

Teaching English in China / Teaching Chinese in Scotland

Yimei Li, is a teacher of English in a city called Simao, located in the state of Yunnan Province in the southwest of China, currently teaching Chinese at St. Ninian's High School as part of a project with the British Council.

Teaching English in China (from interview notes)

School day

The school day starts at 7.30 am and finishes at 4.50 pm with a 2.5 hour lunch break in between. There are also evening classes that start at 7.30 pm and last for two hours. English, Maths and Chinese are considered to be the most important subjects in China. Pupils only learn one foreign language, which is English, and they are very motivated to do so. On a Monday morning, all pupils and teachers go out onto the playground. The flag is hoisted, the Chinese national anthem is played and then the Head gives a talk. My school is open until midnight and quite a few teachers live in the school.

Equipment

Pupils have to buy their own books, tapes and other equipment. The books and tapes are the main means of teaching. There are no language labs and E-mail not used widely. PowerPoint is quite new in my own school in Yunnan Province. I am not aware of any other schools using it and I personally have not yet used PowerPoint with my pupils. Also, I am not allowed to take pupils into ICT rooms because that is the domain of the ICT teachers.

Teaching and learning

There are between 60-80 pupils in each of my classes, which means it is not practicable to do pair work. The main teaching is from the textbook and we also have question and answer sessions. Teachers have very little influence on the curriculum since the government chooses the textbook and provides a scheme of work to follow. Deviations from this are not allowed. The books nevertheless appear to be fairly modern e.g. they include items such as "how to make pizzas and smoothies." Since I started teaching in 1994, the textbooks I use have been changed three times. The first and second times, the books were "British English"; the third one used "Canadian English" and is called "Go for it".

Assessment and Reports

There is frequent assessment, the unit taught over one week is assessed in the following week, and there are 14 units taught in total per term. In contrast to British students, pupils may not use dictionaries in tests. The skills tested include listening, reading and writing. The tests are a mixture of multiple choice questions, comprehension questions, filling in the blanks, and translation.

I have to write reports twice a term for each pupil; these can be typed up or handwritten.

Parent evenings

Parent evenings, of which there are three per term, are supposed to last two hours but I have spent many more in order to see all the parents. I also have to do a 30 minute talk to parents of each of her classes to tell the parents what I have been teaching and what I am going to teach over the next few weeks.

Homework

Homework must be set every night to every class. It should last one hour per subject per night. Parents complain if no homework is set. I see each class six times a week, sometimes even eight times, so homework is set at least six times a week for English alone. The Head can select extra subjects for additional lessons during the week. There is normally no problem about pupils completing their homework because it is considered shameful for the parents if a teacher has to phone home about homework not having been done.

Evening classes and Saturday school

I also do evening classes three times a week, for two hours, for which I get paid. Pupils are expected to attend. If they do not, phone calls are made home

There are no lessons for S1 on a Saturday. However, other classes, i.e. S2-S6 will sometimes have to come in on a Saturday for extra lessons. I am paid up to £2 a class, and I earn around £100 a month. This is enough to live on, but not to do anything extra.

Holidays

The summer holidays are roughly from 12th July till 25th August. The winter holiday lasts roughly from 12th January till 25th February. In addition, teachers get seven days' holiday around the National Day and again around the May Day holiday. We also have one day free at New Year, and on 10th September is Teachers' Day, which means pupils bring flowers and gifts for their teachers.

Teacher training and in-service support

Many teachers in China do not receive formal teacher training but go straight from a university degree to a teaching post. They can request a school and will be observed for one lesson before being accepted or not. There are staff meetings once a fortnight at which the head teacher will speak but teachers are not permitted to ask questions.

The head teacher does not usually get involved in matters of discipline, so teachers are solely responsible for the behaviour of their pupils in class. Phoning a parent is a last resort.

If teachers want to move school they request a move from the head teacher. The head of the school they want to move to is approached. If there is a place, the teacher can move.

Teaching Chinese in Scotland (in Yin Li's own words)

I have been working as a Chinese language assistant since September in East Renfrewshire. This is my first time in Scotland. It has been a wonderful experience so far. I have enjoyed working with teachers and pupils in different departments, for example modern studies, art, and history. Everyone has been very supportive especially with the language, as I have struggled a little bit with the accent!

As a language teacher in China, I really feel that this year is providing me with an excellent opportunity to improve my teaching capabilities in English.

Having been here for a number of months already, I have picked up on some of the many differences between the Scottish and Chinese education systems. The courses here are very useful and helpful for the pupils' futures and the pupils are given more opportunities to learn languages. The Chinese pupils can only learn one foreign language.

The teachers here in Scotland give pupils more time to think about their work and allow them to discuss things and ask questions, as well as voicing opinions. I like this kind of teaching style; it is not mechanical learning in every subject. I also like the class sizes here. Pupils learn better than in large classes. In China, it is hard for a teacher to organize their teaching as well in huge classes; more than sixty pupils. Pupils listen to the teacher in Chinese schools and then have hours and hours of homework every night. There is no variety. The pupils have little free-time to do the things that they like or even time to think for themselves. They just work hard on their school work for many hours every day. Chinese pupils are so tired! The pupils here are so happy to learn in school. I hope to take back lots of ideas to my colleagues in China.

Presently I am running several Mandarin clubs. Pupils and staff have responded with excitement and interest. It is a good opportunity to let the pupils know more about China and Chinese culture. At St Ninian's High School, my mentor has helped me set up an S1 Scotland -China Project Group and we are getting ready to celebrate the Chinese New Year with the teachers and pupils in February.

Despite Scotland's cold weather, I have found that Scottish people are very friendly and kind.