

Assignment 1 - Reflection and Highlight of Chapter 5 and 7

I have read Chapter 5 and 7 of the book. Below is a summary of the most inspiring content of the chapters, and how these theories and techniques would enrich my teaching skills when combined with today's workshop.

The book suggests that language acquisition and context should not be separated, because Communicative Approach emphasizes on three capabilities: expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning. A student can only become an independent life-long learner when equipped with these skills. However, the development of these skills would not be possible if learning is not based on contexts. The book also mentions the fact that the majority of Chinese native speakers do not understand too much Chinese grammar does not prevent them from being fluent in the language. This is such a simple and obvious observation, yet it is highly inspiring. This proves once again that fluency is not the result of grammar drill but from numerous practices in authentic contexts.

Based on the book and today's workshop, I come to the observation that Communicative Approach has brought along fundamental changes to roles of both teachers and students and setups of a language classroom. In terms of teachers, they need to transform from a front trainer to a facilitator. In my opinion, such a change in role also reflects a change of the teacher's mindset. For students, they need to transform from passive learners to proactive participant in the process of language acquisition or even during the selection of teaching materials. I think this is a result of the change of the teacher's mindset because s/he no longer considers himself/herself the authoritative figure of the class. As for activities, teacher-centered one-to-one Q&A will be replaced by student-centered group activities. In order to suite the new demands, the classroom setup will be changed from detached to authentic or near-authentic setup. From all these changes, I am able to see that another benefit of having a student-centered classroom is that classmates will eventually be able to correct each other, not only relieving the teacher's burden but also making the classroom a more efficient language learning environment.

I have learned a lot after studying the activities mentioned in the chapters and from watching the videos in today's workshop. And one thing that would always stay in my mind is that planning is the most important step in most student-centered activities. The book also helps me to realize that building a student-centered classroom does not mean to leave all the work to the students. Instead, the teacher is now responsible in planning the structure and details of the activities. Through examples, the book has shown me how much a difference would it make should planning is not carried out carefully.

Both the book and the workshop suggest the teachers to be flexible when it comes to situations such as deciding how many authentic materials to use, how much time should be spent on grammar explanation, and how much time should be spent on teacher-centered activities. I agree and I think the key here is to make a well-balanced judgment so that the "i+1" principal is observed and students' capability to communicate in unpredictable situations is trained.

Last but not least, the precise, clear, and right-on-the-spot writing style of the book is yet another aspect that inspires me. I like the fact that Dr. Tseng only includes the very essence of different scholars' thoughts in the book and then supports them with a lot of practical ideas. This book will become my latest source for ideas.

Assignment 2 - Reflection and Highlight of "Epilogue: Implications for Teaching"

The most important change today's workshop and the article have brought to my teaching philosophy is the realization that learners in a successful language class don't focus on language itself; rather, they learn some kind of subject matter or other content through the second language (Van Patten, 103). My teaching style has been profoundly changed as a result of this enlightenment.

I have now embarked onto a self-criticizing journey to re-evaluate all the activities of my Chinese classes. Today's workshop and the article have shown me a set of guidelines to help me achieve this goal. The bottom line is that all activities should be meaning-based to qualify as acquisition-oriented, because input would not foster acquisition without a meaning goal and communicative intent – in the words of Van Patten, "learners should not spend their time producing utterances for the sake of producing utterances" (Van Patten, 109). Based on this observation, I reach the conclusion that teacher-student and student-student interactions should always be natural and meaning-based.

I used to group new vocabulary (those I think my student should understand) into various thematic packs before I present them to my students, without assigning further meaning-based activities utilizing these new words. From now on, I will be sure to attach activities that mimic real-life experiences and/or situations with informational goals to the new thematic vocabulary packs so that I can stop presenting the vocabulary for the sake of presenting them. Moreover, students' interests and needs will be considered to ensure the presence of student-determined language resources. All these guidelines will help me refine my activities, making sure that it is acquisition-oriented. Of course, I will also keep in mind that I should be realistic when setting goals, so that the "i+1" principle is observed.

