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International Postgraduates' Involvement in An English Storytelling Volunteer Project for Taiwanese Children

Chieh-Lan Li^{1,*} , Zuraidah Ali²

¹ Foreign Languages Division, General Education Center, Ming Chi University of Technology, Taiwan; winnieli@mail.mcut.edu.tw.

² College of Continuing Education, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia; zuc@uniten.edu.my.

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Abstract


English is considered a foreign language in Taiwan; however, there is a growing emphasis on achieving English proficiency. Parents are increasingly enrolling their children in English tuition and enrichment programs, and even public libraries have introduced English-based weekend activities, including interactive community programs such as English storytelling sessions. Organizers of these activities often invite international university students to volunteer, fostering an immersive English-learning environment for children. In line with this trend, the Office of International Affairs at Ming Chi University of Technology (MCUT) engages postgraduate international students as volunteers to support English enrichment initiatives at nearby public libraries. Nevertheless, the rigorous academic demands of postgraduate studies present challenges for volunteer recruitment and retention. This study aims to explore the motivations of international postgraduate students to volunteer in helping Taiwanese children learn English. Twelve volunteers from diverse national backgrounds participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the data were thematically analyzed, resulting in the identification of five key motivational themes. The findings offer insights into strategies for improving the recruitment, engagement, and retention of volunteers for English storytelling programs involving postgraduate students.


Keywords: International volunteering, University students, English storytelling, University social responsibility.

1 | Introduction

Globally, volunteering has emerged as an inspiring trend, offering mutual benefits to both volunteers and host communities. According to Nichol et al. [1], volunteering positively impacts individual volunteers across

 Corresponding Author: winnieli@mail.mcut.edu.tw

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three dimensions: social, mental, and physical health. A recent form of volunteering that has gained particular popularity among young people is "voluntourism." In China, the concept of volunteering within tourism was widely promoted during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and following the Wenchuan Earthquake in the same year [2]. International volunteering has become increasingly popular among university students, driven by international mobility programs organized by universities as part of academic curricula or co-curricular activities. In a study on international student mobility, Gümüş et al. [3] identified three primary benefits of volunteering: sociocultural, emotional, and academic development. According to Dohnalová and Zelenková [4], university student volunteering not only fosters personal development but also contributes to the sustainable development of society. Moreover, it provides an effective avenue for students to develop new skills and gain practical experience, particularly in fields relevant to their future careers [5].

Today, volunteers are no longer limited to serving their immediate communities; increasingly, they are willing to invest time and financial resources to engage in volunteer activities abroad while pursuing their studies or during short academic breaks and vacations. These individuals voluntarily participate in selected community activities without coercion or financial compensation, gaining invaluable experiences through international volunteering [4], [6–8]. Through learning opportunities and social interactions, volunteering fosters self-growth and enhances personal well-being [9].

According to Villacé-Molinero et al. [10], international volunteering programs for university students fundamentally contribute to the development of interpersonal and professional skills. Depending on volunteers' personal characteristics and sociocultural contexts, such programs facilitate learning, skill acquisition, and achievement among both student volunteers and the local communities they serve. Thus, international volunteering presents significant opportunities for fostering self-growth while contributing to host communities' development.

This study extends the discussion on the rewarding effects of international volunteering highlighted in the literature by examining the impact and significance of volunteering among international university students who participated in a volunteer program organized by the Office of International Affairs at Ming Chi University of Technology (MCUT), Taiwan. The findings aim to enhance the understanding of volunteer engagement and, more importantly, to reinforce the value of volunteer tourism experiences [11]. In Taiwan, there is a growing need, particularly among children, to improve English language proficiency. Engaging international students to interact with local children through dynamic, activity-based programs presents an effective strategy. Given that most Taiwanese children do not speak the native languages of the international volunteers in this study, the children are naturally encouraged to use English as the primary medium of communication during these interactions.

However, recruiting international student volunteers presents challenges, particularly due to academic commitments. At MCUT, the international student body is predominantly composed of postgraduate students, whose demanding academic schedules include classes, research, and industry engagements. Consequently, volunteering requires them to balance significant academic and volunteer commitments. Considering the intensive volunteering hours and weekend obligations involved, understanding the motivations that drive these international students to participate becomes crucial. To address this issue, the overarching research question guiding this study was: "What motivates international postgraduate students to volunteer for the English Storytelling community project?" This research aimed to qualitatively explore the underlying motivations of international postgraduate student volunteers at MCUT to engage in the community project despite their tight academic schedules and substantial volunteering commitments.

