

Hey Van Episode 1 - Oh My School English Class!

1/19/2023

Hey Van Hey Guys, this is Van. Finally, the first episode is released and I can start procrastinating about the next one! Lol... Just kidding. I've been thinking about making a podcast for young English learners for a while and here it is. I wish to create a space where we can talk about any topics for fun. But most importantly: in English.

I've been teaching Chinese kids English Language Arts for over 7 years. If you ask me what an English class should be like, frankly, I don't know where to start. Different teaching styles suit different learners. But at the end of the day, it's language learning, which enables you to broaden your world vision, acquire new knowledge and express yourself. However, what has happened in the past two years is not a good sign for enhancing English language skills.

In August, 2021, The Chinese government banned for-profit tutoring in subjects in the school curriculum in an effort to ease pressure on children and parents. Over the past few years, the English reformers have been advocating a decrease in the amount of time spent teaching English. What's more, due to the strict pandemic restrictions, numerous schools have switched to online classes, where students struggle a lot to keep up with the curriculum and have less chances to speak the language.

Funny thing is that right after the policy, "Double Reduction" was announced, one of my students told me that their nap time at school was deprived. I guess without the help of private tutoring, all of a sudden teachers felt the burden had fallen on their shoulders. They just panicked.

Especially with all my students entering into secondary education and transforming into teenagers, well it sounds kinda scary, I started to notice some big differences in terms of their homework quality, time management and eventually test scores. I totally understand that with all the pressure and competition, it can be truly overwhelming to be a middle or high schooler nowadays. Accordingly, it also occurred to me to find out what an English class looks like at public schools. I'm curious.

So today I invited 10 teenagers to join us to talk about their school English classes. First let's find out who they are! I am Gustavus. Hi, I'm Terrine. My name is Ethan. Sally. You can call me Mike. I'm Alice. My name is Lily. I'm Richard. My name is Natalin. My name is Killer Sage.

Are textbooks still widely used? What's a teacher's role in class? These kids will use a few sentences to briefly introduce their English classes.

We don't use textbooks a lot. They teach us by reading textbooks and sometimes they will ask us some questions.

Our teacher always uses workbooks. Sometimes she teaches us english songs. We ask her any questions and she's happy to give us the answer. She encourages us to communicate in English more. So most of us speak English in her class.

In our English class we use textbooks. Our teacher usually asks to read articles on the book and answer questions. Sometimes she let us to discuss with each other to find out the answers.

Well, the teacher sometimes uses a textbook, but in most cases she uses the guidance papers. In the class, our teacher does most of the teaching and we usually answer the questions and just take notes.

We use different textbooks in the English class and that's pretty unusual. Our english teacher often let us do some activities and we enjoy the English class every time because it is interesting.

My English class is not very active. Everyone listens to the teacher carefully. Usually our teacher tell us what we will learn first and then she asks us to turn to the right page and starts a new lesson with the help of power point.

My teacher leads us to familiar the paragraph in the text book first. She summarizes the grammar and important words from the paragraph and give us different samples to teach us how to use them. Next she asks us to do more practices.

In class, we are used to using some pieces of paper which includes some questions to let us understand the paragraphs batter instead of the textbooks. So for me, my English class is kind of normal.

Our English class is like our English teacher will first use textbook and a Power Point. She will use the Power Point to play some listening and we will use it to finish some exercise on the textbooks. There are also some exercises in the Power Point, but our teacher thinks it's too childish and it's too easy for us. And then she will explain some words and some phrases that will appear in the test and we just take notes.

We use textbook in class for some vocabularies and passages we should recite but not much. We mainly use our notebooks and learning plans made by our teacher, so it's quite busy in English class because we have to write down many words and also communicate with teacher at the same time.

Do teachers mostly speak Chinese or English to teach? When I was a student, the answer was Chinese. But what about theirs?

Well our English teacher doesn't use English to explain everything but she uses English to explain the new words

Actually not everything. She usually explains grammar rules in English.

Our teacher uses English to talk with us and she encourages us to talk to her in English too. But sometimes when there's something very important she would just emphasize it by using Chinese. Well, I have no problem understanding it. My listening is very good.

No, she seldom uses English.

Mostly, I think. I can understand very well because the words she uses are easy for me, you know.

When we don't respond as she explains the same thing repeatedly, she uses Chinese.

Our teacher always uses Chinese to explain the words and phrases we don't understand.

But she will also give us some examples of how to use the words in English.

Our English teacher doesn't use English to explain everything. She just uses English a little like saying 'Okay', 'Now class begins' or 'Turn to page 56', 'Look at 1A' these kind of sentences.

My teacher uses English to teach us most of the time when he teaches new classes. Though he uses Chinese as well when he explains some complex grammar.

