

Promoting Inter-Asian Understanding through English: Cross-border Exchanges through an Asian Youth Forum

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of going beyond the classroom to provide EFL learners with out-of-class opportunities to use their language skills in real-world situations with same-age peers. It introduces the *Asian Youth Forum (AYF)*, a unique series of international youth conferences designed by English language educators in Asia that aims at promoting cross-cultural awareness, communication skills, leadership and international understanding through the medium of English-as-a-global-language. The Asian Youth Forum is an annual 1-week event that brings together college-aged EFL students from across the Asian region. Participants typically comprise 30 - 80 young people from 10 - 15 countries such as Japan, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines. During this all-English event, students take part in a rich program of academic seminars, presentations and social events built around the themes of language, culture, global issues, and leadership. This paper outlines the aims and history of the *Asian Youth Forum*, describes its design and special features and reports on the program's outcomes in terms of student attitudes, language development, learner identity and international understanding. The author concludes by calling for further EFL youth exchanges of this type in other regions of the world.

Keywords: Asia, youth exchange, language, culture, International Understanding, cross-cultural communication, UNESCO, leadership

Introduction

Foreign language educators can define themselves in two ways – one narrow and one broad. A narrow definition states that the sole job of language teachers is to teach students in the classroom as effectively as possible within the confines of each class period. A broad definition states that the job of language teachers is not just classroom teaching but also to provide students with educational opportunities outside class to learn and use the foreign language in the wider world. For those who see themselves

as language educators in this broad sense, learning doesn't stop when the bell rings. Instead, education beyond the classroom means giving students chances where they can use their language skills, increase motivation and raise awareness through real-world experiences.

There are a variety of ways to get students out the classroom in order to practice, use and improve their language skills. Some teachers give research tasks or contact assignments that require students to interview people, carry out surveys or visit local museums off campus. Other teachers involve students in service-learning projects that engage them in volunteering at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, hospitals, refugee centers and senior citizen homes.

For language educators involved with global education, a further step is to take students overseas to involve them in international projects that promote foreign language use, global awareness, cross-cultural communication, international understanding and social responsibility. This step represents a concrete response to appeals by international bodies such as Council of Europe's calls for "intercultural dialogue" (2017) and declarations by the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO).

UNESCO's *Recommendation on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace* (1974), for example, calls on teachers around the world to promote:

- an international dimension and a global perspective in education at all levels
- understanding and respect for all peoples, their cultures, values, and ways of life
- abilities to communicate with others
- readiness on the part of the individual to participate in solving the problems of his/her community, country and the world at large

UNESCO'S *Linguapax Kiev Declaration on "Content and Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages and Literature for Peace and International Understanding"* (UNESCO, 1987) urges language teachers worldwide to:

- be aware of their responsibility to further international understanding
- exploit extra-curricular activities such as pen-pal programs, video exchanges, and overseas excursions to develop international understanding

A number of English teachers have emphasized the value of taking students out of the classroom and into the world in order to improve their language skills and promote global awareness (Cates 2010). Sample initiatives range from EFL study tours to rural villages in the Philippines by Japanese college students (Hinkelman 1993) and rainforest EFL eco-tours to

Indonesia (Lynch, 2006) to *Habitat for Humanity* house building projects in Nepal (Marlowe, 2012).

Another way to take language learners out into the world involves cross-border exchange projects. International youth exchanges, in particular, enable young people from different nations to develop cross-cultural understanding and international friendships (Cassidy 1988, Hawks 1994). This paper introduces one such initiative, the *Asian Youth Forum*, describes its history, structure, aims, and outcomes, and outlines its role in promoting international understanding through English among Asian students.

Table 1
Asian Youth Forum: Basic Data

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Name: Asian Youth Forum (AYF) ▪ Founded in: 1999 ▪ Founded by: Asian EFL college instructors ▪ Sponsored by: Pan-Asian Consortium (PAC) ▪ Held at: the annual PAC conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number of AYF events held so far: 17 ▪ Number of host countries: 7 ▪ Number of host cities: 9 ▪ Total number of participants: 935 ▪ Asian nations represented: 33
<p><u>Asian EFL Partner Organizations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pan-Asian Consortium (PAC) ▪ Korea TESOL (South Korea) ▪ JALT (Japan) ▪ Thai TESOL (Thailand) ▪ ETA-ROC (Taiwan) ▪ FEELTA (Russia) ▪ BELTA (Bangladesh) ▪ PALT (Philippines) 	<p><u>AYF Hosting Institutions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sookmyung Women’s University (Korea) ▪ Seinan Jogakuin University (Japan) ▪ Mahidol / Srinakharinwirot Univ. (Thailand) ▪ Thammasat University (Thailand) ▪ Ateneo de Manila University (Manila) ▪ Pasig University (Manila) ▪ University of the Philippines (Cebu) ▪ Far Eastern National University (Russia) ▪ Danang Univ. /Hue Univ. For. Lgs. (Vietnam) ▪ Dalat Univerity (Vietnam)

