Self-Reflection   Xuemei Huang

A window toward online teaching

During this week, we had our first two online training sessions. Overall it was an interesting experience. It is opening a new window of possibilities for me toward online teaching.

During the first lesson, Professor Tseng guided us to review teaching theories and strategies such as backward design, world-readiness standards, target language & comprehension input, and student-centered learning. I am familiar with most of them, but I am weak in English language pedagogy terminology. I am impressed that we have several instructors who can converse about these terms without referring to notes.

Backward design is a method I employed for the 2016-17 school year. Backward design helps me develop and maintain clear goals before designing lessons, choosing instructional methods and activities, and developing assessments. I feel more confident to teach when I use backward design. However, sometimes I do not maintain that discipline; when I am busy, I may choose only what materials I have and follow their teaching guidelines. At these times, I feel more comfortable to not to do backward design. I wish to learn strategies to help me stay focused on backward design during our summer STARTALK program.

This is the first time that I start knowing about online teaching tools, such as Zoom, Adobe Connect, and WizIQ, and from our first lesson I am especially interested in learning more about WizIO, since it is designed for student-centered learning.

Before our second lesson, we STARTALK teachers were assigned to watch 10 online teaching videos, from former STARTALK teachers. During our second lesson, Professor Tseng lead our teacher group to discuss these videos. Watching the videos gave me basic ideas and a good sense of how online teaching should look like. I noticed several strategies I think are helpfully for online teaching.

- First, questioning skills: the 10 videos were all mainly student-centered, and the most used STARTALK teacher strategy was questioning. Guided by teacher modeling and questions, most students could produce understandable and meaningful language. I see

how the questioning strategy can work very well for small-group study. My concern is if this same questioning strategy can still work effectively in a classroom of 15-25 students.

- Second, activities with an interactive technology tool. In several videos, a tool was used to pick up textbooks for different subjects and put into a backpack, such as choose food for hotpot and put into the hotpot. I can imagine how excited students will be when using this tool -- it allows presenting real-life situations in authentic ways.

Collectively, the questioning strategies, interactive activates, the real life-life tasks, and the advanced technology tools help teachers facilitate a learner-centered classroom.

- Third, I observed that all the teachers in these videos use more than 90 percent target language and provide comprehensible input. As a Chinese teacher, I know it is not easy, especially for an online course. The PowerPoints with photos, gestures, and sentence patterns are all key in helping students understand concepts. I also notice that some teachers use both Pinyin and Hanzi characters, a definite help for new students to remember how to speak various vocabulary words.

I am looking forward to next week, and learning more about online training and associated technology.

Exploring online teaching technology

From the second week of training, we have learned and explored online teaching tools. This is the first time that I have tried these tools, including WizIQ, Adobe Connect, Zoom, Appear In, Google Hangouts, etc. The training is opening my mind and has given me different and interesting experiences. The assignments are interactive and meaningful. I even used Zoom to create a short video when I was doing an assignment; for me it was not easy to start recording, and somehow stressful, however, I am glad that I have the opportunity with professional help to learn these skills.

We have one assignment: choose three essential technology features from these common online teaching sites. Most of us chose "screen sharing". The reason is obvious for us – when teaching online, we need to be able share teaching materials, including documents,

PowerPoints, and videos with students. Henny Chen Laoshi guided us to think through the pros and cons for screen sharing features. I started to realize that screen sharing works well when the host teacher needs to control the session, because it is mostly a host/teacher-centered feature, and screen sharing relies on Internet speed, can be slow, and it is not first choice for most STARTALK online programs. This practice gave me a new viewpoint to think about online teaching tools and features, and I realize that all features we choose to use, all activities we design, are based on enabling students to easily participate. The second mostly popular choice was "drawing, highlighting", and Henny Chen added "eraser". All these tools allow students to interact with the lesson, and give teachers a visual method to check student understanding. Online teaching is clearer to me than before, and I am starting to realize that there are differences between face-to face teaching and online training.

In F2F teaching, the teacher can attract students by TPR (body moving): walking around, walking close to students, even knocking on a student's desk, pat a student's shoulder; teacher can use a real physical example to pass around the classroom or display to show students; students can physically move and act-out to do roll play; students can be divided to work in groups of 3 or 4. However, these activities won't work well for online teaching.

