

Final Assignment details:

Word Count: Between 2,000 and 2,500 words (**no more, no less**)

Note:

After emailing your assignment **DO NOT REMOVE IT** from your hard drive until after having received your final mark. Make sure you have a copy, perhaps on a USB.

Only send one document. All info (story and sources) have to be in same file.

Assignment requirements:

- A minimum of 5 original interviews.
- You are greatly encouraged to do **MORE** than 5.
- Your primary interview (s) could be in person. But this year can be by phone.
- Be aware that you might need to interview the primary person (and maybe some others) more than once.
- At least 3 of the other interviews must be in person or by phone.
- Email interviews are accepted as long as you meet the other interview requirements (**a minimum of 4 are NOT done by email**).
- Contact info (phone and email) must be included for all interviewees at end of assignment. They do not make up part of the word count.
- Include people you tried to interview but who declined or were unavailable.
- You must have a minimum of one scene in your article. If you don't do any in-person interviews, **you will need to reconstruct at least one scene.**
- A good idea, but not imperative, is to start the article with a scene (either witnessed by you or reconstructed). You can have more than one.
- Follow the CP style guide.
- Include your research information at the end of the article.
- It does not make up part of the word count.
- Include a word count.
- Have a tight, **catchy title.**
- **Indicate target publication.**
- No footnotes.
- You can provide Internet links (but they can't be used to explain your story).

- Sidebars are acceptable but not necessary; they are part of the word count. Make them tight. Give them a headline. Bullet points or other such formats are OK for a sidebar.
- Make sure the file has your name on it.
- For the **first draft only** you can use "TK," which means a certain detail will be forthcoming in the final draft. For example, "In TK, the company published a report..." The TK subs for the actual year, which you have yet to determine.

Speaking Their Language

A York University student, isolated in Kazakhstan due to the pandemic, takes part in a unique program to teach English to the children of front-line medical workers.

by Ademi Yestayeva

On July 9, 2020, Janna Aitakhmet and I appeared on each other's screens: two girls from Kazakhstan with bangs and glasses, smiling and waving like a slightly aged reflection in the mirror. Janna, 15, booked a lesson with me on a new e-learning platform "Teaching for Heroes."

I am a 21-year-old 4th-year student in York University's Professional Writing program; it was my first time tutoring someone outside of my family and I was anxious. Soon after, however, the awkwardness was gone. We sang along to *Winter Bear* by V of BTS — a famous K-pop group we both love — to practice the English pronunciation. We also discovered that we share a favourite Studio Ghibli movie, *Howl's Moving Castle*. The fantasy film became a recurring theme in our lessons for the next two months.

Janna was my first student when the social initiative "Teaching for Heroes" (TFH) emerged in Kazakhstan at the beginning of July, as the country was entering a second COVID-19 lockdown. At its core, it was a grand "thank you:" hundreds of high school and college students volunteered to tutor the children of frontline medical workers online, while their parents were fighting COVID — like heroes.

The charity project, started by a few teenagers from Almaty, Kazakhstan, soon went international. Perhaps because it wasn't like learning at school; students picked teachers based on their interests and availability. The premise was to teach English to students aged 8-16, but many were also interested in other subjects, like biology and chemistry, or preparing for college admissions. To their own surprise, some of the teachers found themselves sharing their adolescent experiences on top of explaining grammar rules.

The Republic of Kazakhstan might be known in the West to those into boxing (Triple G or Gennady Golovkin was the world's best boxer in 2017), or to those who have seen the movie *Borat*. (By the way, the opening scenes were actually filmed in [Romania](#).) It's the world's largest landlocked country and it generates 60% of Central Asia's GDP through the oil and gas industry. The country is also home to more than [100 ethnic groups](#). Approximately 83% of the population speaks the state language, Kazakh. However, Russian is the language of international communication throughout the region.

A lot of Kazakhstanis speak more than one [language](#). In 2007, the government adopted a cultural project "Trinity of Languages," aimed at making the country trilingual by developing Kazakh and Russian across-the-board, and English as "the language of integration into the global economy." Though English isn't needed in day-to-day life in Kazakhstan, it's a mandatory subject at most schools and a common aspiration for schoolchildren and adults, whether for business or travel, but particularly education.