The Asian Youth Forum

The *Asian Youth Forum* (AYF) is a 1-week international youth event, held entirely in English, which brings together college students from across Asia for seminars, workshops, social events and interpersonal exchanges aimed at promoting Asian awareness, cross-cultural understanding, social responsibility and world citizenship. It is held in a different host nation each year as part of an annual “Pan-Asian” conference on language teaching.

Origins and History

The *Asian Youth Forum* was founded in 1999 as a non-profit volunteer event by university-based English educators in the Asia-Pacific region. The founding of AYF grew out of Asian links forged during the 1990s among language teaching associations in Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. During this decade, these organizations began to look beyond their borders and encourage members to attend conferences in each other's countries in order to explore common issues and document the state of English language teaching in Asia.

These efforts at Asian outreach led to the signing of sister agreements between the *Japan Association for Language Teaching* (JALT), *Korea Teachers to Speakers of Other Languages* (KOTESOL), and *Thai Teachers to Speakers of Other Languages* (Thai TESOL). These led to the formation of a *Pan-Asian Consortium of Language Teaching Societies* and to the holding of a series of *Pan-Asian* “PAC” conference. The PAC Consortium has now expanded to include the *English Teaching Association of the Republic of China* (ETA-ROC), the *Philippines Association for Language Teaching* (PALT) and the *Far Eastern English Language Teaching Association* (FEELTA) of Russia.

The first *Asian Youth Forum* (AYF 1) was held in 1999 in Seoul, South Korea as part of the second *Pan-Asian* conference (PAC 2). The idea for AYF arose from a proposal for Asian teachers attending the convention to bring along EFL college students from their countries. The first AYF was so successful it was decided to organize further events at future conventions. A total of 17 AYF events have now been held in a variety of Asian countries (see table 2).

AYF Logistics

Each AYF event is put together by an organizing committee that consists of:

- an AYF Chair, Conference Chair and Advisors (EFL professors at Asian

- universities)
- an AYF Host Country Team (consisting of teachers and students in the AYF host nation)
 - an AYF Student Leaders Committee (elected or appointed by the AYF Chairs)

Table 2
Asian Youth Forum Events

	Date	Host City	Venue / Partner	Participants
AYF 1	1999	Seoul, Korea	Olympic Peace Park	45 youth, 9 countries
AYF 2	2001	Kokura, Japan	Int'l Conference Center	40 youth, 11 countries
AYF 3	2002	Taipei, Taiwan	Chientan Youth Center	50 youth, 8 countries
AYF 4	2004	Vladivostok, Russia	FENU University	70 youth, 8 countries
AYF 5	2007	Bangkok, Thailand	Mahidol University	70 youth, 17 countries
AYF 6	2008	Tokyo, Japan	Olympic Youth Center	110 youth, 16 countries
AYF 7	2009	Manila, Philippines	Ateneo de Manila Univ.	83 youth, 14 countries
AYF 8	2010	Seoul, Korea	Sookmyung Women's U.	41 youth, 15 countries
AYF 9	2011	Taipei, Taiwan	Chientan Youth Center	76 youth, 11 countries
AYF 10	2012	Vladivostok, Russia	FEFU University	64 youth, 16 countries
AYF 11	2013	Manila, Philippines	Pasig University	29 youth, 8 countries
AYF 12	2013	Cebu, Philippines	Univ. of the Philippines	34 youth, 8 countries
AYF 13	2015	Bangkok, Thailand	Thammasat University	67 youth, 14 countries
AYF 14	2016	Danang, Vietnam	U. of Foreign Languages	73 youth, 12 countries
AYF 15	2016	Taipei, Taiwan	Chientan Youth Center	56 youth, 10 countries
AYF 16	2017	Seoul, Korea	Sookmyung Women's U.	27 youth, 9 countries
AYF 17	2017	Dalat, Vietnam	Dalat University	44 youth, 12 countries

Each year, this committee organizes an international AYF youth conference in an Asian host country that brings together students from a variety of Asian nations. The AYF committee works in collaboration with the Pan-Asian Consortium (PAC) and with national language teaching associations in Asia.