Online teaching is more challenging for both teacher and students. The things that online students can see are limited to the teacher's and other classmates' live camera feeds, and the screen display in front of them. I imagine that for students sitting in front of computer, facing a small screen for one hour, this may not be fun. The online teacher needs to establish a safe, relaxing, and friendly tone for the class via greeting, and asking students questions. Knowing how to use the screen and white board actively seems very critical. Teachers need to be very clear in describing each slide's purpose, activity, and student participation modes (give clear directions).

Teachers need to be well prepared, plan and teach step by step, to maintain student interest and ensure students can easily participate. For each online lesson, teachers need to design three communicative mode activities, and provide online tools to students for participation. For example, the teacher can display a picture with characters, and the teacher or a chosen student speaks that character aloud, and other students need to circle the info when they hear, so

students can practice listening and recognizing written Chinese characters. Using the same picture, the teacher also can design an interpersonal mode activity, such as question each other, create dialogue, or do an interview. After practice, students can be asked to present pictures.

Through our training and watching sample online teaching videos, I have gained much more of a sense about online teaching. I am looking forward to trying with my partner teacher and designing our first lesson.

BEST leads to differences

Today is my first day of training at UVa! Professor Tseng guided trainees to discuss six in-class activities with the most appropriate types of instruction.
Teacher-fronted/centered mechanical, meaningful, communicative, and Student-centered mechanical, meaningful, communicative instruction
These terms are familiar to me, and I was confident while answering the practice questions. However, I was surprised to find that I missed 3 of 6 when Tseng Laoshi announced the correct answers. I realized that I had a misunderstanding, and had a stereotypical impression about the differences between teacher-fronted and student-centered activities. After discussion, I realize that each type of instruction has pros and cons, and not every lesson is better as a student-centered activity. A good teacher needs to use different types of instruction in appropriate situations and for different purposes. For example, teacher-fronted mechanical activity sounds teacher-centered, and newer teachers (like me) try to avoid it, but it is a good method for students to hear and practice tones and pronunciation. Teacher-fronted meaningful and communicative activities can be very helpful for students to learn and practice conversational skills. Student-centered mechanical activity seems student-centered, but it is just mechanical study, and won't help students really learn authentic language.
We also talked about input and output in language learning. After watching student videos, I admired that intermediate-low students could perform long paragraphs. I like the concept that Tseng introduced: "Flood Input - Push Output". So far in my own teaching, I have paid attention to language input. I speak meaningful Chinese as much as I can in class, and I give students plenty of listening input. However, I thought that Chinese is one of the most difficult languages

for native English speakers, and I believed students need a long time to absorb and be ready to "output" language. Apparently, I had low expectations of my students' ability to output language. Most of my students in intermediate-low (Chinese 2) can speak some complete sentences, but I didn't expect them and I didn't teach them to speak and write or output meaningful paragraphs. My students and I both stayed in our comfort zones. In today's training, I saw students' potential, and I will gently push my students to produce more and move to a higher level.

What do you think makes the best teacher? It feels different when all teachers were asked and answered the question. During discussion, teachers (students) came out with many interesting answers. Two leader-teachers gave us their conclusion to be a best teacher:

BEST B: BE a fun teacher; E: use EFFECTIVE teaching strategies; S: be STUDENT-centered, T: use TARGET language.

Even though our UVa STARTALK program has just begun, I feel that I have already learned much from professors, leader teachers, and other colleagues. The pace is quick, and I feel a little pressured, but definitely I will improve and benefit from this program… thank you!

Pain and happy first try

July 7th 2017, was a significant day for my teaching career: I conducted my first online lesson, even though it was only an opening ceremony. Before we began, I was nervous, and so was my teaching partner Shi. We worked in the hotel lobby until 10pm the night before the opening ceremony even though we had already created our PPT a day earlier.

My first-time online teaching experience began auspiciously. Twenty minutes before first period (my period), I couldn't launch my class. Fortunately, Henny Chen Laoshi took care of my problem right away: I walked (ran) with her to another room, listened as she talked with a WizIQ technical specialist, and the problem was solved. I was so grateful to have such an experienced and kind lead teacher.

When two students showed online, I started chatting with them, and within two minutes I forgot all my nervousness and fear. The lesson went well, but technology problems bothered us several times. When students typed on screen, I couldn't see their typing; and one student lost internet connection several times. I learned that online classes have more unexpected

situations. As an online teacher, first I need to stay calm, and second, I need to remain flexible. Being flexible means being well-prepared, with a backup plan. During the lesson, I asked one student to read "can-do statement" on the screen, but she couldn't fully understand my request. After giving her hint, she still didn't get it, so I asked my partner teacher Shi Laoshi to read it. The small stoppage helped me learn two things: (1) a partner teacher is a good resource and support, and (2) many online lesson stoppages are caused by unclear instructions or icons. Lesson learned: move on if the stoppage is not very important and find another time to circle back and explain.