2 | Material and Method

2.1 | Overview

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect contextually rich data from participants. Volunteer participants were recruited through announcements targeted at specific

nationality groups among the international student population. Interested students underwent a brief selection interview to assess their suitability for the project.

2.2 | Participants

The study involved a total of 12 participants, hereafter referred to as storytellers. All storytellers were international postgraduate students enrolled at MCUT, Taiwan. The storytellers represented six nationalities: Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, American, and Pakistani. To enhance the cultural diversity experienced by the children in the community, six nationalities were selected for the project, with two storytellers from each nationality forming a team. These nationalities were chosen based on the criterion that each had more than two students currently enrolled at MCUT.

After identifying the nationalities, the researcher invited eligible students from the selected groups to participate as potential storytellers. A selection interview was then conducted to identify the most suitable candidates. Each storytelling session was organized with two storytellers from the same country collaborating as a team. Participants were required to meet the following selection criteria:

- I. A strong interest in engaging with the community, particularly with children.
- II. For non-native English speakers, a good level of English proficiency and effective communication skills, including clear pronunciation.
- III. A willingness to commit weekend hours to participate in the project.

2.3 | The Volunteer Project

The community project was titled the University Social Responsibility (USR) community service project of local library storytelling. It was organized for the neighborhood surrounding MCUT, and activities were conducted in New Taipei City, Taiwan.

The project involved collaborations with five local libraries. Storytelling sessions were held either in the morning or the afternoon on weekends, according to the schedules coordinated with the library management. Sessions were delivered through three modes: in-person, online (real-time), and hybrid formats. Each storytelling session lasted for 1.5 hours and followed a structured format:

- I. 30 minutes for self-introductions, cultural sharing, and warm-up activities.
- II. 30 minutes for storytelling, including teaching story-related vocabulary.
- III. 30 minutes for arts and crafts activities.

The volunteer project pursued four primary objectives:

- I. To fulfill USR by delivering multicultural storytelling services to local communities.
- II. To promote the concept of "internationalization at home" and contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG).
- III. For storytellers: to engage with the local community, interacting with children, parents, and librarians, and to deepen international students' understanding of Taiwanese customs and culture.
- IV. For the local community, particularly children: to provide exposure to foreign cultures and folktales, opportunities to practice English, and platforms for cross-cultural exchange.

Given that English is a foreign language in Taiwan and that the children's English proficiency was limited, the researchers incorporated a group of translators into the program. Translators were recruited from MCUT's undergraduate students, specifically from the elite or advanced-level English classes in the freshman or sophomore years. Some translators were personally recommended by American instructors teaching the elite English classes. Each storytelling session was supported by one translator, whose role was to provide real-time oral translation to facilitate the children's understanding of the stories and other interactive content.

Like the storytellers, translators were selected based on their English and Mandarin proficiency, interpersonal skills, and willingness to dedicate their weekends to the project.

2.4 | Selection of Stories, Material Preparation, and Training of Storytellers

Regarding the selection of appropriate stories, basic guidelines were provided to each team of storytellers before the selection process. These guidelines emphasized the importance of ensuring age-appropriateness for children and maintaining sufficient cultural authenticity to accurately represent the storytellers' home countries or specific cultural aspects such as traditions and customs. Final story selections were made based on the storytellers' childhood experiences and discussions with the researchers.

Each team was responsible for preparing a presentation file, which included the story text, a self-introduction segment, and warm-up activities such as songs or games related to the story. The storytellers introduced their countries by highlighting their geographic location on a world or Asia map and presenting cultural features such as local food, traditional clothing, and famous landmarks.

For the storytelling component, most teams chose to compose an English version of their original folktales, translated from their native languages. Consequently, some stories initially contained grammatical errors or unclear descriptions. Therefore, before any storytelling session was conducted at the libraries, each team was required to hold at least two online meetings with the principal investigator to review and correct any issues within their PowerPoint files. During these sessions, additional guidance was provided regarding the selection of appropriate songs and games for the warm-up activities, as well as suggestions for arts and crafts projects. Advice on storytelling techniques and methods for capturing children's attention was also shared.

Translators were similarly required to practice translating the storytellers' oral explanations and story texts from English into Mandarin during the training meetings, ensuring smooth and accurate communication during the actual sessions.

2.5 | Recruitment of Children

The recruitment of child participants was facilitated primarily through the support of local librarians, who created promotional posters and announced event details on the libraries' official websites. As the program targeted the immediate community, all participating children were Taiwanese, ranging in age from preschool to early elementary school (first to third grade).