The article has been extremely helpful. However, it does raise some questions. I especially need help on clarifying the following paragraph: "A focus on form should not take place in the absence of meaning. That is, a focus on form should happen in one of two ways: (1) through a communicative interchange or (2) through some kind of comprehension task" (Van Patten, 110).

Assignment 3 - Reflection and Highlight of “如何从观摩课堂教学学习教学技巧” and “Brain and SLA” presentation

Liang's article has proposed five areas to pay attention to when observing a class. They are: (1) teacher's body language; (2) how does the teacher achieve the day's teaching goal; (3) time management skills; (4) teaching skills; and (5) teacher-student interactions. I agree with the author that the observer should arrive the classroom earlier to avoid interruption to the class, but more importantly, to learn more about the physical setup of the room and the student body of the class. This is because learning environment has a huge impact on learning and teaching, and students' facial expression when they walk into the class to certain extent reveals their attitude towards the class and the teacher.

This article is more than just a checklist on what to look for when observing a class. To me, it has presented a lot of dos and don'ts when teaching a language class. In this assignment, I would like to talk about the ideas that are inspiring to me, which would help to improve my teaching skills.

In terms of a teacher's body language, it is important to keep in mind that one's attire says a lot of the person's persona, and would directly influence students' impression of him, which influences the effectiveness of classroom management. Liang also suggests that a teacher's vivid facial expression could be used as a teaching tool which could facilitate learning. On the other hand, unnecessary gestures should be kept to minimum as it would be distracting.

In order to achieve the day's teaching objectives, a teacher needs to have clear objectives, efficient teaching method, and well-designed assessments. In my opinion, one of the key factors to ensure successful output is a teacher's capability to reshape input based on his students' proficiency level, past knowledge, challenges, and even their ethnic backgrounds. And meaningful interactions at the beginning and end of the class could also be considered as assessments.

Last but not least, the quality of teacher-student interactions also shows how successful a class is. Based on my experience, the relationship between a teacher and his students should be respectful yet friendly. Respecting of each other is the foundation of successful classroom management and a friendly teacher is the key to better understanding and more vigorous meaning-based discussions.

Reflection on “Brain and SLA” presentation:

It is great to find out that emotions interfere with one's learning and that people's memory last much longer when it comes to positive things. As a result, I will try my best to create happy learning atmosphere that could make my students' learning more efficient. And this newly designed learning environment will also be decorated with authentic materials and vocabulary. This is because of the research result, which proves that students are capable of picking up extra language information even without conscious efforts.

Assignment 4 - Reflection and Highlight of "How to teach the culture of Chinese New Year"

Background information: I recorded a few videos during my one-week observation in Ms. Hui-mei King's class in Millburn High School, New Jersey. My first impression about this class was "nothing special". However, I realized that Ms. King's class is such an excellent example of how to teach the students about the culture of Chinese New Year when I watched these videos again, with the new knowledge I received from the past week.

1. What are students doing (including Receiving information, applying skills, practicing newly acquired skills, time on task)?

Students had been participating in the Spring Festival Celebration Week, a learning project to educate them about Chinese culture. On Monday, Ms. King showed the students the basic information of Chinese New Year, and gave them assignments for the week. On Tuesday, students did research and learned to do paper-cut to decorate the windows. They also learned about the meaning of paper-cutting in Spring Festival. On Wednesday, they learned to make dumplings. On Thursday, they performed a skit to demonstrate the customs. Last day, they presented their research and showed the class what they had learned.

2. What are students producing?

The students are producing the info about Chinese culture and custom they had learned from the videos, readings, and hands-on activities. They presented their learning through a wide range of projects: window decorations, dumplings, skit, and PowerPoint presentations.

3. What interactions are going on between teacher/student and/or student/student?

Ms. King was an initiator as she laid down the structure and basic set-up for the week. The students interacted by following the instructions and tried to be creative within the framework. Between students, they exchanged ideas and info they gathered to put together a skit. They also communicated with each group to make sure that the presentations would not repeat the info other groups had talked about.

