

Teaching China's New Generation: Jimi Knight



When I was invited to contribute to this newsletter, I wasn't sure where to begin. Despite having lived and taught in China for the past 12 years, I don't consider myself an academic. Instead, I see myself as more of a hands-on worker—a farmer type. It's an image my colleagues often joke about, and I embrace it because, like farming, teaching demands hard work and dedication. During my time in China, I've worked in three distinct settings, each with its own lessons and challenges.

My first role in China was at a training center during what I call the "golden age." It was a time of growth and opportunity for both students and teachers. For the business owners, it was a lucrative era—a gold rush. For us teachers, it was a chance to refine our skills and make a real impact.

Later, I joined a start-up training center trying to replicate the passion and energy of the early days. Unfortunately, the focus shifted from quality teaching to gimmicks and profit-making. As a teacher, it was disheartening. We were often asked to dress up or stage photo ops to impress parents, regardless of whether the students were actually learning.

But for me, teaching has always been about that moment—the spark in a student's eyes when something suddenly clicks. That's what motivates me. Even in the less ideal circumstances, I embraced demo classes, which were often scripted sales pitches. While the content might have been fake, the teaching opportunities were real. I used them to refine my techniques, adapting to each new student and tailoring the material to meet their needs. One lesson I've carried with me is this: The material stays the same in a demo, but the students change. In regular classes, the students stay the same, but the material changes."

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This mindset has been invaluable. Understanding each student's strengths and weaknesses and adapting accordingly makes all the difference. For shy students, I'd involve their parents in activities to build confidence. For high-energy students, I'd keep the class fast-paced to maintain their focus. Each student is unique, and effective teaching requires flexibility and creativity.

Another critical lesson I've learned is the balance between following the curriculum and teaching what's right. Sometimes, the curriculum is flawed or even incorrect. When this happens, I do my best to teach the students the correct way, while also preparing them for what the system expects. As foreign teachers in China, we must respect the local education system and cultural norms. For example, I once observed a local teacher explaining how to write the number eight with a gap between the start and end points. This was completely different from how I was taught. When I asked about it, the teacher explained that this method was required in primary and high schools.

This experience reinforced an important point: What's "right" in one culture isn't necessarily "right" in another. As teachers, we must adapt to the local context to avoid setting our students up for failure. A colleague once told me, "It doesn't matter what we do; they won't remember it." I disagree. While young students might not remember specific lessons or even their teachers, the foundations we lay shape their future learning.

I like to think that because of the work we do, their future English classes will be just a little bit easier. As teachers, we are always making an impact, even if it's not immediately visible. Teaching in China has taught me patience, adaptability, and the importance of cultural understanding. It's not always easy, but the rewards—the sparks of understanding, the connections with students, and the knowledge that you're shaping their future—make it all worthwhile.



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