Well, about 70% of the time our English teacher uses English and about 30% of the time she uses Chinese. Because the things we are learning at the moment are very easy, I can understand everything very easily.

There are so many activities and interactions being used in class to get students more engaged or motivated. For an average size of a Chinese class, what activities do they usually have? How do you organize so many students effectively to participate?

For example, we have a game called Words Guessing. The teacher says the meaning of a word and we need to give the word that matches one by one. Uh I think it helps me memorize the words.

We have an English class for us to just read every week. We choose the books by ourselves. After we read for 20 minutes, our teacher invites us to share what we read and asks us to make a bubble chart about it. This interaction helps me with my expressive ability and makes me better understand the material I read.

Yeah, of course we have some teamwork in class. For example, two students from a group and we exchange our opinions and feelings about one topic and talk about anything we want to talk. We can learn a lot from our partners. Also, one student gives a presentation at the beginning of every English class. We can use any topics we want. It's free, you know. It helps us build self-confidence to express ourselves in front of people. Also, is a test of the ability to withstand pressure.

Once she wanted us to practice the use of aAttributed Clause. She used two classed to play a game called Who Is the Spy. We discussed and shared answers with each other. This kind of activity makes me more interested in learning English.

They give us quizzes or ask some questions.

We have free talk before every class. We can share things and sing. Our teacher shares her experience when most of us were infected with Omicron. She also wrote down the key phrases she used in her talking. Most of the time we have teamwork with their desk mates. We finish our task by asking and answering each other some questions. We also play little games like Number Off.

Like discussing in groups, practicing dialogues with classmates and so on.

In most cases our teacher just asks the questions and we answer the questions. Because we have to use English to answer them, they gave us a chance to practice our English. And because when answering the questions we need to think, so it gave us a lot of opportunity to think.

Learning English is fun. It can be challenging as well.

English grammar is hard. Words are easy to learn.

I think it is English speaking. The easy part is reading.

I think the most difficult part of school learning is to learn some similar phrases but with different meanings like 'take up', 'make up', 'put up'. And the easiest part of school learning is grammar because I have learned it before I go to middle school.

The most challenging part is we often need to retell the passage we've just learned in our own words when we're learning a new unit. We should be very well-prepared and creative. I'm not very good at summarizing, so this helps me with my verbal skills a lot. Vocabulary is pretty easy for me.

I think the challenging part is changing the tense of the sentence. The easy part is listening. The challenging part is memorizing the easy part is the reading and the vocabulary.

Also, learning comes with questions. I love answering my students' questions. What if they have questions, will they talk to their teacher a lot?

In my opinion, my teacher is a humorous person and he's easy to get along with. So I always felt relaxed to ask him questions and sometimes I even communicate with him about my life and my learning. He is treated as a friend by us.

Yes, I always ask my English teachers questions and she seems very happy to help. It's a good way to get more knowledge and improve yourself. So every time I try not to miss the chance. I also use dictionaries and the Internet. They're wonderful because you can get anything you want.

If I need some help, I will send a message to her and she will explain the questions to me or explain it in class.

I don't communicate a lot with my teacher because usually I don't have many questions. And if I have any problems, I would just search it on the Internet because it's the most convenient way.

No, I ask my friends or families.

To be honest, not at all. I either ask my parents for help or I make use of online resources.

I don't communicate a lot with my teacher. If I need some help with my English, I think I will ask my teacher for help.

Because I am the English monitor, so I often communicate with my English teacher. Like she needs my help to collect the homework and hand out the homework. Sometimes she will give me some treats like cookies and nuts and I feel free to ask her any questions and she will answer me patiently. I feel lucky.

Reading is an essential part of my class. I don't need to emphasize how important it is. Do they read a lot in English besides the curriculum?

Yes, I do and I like nonfiction best. It's history, science and politics. I love them.

I like adventure novel best because I think it's very exciting. And some of the events can make me imagine a lot like monsters and different kinds of magic.

Not very often.

I don't read any. Novels are my favorite.

Yes. I like reading English novels and watching English movies. My favorite genre is Sci-fi because I like some, you know, strange and imaginary things. I think they're cool and exciting. And some things in the movies or some details in the books, they are grand and magnificent. And that's why I like it.

My favorite genre is fiction and especially adventure fiction, science fiction and detective fiction. They're super cool. For example, my favorites are Harry Potter, Magic Treehouse series and Sherlock Holmes.

Because of my homework, I don't read English novels very often. But I sometimes read novels as well such as Harry Potter, Charlotte's Web, Secret Garden and so on. As I'm a reason-minded person, detective novels, fantasy and science fiction are all my favorite genres.

Yes, my favorite genre is poetry. I think poems are really beautiful.

