



Mary Whitsell is explaining to her students.

“Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream...”

On a recent afternoon, the quiet reading room of the Yongcheng Community in Yinzhou District, Ningbo, was filled with cheerful voices.

Leading the chorus was Mary Whitsell, a 71-year-old American retiree whose sunlit smile warmed the room as she guided her students through the melody of this classic song of English children.

Having lived and worked in Ningbo for 12 years, she recently celebrated her 131st community English class—an ongoing effort she has sustained for three years without fail. Every week, rain or shine, she makes her way to the Jin Study to lead what has become a cherished ritual: a free English class full of energy, curiosity, and cross-cultural warmth.

The genesis of her community engagement traces back to 2021 when she joined a public Chinese language course offered by the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. Immersed in the cultural tapestry woven through each Chinese character and phrase, this newly retired university instructor found herself compelled to give back. The idea came quietly but firmly: she would offer free English lessons to the community.

1 A Neighborhood Sensation

“Mary, is your favorite fruit round and red?” “Yes!” “Is it sour?” “Yes!” “I see, it must be the waxberry you mentioned liking last year.”

Whitsell’s class is marked by a conversational, humorous, and disarmingly warm style. These verbal exchanges have become part of her class’s charm, drawing residents of all ages and backgrounds. One longtime student quipped, “Learning English in Mary’s class is so much fun. I’d skip other business just to attend.”

In May 2022, she officially became a “One-Day Curator” for the community. Every Wednesday since, she has been faithfully at her post. So committed is Whitsell to the weekly gathering that even when she travels back to the United States to visit family, she arranges for a fellow foreign friend to substitute.

Her classroom is as diverse as it is dedicated. Among the students are retirees in their sixties, stay-at-home mothers seeking to reenter the workforce, and young professionals navigating a bilingual job market. To meet their varied needs, Whitsell tailors her lessons thoughtfully, ensuring no one is left behind.

From time to time, she takes the class outside—onto grassy lawns in public parks or beside scenic riverside trails.

131 Free English Classes of an American Granny in Ningbo

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2 Bond Beyond Language

One of Whitsell’s female students, Yaoyao, posts on her social media after each class, prompting curious and envious reactions: “You mean a foreigner in your neighborhood gives free English lessons?”

When asked about her voluntary efforts, Whitsell has never offered a detailed answer. But the origins of her work are rooted in reciprocity and quiet gratitude.

Whitsell and her husband worked at the English Language Education Center at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China for

eight years since their arrival in Ningbo in 2013. They have built professional ties and friendships with Chinese colleagues and students. Upon her retirement in 2021, she enrolled in the institute’s Chinese language course where she was left with an inspiring experience.

“Learning Chinese is incredibly challenging,” she said. “But the unique beauty behind the language captivated me.” As her language comprehension deepened, so did her sense of connection. She wanted to give something back—some-

thing she was skilled at.

In March 2022, she approached the Yongcheng Community office with a simple proposal: “Do you need an English teacher? I can teach for free...” The community staff welcomed her with open arms.

“Every class, she comes early, distributes handouts, assigns homework—she’s incredibly conscientious,” noted Zheng Guohua, leading staff of Yongcheng Community. “Her classes enjoy great popularity. We never expected such dedication from a foreign volunteer.”

3 From Class to Family

Over three years, her class has formed bonds that stretch well beyond grammar and pronunciation. Horah, in her 50s, stands among her earliest students who has attended since Whitsell’s first lesson.

“She’s like a ray of sunlight on a winter day,” Norah mentioned. “We’ve connected not only in learning but in values and perspectives. That resonance makes every session special.”

When Norah visits her hometown, she never forgets to bring back a small gift for Whitsell. Their relationship has evolved into a cross-generational friendship.

Pan Dalu, a student born in the

1990s, values Whitsell’s ability to create a stress-free learning environment. “Her sense of humor removes my fear of speaking English,” he added. “With Mary, I feel confident.”

For Zhang Libo, a 45-year-old full-time mother who joined the class last October, Whitsell’s lessons have brought unexpected joy into her daily life.

Whitsell is more than a teacher. After class, she serves as a confidante, a companion, and, during difficult times, someone that her students readily seek for support. When Whitsell and her husband went back to the US, several stu-

dents would help feed her cat, clean its litter box, and regularly video-call Whitsell.

During traditional Chinese holidays, her students organize small parties in her honor. They decorate the room, prepare thoughtful gifts, and share heartfelt greetings that leave her visibly moved.

“I never imagined such warmth and care,” she was deeply moved upon recalling those moments. The affection is mutual. Across cultures and generations, Whitsell and her students have built a community rooted in kindness and shared purpose.

4 New Life, New Home

Day by day, through these exchanges, Whitsell has grown deeply attached to her adopted city—and to the culture that surrounds her. As an avid writer, she often pens stories about life in Ningbo for English-language publications, documenting everything from iconic landmarks to charming corner shops.

Her apartment is a quiet reflection of her immersion in Chinese culture. Calligraphy scrolls hang from the walls, their brushstrokes evoking centuries of tradition. On her desk sits a lamp etched with the famed prose of the *Lantingji Xu*, bathing the room in soft, scholarly light.

Her notebook is filled with Chinese idioms and classical poet-

ry, each annotated with pinyin and explanations. “Xué ránhòu zhī bùzú” (To learn is to realize one’s ignorance). “Wēn gù ér zhī xīn” (Review the old to understand the new). Occasionally, she spends hours tracing characters with a brush, practicing calligraphy with meditative focus.

Her commitment to community extends beyond the classroom. She regularly participates in environmental volunteer events, encouraging friends to join and promote environmental protection.

“I thought I was giving something by teaching here,” she said. “But honestly, I’ve received much more than I’ve given.”

What began as a classroom

has become a bridge—between languages, generations, and cultures. Through her students, Whitsell has unscrolled a panoramic portrait of China. And now, through her stories, she hopes to offer overseas friends a window into the city’s vibrant tapestry.

“I want them to know the real China,” she remarked. “And I want them to come here. To come to Ningbo. I know they’ll fall in love with it too.”

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