AYF Participants

The Asian Youth Forum is open to young people from throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Participants are typically university students age 18 – 25 who have an interest in Asia and a basic command of English. Each AYF event can range in size from small (20 – 40 participants) to medium-size (50 - 70 participants) to large (70 – 100 participants). A typical AYF event brings together EFL students from 10 – 15 Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.

AYF Recruiting

Recruiting for each AYF event begins about 8 months in advance. Participant recruiting is done in three main ways:

- through invitations to regional language teaching associations
- through invitations to partner universities
- through an on-line AYF website set up for each event

For each event, attempts are made to balance participant nationalities, gender, religion and ethnic background.

AYF Venue

Most AYF events are held as part of the annual Pan-Asian PAC conference on language teaching. This means that AYF is held in the same host country and host city as the PAC convention. Previous host cities have included Tokyo, Seoul, Vladivostok, Taipei, Manila, Cebu and Bangkok. Each *Asian Youth Forum* event is held at a local university campus, youth center or conference hotel arranged in cooperation with the host country language teaching association.

AYF Accommodations

In principle, students are housed in mixed-nationality rooms in local hotels, guest houses or youth centers. A typical 4-bedroom, for example, might house an Indonesian student, a Japanese student, a Thai student and a Filipino student. This arrangement promotes inter-personal contact, inter-Asian understanding and maximum use of English as a lingua franca. It can also build strong bonds of friendship between roommates from

very different societies and help to bridge barriers linked to race, religion, culture, and ethnicity.

AYF Costs

Funding for each AYF conference comes from a variety of sources. These include student participation fees, sponsorship from Asian language teaching organizations, financial support from host universities, funding from outside sponsors and individual donations. Participants pay their own travel expenses to the host city as well as a modest AYF participation fee to help cover meals, accommodations, local transport and program costs.

The AYF Program

Each Asian Youth Forum includes an academic program and a social program. The academic program educates participants about the host nation, about each other’s countries and engages them with social issues in the Asian region. The social program allows participants to get to know each other, enjoy aspects of each others’ cultures and promote intercultural friendships.

Table 3
A Typical Schedule for the 1-Week Asian Youth Forum

DAY 1	Arrivals & Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ students fly in to the host city and register for AYF ▪ they attend an orientation, then join ice-breaking activities
DAY 2	Opening Ceremony & Welcome Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ students attend an Opening Ceremony and academic sessions ▪ at night, they take part in an AYF Welcome Party
DAY 3	AYF Sessions & City Tour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ students attend AYF sessions in the morning ▪ in the afternoon, they do a city tour guided by host students
DAY 4	PAC Ceremony & AYF Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ students attend the PAC Opening Ceremony in ethnic dress ▪ they then attend AYF sessions and prepare their PAC sessions
DAY 5	PAC Talks & Cultural Performances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ students give AYF presentations to PAC conference-goers ▪ in the evening, each national team does a cultural performance
DAY 6	Closing Ceremony & Farewell Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ students make AYF commitments, then have free time ▪ at night, they attend the Closing Ceremony and Farewell Party

Academic Program

The academic program includes the following program components (see table 4):

Opening and Closing Ceremonies

Each AYF event begins with a formal opening ceremony at which the organizers introduce the national delegates attending, outline the schedule of events and include welcome messages from AYF advisors. At the end of the 1-week event, a formal closing ceremony is held at which students receive their certificates of participation and make farewell speeches.

Asian Country Presentations

At each AYF, national delegations prepare and give a 20-minute country presentation to introduce their nation, in English, to other participants. These Powerpoint reports typically use video clips, photos, maps and data to profile the people, culture, society, history, politics, and religion of each nation. In their session, students are also requested to report on recent trends, popular fads, and social issues in their countries. Each English presentation is followed by question and answers plus a short discussion period.

Asian Language Lessons

National delegations are also required to prepare and teach a 15-minute lesson designed to introduce the national language of their country. These include a description of the language, conversation expressions and an introduction to its writing system. Each team thus gets the experience of teaching their national language – through English - to other Asian participants. The participants, in turn, get a special chance to learn, practice, speak and write basic Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Thai, Indonesian, Russian, Chinese and other languages.

