Burundi, I experienced the same problems that my friends had had with French. Our Kirundi training was a bit more low-key than the French training, as the trainees were not living together and thus not required to be totally immersed in Kirundi -- other than 6 hours of classes per day.

French is easier, in many respects, for English speakers to learn than is Kirundi, because many French words are the same or similar to English words, coming from the same Latin background. But Kirundi is totally different from English -- not just in terms of vocabulary, but also the way that the language is put together. Like many other Bantu languages, it relies heavily on prefixes and suffixes for modifying nouns, verbs, and all the other words in the sentence that have to agree with these. The twenty different noun classes all have their own sets of prefixes and suffixes: the form of an adjective, such as a number, thus changes depending on the noun class of the noun it modifies. Kirundi is also tonal and everyone slurs the words together, so it takes a long time to learn to distinguish different words. Although Kirundi has adopted some words from Swahili, most of it is very unique to Burundi. The only other similar Bantu language is that spoken in neighboring Rwanda, which is called Kinyarwanda.

I am not sure how far I will ever be able to get with Kirundi. After one week, I can greet people and count, and understand some basic structures. But this is an important start...where I live in Burundi, in a small provincial capital of 5,000 people, almost everyone speaks Kirundi -- and even those who have been to school and learned French, rarely use it. This past week I went to the market and asked the prices of vegetables in Kirundi. This caused quite a bit of amazement, as the Burundians always tell everyone how difficult a language Kirundi is, and they know that few "abazungu" (white people) ever bother to learn much Kirundi, irregardless of how many years they live and work in Burundi.

One problem that I shall have to work on, however, is coming up with a word for "woman forester" in Kirundi. The word does not yet exist, as there have not been any women foresters here before. A man forester is called a "bwanashamba", with "ishamba" being the word for "forest" and "bwana" meaning "man" or "master". My language instructors and I discussed whether I could call myself a "umugoreshamba" (woman of the forest) or a "bwanashambakiza" (a woman master of the forest), but we were unable to reach a decision. As my work here develops, I shall have to let you know what works out.

Best wishes,

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