

2018 UVa STARTALK

Self-reflection #1

By Peng Yu

June 22, 2018

After the first week online training, my biggest takeaway is that online language teaching and learning is not that different from the classroom face-to-face setting, rather it has a few technological advantages than traditional classroom.

The keys to the success of online teaching is quite the same as classroom teaching. Backward design applies to both settings, and contributes to the success of language teaching and learning. Learning objectives should be clearly stated and accessible to students, no matter it's online or in traditional classroom. Student-centered activities can be facilitated through online platforms, such as Zoom and Nearpod. Certain elicitation techniques can be employed in virtual learning environment to encourage students' language output.

However, the teaching demos definitely illustrated the benefits of online teaching and learning. The two teaching demos are equally successfully in terms of fulfilling the six ACTFL-endorsed principles for effective teaching and learning. Using an observation checklist, I can clearly and confidently say that the online class can facilitate learner-centered learning experience. The teacher-student interaction and interactive online activities keep students engaged all the time, especially the Nearpod functions can allow students to participate in the learning process in a variety of ways, from quick and simple multiple-choice comprehension checks to handwriting and typing characters, demonstrating not only speaking but also writing output. With the help of Zoom's share-screen function, the instructor can easily share powerpoint slides with students, which makes the learning materials easily accessible. The teacher can focus on using the target language to facilitate learning and tailor everything towards students age and proficiency level; and students can focus on using the target language to generate expected output. Moreover, if students would like to "re-experience" the whole lesson, the recording function of Zoom can

easily help teacher share the class video with students. The recording and sharing of class videos can be a challenging task for traditional classroom, and sometimes, much more expensive and time consuming.

All in all, the success of these two teaching demos drew my attention back to the beginning, the backward design. What I plan to do in my own online teaching is to think about the learning goals for my students in the very beginning, and plan assessment and learning activities with maximized effective technology integration. Plus, I am very excited to try out Nearpod and all its functions.

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Self-reflection #2

By Peng Yu

July 1, 2018

As the second week online training is wrapping up, I am thinking deeper about the differences between F2F and online teaching, and getting more hands-on practices with the technologies that I am going to use for the online teaching tasks.

In a traditional F2F classroom, even technology fails, the teaching and learning can possibly continue. In contrast, online teaching relies heavily on the stability of the internet and the functionality of the applications. But I am glad to notice that Zoom allows users to join in the online classroom in multiple ways, on computer, laptop, tablet, and even phone. If one way goes wrong, students can simply switch to another. As I am transitioning to teach in an online environment, I need to consider all possible problems that may happen during class and prepare backup plans. Rehearse before hand for a virtual class may be more necessary than teaching in classroom.

When a teacher steps into a classroom, the teacher presence is automatically developed. Students subconsciously focus their attention on the teacher. They are so accustomed to it that they even forget they should be the center of the learning. In a virtual classroom, even with video chatting on, the teacher's window is equally small on the side, students can be more concentrating on the learning materials presented on the main screen area. Thus, students may potentially feel less intimidated by teacher presence, and may feel more comfortable when participating in interactive activities. However, as a teacher, when I am teaching online, I need to think more about how to better grab students' attention with well-prepared materials, and how to engage students in a variety of ways.

Usually people think F2F class is more engaging than online class. It's not necessarily like that. In a F2F class, when teacher does comprehension check, sometimes the whole class responds as one, this means it may be less engaging for each individual student. But in a virtual class, the comprehension check can be more individually engaging, because each student has to respond by themselves. In an online environment, each question is addressing each individual student, therefore, it is making connections on a personal level. This tells me that I should be more aware of each student's individual learning needs, and therefore, provide necessary differentiated instruction.

In addition to noticing the above mentioned three differences between F2F and online teaching, I also need to get more familiar with Zoom and Nearpod functions so that I can feel prepared to be able to teach online since Zoom and Nearpod will be the major tools that I am going to use in this program.

As for preparing teaching/learning materials, I don't see a big difference between F2F class and virtual online class. But I did feel that preparing online materials requires more attention to details.

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Self-reflection #3

By Peng Yu

July 3, 2018

My biggest takeaway from the morning session is to distinguish “meaningful” drills and “communicative” drills. To answer a “meaningful” question, students would use highly predictable vocabulary and sentence patterns; to actually communicate, students (at novice and intermediate level) would use their own daily life experience to create with language. The three types of drills - mechanical, meaningful, communicative - are all necessary. It depends on what teaching goal the teacher has chosen to achieve. However, to promote teacher-student interaction and student-centered learning, it’s better to use more meaningful and communicative drills. This also inspires me to think about how to effectively design activities which may potentially encourage students to speak more in a virtual class. Without well-prepared questions, students may not automatically generate quality sentence-level output.

