

Peace Corps

Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools

Educators | Lesson Plans

The Importance of Speaking Another Language

Lesson 3 for *Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge*

Subject(s): **Language Arts & Literature, Social Studies & Geography, Cross-Cultural Understanding**

Region / Country: **Central & Eastern Europe / Ukraine**

Grade Level(s): **6–8, 9–12**

Related Publication: **Uncommon Journeys**

Overview

Students will evaluate how important it can be to speak a language other than their own.

Background Information

About the Story

In the prologue to his memoir, Deever explains why he characterizes Ukraine in his title as the heavy side of the world—for its diet, its industry, its weather, its economic and social conditions, even its humor. He ends with a paean to the resiliency of Ukrainians, who, despite all their burdens, keep on singing and surviving.

"Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge" details the author's first day on the job at a school in newly independent Ukraine. His initial anxieties, the kinds of jitters shared by most new teachers, were complicated by his limited language proficiency (he had 10 weeks of language training before arriving at his Peace Corps post) and the cultural differences to which he had to adapt. He gives the reader a description of September First, the "Day of Knowledge" in Ukraine, when students and teachers join to celebrate the re-opening of school. The second part of the story details his observations of a master teacher, Svetlana Adamovna, as she struggles to revise her annual pro-Lenin First Lesson in the wake of the new Ukrainian politics. To learn more about Peace Corps Volunteers in Ukraine, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at www.peacecorps.gov.

Students will find more meaning in this story if they understand the geographical, social, and political context of Ukraine. They should be able to locate Ukraine on a world map and understand Lenin's role in the establishment of Russian communism and the former Soviet Union. They should also be familiar with events surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Finally, they should understand the mission of the Peace Corps and the role of a Peace Corps Volunteer.

About the Setting

Ukraine, a country of 233,000 square miles (somewhat smaller than Texas) with a population of almost 50 million, lies between Russia and Poland, just north of the Black Sea. Although its diverse ethnic population—Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Crimean Tatars—speak many languages, Ukrainian and Russian are the most common. The government has made the teaching of English a priority so that Ukraine may be better able to participate in the global economy.

Ukraine's long history has been turbulent. In 1240 the Mongols, led by the grandson of Genghis Khan, attacked Kiev—today's capital of Ukraine—and controlled the region for nearly two centuries. In the wake of Mongol domination, Ukraine was invaded and ruled by Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and others. A Cossack uprising in Ukraine led to the country's liberation in 1648. Ukraine signed a treaty with Russia in 1654, which led to subjugation by the Russian Empire and ultimately by the Soviet Union. Stalin tried to stamp out Ukrainian nationalism in 1932 and 1933 by collecting grain and starving nearly 10 million Ukrainians, in what is known as the Great Famine. In 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine achieved independence.

Not all Ukrainians welcomed their independence from Russia. And at a time when the entire educational system was trying to implement Ukrainian as the language of instruction, there was also a growing demand from parents and students for increased instruction in English. Taken together, these factors placed incredible

strain upon an already stretched educational system.

In response to Ukraine's educational initiatives, the Peace Corps launched its TEFL project (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in Ukraine in September 1993. Deever belonged to one of the first groups of Peace Corps Volunteers assigned to teach English in Ukraine. Today, about 80 Volunteers work in the TEFL project to expand and improve the quality of English instruction in schools and at teacher training institutions—and to assist in developing new English teaching materials for primary and secondary schools. Volunteers also work in the areas of small business development and environmental protection.