TTFH's founder, Ilya Kan, 16, is the same age as the older students in the program. He got the idea for the project when he was returning home to Almaty from his boarding school at Milton Academy in Massachusetts last March. During his mandated 14-day quarantine at a hospital, he met and befriended a nurse named Akmaral.

She told him she wished her 12-year-old son could speak English like Kan and asked for tips on how the boy could learn the language. At some point, Kan started creating exercises for him and found himself enjoying the process. After being released from quarantine, he couldn't reach out to Akmaral, but he wanted to express his appreciation for her hard work. "[The project] became a way to say thank you to the people who are risking their lives in the fight against COVID-19," he says.

Kan contacted some acquaintances in Poland, who founded the e-platform Nativated for learning English in one-on-one sessions with students from two top UK universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Eventually, they agreed to make a website for TFH for free using the template they already had. Kan promised to use some of the funds donated to TFH to purchase lessons at Nativated as a gesture of thanks.

In preparation for the launch, Kan invited some old friends from school to join the management team, and they began recruiting volunteers via social media to register on the communication platform Slack. Within a month, the project's workspace was boasting over 300 participants. The brand-new website was up and running on July 7, 2020. In the first three days, 650 students registered across Kazakhstan, 185 lessons took place and 210 more were already booked.

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Janna was one of the first students enrolled in the program. The only daughter of a pediatrician she was living in Pavlodar — a city of 331,000 in northeastern Kazakhstan. She had seen her mother only two times between March and July. Janna was isolating at home with her father and grandmother and finished grade 8 remotely at the end of May. The doctors at her mother's hospital were contacted about the upcoming site for learning English for their children, and Janna's mother, Dina Aitakhmet, encouraged her timid and soft-spoken daughter to sign up.

At first, Janna was afraid it would be like school, where you get scolded for grammar mistakes. She booked her first lesson after choosing me from the list of available teachers. Being stuck at home in lockdown, I had a lot of free time, and I joined the project in hopes that my skills could be helpful to others — I've been fluent in English since I was a high schooler in Almaty five years ago. Janna initially liked my interest in K-pop; later, we had

many educational conversations about culture, travel, and foreign languages — all, of course, in English.

According to Kan, the project is about "learning, sharing experiences, and at the same time, making friends and meeting new people, learning about new experiences." The volunteers are encouraged to share fun facts on their profiles upon registration, so students can get a sense of their personality before booking a lesson. The objective is to create a stress-free and informal environment that encourages learning in a fun and interactive way, as opposed to the traditional classroom setting.

The main criteria for becoming a teacher were straightforward: knowing English at least at the Upper Intermediate (B2) level and having a couple of hours of free time weekly. The first batch of volunteers were students from all over Kazakhstan, as well as those studying and living abroad — from the U.S. all the way to New Zealand.

But despite the background similarities, everyone's living situation was different. Anel Abiken, 22, had just completed her BA in Biochemistry at the University of Exeter in the UK. She was self-isolating in the quiet city of Exeter, populated mainly with students and seniors. Under normal circumstances, she would've done an internship at a local lab and then gone home to Almaty for a break, but she decided not to risk her family's and her own health.

Teaching wasn't something Abiken would have imagined herself doing. But during the two months she participated in the program, she taught two to four lessons weekly to three students. It was practical for her, in a way: due to the five-hour time difference, she had to teach in the mornings, and that helped her maintain a routine similar to the one she had before lockdown. She was relieved, though, when her students asked to learn more about her field of study, rather than English grammar — that seemed easier for someone about to pursue her M.Sc. in Material Engineering.

But even in the middle of breaking down the theory of evolution, as one had asked her to do, she found herself connecting more personally with one of her students, 15-year-old Aisiya, who wants to study medicine and biology. The teenager was angry the boys at her school kept telling her that women shouldn't be in science. Abiken discussed the matter with her, which led to a conversation on the role of women in STEM. For homework, she sent her student introductory articles to read up on feminism in English.

This was the moment that, much to her surprise, Abiken realized she was a lot more engaged in the teaching process than she thought she would be. She also started teaching her students how to write personal statements for their college applications and shared her experience transitioning from high school to university in a foreign country on her own — the things she had to learn through trial and error. She became the mentor she wished she had when she was younger: "It was nice that I could be the one to support them through this."

