

Six Month Testimonial

By Levi Shand

There seem to be an infinite number of ESL agencies operating up and down Thailand. Many work from its major cities; you have your Bangkoks and Phukets, housing big hitters who place teachers all over the country, and then you have secondary cities like Surat Thani with its own field of schools and academies seeding the town with foreigners. How do all of these agencies work? Glad you asked!

Generally, a native English speaker searches the usual online forums for work, contacts an ESL company, and upon being contacted in return the mechanism to insert that applicant into Thailand sparks to life: communications are made regarding the employer's expectations and the native speaker sends along their flight itinerary when it's booked. The new hire prepares their life for the emigration experience but the employer, at this point, becomes difficult to generalize about.

Some agencies, namely the larger ones throughout the country, (read: those which have the greatest number of contracts) tend to be budget operations. They simply arrange with a native speaker to have them arrive by a certain date and meanwhile, promise that teacher's assigned school that they'll have a foreign teacher in the classroom by that date. In the eyes of the agency, it's done its job; a teacher has been transferred from their country to Thailand, a need has been filled, and that's that.

Seems pretty cut and dried, but this scenario leaves a lot to be desired from the two other parties to the transaction, and the problems inherent in this simple model originate with the agency. (Let's assume for the sake of this testimonial that the applicant cannot be or has chosen against being hired directly by a Thai school.) Firstly, the foreign teacher in the above situation is left with many considerations, beginning with travel arrangements. Which airlines service their assigned province/city? If not, how ought one travel from the airport to the town/city? Are some methods of travel better than others? What's domestic travel going to cost? Is it necessary to learn how to drive a motorbike? If your

agency simply hires you, you'll have all of these considerations to discover on your own.

Secondly a foreign teacher will, like any animal, need accommodation. Where are you going to stay? Must you rent a room in a hotel/hostel for awhile until you find suitable lodging? How much will that cost, and what are the odds you'll find a decent place if you're searching alone in a strange country? Where does one begin? In many cases, a foreign teacher arrives in Thailand somewhat blind; the above questions must wait to be answered until the teacher is on the ground, culture-shocked and mentally preparing for the first day of class.

While these difficulties are standard in the ESL profession, they are only the teacher's half of the question at hand. Any Thai school in a business relationship with an agency that just hires native speakers, gets them here, and leaves them unsupported once they land is met regularly with disappointment: the transition often proves too hard for the teacher. A perfect storm arises in their new life, of confusion about the Thai language, perhaps, and frustration about communicating and building anxiety over that long-awaited first paycheck...such that many simply go home. Imagine yourself as a student, having to adjust to a new foreign language teacher a few times per semester. Pretty lame, right? At the time of writing this article, I'd been in Thailand six months and have seen this situation unfold multiple times.

The challenges a new teacher faces after arrival can be pretty great compared to those they endure beforehand. After finding a place to stay and learning a few words with which to defend themselves the time shortly comes for new teachers to visit the immigration office, or Penang, Malaysia to conduct their first visa run. These steps can be done poorly or well, and I've seen it go both ways. The new teacher is generally given a tour of their school before their first day, but then they begin upon that first day "green" as the day their plane landed. They must hunt down a laundry place, a bank, a bicycle or motorbike, personal effects, and other things of the like, armed only with the advice of those English-speakers they were lucky enough to meet thus far.

Super English cannot be classified among those agencies mentioned above.

Support has been a top priority of Peter's and his staff's ever since I arrived in Surat Thani. I was met at the airport by a staff member and taken directly to SE housing, where I learned I'd forgotten a bag at the airport. That staff member turned right around and accompanied me into the tiny airport's lobby and spoke

Thai to the help desk people and sure enough, they brought out my prodigal bag. When we arrived home she waited while Savannah and I unloaded our stuff and then took us to Big C, Thailand's Wal-Mart, to get some basics. On the way she stopped and bought us some fresh coconuts to drink from and refresh ourselves and afterward, being hungry, she took us to a nice restaurant by the Big House where we covered the bill in thanks for being so warmly welcomed. I haven't forgotten those first hours, and their pleasant tone has colored my experience here.

We were aided in finding all sorts of places including laundry joints, good restaurants, outlets for electronics and the best food vendors, clothing stores and convenience marts, mechanic's garages and many other resources that have made our lives here simple. And it wasn't just one particularly helpful staff member who advised us and showed us around and how to live here; different snippets of valuable information poured in from other staff members, all the other teachers, and of course Peter and his wife, Jeab. We weren't helpless ducklings by any stretch, but to say we simply adapted on our own to Thai living would be to do an injustice to the great number of folks who helped us along the way.

When it comes time to do our Visa work at the immigration office, a staff member always accompanies us as a translator/go-between. When we're struggling a little in class, all we have to do is voice our concern and a proportionate amount of attention is paid, enough to help us on our way. Each month we are rewarded for our successes, and that reward comes in the shape of a party thrown by Peter. It seems that regardless of what query or concern we have, there is someone on staff who can help or advise us.

As teachers come and leave, we've found ourselves this semester in a position to act as last semester's teachers acted toward us, meaning we had and have taken the chance to pay forward the kindnesses visited upon us to this new round of hires. We did a lot of work early on to introduce everyone and to help them settle into this new, strange way of life. We gave motorbike lessons, we took people around town if they needed something, we've given classroom-related advice, and have taken the greatest interest in ensuring, as much as we can, that this experience is a positive one for as long as we have the opportunity to impact each other's lives.

Now, this sort of care and extending-of-hands strikes me as out of the ordinary, at least in terms of ESL agencies operating in SE Asia. Perhaps there

are others like Super English, but I tend to hear notes of envy in the responses given by other agencies' crews when one of our teachers talks about a perk we enjoy, or a trip we're all going on or a party we've been given. It seems to me that it takes a special sort of environment to foster feelings of family and proactive aid, of full-on support while keeping a cool, hands-off approach that discourages micromanagement. We tend in our group to help each other, and there's no price to be put on that. Super English has been a positive experience for me, and in that context I've felt compelled to help others enjoy it as I have. I suspect that this particular brand of goodwill will be paid forward ad infinitum as Super English grows and develops over the years. Take away from this testimonial that these sorts of feelings and actions can only take place in an environment crafted to foster them, and use that thought to help you choose which route you'll take to Thailand.