

ESL Suite

When I Started Teaching

Having been in the ESL industry in China for many years I've seen the ins and outs, ups and downs, and trials and tribulations of the ESL teacher.

The joy of getting through to that first child – the frustration of encouraging a challenging student, week after week, in the hope that you'll help them achieve the potential you know they're capable of. I've been there. I've done that. I've spilt paint on the shirt during the craft stage of the lesson.

Having been through the trenches of teaching under pressure, when sick, or when missing home – there are a few nuggets of truth and wisdom I have to offer – if you're open to hearing them.



YOUR KIDS WILL PULL YOU THROUGH.

When you first arrive in China, as with any country you're settling into for a year, we're exposed to new bugs and "nasties" – colds we've never been exposed to, food that's playing havoc on our tummies. Trust me, it happens to all of us: you're in your new job wanting to make a good impression, but all you want is Mom. You dread the idea of a dozen excitable kids waiting for you on the other side of that door.

The funny thing is – it's the kids that are going to pull you through that class. Remember, you can't fool kids – they're a notoriously honest audience – you can't fake it. Level with them. Tell them you're not feeling great and you want them treat you with a little tenderness today. You'd be surprised how the most rambunctious boisterous boys will be offering to bring you a tissue or pick up the pen you just fumbled to the floor for the 40th time today.

DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF.

The pursuit of perfection is enough to drive any teacher of young learners 'round the bend. There's only SO PREPARED you can be for a class. You'll eventually come to terms that KIDS WILL BE KIDS – and we should celebrate them for it. You're likely to encounter the repeated audio onslaught of a box of pencils being dropped from the desk to the ground and rolling everywhere. First time, okay. Second time, really? Third time, now you're doing it on purpose. Fact is kids will be kids, they're clumsy and energetic and their arms and legs are longer than they were last week. Learn to enjoy them for what they are and use their energy and silliness to keep you young in the classroom.

LAUGH AT YOURSELF WITH YOUR STUDENTS, BUT NEVER AT THEM.

Don't learn this one the hard way like I did. Students will happily spend an hour drawing ridiculous clothes on a print-out of you, and they're likely to give some weird names too – especially when they're learning new vocabulary. How often have you had a 5-year-old say “Teacher is a pencil.” Not funny at all right? But you laugh anyway cause we're teachers and we're approachable and we have a connection with the funny guy. Allowing the kids to feel safe in your company – safe to express themselves and try out new things with the language will result in hours of giggles and chuckles – but there's a big difference between laughing AT a mistake and laughing WITH someone who made a mistake. Kids are emotional creatures still figuring out how to react and build a thicker skin – feeling laughed AT is going to shut them up faster than a clam in low-tide. Learn to find the moments of humor in the lesson, don't take what your kids say personally (no, you don't really look like a monkey), know when to laugh and when to empathize and encourage.

AND FINALLY....

HAVE PASSION FOR WHAT YOU DO.

Think back to your favorite teacher from kindergarten or primary school. If you're as old as I am (that was a good few rotations round the sun ago), I honestly I don't remember WHY Mrs. Urry was my favorite teacher. I remember getting in trouble, being told to stand at my desk, not earning the gold star because I was talking to my desk-buddy...I was always in trouble! So how can she be my

favorite teacher? Because she always gave me another chance. She helped me get that gold star, she reminded me that talking during reading time is rude to the others who want to read, and that when there are 20+ kids in a class – sometimes you got to give a lady a break. The point is I remember her forgiving smile and encouraging aura. I don't remember the words she used to encourage me but I remember the feeling. Wouldn't it be nice to be *that teacher* to someone?

Teaching is a work of passion – and the kids are going to teach you as much, if not more, about whom you are as a teacher and as a person. It taps into that sense of nurturing even the most macho men would try denying. Whether you're asking hyperactive Emma to sit down back in her chair for the 1,000th time, or giving Leo a high-five for finally nailing his spelling test this week – enjoy your kids – enjoy the chance you've been given to make a difference in someone's life. We're educators – we were born to make a difference.

Written by Matt Zweig | Recruitment Associate & Blogger at ESL Suite



Matt is a born and bred Capetonian from South Africa and has been living and working in China since 2010. He's worked in many different departments of the ESL industry, and won the SINA GOLDEN TEACHER OF THE YEAR award in 2014. Matt became a recruiter so he could share his love of teaching in China with the rest of the world. Matt's favorite China moment was a shopping trip to Hong Kong in 2013.

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