

Recipe for English :

Developing interest in extra-curricular English clubs

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The trail and error of creating a “recipe”

Chinese food, in its various types, is one of the wonders of the culinary world. Who doesn't love the sweet and tender taste of char siu pork, or the comforting, savory soups famous in the Guangdong region? While many a Westerner like myself enjoys eating these tasty foods, the idea of cooking them is somewhat daunting. Everyone knows that Chinese food is incredibly demanding to prepare because of the focus on detail that must be given at every step.

What makes a good recipe? A cook must consider the mix of the flavors, the appetite of those who will eat the dish, the temperature required to cook the food to its proper texture, and even the presentation of the final product. Once a dish has been “perfected” to the taste of one cook, another may change it a bit, or variations on the recipe may be required if it's to be cooked in a new location, where certain ingredients aren't available, or the altitude is different, for example.

In the three years since I began teaching English full time in Macau, I have come to see my role as a teacher—especially that of creating new English clubs at my school—as a bit like the process of cooking.

I cannot say that I have yet “perfected” the “dish” of English activities here, but through trial and error, I have made the following observations about what works and what doesn't work for my particular group of “eaters.” Just like a recipe, elements of English clubs which may have worked in my home country, the U.S., have had to be adapted or changed in order to fit my students' taste.

Motivation: participation and production

One of the continuous challenges for me in the process of creating clubs has been to understand students' motivation for joining them. I have tried several kinds of clubs in the last three years : a creative reading and writing club, an English movie club, an overseas study club (focused on cross-cultural awareness and study preparation for major international English exams), and an English newspaper club. While most clubs attracted fairly large numbers of students at the beginning, the club that has been most successful at retaining and adding new members has been the English newspaper club. I believe there are two reasons for this.

First, the club annually creates three colorful magazine-type productions, and numerous black and white one-page news flyers. These are distributed among the student body and students are able to see their own names in the byline of articles. In addition, this club takes yearly trips to visit real news groups and helps to place students for summer journalism internships. The students thus gain a real sense of self- satisfaction from seeing their own work in print, and they have a chance to develop their writing more both in school and out of it.

Second, this club does NOT require perfection, and there are various roles for students to fill. Due to the nature of a newspaper, designers, photographers, writers and editors are all required in order to successfully produce a paper. This allows students of all levels to participate. Those with good creativity and computer skills but who are shy about

using their English may choose to be a designer instead of a regular reporter. In fact, students of various English levels are invited to contribute- even Junior students - because the newspapers include different kinds of articles, and even simple games which can be written by anyone. In addition, the editors (including the teacher) can do their job of editing, and help correct the grammar mistakes of the writers. It's always fun seeing the faces of those timid about using their written English the first time that their articles are printed. Often, it's even a surprise to their classmates or teachers, because their English marks may not be the highest in the class. What they learn and enjoy is the idea that through trying, and through participation in a group effort, even their English is good enough to be printed.

Another example of the importance of participation was learned through the English Movie club, which was designed with Juniors in mind. In its original form, the club was designed to function as an additional conversation practice for students. They were to watch part of a movie together with the teacher each week and then have 30 minutes or so of discussion following the viewing. After one year of following this plan, it was obvious that something was missing. Although attendance was semi-regular and relationships among the students and with the teacher was good, students were still reluctant to speak and there wasn't growing interest in the club. This year, instead of just watching movies, students themselves also had to create short films. The school year was divided into 5-6 week units, with each unit centering on a certain film genre. Students watched movies from that genre, wrote their own script and produced a 3-5 minute film in which everyone had at least a small speaking part. While some bugs remain to be worked out, as a few students shouldered the majority of the responsibility, the club more than doubled in size and attendance was very regular. Students also thoroughly enjoyed the productions and since this was a Junior club, it was much easier for them to learn and digest lines than to risk the embarrassment of speaking their own ideas about and critiquing a film.

Drama performance in Sichuan



English helpers' leader camp

The bottom line is : having something to do and something to show for their effort (not only something to learn or experience) is very important to my students - no matter what kind of club is being considered.

Correct planning and clear communication

Another aspect of capturing and keeping students' interest in English clubs has to do with correct planning (including understanding students' expectations) and clear communication.

A clear difference between local students and students from my home country is the emphasis placed on tests and exams. Even to this day, I sometimes forget to check the test schedule when planning events for the English clubs. If that happens, and I ask for newspaper articles to be submitted or if I schedule a recording session for the English Movie Club during those times of heavy workload, both the students and I will be upset and frustrated. This year, I tried to predict, before the school year even started, when those times of heavy work would be based on last year's calendar, and tried to schedule lighter activities for those times. Although not every conflict can be avoided, some understanding of local students' priorities and an attempt to plan around them can go a long way.

In addition, when changes do need to be made or reminders need to be sent out, clear communication is, of course, really key. In fact, I feel that English clubs (and myself as a westerner) need to work extra hard in this area. While many methods of communication are available, not all of them are entirely effective at reaching students. In the first year of the clubs' existence, I often used the school's broadcasting system to remind students of upcoming club times and events. After several months, however, I found that these announcements



Movie club

were often made while students were still chatting after lunch and could not be heard clearly, or some classes would be on field trips and miss the announcements altogether. After going back to the drawing board, I found that, like the local system of class representatives, finding one or two students to be in charge of contacting the others or creating small groups with a head within the club is probably the best way (besides Facebook groups) of notifying students of important information. In some cases, especially perhaps in a second language, face-to-face communication is always the best. When they are busy, students (and even teachers) may just tune out or overlook English messages.

Careful attention and patience has definitely been required on the road to creating a "perfect" recipe. While the journey is not over yet, the process has been rewarding and often even fun! Seeing students succeed and enjoy English brings more satisfaction than a mouthful of the best Chinese food around! Happy "cooking"!

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Macau post trip

