

Focus on China

This week we are profiling Matthew, who as a young graduate went on a gap year and ended up living and teaching in China for 5 years. Mathew didn't have a qualification but learnt (the hard way!) on the job.

Here is Matthew's advice for anyone thinking of teaching in China.

What do you like about teaching and living in China?

China and its culture is colourful, exciting, and endlessly fascinating. But its uniqueness can also present challenges for the English teacher. Although most Chinese students will have met a 'wai guo ren' (a foreign person) before, they are still likely to be fascinated about their new English teacher, including their home and family. It's a good idea to take some photos of home, friends, family, pets etc. Students (and often their parents) are likely to find these of great interest or comedy value!

Do you need to speak the language to teach in China?

Learn some Chinese before you go! Although English is now commonly spoken in China's bigger cities, having some basic Chinese will help with daily practicalities and your efforts will always be supported and appreciated by Chinese people.

What are the challenges of teaching in China?

Chinese children are often afraid of 'losing face' by making a mistake in front of their peers. It can

therefore sometimes be difficult to get them talking. I found a good way to overcome this was through group word games where individual mistakes were less obvious or mattered less when everyone was having fun. For example, a game that would always work well as a warm up activity was 'LOUDLY/quietly'. I would have a set vocabulary list that I wanted students to familiarise themselves with. If I shouted the word, students would have to whisper it back to me, and vice versa. Alternating between LOUD and quiet words and making strings of words quickly adds to the complexity level and the fun! This also worked well as a team game by dividing the class in half.

The focus in many Chinese schools is on English grammar. I often found that students had far better written English than oral English. While they would breeze through the written grammar exercises in their textbooks, they would often struggle to hold a basic conversation in English. I found another good way to get students talking was to actually set activities where oral description is required. The game of charades, for example, and general acting activities where students had to verbalise what was going on, are always good ways to get lower level learners talking and building confidence.

Do you need a teaching qualification to teach in China?

If I'd had a qualification when I first started teaching in south-west China, I think my lessons would have been a lot more structured and planned.

I think the main advice I would give to someone who was just starting or considering an English language teaching career would be to take a formal English language teaching qualification such as CELTA. From my own experience that would have helped me when I first began in terms of planning a class and delivering a more structured and interesting class.

What advice would you give about teaching in China?

- Double check with your school the class sizes that you will be teaching (these can range in size dramatically). Small and large classes are totally different in dynamic and require different teaching approaches.

- Gift-giving is part of Chinese culture. Bring a small gift from your home for your school principal, other teachers, or if you are staying in a homestay.

- Make sure you are clear about visa and accommodation arrangements with your school before leaving.

- Wherever possible and permissible, if parents are waiting outside to collect their children after class, bring them in to class a few minutes before the end. Review with the children what you have learned and set any homework for the next class with parents in the room. Chinese parents are in general very focussed on education and like to be involved in their child's learning!

- My last piece of advice would be to just go for it. Don't be afraid. English language teaching is great fun. It certainly gave me a very valuable life experience that I now make use of in my professional career.

Matthew now has a marketing role in a Chinese company based in Europe – a job which he got in large part because he learnt Chinese when he was in China.

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