

Guidelines for volunteer English teachers in Shanghai's migrant schools

Objectives of the Program

Many of the schools have asked us to focus on reinforcing what the children are learning in their standard curriculum, with a view to helping them obtain better grades in their exams. In general, we are either co-teaching in the classroom with the regular English teacher (a local teacher) or providing additional classes at the weekend (often with a local teacher in attendance), in which case it's best if classes are built around the textbook the children are using to reinforce what they are learning.

Make sure you have a copy of the text book that your students are using. (you can get this from the lead teacher at your school or from the program coordinator) If you have been asked to reinforce what is being learnt in class, then refer to each week's lesson when preparing your lesson. Even if you are doing something different from what is in the text book, it makes sense to understand what they have been learning already so that you can build on that.

The emphasis is on developing the students English language skills, and in particular listening and speaking which are weaknesses in the Chinese education system. We can also provide a role model for pronunciation of words – also a weakness, since teachers' pronunciation is often incorrect.

We aim to try to engage the students by providing learning activities that make learning fun and meaningful. Volunteers can present alternative teaching methods that the local teachers may not have encountered before and may find productive. Bear in mind that many of the teachers are from rural areas themselves, probably have never encountered a foreigner before, may not have the benefit of much formal teacher training, and often have only rudimentary textbook English themselves.

What might volunteers find?

The students will be very interested in you!

Resources may be very limited. Do not assume tape recorders, charts etc will be available. You will need to bring most of the resources you wish to use.

The classroom may contain very basic furniture and facilities, and may be very crowded. Class sizes may be large – as many as 60 students in some cases. Co-teachers can assist the main teacher in managing a big class. Where possible we suggest dividing big classes into smaller ones or providing two or more teachers for one large class. For the extra English classes at the weekend, ideally the class size should not exceed 20.

At our weekend classes, we have been presented with students from different year groups in the same classroom. If possible, it is better to have only one year group in any given class, even if ability levels are similar. If they are from different year groups, you cannot refer to and build on what was learnt in that week's English class as they are using different text books.

The noise level may be high and it may be difficult to gain your students' attention and keep them focused. Some ideas below may help.

The students may repeat whatever you say – even when you are just giving instructions. This is how they are used to learning, so be creative in the beginning about letting them know if you don't want this to happen.

Ages of students

In the standard Chinese school system, children go into first year primary in the September before they turn seven, so the ages correspond to the years as follows:

1 st grade	6-7
2 nd grade	7-8
3 rd grade	8-9
4 th grade	9-10
5 th grade	10-11
6 th grade	11-12

Note that Shanghai primary schools only go up to 5th grade these days and the 6th grade has become a preparatory year in middle school. However, in most provinces and in the migrant schools, they maintain a 6th grade.

Note also that the ages of students at each grade may not correspond exactly to the standard. Some may have missed some years of education while on the move and some older children may repeat their last year in school because they cannot go to middle school.

If you want to know how old a student really is, it may be best to ask their date of birth rather than asking how old they are, bearing in mind that in Chinese tradition, children are one year old at birth and some even add another year every time they pass Chinese New Year! This is called "xu sui" (nominal age) as opposed to "zhou sui" (calendar years). The problem is that three different methods of calculating ages are all in use, so the age they give you may vary from the actual age by anything from 0-2 years! Of course, some of the younger students may not even know their birth year, so you may just have to accept some uncertainty on their ages!

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