4. How are students REWARDED OR RECOGNIZED by the teacher and/or other students

The students were rewarded with a fun week of celebration, traditional Chinese snacks, dumplings, and a lot of laughter. But the most important thing is that at the end of the week they had obtained a pretty good feel about Chinese culture, values, and customs.

5. What provisions are being made for STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

Based on my observation, there was no student with special needs in Ms. King's two classes. As a result, special adjustment was not needed.

6. How, if at all, does the teacher demonstrate attainment of the New Jersey Professional Teaching Standards?

Standard 7.1.A – Interpretive: students interpreted the materials given by Ms. King.

Standard 7.1.B – Interpersonal: students interacted with each other to put together a skit and presentations

Standard 7.1.C – Presentational: students presented the results of their research through skit and presentations

Standard 7.2 – Culture: Through the week of celebration, the students had learned about the culture and customs of one of the most important festivals for Chinese people

Standard 8 – Ms. King used videos and the Internet to show students the basic info, and to show them guidelines that might be useful to the research. The students used PowerPoint presentations to showcase what they have learned.

7. What did I learn from this experience?

I have learned from this experience that cultural presentation can be very interactive, educational, yet highly entertaining. I have learned that before building a student-centered classroom, the teacher needs to lay down a well-organized framework, which would serve as guideline for the students to follow, so that the class would remain organized throughout the project. Students learn better if the cultural info is interactive. The skit was the highlight of the project in this case.

Assignment 5 – Reflection on Mini-demo

- Hand gesture is a great teaching tool as it could be used to convey a message to the students for example:
 - Hand gestures play an important part when it comes to TPR demonstration
 - Two hands rising slowly asks students to say something together
 - Stretch out your hand with your palm facing upward means “you please”
 - As a male teacher, I should learn how to make my arms more flexible
- It is very important to follow the “i+1” principle. Students could easily lose attention when a teacher leaves too big a gap between two pieces of information. And when they do, classroom management issues might arise. So it is very important to keep activities from being too challenging.
- It is a great practice to test students’ comprehension by putting the newly learned phrase in a simple question which demands the students to produce answers that contain the newly learned phrase. Such a practice helps to produce meaningful output.
- When teaching the topic of “family”, it is best to bring portraits from bigger families. Bigger families help to demonstrate more family-related terms such as siblings.

Assignment 6 – Reflection on first hour of practicum

Topic: Hobbies

Objective: Express your hobbies

Grade: 9th – 12th

Number of students: 12

Class duration: 50 minutes

I consider today's class as a breakthrough since I was able to conduct the class without speaking a single English word, and my PowerPoint presentation did not contain any English word as well. I was able to achieve this by employing TPR, authentic materials, and pictures to convey the ideas.

I started with introducing simple words for tangible items such as basketball, tennis, and baseball. The students were able to understand and master such vocabulary right away thanks to the pictures and my gestures. And I moved onto the Verb + Object combination by introducing the word "play". It took the students a while to figure out the difference between basketball and PLAYING basketball. Eventually, the majority was able to perform communicatively after a series of recasting and emphasis.

The idea of "like" was introduced to form the structure "[someone] likes doing [activity]". The class handled this without any difficulty.

Activities that covered the three communication modes were used to ensure students' comprehension and to improve their listening and speaking skills. The first few were interpretive since I needed to conduct comprehension check. And slowly the focus shifted to interpersonal and presentational.

Overall, the students' performance had been satisfactory. They were able to pronounce the words fairly accurately and were able to use these words in simple short sentences. Certain students still needed correction on the "playing basketball" vs. "basketball" idea by the end of the class.

There are areas that need improvement for this class. First, I need to organize my teaching materials better. I started the class late because some handouts were ready by 9 AM. But more importantly, I need to train myself better so that the students can fully understand my desire to see them come forward and present in front of the class. To do so, I need to have better demonstration and instruction on the assignment so that the students would expect what to do next after they finish interviewing each other.

