

The Handprint of Humanities

College alumna Lucy Leishman pivoted from teaching in the US to researching in Cambodia. Now, she uses her humanities education to more effectively teach English to non-native speakers.

by Emma Mafi (Microbiology '25)

Lucy Leishman (English Teaching '22) taught English language arts to middle and high school students for three years before deciding to make a change. Remembering the humanitarian trips she took as a teenager, Leishman reached out to Sustainable Cambodia, a nonprofit organization, and promptly joined their team, trading her New England classroom for a school in rural Cambodia.

FROM CLASSROOM TO CAMBODIA

Leishman became the nonprofit's newest education consultant and English teacher in August 2025. In this role, she is primarily responsible for helping Cambodian teachers instruct English more effectively to native Khmer-speaking students. However, Leishman had no experience teaching English as a second language before arriving in Cambodia. She says, "It was clear from day one that I needed to expand my skill set in order to meet the needs of the students and teachers."

She soon found that many gaps in their school systems stemmed from the Cambodian Genocide that plagued the country from 1975 to 1979. The leaders of the conflict targeted education through the destruction of books and records and the mass killing of the educated, ultimately setting the country's education system back decades.

Working to improve the outdated teaching methodologies in place, Leishman turned to research on second-language learning, studying journals, articles, and books on the topic. She leaned heavily on the skills she developed as a humanities undergraduate—namely those she learned while completing a Humanities Undergraduate Mentoring (HUM) Grant.

ONE HUM GRANT, THOUSANDS OF USAGES

Leishman received a HUM Grant in winter 2021 to study 40 years' worth of secondary-school writing-center research alongside fellow undergraduate Annie Hilton-Haverlock (English Teaching '22). Together, the two

scoured dissertations, research, and journals to summarize current work in the field for busy teachers—and after two years, they published a 45-page literature review with their findings.

This process helped Leishman expand her skill set as she confidently and consistently worked to "define search terms, identify credible sources, take strategic notes, and synthesize and present my findings for my audience," she explains.

These skills lay dormant while she taught in the years following her graduation; however, after joining Sustainable Cambodia, she now finds herself relying on these skills daily to compile information about second-language teaching.

"Ultimately, the goal is not for *me* to know all there is to know about foreign language pedagogy; the goal is for me to give that to the teachers," she notes.

Over time, this process of finding and sharing information on teaching methodology has had big impacts on Cambodian students' ability to pick up English. Prior to Leishman's arrival, teachers relied on repetition to teach English. Students memorized a lot of vocabulary but had very little experience using language to convey their own thoughts. Leishman now

trains the teachers to use updated teaching methods that will help students express themselves in English. "The way my research is helping students in their education is that it's improving their communication. It's helping them be confident in their own productive communication abilities," Leishman says.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF A HUMANITIES EDUCATION

Though she has been in this role for only 11 months, Leishman has already seen both students and teachers benefit from her undergraduate work. "My experience in the humanities taught me to be a critical thinker and to think outside of the box," she says. "So much of what I am, I credit to the education and educators I've been blessed with; thus, I feel it is my duty to do what I can to support others on their path." ■

