



## TEACHING CHINESE AT CASCIA HALL PREPARATORY SCHOOL

By LI XUEDE

I am Li Xuede from Yanan Senior High School in Shaanxi Province. At present, I am teaching Chinese at Cascia Hall Preparatory School. I have two classes of students. One class includes 12 kids from the eighth grade. The other class has nine students, of whom four are freshmen, one is a sophomore and four are seniors. I usually start my class for middle school students at 11:30 a.m. This class lasts for 40 minutes and then we eat lunch. At 1:00 p.m. I start my upper school class which lasts 50 minutes. This is the first time Cascia has ever offered Chinese and therefore I am the first one to teach in the program here. I picked Far East Chinese for Youth Level 1 (远东少年中文 1) as my textbook for both upper school students and the middle school kids. My teaching approach and the progress made in each class are very different, however.

So far, the upper school students have finished learning Unit 1 Pinyin (initials and finals as well as tones); Unit 2 Chinese people (people, names, students, common greetings); and Unit 3 Capsule 1 (numbers). They have also learned how to read and write about 80 Chinese characters. They are now able to greet people, give brief introductions, count, write some beautiful Chinese characters, and sing four Chinese songs.

I usually set aside 10 minutes every class for a mini Chinese culture lesson. We have discussed the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, moon cakes, schools in China, and what kids do and how they spend the weekends.

Students are fascinated with my Chinese class because I try to involve them as much as possible in learning activities. We often use hand movements in the air to practice the strokes of characters. Students are also asked to perform, dance, and act out Chinese conversations. They are learning very quickly and are doing an excellent job.

While my middle school students learn at a slower pace than my high school class, they are still very impressive. They have finished learning pinyin and two capsules on Chinese people (中国人) and Chinese names (中文名字). They have also learned three Chinese songs (两只老虎, 找朋友, 小兔子乖乖) and can sing them extremely well. We use flash cards, have dictation, and use learning games. Recently I asked my students to act as teachers. They must help their classmates learn new words, and help them correct their work. While they do this, I act as supervisor, making sure things stay on task. I was surprised to find that as teachers they worked very hard to engage everyone. They even introduced character writing competitions! Everyone wants to show how much they have learned and how well they can do as a teacher. I learned from other teachers and parents that the students are happy with me and happy to be in my class. They say Chinese is great fun. They are experiencing a totally different culture.

In my opinion, teaching Chinese here is totally different from teaching English in China. The students are different. In the United States, kids like to be involved and engaged. Because the class size is small it is much easier to encourage this kind of engagement. When grading student work, homework, class performance, and test scores are all included. As a result, it is clear that a student's attitude and learning process is valued in addition to test scores.



*Li Xuede decorated the school cafeteria to celebrate the Chinese New Year*



Teachers also have more choices when deciding on the best textbooks and when giving grades. Chinese is a difficult language for many reasons. First, it is a tonal language. Words with different tones convey different meanings. Chinese characters are also difficult to write. Because of these challenges, different methods and strategies should be used in classes, getting students involved. Learning by doing is the best policy.