Stand outside Hayward Field during this week’s World Junior Championships, and it’s actually possible that you won’t understand a single word uttered by those around you.

The International Association of Athletics Federations’ six-day competition has brought together competitors from 167 different countries — including many where English is not the first, or even second, language.

That’s where a team of University of Oregon volunteer ambassadors — including many who are fluent in two or more languages — come in. Primarily made up of UO students, the team is tasked with acting as a liaison between the university, TrackTown USA and the visiting teams.

That means trying to bridge the language barriers when possible — though the highest goal, some ambassadors say, is simply to make sure the international athletes are enjoying Eugene.

“A lot of them just want to go shopping,” said Stephanie Chang, a UO junior studying physiology who volunteered to become an ambassador for the South Korean junior national team. “The athletes have to compete, but they also want to have fun.”

Chang, 20, is herself an exchange student from Taiwan who is fluent in Korean. She is one of 116 ambassadors assisting the international athletes during their stay; her job is to make sure the athletes are on time to their events and know the daily schedule.

Chang also acts as a translator as needed.

About 250 people applied for the ambassador positions, showcasing their cultural and linguistic skills before organizers from the Office of International Affairs, who quickly tried to assign students to countries that shared a similar language.

A total of 33 languages are spoken among the ambassadors, including popular languages such as Arabic, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish, but also less familiar languages such as Bemba, Hungarian and Swahili. Some students speak as many as three languages.

Entering a town where nearly 88 percent of the residents speak English only, according to Eugene census data, having ambassadors who can translate and act as role models to the visiting athletes is vital, said Sheila Bong, program director at the university’s Global Studies Institute within the Office of International Affairs.

Once selected, the ambassadors enrolled in three classes at the UO, focusing on such topics as global sports, politics and business. The ambassadors are unpaid volunteers, and in fact had to pay tuition to take the preparatory classes.

The final class taught students how to become energized and welcoming ambassadors — a Walt Disney-like approach, Bong said — while also being “politely persistent” about matters such as punctuality.

Completing their coursework last Thursday, the volunteers didn’t have to wait long to test their skills as the first athletes began arriving over the weekend. Despite the diverse range of languages known by UO students, not all of the visiting athletes’ languages could be covered. In those cases, the office has relied on athletes from those countries knowing enough English to communicate.
Ambassador Yiqian “Daisy” Fan, a 22-year-old university senior studying economics, is fluent in Mandarin Chinese. But by the time officials reviewed her application, assignments already had been made for all the guest athletes who speak Mandarin Chinese.

Which is why Fan, who is from China, found herself in charge of the junior national team from Slovakia. “At first it was awkward,” Fan said of the communication challenge, “but I found one (Slovakian) girl who speaks English and so she translates for me.”

Fan even resorted to using Google Translate, an online translation engine that supports English and the Slovak language. She decided that it ended up creating more confusion, even though some of the athletes thought the translations were hilarious.

Chang, ambassador to the South Korean team, said she simply hopes to build friendships with the athletes and make certain that it’s a trip they’ll remember. When the competition ends, she plans on organizing a Korean-inspired potluck.

“Some of the athletes are so excited and thankful that they even want to cook for us,” she said.

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