AYF Workshops

A key feature of the academic program is attending workshops held by AYF teacher advisors on the four AYF themes of *culture*, *language*, *issues*, and *leadership*. Workshop topics range from Asian stereotypes, conflict resolution, and gender issues to problem-solving skills, linguistic awareness, and territorial disputes. Peace education videos such as *Rainbow War* and cross-cultural simulations such as *Bafa Bafa* are used to sensitize participants to the challenges of cross-cultural understanding.

Table 4
Overview of AYF Academic and Social Program

ACADEMIC PROGRAM	SOCIAL PROGRAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Country Presentations: students give a 20-minute presentation about their country • Language Lessons: students prepare and teach a 15-minute lesson on their language • AYF Workshops: students join workshops on language, culture, issues, and leadership • Guest Speakers: students attend talks by experts on language, culture, social issues • PAC Presentations: students give English talks to teachers at an Asian EFL conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome Party: students attend a Welcome Party and meet the other participants • City Tour: students do a tour of the host city guided (in English) by local students • Cultural Performances: students perform a song, dance or music from their country • Excursions: students join local excursions or form groups to explore the host city • Farewell Party: students attend a Farewell Party Ceremony and academic sessions

Guest Speakers

At most AYF events, local or international guest speakers are invited to give talks to participants - in English - on topics linked to AYF themes. These speakers are usually arranged by the AYF committee, the EFL hosting association or the local host institution. Past speakers have included Indian journalists, Filipino human rights experts, North Korean refugees and American leadership trainers.

PAC Conference Presentations

A unique feature of the *Asian Youth Forum* is the inclusion of AYF student presentations at the annual PAC language teachers' conference on the following topics:

- *Language Learning in Asia: The Students' View*
- *Countries, Cultures and Inter-Asian Understanding*

These presentations consist of a multi-national panel of students from 5 – 7 Asian countries and are attended by language educators attending the convention. They provide a unique chance for Asian students to address issues related to language learning and international understanding, to practice public speaking and to voice their thoughts and opinions – in English – to the teachers who attend.

Post-AYF Commitments

On the final day of each event, an "AYF Commitment" session is held. At this session, the organizers emphasize the importance of promoting Asian awareness, intercultural understanding, and social responsibility, then provide time for AYF students to brainstorm actions that they commit to take in their home countries to promote these AYF ideals.

Social Program

The AYF social program plays an important role in each 1-week AYF event. It consists of the following components:

Welcome and Farewell Parties

The social program begins with an evening AYF welcome party which allows students to relax, learn each others' names, get to know each other and enjoy a variety of music, dance, and ice-breaking activities. After the closing ceremony, a farewell party is held on the final evening which gives participants the last chance to celebrate the completion of the program with their new Asian friends.

City Tours

At each youth forum, AYF delegates take part in a 1-day city tour guided (in English) by local Asian students from the host country. These typically include visits to local parks, temples, churches, memorials, historical neighborhoods and sightseeing spots using a variety of transport that can include subways, buses, taxis, jeepneys, and ferries. Past events have included Bangkok riverboat cruises guided by Thai students, Taipei temple visits guided by Taiwanese students and walking tours of Vladivostok guided by Russian students.

Cultural Performances

One of the highlights of each AYF is a session of cultural performances prepared and hosted by Asian student delegates. This provides a colorful evening of Asian song, dance, music, and drama, and allows each national delegation to introduce aspects of their cultural arts. Typical evenings feature a wide variety of performances that can include traditional Thai dances, Filipino love songs, Indonesian folktales, Chinese martial arts, mock Indian weddings and K-pop performances.

Dimensions of exchange

The Asian Youth Forum promotes exchanges between young people in Asia in a number of different forms.

Nation: AYF promotes exchanges at the national level through bringing together youth from a range of Asian countries and allowing them to interact as representatives of their nations. These exchanges include both formal encounters (via the Country Presentations given by each national team) and informal encounters (through sharing cross-national comparisons in seminars, at meal-times, and in the dorm rooms)

English: AYF also promotes exchanges between Asian participants of different English proficiency levels. This involves encounters between low-level and advanced-level English speakers as well as exchanges between EFL countries where English is taught as a foreign language (Japan, Thailand, South Korea) and ESL countries where English is used as a national language or medium of instruction (the Philippines, Malaysia, Pakistan).