After the lesson, my partner teacher Shi Laoshi was excited to give me her feedback: "You were so great, your smile, your voice all passed; your passion and your love showed through." I don't think my teaching techniques were perfect in the lesson, but I agreed that I was immersed completely in my teaching role when I was "live" in front of the camera.

July 8, Saturday, was a working day for all UVa STARTALK teachers. In the afternoon, Day 1 teachers in three groups had rehearsals in front of other colleagues and leader teachers. It was my first experience to see how to discuss teaching plans. In my past four years of teaching, I was the single Chinese teacher on my campus, I didn't have an opportunity to co-work with other Chinese teachers, and I didn't have an opportunity to discuss the planning details with others. The lead teachers questioned presenting Day 1 teachers frankly, and gave advice. Some STARTALK teachers also joined in discussion. I don't really know the feelings of the presenting Day 1 teachers (probably a little embarrassed), but I believe that they have benefitted from the experience and others' suggestions. At least I know that I did!

In the morning, we had two online teaching PD sections, and the speakers were Dr. Yao Gao and Dr. Kathryn Murphy. Dr. Kathryn started her online teaching 30 years ago, and I wasn't aware of online teaching at all at that time. These two experts introduced many online teaching strategies and tools. I was lost for a while because of information overload, but luckily, I have their PowerPoint, and intend to try their online teaching tools and select the most useful tools for my own teaching.

Active online teaching resource: http://readchinese.nflc.org/?page=to_the_learner

Writing : http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/games/characters.shtml

Listening : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Xpdhbh_2Rc

   or http://www.nclrc.org/webcasts/chinese/2014-11-30/index.html

Speaking : https://edpuzzle.com/join/ojsijha

Lessons from real teaching

After conducted the two periods of online teaching, I can compare my own teaching and I can see my foot trail.

Case 1: The first period class wasn't smooth. One of my two students couldn't hear me and I couldn't hear her. Even though my partner teacher Shi Laoshi guided her to log out and log in, I still had to pay more attention to her and the lesson apparently went slower than I planned at least ten minutes. I tried to catch up and I skipped some slides and some activities. At the end, students' language output basically meet the lesson design, and I taught most concept. However, I also made many mistakes, and some of them were low level mistakes.

Lesson learning: technology issues happen often for online teaching. As a teacher, I have to be flexible and learn handle my emotion and teaching pace in emergency situation.

Case 2: One concept of this lesson was to talk about address in Chinese way. I used the several business cards to check students' understanding about the meaning of address. Students were assigned to do some preview work and I assumed that students at least are able to recognize the word "address" and know the meaning. I asked students to circle the address on the business cards, and both students circled the whole business cards. Apparently, they didn't understand what the "address" is. Our leader teacher Lin Laoshi reminded me and gave me advice right after the first period teaching. So the second period, I explained the word "address" and demo to point out the "address" on the business card. Students quickly get the meaning and completed the task right away.

Lesson learning: as a teacher, I can't assume or expect students know the concept I haven't taught. Before I ask students to do a task, I need to explain and demo first. It is a simple concept, but I often forget it.

Case 3: We designed an activity to enforce students to understand the difference of address between US and China. Students were given some mixed address elements to sort them in

correct order. I was planning to ask them to read the correct address, but I was nervous that I couldn't complete the lesson, so I skipped the reading step and move to the next slide. The second group lesson, I gave students time to practice the address speaking, and students did very well and they felt good because they were able to do it.

Lesson learning: sometimes I have to decide what to skip during my teaching for different reasons, but I should never skip the best practice moment for students. I need to tell myself that complete teaching task is not the most important thing.

Case 4: I had a student lost internet connect for several times. After she came back, I was happy to see her and asked her to do a written task. Just after she started, I gave her immediate feedback, "super good, you are great!" Unfortunately, she made a mistake because she didn't really understand my question at all. It was ironic that I just praised her.

Lesson learning: giving students positive feedback is good, but I was so impatient. I need to learn to wait, wait to see students to speak and to do their work, and give them real positive feedback instead of very blank fake praise. Similar, I also often stopped students and took their words if they didn't speak fast enough.

Lesson learning: language output is a process, and I need to patiently wait for students and give student enough time to process.