

# “LEARN TO BE COMFORTABLE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE”: TEACHING ENGLISH IN CHINA DURING THE PANDEMIC



*Joshua with some of his students at the Great Wall*

Joshua Graham began his academic career as an engineering student, but soon realized that it was not the field for him. While he understood the content, he did not see himself having a career in engineering. He did, however, do very well in his writing courses. Recognizing that writers often lack understanding in technical fields, and that engineers are often poor writers, Joshua sought out a field that offered an overlap between the two disciplines. He was pleased to find that technical communication married the technical elements of the engineering field with his aptitude for writing.

Since his graduation in May 2018, life has taken Joshua to uncomfortable places. Like many graduates, Joshua did not have the easiest time finding employment. He was not idle, though, and used his skills to help others. “I was tutoring a student from China and basically edited her master’s thesis. She tried to pay me, but I refused. She said I explained things in a way that she could understand and said I should come to China to teach.”

Initially, Joshua did not consider this proposal, but changed his mind with inspiration from an unusual source. “I was still looking for work, and I tuned into the local sports radio station in St Louis where I lived. They were talking about our baseball team, who weren’t doing so great at the time, and the announcer said that the team needed to ‘learn

to be comfortable being uncomfortable.’ I heard it, and that part stuck with me, because I realized that there would be nothing less comfortable than going to China to teach English. That’s when I made the decision.”

Joshua connected with a recruitment agency that matches candidates with schools in China. His only stipulation was that he had to work in Ningbo, where his friend lives. Soon after his arrival in Ningbo in late 2018, he began teaching children, ages 4 to 9, and tutoring adults outside of work. He was pleased to find that his experience in technical communication was very useful in teaching, in that the aim was to simplify difficult concepts. He had intended to teach for just a year but found this experience so fulfilling that he decided to stay for another year.

COVID-19’s full effect struck early in 2020, the middle of Joshua’s second school year. Unwilling to leave during a global pandemic, Joshua extended his stay even longer. Now he teaches kindergarten and plans to attend the University of Nottingham in Ningbo—the same institution that his very first student attended—to pursue a master’s degree in Applied Linguistics. He says that “you can’t grow if you’re comfortable,” and he is very pleased with where this advice has taken him.



*Wearing a traditional emperor dress for a Chinese new year*