

Kenta Ferrin

International School Educator

Graded - The American School of São Paulo

Interviewed by William Zhang

Transcript edited for length and clarity

Kenta has been working in education since 2007, when he started his career as a Teach For America corps member on the island of O'ahu, Hawai'i. After receiving his Master of Education, he continued to work in schools across the United States. A highlight of his career was working as the Director of Development at Presidio Hill School, a small progressive school in San Francisco. He was so inspired by the students and teachers that he decided to rejoin the classroom, this time working in international schools! In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, he and his husband moved to Guadalajara, México, where he spent five years teaching 8th grade Science at the American School of Guadalajara. With the world of international schools now open, they left México in 2025 and relocated to São Paulo, Brasil, where he is currently teaching middle school science at Graded – The American School of São Paulo. This path has provided him with the opportunity to become fluent in Spanish, and he is progressing toward fluency in Portuguese. He is incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to experience adulthood in other countries and is looking forward to continuing the adventure!

William: All right, Kenta, thank you so much again for coming here. It's really an honor to interview you.

Kenta: Thank you, William.

William: Our 1st question, please share a little about yourself. What inspired you to become a middle school science teacher?

Kenta: Sure. My name is Kenta Ferrin, and my students call me Mr. Kenta. I've been in schools for almost 20 years. I used to work at a school in San Francisco called Presidio Hill School. I've taught for about 13 or 14 years, and I became a middle school science teacher. My senior year of college, I worked at a summer camp and I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I was really interested in environmental education. I loved working with kids, so I was like, "oh, what can I do?" I looked at pathways, because I was also interested in service, and one of the pathways is a program called Teach for America, where they place high school graduates in under-resourced schools that often need teachers. I applied and got in, in 2007. I went to Hawaii and got my Master of Education, and I did two years of teaching science there through the

program, and I loved it. So ever since then, I've been either a science teacher or working at a school in a different capacity.

William: Okay. For our 2nd question, do you know another language? If so, how did you learn it?

Kenta: Sure, so I would say I know 2 other languages. I speak English, Spanish, and Portuguese. English and Spanish like fluently, and Portuguese almost fluently, like well, especially now living in Brazil. With Spanish, I have to say that I had a really great base, a great foundation from high school and middle school. I always love languages, so I would watch TV in Spanish. I would watch a lot of programs from Mexico. Then I moved to Mexico as a teacher in 2020 and just being immersed in the country and culture, you pick up on things really quickly when you can hear it and make connections immediately. So I think a lot of people who move to a new country to learn a language from 0, it's very difficult. But because I had this understanding already, I was able to lean on my high school knowledge and then come to fluency by living there. Then Portuguese, I'm grateful for the base of having Spanish because there are a lot of similarities in the vocabulary and then living in Brazil now for over a year. It's, again, watching Brazilian programs and then just being immersed in the country and culture.

William: All right. So it's really about being there, living in that language and having that experience.

Kenta: Absolutely. That would be the key for me. I think a person can get quite far in their language learning journey, not being immersed. But the immersion piece, I think, was critical for me at least in terms of really connecting the dots.

William: Right. For the 3rd question, you've worked in 3 countries as an educator, and so how have these different middle school experiences been different across the countries?

Kenta: That's a good question. I think I'm gonna start with how it's the same. It's the same that middle schoolers are middle schoolers, in the States, in Mexico, and in Brazil. It's a time of transition, it's adolescence, and I think kids want to enjoy school, and they really have to find it relevant in order to love it. I would say that I've been lucky in my experiences, and especially in Mexico and Brazil, is that one thing I really noticed in these two countries is that relationships are really important to kids. So they really want to get to know you as a teacher. They want to know your favorite food. They want to know where you like to shop. They want to know what you did on the weekend. So much of the relationship is verbal, right? They'll come in at lunch or they'll come in before class. They'll stay after class because they just want to ask you questions all the time. I think that's something that I really appreciate because it means that they want to get to know me as a person, that feels nice, especially just being new to their country.

William: And then, is there anything that's different between these countries for the students?

Kenta: I mean, other than the language, I can't say that I find them that different. I can't say that my students in Brazil are that different from my students in Mexico or that different from my students in Hawaii. I would say that my students in Mexico and in Brazil are also super, super family oriented. In Mexico, we have something called Comida, and it happens at three. It's lunch, and it happens at 3 o'clock. Kids really love to spend time with their family and their extended family. They really [like] spending time with their grandparents. They have a meal together that lasts two hours. That was different from my experience in the States. I think that I've always worked with students who are close with their families, but especially in Mexico and Brazil. It was very much like extended family was really important.