Assignment 7 – Reflection on second hour of practicum

Topic: Hobbies

Objective: Plan to do certain activities on weekdays

Grade: 9th – 12th

Number of students: 12

Class duration: 50 minutes

I started the class with a brief review. It was completed quickly because the students' knowledge on previous class was solid and still fresh. Following the "i+1" principle, I started with another set of activities. This, together with the activity phrases taught in previous class, completed all the key hobby terms required by the topic. I followed the same pattern when approaching these terms. I started with introducing single words, which was followed by putting them in simple sentences, and finally interpersonal activities would turn the sentences into meaningful answers to different questions.

One characteristic that sets this class away from others was that all assignments for the whole period were given in one single package at the beginning of the class. The rationale behind this was to ensure that materials were well-organized for the students and to save time, since the teacher wouldn't have to waste any class time to distribute assignments. There was a vocabulary list attached to the end of the assignment package. This gave students a quick reference tool during class, so that they could focus better on creating sentences.

The major structure keyword to be introduced in this class is "to want", which implies that the action would take place in the future. I realized that it is very important for students to master the previous idea of "like" before they approach "to want". The activity that I used to test the students' comprehension was called "Teacher Ku Likes... What About You?". In this activity, pairs of students were given a chart showing what Teacher Ku likes or dislikes. They were first to make a sentence telling one's group member what Teacher Ku likes based on the chart. And they will tell each other if they like or dislike Teacher Ku's hobby. If they like it, they would have to use the phrase "also" in the sentence; if not, they would have to tell what they actually like. And they were invited to present their answers to the class. Based on the observation of the group work, students were able to master the "like" structure. However, my request for them to present in front of the class still failed to be understood. I need to improve on my demonstration skills so that activities could be more efficient.

The idea "to want" was taught with the combination of weekdays and activities. First of all, students would practice through simply pairing the phrase with newly learned activities. After that, a PowerPoint slide showed the students the proper position for time-related terms, in this case, weekdays. I was satisfactory with the outcome for this arrangement. Students understood the idea right away. This is crucial since the position for time-related terms in English is different from that in Chinese. The class reached its end after a few practices. And I wrapped it up with an over-all review.

Assignment 8 – Reflection on third hour of practicum

Topic: Dining

Objective: (1) Introduce some common tastes; (2) Introduce some common Chinese dishes; (3) Describe the flavor of Chinese dishes

Grade: Rising 8th

Number of students: 12

Class duration: 50 minutes

I started the lesson with a review on beverages and hobbies. I used a 30 second Sprite commercial featuring Kobe Bryan and Jay Chou for authentic material. And based on the commercial, I designed an activity to review both vocabulary from previously learned topics of beverages and hobbies.

The class slid smoothly from the review of beverages to the introduction of tastes. I combined two approaches to make sure that students understand each taste. First I used common items they see in daily living as examples to show the taste. And I used pictures and TPR to show how these tastes make a person react. For example, I would stretch out my tongue and fan it to signal that red pepper flakes and Tobasco sauce are hot and spicy. I also paired two items with each taste to prevent students from confusing that the taste is the item itself.

For meaningful activity, I brought a bag full of snacks to the class. Students would reach into the bag and pull out a snack. They were allowed to keep the snack and enjoy it after class only when they were able to describe the taste of the snack. The bag was passed from one student to another until the every student got a chance.

From common tastes the lesson went into the learning of common Chinese dishes. This session relied heavily on pictures. Once the students saw the pictures of the dishes, they were able to describe the taste based on their personal experience. When learning the dishes, I also taught them the measure words associated with each item. And the students were given another chance to practice their counting skills. The students' performance on this session was satisfactory.

The strength of this lesson was the use of authentic materials and realia. Students were able to learn the terms much faster when there was a connection to their daily living. The weakness of this lesson was that there could be more student-centered activities. The learning outcome could have been even better should I reserve more time for students to conduct interviews with each other and present the answers.