It is important to note that younger children attending library sessions were typically accompanied by their parents, mainly mothers. No specific English proficiency criteria were imposed on the participating children; however, most of the attendees demonstrated English abilities at the beginner to pre-intermediate level.

3 | Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the factors that motivated university students to participate as volunteers in the community project. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the in-depth interview data.

3.1 | Interview Schedule and Procedure

Participants were informed that interviews would be conducted online, and their physical locations during the interviews were not a concern. All twelve participants agreed to participate via Microsoft Teams. Participants were responsible for ensuring stable internet access and availability for the entire interview duration. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to obtain qualitative, contextually rich data from the participants. The guide was carefully constructed through collaboration between two researchers, drawing on their experiences in teaching and volunteering. To comprehensively investigate the factors influencing volunteering, the interview guide was designed to explore two primary domains: 1) volunteer motivations and

experiences, and 2) volunteer reflections and evaluations of the volunteering activity. An example question included: "What were your motivations or reasons for volunteering for this activity?"

It has been suggested that data saturation can typically be achieved with a minimum of twelve interviews. As the project involved twelve storytellers, the researchers observed that the interviews were sufficiently in-depth to reach data saturation. After obtaining oral informed consent from the participants, the researchers conducted the interviews using the semi-structured guide, employing follow-up prompts and additional questions to elicit deeper insights and detailed descriptions. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 40 minutes.

3.2 | Data Analysis

The interview data were thematically analyzed by two researchers using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Inductive thematic analysis involves deriving patterns and themes directly from the data, rather than being guided by pre-existing theories. Both researchers independently performed line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts, generating initial analytic codes. These codes were then refined into latent codes, which were subsequently organized into subthemes and overarching themes. This iterative process was repeated for each transcript until no new themes emerged, thereby achieving thematic saturation. Throughout the analysis process, coding was conducted both independently and collaboratively during scheduled meetings to enhance credibility through researcher triangulation. Themes were collaboratively named and defined, ensuring a shared understanding and interpretation. Representative quotations were selected from a diverse range of transcripts to provide depth and support for each identified theme.

4 | Results and Discussion

It is noteworthy that the volunteers participated in the program voluntarily, without any pressure or coercion from the university. Specifically, the volunteer activity was not integrated into their academic study plans, nor were academic credits or formal recognitions awarded as incentives. Therefore, understanding the intrinsic motivations driving participants to commit to the volunteer program became a crucial focus of this study. Participants were asked the central question: "What motivated you to volunteer for this activity?" A thematic analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with the twelve storytellers identified five overarching themes (*Fig. 1*).

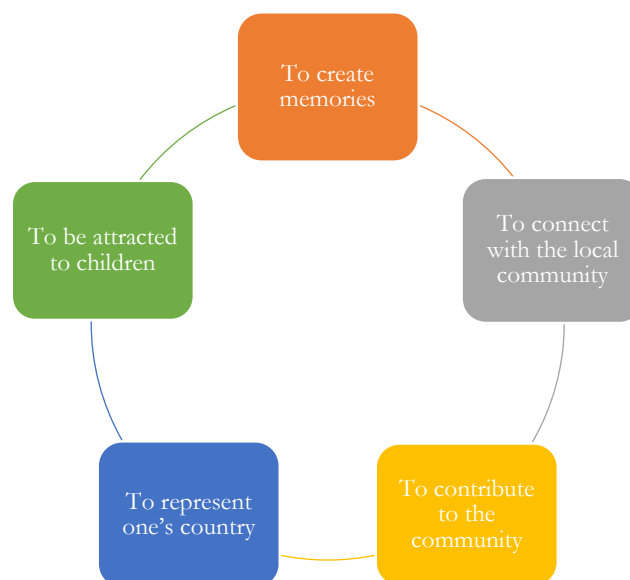


Fig. 1. Five emerging themes identified through thematic analysis.

4.1 | To Create Memories

Based on the findings, three out of the twelve participants emphasized the importance of volunteering as a means of creating memorable experiences while studying abroad. These participants were from Indonesia, Thailand, and India countries geographically distant from Taiwan. For many of them, it was their first time traveling outside their home countries with the intention of pursuing postgraduate studies.

When given the opportunity to volunteer and engage with local children, these participants believed that volunteering would provide valuable exposure to the Taiwanese community, particularly through interactions with children. For Volunteer 3 (Thailand) and Volunteer 8 (India), the volunteering experience was described as both special and memorable.