Leadership: AYF also promotes exchanges between “average” Asian students and Asian youth leaders. While the majority of participants are typical college students, efforts are made during the selection process to include dynamic Asian youth active in a variety of fields. This means that university students from Indonesia, Japan or Thailand may find themselves participating in seminars or a sharing dorm rooms with a Pakistani youth journalist, a Filipino human rights activist or a Vietnamese teenager who runs her own environmental NGO. These contacts with activist peers their own age serve to inspire Asian EFL students, provide them with powerful role models, stimulate them to consider future career paths and model ways in which they can contribute to their communities, countries and the Asian region.

Challenges

Three of the biggest problems involved in organizing each *Asian Youth Forum* include finding enough funding to cover basic costs, ensuring accommodations for up to 100 students and arranging entry visas to the host country.

Finances: For the first 10 years of its existence, the *Asian Youth Forum* was able to rely on dedicated funding from supporting institutions, organizations and publishers to help cover the cost of each annual 1-week event. During that period, AYF charged student participants a nominal participation fee and was able to offer travel scholarships to deserving students. Unfortunately, after the economic downturn, this funding evaporated. Currently, AYF costs are covered mainly by student participation fees and support from host country partners.

Table 5
Asian Youth Forum Participant Comments

AYF Student Comments

▪ *(AYF) encouraged students to speak only in English as an international language throughout the program. The meeting with multilingual students and teachers gave us an impetus to have more ambition to study English, as well as other languages.* T.C. (Japan)

▪ *I wanted to take part in AYF because it provides a venue for young people like me to discuss vital issues that affect our society, specifically environmental and social problems. I believe that young people in our own ways can help in solving world issues.* K.W. (Korea)

▪ *By understanding other cultures we can promote peaceful co-existence. Participating in AYF, meeting people from various cultures and understanding diversity is part of the process of creating a peaceful world.* M. J. (Philippines)

▪ *We all are different by nature, cultural habits and appearance, but we all are children of the earth. We are in charge of the future of our cities, our states, and the world. If we want to achieve a peaceful, friendly and rich society, we should start now. I believe we can.* E. M. (Russia)

AYF Teacher Comments

▪ *I traveled to AYF with 10 of my students. Many of them made close friendships with their host families. The Japanese and Korean students, in particular, spoke out throughout AYF about the stereotypes they had of each other. It is my hope that this kind of activity, youth crossing boundaries in Asia to engage in discussion, will become a priority.* Bill Perry (Japan)

▪ *AYF is a unique experiment in cross-cultural communication and understanding. The concept of college-aged students from all over Asia coming to a PAC conference to use English-as-an-Asian-Language to problem-solve, discuss world issues, and promote peace was exactly what my students needed. As an educator, I would like to congratulate the AYF team for their courageous but hopeful initiative. Using English as an Asian Language for peace-building and international understanding is something we can all support.* Beth Barry (South Korea)

▪ *The Asian Youth Forum was a powerful opportunity for students to share cultures and explore differences. Each of us felt we were participating in something powerful. And English was the medium of communication. Being tolerant towards differences, and willing to take risks, offered students an unforgettable experience. As an outcome of her AYF experience, one of my students is planning to major in Peace Studies in graduate school next year.* Alice Lachman (Japan)

Accommodations: Another major challenge is finding affordable, convenient accommodations for participants in each host city. For most AYF events, the organizers have managed to arrange housing in youth centers, college dormitories, guest houses and cheap hotels. In one or two cases, homestays with local families in the host country have been arranged. For small-scale events of 30 – 50 students, facilities can usually be found. For larger events of 80 – 100 students, this becomes much more difficult.

Visas: A further challenge for each event is ensuring that participating Asian students are able to obtain entry visas to the AYF host country. This can involve a great deal of time and effort in drawing up AYF invitation letters, issuing these to participants and sending official documents to embassies in up to 18 different countries. For some host countries (e.g. Thailand, the Philippines), entry visas are not a problem. For others (e.g. Russia, Korea), this is more difficult. For students of some nationalities (e.g. Japan), visa-free travel in Asia is easy. For other students (e.g. Pakistan, Bangladesh), this is more difficult. Sadly, a number of students are denied entry visas each year as a result of suspicions about their nationality or intentions.

