

An expatriate's viewpoint on teaching English in Taiwan

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Taipei Language Institute Kaohsiung Centre
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Having been asked to write a brief narrative on my experiences teaching in Taiwan I would firstly like, briefly, to introduce myself.

I was born in the United Kingdom in April 1965 but have lived overseas for almost half my life, fourteen years of which have been spent in Taiwan, the remainder in the West Indies and the Middle East. I became a Christian in 1992 and after seeking the will of Jesus for my life, he told me to move to Taiwan. I arrived in this grand city of Kaohsiung in March, 1993, and I remember vividly my first impressions – a veritable tsunami of motorcycles and a popular television station – KTV. This company appeared to have many TV studios which baffled me. It was then pointed out to me that KTV didn't mean Kaohsiung Television, but *Karaoke*, to which I replied, "What's that?" The rest is history!

Despite the daily challenges I face living here, I love Taiwan and its people very much, and having been granted permanent residency status in 2000, would like to spend the rest of my life here serving the Lord Jesus. Sometimes I ponder who am I? I hold a British passport but yet don't feel completely British; could it be my peculiar "mid-Atlantic" accent which sounds neither completely American, nor come to think of it, completely British any more either; or could it be that my infrequent trips back to the UK make it more and more of a distant memory.

Now to my experiences of teaching in Taiwan.

Most of my major teaching experience has been in the private language school sector

of the English market. I currently teach at two schools: the Taipei Language Institute (中華語文研習所) Kaohsiung Centre which focuses primarily on junior and senior high school students and adults, but which also specialises in teaching Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese; and at Octopus English (八爪魚美語), a school which opened in 2001 focusing on teaching phonics, reading and basic writing skills to elementary and junior high school pupils. Other teaching opportunities have included a conversation class at the Export-Import Bank of the Republic of China (中國輸出入銀行) Kaohsiung Branch Office. I still teach them today which suggests that they like my style of teaching! I have also worked as part of a team to assist the Foreign Affairs Police in Kaohsiung City in producing a handbook for the expatriate community in the city. I have also worked with a group of others to assist Zhong Hua Telecom(中華電信) to train a team of operators responsible for handling the 24 hour helpline for the expatriate community in Taiwan. Working with these organizations has been valuable experience for me, enabling me to learn so much about Taiwan and its peoples.

My method of teaching in both private language schools depends on the age and ability of the student. Working with small numbers has been very rewarding because it has allowed me to get to know many of the pupils very well and also to help them with their language development. I have never seen myself as a “bricks and mortar” teacher, simply teaching basic elements such as phonics, grammar and structures. These are very crucial elements which the learner must acquire, but I leave this to the teachers who specialize in this area. I emphasise communication skills in my classes, which allow a student to understand and to use the language in a natural way. With more mature students I also like to impart knowledge and critical thinking into their classes and to teach them more about the world. With younger learners I tend to use books or magazines focusing on vocabulary, reading and listening skills. I may not have the most innovative teaching methodology but have found that my way has worked very successfully over the years.

Possibly I have, subconsciously, adopted methods my father used with his students, particularly in the Middle East. An out of class ‘adventure’ – a picnic or a visit to an airport for example (in my case so far – Starbucks and Costco) enables a student to learn so much without realizing it and it gives confidence.

Three months ago I faced the most daunting teaching challenge to date: holding conversation classes in two Kaohsiung City senior high schools (you know who you are folks!). Suddenly I had to change from the comfort of small classes to class sizes

in excess of 30 students! This required a complete change in the way I had previously taught. At both schools I have adopted a very basic method of teaching – dividing the classes into smaller groups which allows me to set tasks which involve pupils working together. As I walk around I can talk to individuals getting to know them and allowing them to practice their language skills. Of course they won't have the same exposure as a student in a smaller group, but it is important to give them as much exposure as possible. Class management can be difficult at times as when I'm talking to one group, others in the class sometimes tend to chat in Chinese to each other. (Make the chat English next time people!!!) I am constantly looking to find new ways to improve the content and the management of the classes.

Even after so many years living here I still haven't got used to the idea of education being such a dominant influence on people's lives. The long school hours for the pupils followed by several hours in cram school learning such a variety of subjects, and then going home to study until the early hours before getting up a few hours later to start the routine once again. I suppose my viewpoint has been influenced by the fact that I am not Taiwanese and by recalling my own education. For example, take my junior high school years from September 1978 – May 1981. A typical day involved starting school at 8.30am, a 75 minute lunch break when I played with my friends (or escaped from the school bullies), two hours of classes in the afternoon, finishing school at 3.30pm; and then getting home by around 4.30pm. I would then play with my brother before sitting down for dinner at around 6pm. Playtime or watching television would then be the order of the day until bedtime unless, of course, there was some homework, usually a small amount taking up about one hour. When I have described school life in the UK students here have found this to be an unbelievable. One of the most common remarks is: "Tai hao le!"

If changes do eventually happen in the system here I would like to see a reduction in the length of the school day and a reduction in the number of hours pupils have to spend in cram schools. Whatever the merits or demerits of such long hours, even now, I still feel a sense of sadness that they are missing out on so much valuable family time and also time to develop interests outside the classroom. A system of encouraging the students to use the material they learn, and to think about it, and to work in groups would be a much better way. A reduction in class sizes would also be beneficial as this would allow the teacher to spend more time with each pupil. With the birthrate in Taiwan falling rapidly this would be a feasible proposition. Interestingly, in Britain the emphasis appears to be focusing on pupils expressing themselves, whereas here it tends to be on developing learning tools and memorizing

facts without encouraging the individual to spend much time analyzing the facts. An ideal system would be a combination of both.

In summing up, teaching here has allowed me to work with some wonderful individuals and to teach so many different pupils in terms of abilities and character. As I type, three people in particular come to mind: two second grade senior high school students who are twins and who, even now, still sometimes confuse me as to which one is which. A few weeks ago they did a short talk on their favourite comic book heroes. As part of the talk one of the brothers did his rendition of Spiderman and the Incredible Hulk. It was a fabulous sketch which made me laugh so much! Another pupil who comes to mind is also a second grade senior high student who is a very accomplished guitarist. I often see him practicing with an acoustic or electric guitar. Although I have mentioned only three here, each and every student is important to me and this is what gives me the largest joy in my teaching: meeting the people I teach and getting to know them because they all have unique personalities.

I may be getting older, but my love for my profession continues to grow. Long may it continue.

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