Furthermore, Volunteer 4 (Thailand) noted that before arriving in Taiwan, a senior student had recommended participating in the university's volunteer programs, assuring her that it would be an enjoyable experience. Representative examples from the interviews are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Examples of volunteer experiences related to creating memories.

Theme	Example
To create memories	"To make the experience in another country, because this is my first time to be in another country, that's why I want to make some memories and experience here." (Volunteer 2, Indonesia) "This is the first time that I go far away from my home, and I would like to experience more of everything, so I joined this project." (Volunteer 3, Thailand) "For us to get experience." (Volunteer 8, India) "It's a good experience. It's our first-time voluntary activity here in Taiwan." (Volunteer 4, Thailand) "It's such a nice activity and experience." (Volunteer 7, India) "A Thai senior student texted me when I was in Thailand and before I was here. They said, 'We have these activities and would like to invite you to join.'" (Volunteer 4, Thailand)

4.2 | To Connect with the Local Community

In addition to creating memorable experiences, several participants highlighted their desire to engage meaningfully with the local community. Notably, both participants from the United States expressed a strong interest in opportunities to "interact and connect with the community." Volunteer 10 (Pakistan) also deeply appreciated the opportunity to share his culture while engaging with local residents. It was his first time in Taiwan, and participating in the program provided a valuable introduction to Taiwanese society.

For Volunteer 6 (USA), the English storytelling activity offered an immediate connection, given her status as a native English speaker. Interestingly, she expressed a broader intention to "do more volunteer activities—even activities that did not require using English just to have more connections" during her time in Taiwan.

Similarly, Volunteer 5 (USA) indicated her willingness to maintain regular engagement with the local community on a "weekly or bi-monthly basis," despite recognizing the challenges such a commitment could pose for a postgraduate student. These examples underscore the volunteers' strong motivation to build deeper, sustained relationships with the Taiwanese community beyond the initial storytelling project. Selected quotes from the participants are presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Examples of volunteer interactions with the local community.

Theme	Example
To connect with the local community	"Get more interaction with the Taiwanese." (Volunteer 2, Indonesia) "The chance to interact with the community." (Volunteer 5, USA) "Able to connect with the community." (Volunteer 6, USA) "In the last year when I had so much more time, I would have liked to do more volunteer activities, even things that didn't involve English, just to have more connections." (Volunteer 6, USA) "It would have been nice if there were more opportunities for introduction to the community and regular chances to involve yourself, like on a weekly or bi-monthly basis." (Volunteer 5, USA) "It was our first chance to not only share our culture but interact with locals as well." (Volunteer 10, Pakistan) "Here, I interact with the children; I can learn how to understand them. I heard that if you can successfully understand children, it becomes easier to understand adults. So, it's my motivation—it's like a stepping stone toward understanding people." (Volunteer 1, Indonesia)

4.3 | To Contribute to the Community

Consistent with previous literature, undergraduates and international students often engage in volunteer activities not only for personal development but also out of a genuine desire to give back to the community. Among the international volunteers in this study, many demonstrated altruistic motivations by participating in the English storytelling project to support local children's English language learning. Volunteer 12 (Vietnam) reflected on her own challenging experience learning English during childhood. She empathized with the Taiwanese children, acknowledging that they might "feel difficult to learn English." Motivated by her own struggles, she expressed a strong interest in "sharing knowledge with the children" and "helping to improve their basic knowledge" through volunteering. This empathetic connection enabled her to relate closely to the children's learning challenges.

Similarly, Volunteer 6 (USA) emphasized her desire "to offer something" valuable through the activity. As one of the few native English speakers among the participants, she recognized the unique opportunity her involvement presented: giving Taiwanese children a rare chance to interact with native English speakers. She noted during the interview that local children "don't normally have access to speaking with a native speaker," a situation common in regions where English is a second or foreign language. This motivation underscores a strong altruistic drive to enrich the children's language exposure. This finding resonates with the motivations identified by Sextus et al. [12] in their study on community-based conservation volunteers, where key motivations included "helping the local community," "socializing with others," and "seeking stress release and escape." Representative quotations illustrating the volunteers' contributions are presented in *Table 3*.

Table 3. Examples of volunteers' contributions to the community.

