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With the support of an IRIS award, I traveled to Bishkek Kyrgyzstan to learn Kyrgyz and practice Russian firsthand. As Kyrgyz is only spoken by approximately 4.5 million people, the vast majority of whom are located in Central Asia, it was vital to be on the ground among native speakers to gain the skills needed.

During my time in Bishkek, I worked with a women's led teaching collective called Lingua Yurt, studying Kyrgyz and Russian for one hour each every day. I used both languages in my everyday life whether it was shopping at the bazaar or impressing taxi drivers with my elementary Kyrgyz skills.

When not in class or spending time with teachers, I participated in language exchanges with friends and acquaintances. As a former English teacher, I traded English practice for Kyrgyz practice with explanations in Russian (a language I am much more comfortable in). Further, I participated in an art group with some friends where I learned to make Kyrgyz traditional handcrafts such as simple felt objects, a woven reed mat, and some ceramics.

In late July, I had the opportunity to explore more of Kyrgyzstan and traveled first to Issyk-Kul, the second largest alpine lake in the world and Southern Kyrgyzstan particularly the ancient city of Osh. Osh is a predominately Kyrgyz-speaking city and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to practice my developing language.

Overall, my goal for this past summer was to work my Kyrgyz into lower intermediate levels and keep my Russian from atrophying. With the help of the IRIS award I was able to accomplish these goals fully.