

## Two thousand four hundred

31 March 2012

2400 what? This big number is how many students we see in our teaching week. Yes, work has begun. We each teach oral English for 50 minutes to 20 classes of between 50 and 70 students between eight and noon. It feels a bit like a theatre performance with us as actors trying to involve the audience in our show, with the premiere early Monday morning and the final performance a matinee on Friday. And as with real audiences, some are more responsive than others. The Monday morning classes have to cope with recovering from the weekend, as well as being the guinea pigs of our lessons, which of course get tweaked and keep improving as the week progresses.

A crazy schedule? It certainly looks like it, but we only do this in the “odd” weeks, the “even” weeks give us a break from teaching and time to prepare the next lesson before it starts all over again. Also although an 8.00 am start sounds early, we leave our apartment only ten minutes before the start of the lesson and are still more than five minutes early, with the students already waiting in class. When the 7.50 am bell rings, there is a visible acceleration in student movement towards their classes. They do not want to be late and rush to be in class before the teacher! In our teaching week we finish



A view from the kitchen window, looking out on our teaching block.



at midday, which gives us the rest of the day to explore the area, do some shopping and stroll around Zhangye. Combine that with the fact that we can prepare our lesson together and the job is actually not too bad.



We both teach in the same five-storey building in rooms that seat 120 people, so really the class is only just half full. The students share a computer screen between two, so we can make Powerpoints with texts for them to read and show photos from New Zealand. There is no way we can move the furniture and put desks in groups, but pair work is not a problem, and when the students turn around they can make up a fine foursome.



Our classes are all first and second year non-major English students. They have studied English for up to 10 years, but never had any practice in speaking, except for the odd one from the Shandan Bailie School. They were put into three groups according to the score of their first semester English test results. We are teaching the A students, the best ones. These classes are made up of groups from different majors: Accounting, Maths, Law, Agriculture, PE, Chinese

Language, to name a few. Most of the other foreign experts here teach English major students and they have classes of around 30 students, who they see twice a week in two 50 minute blocks. The oral English program we are teaching is a pilot, and it is up to us what and how we teach and how we are going to assess the students. It is a fun challenge to make up interesting lessons and find ways to improve their spoken English.

Now here is the headache.... "How to assess the progress of 1200 students you see nine times for 50 minutes?" I guess for some their progress will be huge. From standing up when asked to give an answer and staring at their desk saying nothing, to standing up and actually saying something, anything, will be a giant leap ahead. However, sometimes it still feels a little like trying to push water uphill with a rake. But after having seen all groups three times by now, we can see that many students are enjoying the class and looking forward to the lessons. There is a lot of laughter and students are already less shy than in February.

I am writing this on a Saturday, normally a free day for all, but today and tomorrow are "normal" school days. Wednesday is a holiday, *Chingming*, Tomb Sweeping Day. To make it a three day holiday, Monday and Tuesday are off as well. And this means missed lessons have to be made up on Saturday and Sunday. So like any other "normal" school day, the students get up at around six o'clock, the sound system on campus kicks in and you can see and hear them running around before breakfast. All 13,000 of them.... Or so it looks when we see all these dark shapes moving around in the light before dawn. Now at noon, we can hear the sound system again. It is time for lunch and then back to their dorms, which they share with five others, to have a nap before the classes start again at half past two.

On *Chingming*, some of the foreign teachers will be sweeping and cleaning the English Library that will re-open soon. Maybe a good reason to buy some fireworks, payback time for all the ear-shattering noise we hear whenever there is a wedding, a shop opens or a farmer buys a new tractor. Noise fits the occasion as it will not be a "Shhh, this is a library!" place, but a space where the English major students come to hang out after class, chat in English and borrow books and DVDs. We will open the library one or two evenings as well, as it might get too crowded when many students turn up from our lot of 2400.