In the afternoon, I really like watching the mini-teaching demos in small groups. The guiding questions (that Lin Laoshi and Cai Laoshi have prepared) helped me focus my attention on the crucial elements of a successful online class. While watching my colleagues, I was also reflecting on my own online teaching, what I did OK, and which part I was totally lost. Although we didn’t have thorough discussions on specific videos, Lin Laoshi provided us with some brief comments and reminders. I think the goal of this activity is not to critique others, it actually invites us to think about what we can do better. Learning from success is learning; learning from mistakes should also be a positive learning experience.

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Self-reflection #4

By Peng Yu

July 4, 2018

We spent a whole morning getting positivity and gaining confidence. I really appreciated all the thoughts that the admin team put into the mini-teaching demo critique and reflection activity. I was under unbearable pressure when I learned that my demo was going to be commented in front of everyone, because I knew my video was not even close to the standards, neither pedagogically nor technologically. Yesterday afternoon and last night when I was watching my colleagues' demos, I learned so many new ideas, new ways, and new designs from them. I immediately realized that how poorly I prepared for my demo. My PPT slides were very simple; there were technical flaws due to my unfamiliarity with Zoom and Nearpod; my eliciting questions were not well thought; my activities were not encouraging students to produce quality output; not to mention poor time management. However, the admin team asked everybody to share the highlights of each teaching demo in a 3-5min short oral presentation, and to provide the instructor with constructive feedback on Post-it in writing. The part I loved the most was the hug-and-smile after feedbacks. I was astonished that we could get well-needed feedback in such a positive way. No hard feeling at all.

The afternoon's session focused on elicitation techniques and corrective feedback strategies, which may help me prepare my online lesson activities. My goal is to apply these strategies in the virtual Zoom class so as to elicit high quality students oral output. For example, after a few simple questions, maybe add a few how and why follow-up questions, if students' proficiency can handle such tasks.

Technologically, the Zoom and Nearpod combination works really well. There's a bit of learning curve, but perfectly manageable. Besides, Dr. Gao shared some essential tricks and tips with us, which gave me more confidence in the technology tools that this program chose to use.

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### Self-reflection #5

By Peng Yu

July 8, 2018

As I am still processing everything about online teaching, the first week onsite training was wrapped up. Everything seemed to come together this week. However, I would like to focus on two events to reflect upon.

The first big event was to virtually meet MY students online during the orientation. It was exciting both for me and my students. Sitting on this side of the screen, I was nail-biting. Was Zoom going to freeze? Was my mouse on the screen going to disappear while doing annotation? Was my instruction clear enough? Would I be able to cover every item in 45min given my poor time management skills? Looking at my students on the other side of the screen, I sensed that they were a little nervous as well as exciting. It seemed that they were eager and ready to learn. I could not fail them. Clearly, there's always something going wrong when people do it the first time. Due to unfamiliarity with the online environment, I made a technical mistake. I didn't share the Nearpod screen while students are busy completing the tasks. So, in the video recording, it seemed like my screen was frozen, and nobody was actively engaging in that learning activity. I knew what I was doing, students were clearly hands on, but I didn't demonstrate what we were doing in the recording. It is so important to keep the silence time minimum in an online environment, so that it can demonstrate students are active learning and producing oral language. I was glad I made that mistake during the orientation. It taught me a good lesson. I won't be making the same mistake during actual online teaching on Monday.

After the student orientation on Friday, we had a few pair and group lesson preparation meetings to plan for Day 1 student learning experience. Although we are still getting to know each other's teaching style and personality and under the process of bonding, I already see the advantages of teamwork. Seven brains definitely work better than one. For example, we were debating whether or not to cover every grammar structures in our 60min lesson, Tseng Laoshi and Lin Laoshi promptly reminded us to focus on the learning objectives. We went back and read the can-do

statements, and realized that not a single can-do mentioned covering any grammar, rather they were focusing on the language functions, i.e. what students can really do with the language, not how many things they should know about the language. After clearing that up, the lesson planning went quite smooth because we were aiming at the same goal. We all knew backward design. However, in reality we didn't necessarily follow the correct route but took a few extra turns.

Monday is right around the corner. Things are getting REAL!

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Self-reflection #7

By Peng Yu

July 12, 2018

By Day 3 I already finished two rounds of synchronous online teaching. I thoroughly enjoyed interacting with my students in the virtual Zoom classroom, and definitely observed some benefits of the online learning environment.

On Day 1 I taught two sessions. There were two very different students in Session One in terms of proficiency level and personality. One student was very active and confident to join the conversation; the other was very shy and used very small voice, I could hardly hear her. And clearly the student with small voice were struggling to catch up. My Session Two surprised me with two superb students who could respond to each and every question I threw upon them. They could even make a 4-minute long conversation with each other without any long pauses. I was relieved and very happy when I completed Day 1 sessions because everything went pretty smooth, technology wise as well as teaching. Students met all the learning objectives successfully. I always believe students' success is my success. When I saw them left the virtual classroom with smiles, every minute that I threw in preparing this lesson plan worth it. However, I knew that I needed to think more about differentiation and plan ahead.

