

TEACHING ON THE EDGE
Sandun Secondary

By Rick Neal

Hello, Doctor Jones. I have a pain in my arm. Is it here? Here? Ouch!

This was what I was expected to teach. I had been teaching English to adults in Hangzhou, China when my school's director informed me that starting the following week I would be instructing sixteen year-olds at Sandun Secondary. Helen, the high school's stern head teacher, was now showing me their conversational textbook, which contained simulated conversations that the students repeated. Chinese students spent years learning grammar but instead of using it to build sentences they recited hackneyed dialogues.

"Can I use my own material?" I asked. "I think the students might find it more interesting."

Helen glared at me over her thick, wire-rimmed spectacles. "This is the curriculum. We must follow it."

So I showed up the next week prepared to abide by the syllabus as directed. Except for their red and blue polyester uniforms, the students looked like normal teenagers. The most atypical thing about them was their number; the average class size being fifty.

Teaching the stale conversations from the text was easy in that there was almost no preparation needed. My biggest difficulty was feeling worn out from having to yell inside the cavernous classrooms. Helen had explained that the students were shy to speak and she was right. They were comfortable reciting phrases in a group but panicked if I

attempted to engage them one on one. Another teacher told me that the Chinese school system had little tolerance for any effort that was less than perfect.

At the end of the week I approached Helen again about using my own material. Again she said no.

“But in real life they can’t repeat memorized phrases,” I persisted. “I can help them make their own sentences.”

“Very well. Next week you will use your own material.” She folded her arms. “But we will watch you.”

I arrived Monday morning feeling apprehensive. Coincidentally, my first class was Helen’s. She sat at the back with the other English teachers, eyeing me suspiciously.

I asked the students if they had a restful weekend. They answered, “No, just study.”

“Well, You must study hard if you want to get into university and get a good job”

Silence. I guessed they had heard this line before.

“How many of you plan to one day open your own business?”

A few grunted, “Maybe.”

“If you want to open a business, you must have a plan, a business plan,” I continued. “And what will you put in your business plan? What are some important decisions you must make when you open a business?”

Blank looks.

“Well, you will need a name for your business.” I wrote NAME on the board.

More stunned silence and bewildered expressions.

“What other things are important when you open a business? For example what if you open a restaurant?”

Against all the odds, a girl called out, “Maybe a location?” in a voice barely audible.

I wanted to kiss her.

“Of course!” I shouted.” “Choosing a location is very important.” I wrote LOCATION on the board.

There was a now a buzz through out the room.

Then, with a bit of prompting from me, the students compiled a list of important factors for a business plan. They decided that Product, Décor, and Advertising were also important to include.

“Now I want you to work in groups and create your own business plan. One group will make a plan for a restaurant, one for a coffee shop, one for a health club, and one for a music store.” I put down my pen. “Each group will then present their plan.”

“When we will we present?”

“In twenty minutes.”

Strenuous objections erupted. “It’s too difficult! Not enough time!”

“I believe you can do it,” I reassured them.

For the next twenty minutes business initiatives flowed faster than the Yangtze in springtime. Their final products were all somewhat similar and maybe lacking a bit in imagination but considering the time constraints they did a remarkable job. They showed the most creativity in their choices of names, coming up with monikers like *The Joyful*

Foreigner, Wa Ha Ha, and The Horrible Delicious Restaurant. Time ran out before all the groups could present, which drew howls of protest.

The teachers sat with their mouths open. From that day on, I stopped being treated like their official mascot. When I entered the grounds I was Bruce Springsteen walking onstage for his fourth encore.