William: Now then to the 4th question, focusing back on you. How has incorporating Spanish and Portuguese supported you as an educator?

Kenta: Sure. So, I will say that incorporating Spanish and Portuguese has helped me as an educator because it's helped me connect with students and coworkers. I think as an educator for almost 20 years, the key to unlocking a student's passion or purpose or love for whatever you're teaching is connection and relationships. My students I worked with at The American School in Guadalajara and The American School in São Paulo, are used to teachers coming and going. There's turnover. When I speak Spanish in Mexico and when I speak Portuguese in Brazil, they actually get excited. It's really cool to see. They're like "oh, you speak Spanish?" or "oh, you speak Portuguese?", like "why did you learn?", and "when did you learn?".

William: So this is something new to them.

Kenta: Yeah exactly. So I think it's neat for them, too. I think it's a way for me to show them that I'm invested in them and in the country, and then that goes with my coworkers, too. I think that they understand that I'm interested in knowing Brazil or knowing Mexico more and knowing them more. So it's just expanded my relationships at school and allowed me to know the place better.

William: Okay. For the 5th question, how have your experiences broadened your worldview? Do you have any advice to share with those looking to study or live abroad?

Kenta: Yeah, it's been the reason I have a broadened worldview. I was lucky because my dad was in the military, so I was actually born in Japan, and I grew up abroad. My experience as an adult working abroad gave me perspective and allowed me to see that people, it sounds a little cheesy, but people just live differently in different countries, and they have different values and

priorities. I'm going to use this example again of family and the meal in Mexico at 3 o'clock. For me, it was a little hard to get used to because I was hungry at 12 and I wanted to eat. But, eating at 3 with your whole family, you have to slow down. So that was an aspect of Mexico I really appreciated. Then in Brazil, ironically, lunch is also very important. It's earlier, maybe at 12 or 1, but even in the work culture, you're supposed to get a full hour of lunch, and it's because lunch is important. You need a break, and you need to talk with one another. You know, we're talking about culture, and we're talking about countries, and that brings me to food and all these little things that are in your everyday life that can be really different in a different place. I think that's what broadened my worldview. My advice for someone who wants to study or live abroad is, if you want to do it, you can do it. It's about prioritizing and making it a goal and trying to figure out the steps to reach that goal. Also, knowing that for me, I always think about how I'm a guest somewhere. Like, I'm a guest in this country. I'm a guest in Brazil. I was a guest in Mexico, even though I was living there and working there. I do consider myself a guest. So I really try to understand the culture so I can be respectful. It's always uncomfortable, uncomfortable to make missteps and be like, oh my God, I was so rude, and I want to avoid that. It's going to happen. I think my last piece of advice would be that it's going to be difficult, but you have to be gentle with yourself because you're trying. That would be my advice.

William: And then for our 6th and final question. Is there anything else that you would like us to highlight? So it can be about your journey, your story through education, and anything else you find important?

Kenta: Can I talk about PHS [Presidio Hill School]?

William: Yeah you can.

Kenta: So I mentioned that I've been in education for almost 20 years, and I want to highlight Presidio Hill School as just being a really incredible place for kids. Even though I didn't teach there, I was in fundraising there. I was in development. It really helped me understand how important it is for the curriculum to be relevant for students, for them to love it. And for the lifelong learning aspect of PHS and for the kids to really love what they do has really impacted me as a teacher. I always think about that, even though I wasn't in the classroom there. I saw how amazing the teachers were and how amazing the kids were like you and your brother, and what kind of people they become. I just want to highlight PHS for what they do for kids and teachers. Then in the language learning piece, it is a gift. It's broadened my abilities also, it's given me more confidence. Even job wise, if I'm searching for a job again, I can now say I speak 3 languages, which is so neat. It allows for me a different way to think. Especially in Mexico and Brazil, just getting to know people because I speak their language, I think they immediately feel a little more comfortable. This summer I was in Hawaii, I was shopping, and some guy was like "oh, where are you visiting from?", and I was like "Brazil", and he was like "oh, Você fala

português?”, and I was like, “yes, I do”. He had done a mission in Brazil 20 years ago. It was just these really cool connections you can make when you speak other languages. It's really neat. It's a gift, really.

William: That concludes all my questions. Once again, thank you so much for letting us interview you.

Kenta: Thank you.

William: It's really a great pleasure to talk to you after quite a number of years

Kenta: Thank you, William.