On Day 3 I was very confident that I would be able to deliver a quality lesson based on Day 1's success. Day 3's lesson involved singing and eating authentic Beijing snacks (of course virtually), which was highly engaging. I had a really good time, so did my students. I could tell that they felt happy on the other side of the screen. With proper preparation students' learning experience could be fun, engaging, and effective.

There were two episodes behind Day 3's lesson. Firstly, my Mac laptop experienced compatibility issues with the headset and Zoom. When I played video or audio, the audience in my Zoom meeting room could not hear the audio. Once the headset was removed, everything

went back normal. Thanks to the Admin Team, I was relocated to a quiet office room to conduct my synchronous teaching so that I could unplug my headset without disturbing other teachers in the same classroom. Secondly, the shy student in my first session requested that her webcam being turned off. Surprisingly, once her camera was off, she could speak longer sentences and her voice could be heard. I instantly got the point: the virtual classroom can provide a safe place for shy students like her to thrive in learning in a small class setting.

One thing I would like to improve is to prepare more challenging questions and/or materials to push students with higher proficiency to output longer sentences and paragraphs. Differentiation should not only accommodate low proficiency students but also probe outstanding students. Slow students help me develop patience; strong students challenge me to upgrade teaching. Every student can be a good learner if they want to learn. I, as a teacher, should be flexible and supporting.

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Self-reflection #8

By Peng Yu

July 15, 2018

Our teacher-guided student virtual tour to Beijing has completed the first week. On Day 5 and Day 6, our students visited Beijing No. 4 High School virtually. I led Day 5 tour, and my partner led Day 6 tour.

On Day 5 I only had 40 minutes to cover two can-do statements due to site visitor interview. It was a big challenge in terms of time management and differentiation. For my session one students I prepared a simple right-to-the-point task as scaffolding after reviewing necessary vocabulary and sentence patterns, and then, jump to the the performance assessment to target my can-dos. As for session two, I prepared a probing task for them, to dub for a short film made by students from Beijing No. 4 High School. It was so authentic and engaging, and it's relatable to students' school life. I really enjoyed watching and listening to their dubbing. Although I set the same can-dos for my Day 5 classes, differentiated instruction was the key to students' success, especially when students were at different proficiency levels, not mentioning different learning backgrounds and personalities.

My partner, Zhang Xiaojing Laoshi, really opened my eyes on Day 6 when she continued the virtual tour with students in Beijing No. 4 High School. Zhang Laoshi met technical problems every time when she was teaching over the past week. However, she demonstrated excellent professionalism while facing obstacles in teaching. On Day 6 she definitely shined in this realm. Usually, the second session would be our best students. However, on Saturday, one of our students was on the way to her swimming competition, and constantly lost internet connection. She had to use cellphone audio to join in the Zoom meeting, which meant she could not see what Zhang Laoshi was sharing on the computer screen. One of the activities in this lesson required students to watch a short video and describe what they saw. The student on the phone could not

possibly watch the video. Zhang Laoshi instant came up with an idea, to ask the student who was on the computer to describe what she saw in the video to the student on her cellphone. She magically turned a silence-and-watch activity into an active student-centered oral speaking output for one student and a attention-catching interpretive listening activity for the other. When that student had troubles describing, she immediately chimed in and provided necessary help by asking that student small questions in order to help her continue her description. It's such A SURPRISE! I almost got up to applaud for Zhang Laoshi and the students.

After the first week of online teaching, I already taught three times in the practicum. I really appreciated the thoughts and efforts that the Admin Team put into designing the practicum. I practiced backward design step-by-step in the group prep meetings; developed skills to prepare communicative questions in the group rehearsals; implemented effective differentiated instruction while teaching in Zoom; last but not least, got inspired by a group of highly experienced teachers who put their former success behind and worked hard to polish their teaching during their supposedly summer vacation time. Go, 2018 UVa Teaching Fellows!

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Self-reflection #10

By Peng Yu

July 18, 2018

Day 9 was my fifth class (and the last one) in 2018 UVa Startalk Chinese Teachers' Academy. After teaching this class I felt that I was ready to teach effective virtual F2F class online.

In today's lesson I had five can-do statements as our learning objectives. It seemed a lot. However, with proper preparation and rehearsal, the class went pretty smooth, and my students reached every can-do. Before the class started, I reminded myself to pay attention to timing and pacing. During the class I was able to control the allocation of time and made use of every minute. The last 15min of the class I was able to take advantage of the Breakout-room function in Zoom and allowed students to break out into small groups to practice, and report to the whole class when they came back. I also differentiated the final task--to make a vlog. Two students with similar proficiency collaborated to create a vlog. One high-level student produced a self narrated vlog. One slower student commented on the self narrated vlog. Everybody contributed to the project. It was a complete wrap-up for today's lesson.

After 5 times of actual online teaching practice, I think I am ready to create and deliver synchronous online lessons. There's no significant difference between classroom teaching and virtual F2F teaching in terms of implementing best practices in language teaching. My further interests would be exploring how to develop learning materials for asynchronous portion of a online class.

Look forward to the closing ceremony on Day 10.

