

Yu Huang and Yu Zhu are senior high school English teachers at Hezhang County No. 2 Middle School in the province of Guizhou. In China, most middle schools consist of six grades of students; the first three years are considered junior middle school and the latter three years are commonly referred to as senior middle school (or sometimes senior high school). Both Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu are dedicated to helping their students build interest in the English language inside and outside the classroom.



Yu Zhu (left) and Yu Huang in a hallway at their school



Yu Zhu (far right) and Yu Huang (second from right) collaborate with other teachers in the English office.

They work diligently to increase their students' confidence and give them access to more opportunities. For both of these women, communication and professional development are paramount to forming productive relationships with other teachers and the students—which leads to success in language learning.

Hezhang County, tucked away in the mountains of southwestern China, is a lesser-known, rather isolated part of the country. Although there are high-rise apartments in the town of Hezhang, many students come from farming communities outside of Hezhang's small urban area. "Most of my students are from the countryside," said Ms. Zhu. "Their parents go outside of the county to search for jobs, so the students rent apartments near my school and look after themselves."

Despite the challenges in Hezhang, Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu have both chosen to work in their hometown. With highly qualified teachers flocking to the international metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, more rural areas, like Guizhou province, are left with fewer educators. Ms. Huang had the opportunity to teach in her provincial capital city but turned it down in order to make a difference in her local community. "Everybody thought I should grasp the chance to work there, but at last, I chose to come back to No. 2 Middle School because I like the atmosphere here and I am used to the way we communicate with each other, and I have a family here," said Ms. Huang.

Specifically, she has become used to the way of communicating with other teachers, including Ms. Zhu. These two women met at No. 2 Middle School as workmates while grading student exam papers. Their work relationship developed into friendship when they discovered they shared the same passion for bettering themselves as teachers as well as empowering their students. "We found that we had many similarities, so we started to cooperate to improve our students' English," said Ms. Zhu.

Another similarity these two teachers share is their educational background. Both Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu studied English with the initial intention of finding a stable job. Ms. Huang was an English major at Guizhou University in the provincial capital of Guiyang from 2002 to 2006 and had dreams of working for an international company. Ms. Zhu studied at Bijie Normal School from 1999 to 2001. After teaching primary school for three years, she decided to go back for another two years of schooling at Guizhou Normal College in Guiyang from 2004 to 2006. In the end, both women decided that working with students was the perfect way to stay fresh. "Young people always have new ideas, and staying with them can help me keep a young state of mind," said Ms. Huang.

Although it is not unusual to find Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu in the same classroom, it is unusual for Chinese senior high school teachers to co-teach. "We are the first partners in our school. We sometimes give class together," said Ms.

Huang. “I don’t know of any other teachers in our school who work together in the same way.” In order to provide more opportunities for their students, the two teachers spend an average of four hours per week planning together, co-teaching, assisting each other, and even exchanging classes. “We do not share an office, but we make time to meet together, sometimes at a coffee shop,” said Ms. Zhu.

Both Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu teach two or three 40-minute classes per day. Each class has about 70 students, whom they see each day of the week. Although this may appear to be a light schedule, both teachers are responsible for designing curriculum and supervising extracurricular activities in addition to their teaching duties. Their students range in age from 15 to 18 years and come to them with a wide range of abilities. Like most teachers, they face various challenges inside the classroom, in addition to mixed ability levels: large class sizes, lack of student motivation, few resources, and so on. Rather than complain about these problems, Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu seek solutions together. According to Ms. Zhu, “The first time we worked together, we were teaching the same grade, so we usually talked about problems we faced in different classes. We discussed and studied these problems and tried to find a better solution for our students.”

In addition to problem-solving together, the two teachers visit each other’s classes as co-teachers or as teaching assistants. “If I am trying a new strategy, Ms. Zhu will come to observe me and assist the students as needed,” said Ms. Huang. “We also will sometimes exchange classes to give the students a fresh perspective.” Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu have discovered that working together benefits them as well as their students. “We learn together and motivate each other,” said Ms. Zhu, “and our students find it very interesting to experience these new teaching styles.”

