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LeVar Harris

Teaching English to high school students in Hong Kong

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From New Jersey to Hong Kong: Adventures in Teaching

by LeVar Harris

From English to Cantonese. From pizza and American pie to dim sum and fishballs. From the Hudson River to Victoria Harbor waterfronts. After eight years of teaching high school English in New Jersey, I made a professional leap to explore teaching on an international level and landed in Hong Kong, a bustling city of 8 million inhabitants, tall skyscrapers, and a fusion of British-Chinese culture. I have learned much having taught in both the United States and Hong Kong; these experiences inspire me as an educator.

My Background

A native of New Jersey, I grew up in the central suburban city of Rahway. After completing my undergraduate and graduate studies at Rutgers University, my professional path led me to teach high school English in a few school districts ranging from wealthy and high achieving to working class with low-motivated students. I cherish these diverse realities as they have shaped me as a professional, equipping me with the skills to assist and teach various types of students. In addition, I also taught reading and writing part-time on the community college level. One of my primary goals in my college classrooms was to see what skills were required of students on the college level, so that I could better prepare my high school students to bridge the gap between their secondary and tertiary education. Eight years into my professional career, I enrolled into a certification program for students with disabilities to further expand my professional knowledge. After completing the program, I took a trip to Hong Kong to visit a friend, also a New Jerseyan, who had been teaching abroad, and discovered another professional path that I wanted to explore – teaching on an international level.

Hong Kong Education Environment

To graduate secondary school, students in Hong Kong have to take a high stakes exam with an English component that assesses students' ability to read, write, speak, and listen to English. Students must also sit through a Chinese component with similar parts as well as math and liberal studies assessments. As a result, education in Hong Kong has become a simmering cauldron of competitiveness. Add to this mix the fact that the city has eight universities with enough slots for about 20% of all its graduating students, and the result is a highly competitive environment. Taking advantage of this situation, multiple tutorial centers proliferate in every district of Hong Kong, whether affluent or impoverished, trying to appease the demand to prepare for the test and score well enough to enter university. From this environment, I have concluded Hong Kong is a city that values education, and that such high stakes testing has created an environment in most local schools where teachers feel forced to “teach to the test,” even adding the previous years' exams to the curriculum. While this has some similarities to the United States, the difference seems to be that every lesson in Hong Kong is geared toward test performance rather than skill development. Students are encouraged to complete at least three past exams of reading, writing, listening, and speaking components in an academic year in addition to their current workload.

Classroom Teaching

Picture this scene: Students enter your classroom, stand up at their desks, and after I say, “Good morning class,” they reply in unison, “Good morning, Mr. Harris,” before sitting down. This same practice is followed at the end of class (“Goodbye, and thank you Mr. Harris”). What a nice way to start the day and class! Classrooms in the United States tend to be more informal at the start, perhaps

with greeting students at the door, asking them to settle into their seats, or beginning with some type of “Do Now” or journal prompt. Both methods are indicative of the cultural norms of each society.

In terms of teaching, while most local English teachers in Hong Kong engage in more standardized teaching (dictation, worksheets, PowerPoints) to prepare students for the reading and writing components of the exam, my role is more focused on preparing and helping students improve their English-speaking skills for the group discussion exam component. Gone are my days of teaching the classic novel, poems and short stories, but this new role enables me to be quite creative in teaching English language learners, addressing vocabulary and speaking skills through classroom discussions, pictures, games, online videos, music, etc.

To further assist students, I organize activities during lunch time where students can informally come to the canteen and practice English. These range from practical skills (posting a large-scale map of the local transit system and having students give directions in English from one location to another along with trips to interview foreigners) to fun games (music sing-alongs, iPad app games, ‘Hoop-that-Verb’ grammar and basketball activities) to English debate competition preparations. My experience in the United States with further assisting students to develop a love of English has been mainly been through poetry and book clubs. Since English is native to the United States, the challenge is to encourage students to develop a lifelong love of reading and writing rather than engaging its use outside of classroom. While curriculum in Hong Kong is somewhat rigid and exam-oriented, I try to vary my approach and create different opportunities for students to use English. This keeps it interesting for myself and the students.

Staying Inspired

I remember once returning to my hometown high school in New Jersey and talking to a teacher who inspired me. He told me that a large part of teaching is teaching based on our personality. This means that each teacher has a “personality” that is formed from our beliefs, interests, family, character, etc., so no two teachers are alike, and what works for one may not work for another. I have noticed this in my professional career both in the United States and Hong Kong. In the classroom, the variables we work with are our students, the curriculum, and our personality. I believe that understanding one’s personality is key to being effective and staying motivated. Since the curriculum in most public schools in Hong Kong is often fixed and exam-driven, I constantly feed my personality. One way I do this by attending workshops, many of which are offered through the Hong Kong Education Bureau. In addition, there are a few international conferences that I attend in nearby Macau, South Korea and Singapore which allows me to see what others do and what I can adapt based on my personality and curriculum.

Recently I attended a Google Apps event in South Korea to become a Google certified educator and improve my knowledge of using technology in the classroom. (Apple offers a similar workshop but without certification.) I also use teacher support groups through online teaching forums; there is one here in Hong Kong that I joined (www.nesta.hk), which provides not only advice, but professional development and social events such as “The Amazing Race HK,” tram rides, beach cleanups, and more. I also visit bookstores and toy stores; in essence, any place that can spark an idea that I can use in my teaching and lessons based on my personality and style. This makes my teaching more effective, which in turn, keeps me motivated each year and continues to add to this adventure of teaching and learning.

LeVar Harris, M.Ed., is a former high school English teacher in New Jersey. He also taught English part-time on the community college. Currently, he is teaching high school in Hong Kong to English language learners. He has also assisted other English teachers in Hong Kong through professional development programs and workshops through the Native English Speaking Teachers' Association and the Hong Kong Education Bureau.



Art by Graciela St. Onge