

## The First Wave

English teaching has exploded as an opportunity in Ayutthaya over the past fifteen years. Many schools are actively seeking native-English speakers for their classrooms today. However, the present shortage of TEFL teachers pales when compared with the past decades. One teacher, Phil Jenkins, can testify about this abrupt change. After all, he is perhaps the first official English teacher to be hired in this city. In 1990, Phil Jenkins became the first native-English speaker to teach at Ayutthaya's Rajabhat Institute (prior to its earning of university status). He enjoyed a local celebrity status during this time, which wasn't difficult to achieve since Ayutthaya was still in its pre-tourism years. He landed in a city that lacked shopping malls, public transportation, foreign newspapers, and even a supportive expatriate community. Not surprisingly, Phil promptly learned to speak and read Thai fluently. As an early pioneer to the TEFL world, his early experiences place the first wave Thailand's English teachers into perspective.

Phil later transferred to a school in the Isaan region, where he married a Thai wife and started a family with two beautiful girls. However, before long, Ayutthaya's magnetism drew him back to the city for a second round. This is when I first met Phil. We worked together from 2000-2002 at the Rajabhat College, which still hadn't become an official university yet. He had a solid reputation as a grammar, syntax, and phonics instructor. He was the man that other teachers went to with questions. Since then Phil has earned a MA degree from an Australian university and, more importantly, started his own TEFL certificate course on Ko Samui ([www.teflteachsamui.com](http://www.teflteachsamui.com)). He trains a large number of teachers every year for employment at Thai schools. When I eventually sought out my own TEFL certificate, after 8 years of formal English teaching, it was Phil Jenkin's course that I enrolled in. I tracked him down more recently with questions about teaching during Ayutthaya's early TEFL years. The following interview resulted from this conversation.

1) What is your teaching background in Thailand?

Initially, I had only intended to stay for about a year or two. Fifteen years later I am still here. Thailand does that to you. I've taught at pretty much every level — kindergarten, primary, high school, college and university level, and the usual private contracts. One of the best positions I have held was as a contract teacher with Carlsberg brewery in Ayutthaya. After each class the students would take me to the onsite karaoke bar. It doesn't get much better than teaching in Thailand.

2) What was Ayutthaya like when you just arrive? What year was that?

I arrived in 1990. Ayutthaya was very different. Probably only the temples have remained unchanged. Here are a few things that weren't around then: tarmac roads, a bus service, Western style bars/pubs, Tesco Lotus, the new city and foreigners!

3) Were there many teachers at that time?

I remember my first day at work at the Rajabhat College. We didn't have an International Studies Centre then. I was the only white face on campus. I was a bit of a novelty in those days and drew a fair bit of attention. As far as I know there weren't any other Western teachers in the whole of the province. It was a great feeling.

4) What type of expatriate community was present back then?

I knew of only one other permanent foreign resident. She was the manager of a bar/restaurant called 'Knock on Wood'. I don't remember her name but I used to hang out at her bar quite a lot. It was nice at times to talk with another native speaker without having to worry if I was being understood or not. A couple of years after I arrived, more and more foreign companies set up factories in Ayutthaya and more and more foreign workers came to manage them. The expat community quickly grew and it wasn't long before the 'Knock on Wood' was brimming with people from a variety of nations.

5) I understand that you had once been a tour guide. Has this influenced any of your experiences in Thailand?

Before taking up teaching full time I worked as an overland expedition leader taking groups of travellers from London to Kathmandu and back again.

Moving back and forth through Asian countries such as Iran, Pakistan and India taught me to be patient and smile when things got rough. It taught me to respect traditions and customs especially when dealing with the local authorities. Thailand is a breeze after these countries even when it comes to visas and work permits. I've seen new teachers lose it completely at Immigration when they are refused an extension to their visas because their paperwork is not in order. I learned a long time ago that the only way to get things done is to be patient and keep smiling.

6) You were known as the grammarian of our ISC program. How did you become interested in the subtle details of language?

Firstly, 'knowing' the grammatical system of English is without a doubt the single most impressive skill we

ever &learn&rsquo;. No one knows how we do it, we just do. We don&rsquo;t need to explain the ins and outs of grammar in everyday life, but as teachers we do. Grammar is a huge subject and the &rsquo;rules&rsquo; not always as clear as we would like them to be, so why not develop an interest in the structure of our language and take up the challenge.

7) How has teaching changed in Ayutthaya from when you arrived to when you left?

When I left after my second two year stint at the Rajabhat, we had a state of the art language lab, an ISC with many foreign teachers and the buzz word was &rsquo;communication&rsquo; in relation to communicative language teaching (CLT). Back in 1990 we didn&rsquo;t have access to the Internet or a language lab, so computer assisted language learning was not an option and teachers regularly used the Grammar Translation Method. CLT hadn&rsquo;t really arrived in Thailand 15 years ago.

