

An American Educator Teaching in Thailand
By Brian Steinbach

Before I begin, It seems appropriate to let you know where I'm coming from. I taught High School English to 9th and 12th graders. So, here's a quick break down of what to expect from teaching at Suratpittaya (6th grade to 12th grade), in relation to what I was doing back in the states.

Quick Study Comparison Chart:

	American High School	Suratpittaya
Class Length	90 minute block schedule	55 minute traditional schedule
Number of Hours per week	40 (+grading and lesson planning time spent at home). And administering any detention I have personally given out. You must be at the school even when you are not with a class.	25 (+ lesson plans). Your off hours are your hours. If you have a 3 hour break, go home or out for food. It's up to you.
Number of Periods per day	3 classes a day (so 15 a week), 1 period for office hours.	4-6 classes a day (22 classes a week), 3 office hours for students to come in, and the rest is free time.
Behavioral Issues:	Plentiful	Varies. Though, in relation to what I'm used to stateside, they're pretty much non-existent.
Paper Work:	5 page lesson plans for every class, every day. So, 15 four to five page lesson plans a week. Detention/ behavioral issue forms and corrective actions. Grading homework.	2 lesson plans per week. 1, one page, monthly report for each class (so 2). No grading for my classes. Optional (though paid) articles for the Super English website.

That's hardly everything, but those are a lot of the important ones. The behavioral issues bit is a bit sparse because I wanted to elaborate more than a tiny box would practically allow for.

The Students:

The students here are not American students. They have a basic understanding of a second language at the high school level (degrees of conversational skills vary), they have a level of respect for the teacher that still catches me off-guard, and they seem generally happy to be there. By "happy to be there", I mean they're usually smiling. I'm often greeted by waves and shouts of, "HELLO TEACHER!" It's extremely peculiar at first. Especially coming from classrooms back home, filled with students who (in large) come into the class, plop into their seats, and proceed to: sleep, stare out the window, or even go out of their way to disrupt the class (I have yet to have a student in Thailand throw their desk at another student, or erase the board I just finished writing while I had been berating another student out of the class...). Students in Thai classes WILL often be late. But that's just the culture. It's acceptable. It's hard to start with five students who arrived on time, and then catch up the 30-40 students who came in somewhere between ten and twenty minutes late. But all things considered, that's a very small complaint. Students will talk while you're teaching. If it becomes a big problem, it's easily dealt with (I address it some below).

The Job:

Back home, I was mostly in the same classroom, though I know that's not always common in American schools. My students came to my class, while I stayed stationary. In Suratpitiya, both you and the students will move from classroom to classroom in an awesome display of organized chaos. In the middle of that chaos, you will be passed by students you don't know are yours (you have 1000 students), and they will cheerily yell, "HELLO TEACHER" or "HOW ARE YOU?" It's dumbfounding really- that level of excitement in a high school. Who knew?

Actually teaching in the classroom requires something different than I was ever accustomed to back in the states. Back home my typical class consisted of me sitting or standing at the podium, introducing the topic, and either reading aloud or assigning a reading selection. Whether or not I would lead a discussion or assign in class work depended completely upon the class's behavior. It was all very...formulaic and dry. You can't do that here. You are the conversation teacher, and you have to talk. A lot! The Thai students do not just sit idle in the classroom with all patient eyes on you. I said they enjoy our classes, but it's not so much for the content. We're fun (I guess? Lol). In any case, on day one, I surprised myself-- squashing the first group of students who wanted to talk over me by putting on my best game show voice and calling on them to stand up, and give me (and the rest of the class) the answer. These classes aren't about being the most informative teacher so much. You do want to come in with a good lesson plan that teaches them what you want them to learn. But it's about making English fun, and being the biggest center of attention in the classroom.

A Personally Weird Observation/ Anecdote:

Teaching in Southern Illinois, I was fond of explaining to my friends that teaching was a lot like being Clark Kent. You put on your disguise every morning and you go into work. You're the dull guy that gets the job done. You hide the fact that when you go home, you put on shorts, flip flops, and have a few drinks. But here, the whole thing's turned on its head. I go into the classroom as a total clown (or, if you will, throw on a cape). I become a goof of epic (for me) proportions. Throw on your best game show voice, dance, make sound effects, and generally be the biggest center of attention or class clown that you can be (which makes me wonder if my students find it weird to see me in a coffee shop quietly reading on weekends). For me, teaching here as been like taking weights off the bat. You make English fun for them, and they genuinely look forward to you and your class.