Objectives

To analyze the role language plays in bridging cultural differences

Vocabulary

- Squelch: To suppress; push down
- Spindly: Long or tall and thin
- Pinafore: Sleeveless clothing, like an apron, that young girls wear over a dress
- *Amerikanets*: Ukrainian for "an American"
- Rudimentary: Basic
- Idolatry: Worship, usually of a false god
- Queen's English: Spoken English of the upper class in Great Britain
- Yaroslav the Wise: Grand Prince of Kiev in the 11th century; a Ukrainian historical hero who strengthened the borders of his kingdom and made Kiev a center of culture and learning
- Semaphore: A flag used for signaling
- Disdain: To look down upon
- Sanitize: To clean up or remove undesirable things
- Patronymic: A Russian or Ukrainian person's name, based on the name of that person's father. For example, Svetlana Adamovna's father's name was Adam.
- Connotations: Associations, additional meanings, or overtones connected with a word
- Borsch (or borscht): Beet soup

Featured Reading(s)

- [Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge](#) by John Deever

Materials

- [Map of Ukraine](#)

Procedures

1. Before class, make large signs that say: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree." Post each sign in a different corner of the room. Write the statement "Learning a foreign language is very important" on the chalkboard.

In class, ask students to move to the corner of the room that best expresses their opinion about this statement.

Students should discuss their reasons with the rest of their group. Give the students five minutes for discussion.

Hold a class discussion among the different groups to compare their reasons and see if the class can reach a consensus on the question of whether learning another language is important. [Students might well conclude that the answer depends on circumstances, e.g., where one is living or what one's occupation is. For someone who never travels out of the United States and is involved in strictly local employment, knowledge of a foreign language could make little difference. Even so, if an employer's labor force is made up of immigrants who don't speak English, it would be helpful for the employer to be able to speak the language of the employees. For anyone who travels, studies, or is involved in commerce beyond the borders of the United States, knowledge of one or more foreign languages can be extremely advantageous for many practical reasons that students should enumerate. Students might identify watching films in another language,

communicating directly with people in other countries, being able to translate or interpret for others, reading signs while traveling, and simply having the courtesy of knowing the language of one's hosts are just a few of the many advantages of knowing another language.]

2. In his second-to-last paragraph, Deever writes: "The act of speaking to and understanding a foreigner in a foreign language was a magical experience." Discuss with the class:
 - Why did the Ukrainian students get such pleasure from hearing Mr. John speak their language? Did it affect their relationship with him? Did it affect their opinion of him? If so, why? How?
 - Why did the Ukrainian students so enjoy speaking in English to Mr. John?
 - Why is English taught widely in Ukraine? What particular advantage might English have over other foreign languages for a Ukrainian student? [Ask students if they know or can guess what language airline pilots use worldwide for communicating with control towers at airports. (English.) Most Internet pages and computer manuals are written in English. A great many academic papers at international conferences are prepared and read in English. Peace Corps Volunteers teach English or help local teachers teach English when requested to do so by host countries. This request is made across a wide spectrum of countries in which the Peace Corps serves today.]

Extensions

Ask students to select from the following:

1. Describe in writing what you think Deever should do with his classes to help them learn about American culture. Construct a lesson plan that Deever might use for one of his classes. Include a warm-up activity, instruction, and practice. Try to balance instruction and fun.
2. Students might enjoy reading the rest of Deever's book—*Singing on the Heavy Side of the World*—to learn more about his teaching experience with children in Ukraine.
3. Write a journal entry about your own experiences in learning a foreign language. Why did you choose to study this language? How have you used it so far? How has it helped you so far? How do you think you might use it someday?

Framework and Standards

Enduring Understandings

- People of different cultures differ in their approaches to teaching and their attitudes toward learning.
- Language can bridge cultural differences, connecting individuals of different cultures.
- Serving in another culture challenges one to understand the world from that culture's point of view.

Essential Questions

- Is it important to learn a foreign language? Why or why not? When might it be important? For whom?
- What are the challenges and rewards of serving in another culture?
- How do our cultural values shape our attitudes toward teaching and learning?

Standards

English Standards: 1, 2, 3, 6

Social Studies Standards: I, IV, IX

National Geography Standards: 6, 10

For more information on the standards in *Uncommon Journeys*, [see the Appendix](#) (pdf—160 KB)