To stay abreast of new teaching styles, Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu partake in self-study as well as various teacher trainings. According to Ms. Zhu, “Ms. Huang is devoted to studying methodology and trying innovative concepts. She has inspired me to study hard, too.” Both

teachers have attended trainings offered by U.S. Department of State English Language Specialists and English Language Fellows. “We attended a five-day training in the summer of 2014 and several shorter trainings in 2015,” said Ms. Huang, “where we learned many new strategies.” Both teachers agree that these trainings have been an invaluable part of their professional and personal growth as teachers. “If I could make any recommendation to current and future teachers, I would tell them to grasp every opportunity for further study or training,” said Ms. Zhu, “and to try their best to learn as much as possible.”

Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu work together not only in the office, the classroom, and teacher trainings, but also after school hours with their own English club. They quickly realized that 40 minutes per day was simply not enough to accomplish their teaching goals and satisfy the needs of their students. For this reason, along with several other English teachers, they established the “Magic Life English Club.” The name was chosen by the student club members to highlight the power of English and its influence on one’s ability to travel, navigate the Internet, and live a life that may have seemed possible only in a fairy tale.

The club was started less than one year ago, but it already has over 120 participants from the middle school attending regularly. Because the club is still in its infancy, the leaders hope that even more of the 3,657 students in their middle school will attend. The club meets at the school once every two weeks for at least an hour and is led by different groups of students each session. Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu are there as organizers and facilitators. “The students enjoy being in control and having the chance to share their knowledge with their peers,” said Ms. Huang.

For the two teachers, the English club is also the perfect environment for them to try out new strategies. “We tried the running dictation activity that we had learned about in one of our trainings,” said Ms. Zhu. “The students seemed to love it—all the members took part and were interested in the activity.” Running dictation is a fast-paced interactive strategy that integrates reading, writing, listening, and



Members of the Magic Life English Club engage in a running dictation activity.

speaking. Typically, students are divided into several teams. Each team has “runners” and “writers.” The runners must go to various places around the classroom to read and memorize a small passage, which they will dictate to the writers. The teams compete to complete their passage first and also have the most accurate passage. Ms. Zhu reported, “With so many students in our club, it was difficult to control everyone during this activity.” So, it was back to the drawing board with Ms. Huang to problem-solve and find possible remedies.

Another challenge that seems ubiquitous among Chinese teachers of English is getting students to speak more. Students’ oral competence is often connected to their confidence and self-image, so overcoming such fears among teenagers is not an easy task. However, Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu persist in addressing this difficulty in creative ways; one such way is through music and singing. Ms. Huang’s proudest moment as a teacher was noticing the changes in one of her shiest students. At the beginning of the semester, the student timidly muttered the “ABCs” in front of her peers, but by the end, she confidently sang a multi-verse song for the whole class. Ms. Zhu also likes to use music in her classroom. “I use websites, like www.songlyrics.com or www.lyrster.com, to find song lyrics which are appropriate for the lessons I am teaching,” she said.

Problem-solving and creativity go a long way in the classroom; so, too, do relationships. Both teachers emphasize the importance of building strong relationships with their students and colleagues by spending time genuinely getting to know others. For example, Ms. Zhu creates an inventory for all her students to fill out on the first day of class so that she can learn more about them and know how to contact them

outside the classroom. She typically asks them about their family members, hobbies, dreams and goals, preferred learning styles and habits, email address, and other social media contact information. Likewise, Ms. Huang spends time before and after class talking to her students one-on-one to understand more about their dreams and desires. “I like to talk with them. First, I will be their friend, and then I will be their teacher next,” she said.

Both Ms. Huang and Ms. Zhu want their students to use English as a universal language to communicate and access more information and opportunities. They accomplish this goal by cooperating and by communicating openly with each other, their colleagues, and their students. Most importantly, they recognize the importance of professionalism and continuing education. Ms. Huang recently found out that she has been selected by the Chinese national government to participate in a summer exchange program at Georgetown University later this year. She plans to use this opportunity to strengthen her own skills as a teacher and then share them with others through teacher-training workshops. “My goal for this next year is to spread ideas to other teachers—first teachers in my school, and then in my county. I could be a trainer next year,” said Ms. Huang.

Already one teacher is inspired by Ms. Huang’s work. “She is my hero,” said Ms. Zhu.

This article was written by **Rebekah Gordon**, an English language teacher who is currently serving as a renewing English Language Fellow hosted by Southwest University in Chongqing, China.

Photos courtesy of Yu Huang and Yu Zhu