Homework. For a lot of students, it's a headache. But what if students became teachers and started assigning homework. I wonder what it would be.

My English homework usually consists of written exercise and reading key points. I am in a boarding school, so our teacher doesn't give us too much homework. Usually it takes me only half an hour to finish it. We also have some listening work.

I have one paper, several pages of practices and reciting of notes. I usually take 1.5 hours to finish them all. It's a little helpful to my English learning because it improves my memory. And if I were an English teacher, first I will make it less and second I want my students to have more reading and speaking. For example, they can read one passage or chapter out loud.

Few pages of exercises. 20 to 40 minutes because it's the order from the Ministry of Education.

Our homework covers English grammar, reading, writing and listening. It takes me about 30 minutes to finish. I would have my students read more English articles and stories because I think Chinese students don't have the environment to practice English enough. We don't have many chances to speak English in real life.

We have workbooks which includes listening, writing, grammar, vocabulary and even speaking practice for homework. It takes me about 20 minutes to finish the homework. If I were an English teacher, I would also give some paper exercise. But I will reduce the amount of the homework because students are under a lot of pressure now.

Most of our homework are grammar exercises and some very easy readings. And the other part is the memorizing. I normally have to use around 40 to 50 minutes to finish it. Well, it can help me understand the grammar points and help me prepare for the test. If I am an English teacher, well I will give them some grammar exercises and some readings that needs some understanding of the text to do. That is in general harder. And some memorizing and some book reading. The readings is practice reading comprehension. The grammar exercises is to help the students know how to use these words or structures. So memorizing the grammar points. I don't see any alternative to that and book reading is to enlarge the vocabulary.

My English homework is usually test paper including readings and choosing the words. It usually takes one hour to finish it and it makes me very tired after watching so many English words. So I don't like this kind of homework. But I think it is helpful. If I am an English teacher, I will hand out some paper including what I have taught today to make students review and I will hand out some reading homework. Maybe some of the students want to finish it, but I think it's still a need.

Like I mentioned earlier, most students have had online classes for the past few months. All my classes are online too because of the time difference. It requires strong language skills such as speaking and listening for oneself to really benefit from it. How do they feel about online English classes at school?

I feel distracted. Without other people's supervision, it's really difficult for me to keep focused and listen to the teacher.

Anxious. I've been being slack about my online classes because the teacher is not in the same room to supervise me and I can't discipline myself enough. I always think my classmate study harder than I do and then I will be worried that they get better grades and laugh at me. Um I'm kind of ambivalent about study and that's why I feel anxious about it. I really enjoyed my online classes and I would like to use 'interesting' to describe it. Before every class, our teacher always plays English songs to us which are mostly popular. Sometimes we can sing during the break and in class we can always learn new phrases. The funniest part is that some students have been singing when the microphone was opened unluckily. So online classes are mostly interesting to me.

I used 'tired' to describe my online English classes because online English classes make my English teacher feel really anxious. She worries that some of the students won't focus on the class and go to play some online games. And she also worries about our grades. So she continually picks someone to repeat her words and it usually takes a lot of time. But I still learn from the English classes and I still make progress.

My word is great. Our teacher uses English in most cases, and we use English. My experience is great.

Great. I love it. It's a good way to test our self control. You can be sleepy or lazy; otherwise, you fall behind.

As students, they work hard. But is this their ideal English class?

My English class is good but it's still not my ideal English class. In my opinion, in an ideal English class, the teacher will have more communication with students and we'll get more feedback from the students. And after a teacher teach some knowledge point, they need to let the students do some exercise that uses its knowledge.

Yes, because I don't have any better advice about it.

No, it isn't. Because we mostly listen to teacher. I want to have more communication with my classmates in class.

This is my ideal English class because I feel relaxed in class and our teacher always makes the class rich and interesting.

I wish teachers could take their work more seriously. I wish they would not be that lazy.

Well not exactly. There's very few reading and reading comprehension is very important. So I think there should be more reading comprehension. I think our teachers should use 100% English. No Chinese at all. and I think the rest of our curriculum is very good and should be kept.

My English class is 80% ideal. We're happy and relaxed in class for most of the time and we do learn a lot and communicating and playing games. But I think less writing is better in

and after the class. For instance, teacher can let students express your opinions more and do more reading.

Thanks for sharing, which helps me to have a better understanding of what an English class looks like at the public schools. Keep trying! Don't forget to listen to this episode to gain more practice!

"Hey Van" is a free space for young English learners to express themselves. But, in English! Hope you like this episode. If you have anything to say about this topic or any other topics you want to hear about, feel free to comment below and share the show with your friends! Subscribe to get more interesting content!

Happy Chinese New Year! This is Van. I will see you next time!