Though the project was initially aimed at the children of medical workers, it was so successful that by the end of the first month, the management team expanded the program to include the children of police officers, large families and low-income families, all aged 8-16. Around the same time, the program also became available to children from neighbouring Russia.

A few more weeks down the road, the program truly became international: volunteers and students started joining from eight more countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The number of teachers registered reached about a thousand, and the number of students enrolled exceeded two thousand.

Through all this, the project remained charitable and functioned on private donations — most of which came from exposure in the media. *Forbes Kazakhstan* even profiled Kan on the magazine's website on August 7, where he talked about what makes the tutoring program special. "Our goal isn't [for the student] to become fluent as fast as possible," he said, "but rather to motivate them to keep learning the language in the future."

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Offering mentorship to the younger generation turned out to be challenging, even if it was about helping them prepare for exams that the teachers had already taken. Bayan Tulbassova, 21, recalls receiving many questions from 16-year-olds about college admissions and having to do extensive research to respond to them all. But still, she was so committed that she conducted her first lesson despite having a mild case of COVID-19. She and her first student Amina, 19, had had to reschedule a few times, and Tulbassova was determined to be there.

However, she admits she felt slightly incompetent and almost succumbed to impostor syndrome at first — the psychological phenomenon of a person doubting their skills or accomplishments. As a senior Industrial Engineering student at the University of Hong Kong, she kept asking herself, "Who am I to teach this kid? Am I even good at English?" After every class, she felt relief that it went well. And though it may sound selfish, she especially enjoyed getting feedback from her students. She needed the reassurance that the lesson was actually useful.

She wasn't alone in feeling nervous about the project. Janna recalls her anxiety before the first lesson — she is more used to dealing with teachers her parents' age than someone so close to hers. But if you asked her which she prefers more, she would pick the program and its practice of conversational speech over the school curriculum and its many standardized tests.

The study materials also make a difference. Instead of the few topics about nature, traditions and family that get recycled from year to year in most English textbooks, students have the

chance to explore literature and cinematography about different cultures and experiences relevant to their age. Janna and I have read *When Marnie Was There*, a novel about a young girl, by the British author Joan G. Robinson, and Janna later watched the animated adaptation of the book by Studio Ghibli. I also introduced her to *Anne with an E*, a recent show based on the Canadian classic *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. She binge-watched it in a few days and we set up a video call outside of class to watch the series finale together.

In August, Janna was accompanying her dad on a work visit to a different city, but she still attended the lessons because "they were so interesting, [she] didn't want to miss them." She says that now she can actually respond when someone asks her questions in English, though she still worries about making mistakes a little — out of habit.

Tulbassova's most memorable moment also involved TV-related nostalgia. In attempts to entertain Angelina, 9, from Moscow, they watched the 2005 American cartoon *Ben 10* that was popular in her childhood. Angelina turned out to be a fan, too. This little activity made her feel connected to Angelina, despite the physical distance of thousands of kilometres, the generational gap, and the cultural differences between the two ex-Soviet states. "I was surprised that people still know *Ben 10*, though," she laughs.

Around the same time, Alika Ustabekova, 18, who lives in Almaty like Tulbassova, was tutoring another girl living in Moscow, 11-year-old Arina. They turned out to have a lot in common, too: Arina likes to draw and write poems; Ustabekova got her love and appreciation for art from her father, who is a poet and collects paintings. And they both have four siblings, with Arina being around the same age as one of Ustabekova's younger brothers. Her student reminded her of herself when she was younger, similarly to how I felt about Janna.

There was no talk of college or exams for these two, though. Ustabekova focused on helping Arina improve her English at the level appropriate for her age, the way she helps her younger brothers with their homework, which she enjoys. And since she had some time before starting at KIMEP University in Almaty, she taught almost every evening throughout August. "I liked that I could do something beneficial that brought me joy at the same time," she says.

Although the program was designed for times of self-isolation, it brought people together more than anything. Thousands of teenagers and other young people experienced a unique opportunity to learn and communicate by turning the current limitations into new possibilities.

The project currently remains as is, with volunteers joining and teaching when they can. But Kan says there is now a focus on teaching orphans — potentially offline, as it becomes safe to do so. He's been in contact with heads of orphanages in the Almaty region, and hopes to bring in volunteers in the near future. The project does take a lot of maintenance work, but its unprecedented success shows that a small sentiment of gratitude can grow into something incredible that positively impacts lives.

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