Theme	Example
To contribute to the community	"Offer something that maybe they don't normally have access to—speaking with a native speaker." (Volunteer 6, USA) "I'm really interested in sharing my knowledge with children. Previously, my English was not good, and I understand how difficult it is to learn English. So, I want to help them improve their basic knowledge." (Volunteer 12, Vietnam) "It's like future benefits for all kids to learn." (Volunteer 8, India)

4.4 | To Represent One's Country

Another emerging theme reflects a sense of altruism, wherein participants viewed themselves as cultural ambassadors while participating in the international volunteer project. Volunteer 9 (Pakistan) remarked, "...actually, it was the first opportunity that we got, as international students, to represent our country... represent ourselves, so I think that motivated us." For Volunteer 9, it was his first experience representing Pakistan in a volunteer activity abroad, and he expressed deep appreciation and enthusiasm for the opportunity.

Similarly, Volunteer 7 (India) valued the "...opportunity to share about our country's culture with Taiwanese kids; they will get to learn about English as well as our culture and our country." Volunteer 7's reflections revealed a strong sense of pride and excitement in sharing his national and cultural identity. During the storytelling sessions at community libraries, children were often accompanied by their parents, offering broader opportunities for cultural exchange. Volunteer 7 saw this engagement not only as an opportunity for sharing but also as a mutual learning process involving both children and parents. Selected examples illustrating the volunteers' perceptions of representing their countries are presented in *Table 4*.

Table 4. Volunteers' reflections on representing their countries through community service.

Theme	Example
To represent one's count	"Actually, it was the first opportunity that we got, as international students, to represent our country—represent ourselves—so I think that motivated us." (Volunteer 9, Pakistan) "It is an opportunity to share about our country's culture with Taiwanese kids. They will get to learn about English as well as our culture, our country, a lot of things, and not only kids but their parents are learning too during the process." (Volunteer 7, India)

4.5 | To Be Attracted to Children

While many volunteer activities focus on assisting elderly individuals, people with disabilities, or the homeless, the present study centered on a different population: primary school children. Volunteers were informed that their service would involve English storytelling sessions at local libraries, working directly with young children, and that they would be responsible for selecting their own stories and preparing corresponding PowerPoint slides. Given the typically demanding schedules of postgraduate students, such an offer might not have been expected to attract many participants. However, it was noteworthy that the volunteers accepted the invitation largely due to their love for children.

Volunteer 11 (Vietnam) explicitly expressed a desire "to help the children to have a motivation to learn English," recalling her own childhood struggles with learning the language. She hoped to offer encouragement and share tips with the Taiwanese children based on her experiences. Similarly, Volunteer 12 (Vietnam) stated that her love for children motivated her to accept the volunteering opportunity. She noted that while it is possible to approach children in public places such as malls, it is uncertain whether such interactions would be welcomed.

In contrast, the children participating in the community project were eager to meet and interact with the international student volunteers, creating a welcoming environment where meaningful engagement could take place. Representative quotations illustrating the volunteers' attraction to working with children are presented in *Table 5*.

Table 5. Volunteer expressions reflecting their attraction to working with children.

Theme	Example
To Be Attracted to Children	"I have some motivation to interact with children." (Volunteer 2, Indonesia) "I want to try because I like children, so I want to try and see if I can help the children to have motivation to learn English." (Volunteer 11, Vietnam) "I have the patience to teach children... and I also love kids." (Volunteer 12, Vietnam)

Based on both the interview findings and the researcher's observations, all international student volunteers demonstrated strong commitment and worked diligently to deliver their best efforts throughout the project. As highlighted by Iwona [13], most volunteers are motivated to participate in activities that offer them the chance to "improve the quality of life of others." In this study, five key motivational factors were identified that supported the volunteers' determination to join and persist in the community project, despite their demanding academic schedules.

5 | Conclusion

In conclusion, the international postgraduate student volunteers demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation to participate in the community service project. Despite their demanding academic schedules, they were determined to allocate time during weekdays, between classes, to prepare materials, engage in discussions, and conduct practice sessions for the English storytelling activities. Moreover, while many other students utilized weekends for rest or academic assignments, the volunteers committed their time to serving at public libraries.

This study highlights that the volunteers' spirit of service was driven by five key motivational factors, and their dedication significantly contributed to the success of the volunteer project organized by MCUT, Taiwan. Importantly, their motivations extended beyond academic gain, encompassing broader goals such as fostering social exposure, promoting international cultural exchange, and enhancing community engagement. These experiences not only benefited the participating children but also enriched the personal and professional development of the volunteers.

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Author Contribution

C.L. conceived the original idea, supervised the project, and carried out the project activities. C.L. and Z.A. conducted online interviews for data collection. Z.A. developed the theory, verified the analytical methods,

and wrote the manuscript with support from C.L. Both authors contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

Funders played no role in the design of the study, in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data, in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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