By the time I left, my students could submit assignments by email or even develop their own web pages. In 1990 I didn&rsquo;t even know how to open Word!

8) Can you tell us something about the TEFLworld teaching certificate program on Koh Samui?

At TEFLworld, Samui we run Ministry of Education accredited TEFL certificate and diploma programs. We are very popular with people who want to study for a recognized qualification while having beautiful beaches on the doorstep. The program itself gives trainee teachers experience in teaching actual Thai students. They have the opportunity to teach children (both EFL and ESL) and adults for a minimum of 6 observed hours or, through individual choice, up to 15 hours. The other side of the course, which is based in the training room, focuses on the practical aspect of teaching but doesn&rsquo;t neglect other important areas: language awareness, the sound system, learner problems and teaching approaches.

We have to remember that although we train people to be knowledgeable and effective teachers we also live in a country where fun and games are the necessary ingredients in daily life. That is why, in addition to the above components, the course is also fun.

9) What advice can you give a newbie teacher who wants to teach in this country?

First, and probably the most important, make sure you graduate with an accredited TEFL qualification. There are many, many course providers out there and not all provide what I would call quality courses. Employers know which providers produce good teachers.

Second, be careful not to take on too much of a workload when you&rsquo;re first starting out. Take it slow. Take a college job as opposed to a language school. You&rsquo;ll teach less hours, giving you more time for reflection and lesson planning. This will be far more beneficial in the long run than trying to cram in 30 hours per week.

Third, have fun!

10) What advice can you give somebody who wants to be certified?

Choose TEFLworld! There is lots and lots of information on our website. Check it out.

11) How long have you been in the EFL industry now? What changes do you think needs to be made?

I first started teaching back in 1987 while visiting a relative in Australia. I taught EFL to foreign inmates at a high security prison in Sydney, which was a pretty good experience for someone just starting out. I remember teaching a grammar point to a group of Vietnamese and looking out of the barred window and thinking what a great view of the bay they had. The day after I left, somebody escaped!

Knowing how English is taught in many developing countries, I feel that the whole approach needs to be updated. If we ask ourselves, why we learn language, the answer is invariably &dash; to communicate. That is the bottom line. Using a methodology such as the Grammar Translation Method just does not allow for any creativity whatsoever. Being able to conjugate verbs does not mean you can communicate effectively. Instructing teachers in the advantages of CLT is the way forward I believe.

12) Can you mention something about your work as a headmaster? Is it difficult to raise a family in Thailand while being a headmaster at your primary school?

Being the head of a private school on Samui, running 11 TEFL courses a year and at the same time trying to be a good parent can often be very demanding. However, there is nothing more satisfying than training people to be excellent teachers and seeing young children grow, and witness their language skills develop. But, yeah, there are days when 24 hours is just not enough.

I&rsquo;m fortunate that my children do to Panyadee School, Samui. They receive a wonderful education and obviously I have a great deal of input regarding what they learn and who teaches them.

13) What is it like living on a tropical Thai island?

Samui is incredible. It's beautiful. Beaches and coconut trees are plentiful. There's a huge variety of cuisine to choose from and tourism is booming. More and more foreigners are investing in property and we have the usual amenities such as shopping malls and a brand new cinema. I wouldn't live anywhere else.

14) Do you ever plan to return to Ayutthaya?

Every time I get a few days off, I think about going back to Ayutthaya. It's been over three years so I am sure a lot has changed, but a lot of my old friends are still there. I'll definitely be back for a holiday in 2007.

15) How can somebody contact you if they want to enroll in your course?

Just visit our website ([www.teflteachsamui.com](http://www.teflteachsamui.com)) and you'll find contact details. Alternatively give me a call on 07-418-3189.

There are many opportunities available for those seeking employment as an English teacher in Ayutthaya. Most government schools are seeking native-English teachers at the primary, secondary, and high school levels. In addition, there are a number of institutes that offer advanced degrees such as the Rajabhat University Phrankhon Si Ayutthaya, the Ayutthaya Technical College, and the Rajamangala Institute of Technology. Potential teachers may also apply for jobs at one of the large number of private language schools such as ECC and Xenith.

The best way to find employment is to visit Ayutthaya in person. Bring multiple resumes, teaching certificates, and copies of degrees if you have them. However, if truth be told, some teachers find work even without these credentials. Travelers are sometimes hired even if they are not native-English speakers. Once you are in Ayutthaya, ask around to find the perfect match for your needs; according to your skills, qualifications, and student-age preferences.

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