

Mother's English

Astrid Dittrich: Volunteers of Dalian

“N’ is for NAME! What’s your name?!”

“P’ is for PEN! Pen can write!”

“A’ is for ANT! Ant is small!”

Every week in a kindergarten class at the Dalian, KFQ Tong Li Gong Community Center children gather enthusiastically to practice their English through a volunteer program called “Mother’s English.”

For three hours every Wednesday afternoon, Astrid Dittrich, an expat from Brazil, helps the kindergarteners with their English pronunciation. Like the bright, yellow classroom she volunteers in, Astrid brings her sunny and caring personality to each student and lesson. Her reasons for devoting so much personal time to the program are simple.

“What surprises me about Mother’s English is that the program is not just about teaching English to children, for this we could go to a regular English school,” says Astrid. “It’s also about learning the cultural differences and to show students, and also the volunteers, that English is a precious tool to open a new world.” For Astrid, learning English isn’t just about getting into university or getting a good job. You learn English to connect to the larger world.

Astrid’s students spend a lot of time doing just that. The English lessons focus on listening and speaking. Astrid is Brazilian but fluent in English and supports Helen, who is the Chinese classroom teacher. She works with each student individually to practice the new English words.

The lessons are lively and fun. Both Astrid and Helen use a beach ball to keep the children focused and involved in actively learning. For example, a short music video about direction prepositions was followed up with Astrid throwing the ball to a student. The student then got in front of the class and demonstrated with the ball each direction preposition Astrid called out. There was laughter and smiles but there were also physical connections being developed between the words and the meanings they implied.

Astrid believes that she is always learning from the students. “Sometimes it’s challenging to keep the student’s attention. I’m not a mom, teacher, or even very patient,” says Astrid. “But I do want to help. So I’m learning how to be useful inside a classroom. I never thought I would have the ability to teach someone but it seems I’m learning step by step!”

A civil engineer by profession back in Brazil, Astrid sees her job here in China as an explorer. What she likes most about living in Dalian is the cultural exchange, not just between her country and China, but between all the different cultures she has encountered here. “Here I can find people from everywhere with their minds open to discovering new things and new ways of living. I feel like I can live in any country around the world after this experience.”

Her experience in China as a non-Chinese speaker has made her sympathetic to anyone trying to learn another language. She gives the example of walking down a street in KFQ. “I can walk the same street every day for two years but I don’t know which stores are on the street because all the signs are in Han Zi,” she says. “Even if I can read something, each building that I pass by has so many signs, sometimes I can’t even imagine how many stores there are in just one building.”

It’s humbling to be a foreigner in Dalian but “mind-opening” at the same time. Mother’s English has helped her experience Dalian with greater clarity. “Mother’s English isn’t just an ‘English teacher volunteer’ program,” says Astrid. “I don’t expect to go there to just be a regular teacher like in an English school. I volunteer to teach but also to learn and exchange experiences. It’s been a mind-opening experience to live in China and Mother’s English has helped me do this in a more meaningful way.”

For Astrid, every day in China brings a new discovery and deeper connection to the city she has grown to love.

Mother’s English (ME) is program designed to help primary school children, without access to adequate English programs, to hear and speak English. The program is currently seeking native and/or fluent English speaking adult and youth volunteers to help in the classroom. Not all volunteers work with children. There is also a need for administrative volunteers in the fields of public relations, graphics and finance. For more information on how to get involved in your community and develop new skills, please contact: Rochelle Mathias at 188-4113-8231 or WeChat ID: RochelleMathais.