Outcomes

The Asian Youth Forum is a modest, all-volunteer English language event organized by dedicated EFL educators on a shoe-string budget. Through its work in international youth exchange over the past two decades, however, it has achieved a number of important results. These include:

English proficiency: AYF provides the equivalent of a 1-week intensive English course that requires Asian students to use English 24 hours a day, in academic seminars, meal-time conversations, and late-night dorm discussions. For AYF participants, this 1-week immersion experience results in improved English proficiency, greater confidence in speaking English and better communication skills.

English attitudes: For language learners from EFL nations, participation in AYF shifts their views from seeing English as a school subject, test component or job requirement to viewing English a means of global communication with Asian peers. The English immersion experience that AYF provides encourages students to see themselves as what ELFA (2014) describes as active “language users” of a lingua franca rather than just “language learners”.

Linguistic awareness: In addition to stimulating English skills and attitudes, AYF fosters awareness, knowledge, and curiosity about other Asian languages. This results from their contact with other Asian participants, through Asian language lessons taught by their peers and

through the daily exposure of all participants to the host country language, whether Japanese, Thai, Chinese or Filipino.

Cultural understanding: AYF promotes intercultural understanding by breaking down mutual stereotypes, replacing ignorance with knowledge and building links of friendship and solidarity by bringing together young Asians of diverse backgrounds (Koreans and Japanese, Indians and Pakistanis, Christians and Muslims, etc.).

Asian citizenship: AYF encourages participating students from each country to see themselves not just as Indonesians, Thais or Japanese but as fellow Asians – and world citizens – who share a commitment to working for a better future for the Asia-Pacific region. In this way, it serves to promote the ideals outlined by Osler & Starkey (2005) about language learning for responsible citizenship across cultural and national borders.

Network building: AYF works to build a network of concerned Asian young people who can work together - in their own countries and with other Asian youth - to build a world of peace, tolerance and cultural respect. A number of AYF alumni have gone on to establish national youth forums in their own countries. These include a *Vietnamese Youth Forum* (VFN), a *Philippines Youth Forum* (PYF) and a *Bangladesh Youth Forum* (BYF).

The impact of the Asian Youth Forum on students has been documented by a number of English language educators, such as Barry (2001), Cates et al (2001) and Lokon & Perry (2002). These teachers emphasize the magic that happens when Asian young people from different countries are allowed to meet, the challenge -- and value -- of working with EFL students in the context of youth exchange programs, and the potential this kind of event has to promote mutual understanding among Asian youth through English as a global language (cf. table 5).

Conclusion

In the almost 20 years it has existed, the Asian Youth Forum has brought together roughly 1,000 students and youth from almost 20 Asian nations and given them the chance – through English – to learn about each other's countries, share mutual concerns, explore global issues and make cross-cultural friendships. For many participants, attending AYF is a stimulating, enriching, life-changing experience. Those who take part not only learn new languages and improve their English communication skills but also broaden their horizons, deepen their understanding and begin to see themselves as young Asian citizens with an important role to play in working for a better future. A number of AYF alumni have gone on to work in international business, politics and volunteer organizations, applying the AYF spirit in their work to create a better world.

Organizing each AYF event is not an easy task. It requires a year of preparation, thousands of hours of work and the cooperation of hundreds of colleagues in dozens of Asian countries. As founder and chair of AYF, I believe that this kind of youth exchange has a special role to play in promoting peace and mutual understanding among peoples, countries, and cultures in the Asian region. Events such as the *Asian Youth Forum* that allow young Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Chinese, Indonesians, Vietnamese and Filipinos to meet, learn from each other and build bonds of friendship have a special meaning and urgency in our 21st Century world. My wish is that similar youth forums for EFL students in other regions – Africa, Latin America, the Middle East – are launched to continue this important work of promoting international understanding through English.

What Asian nations – and every country – needs is young people with language skills, cultural awareness, international experience and a sense of social responsibility who can take action as global citizens to help solve the problems facing our world. English language educators have an important role to play in this task. The *Asian Youth Forum* shows one example of what can be done.

The author

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Relevant Websites

- Pan-Asian Consortium of Language Teaching Societies <<https://pac-teach.org>>
- AYF Video Reports (search "AYF Asian Youth Forum") <www.youtube.com>
- Sample website: AYF 17 (Dalat, 2017) <asianyouthforum17.wixsite.com/ayf17dalat/>

- Sample website: AYP 9 (Taipei, Taiwan, 2011)
<<http://ayf9taipei.weebly.com>>
- Sample website: AYP 8 (Seoul, Korea2010)
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