

Self Reflections
2012 Virginia STARTALK Chinese Teacher Academy
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Day 1

The chapters I've read for today's assignments are Chapter Four (Introduction to AP Chinese Language and Culture) and Chapter Five (Communicative Approach in teaching Chinese). As a teacher who is going to teach the AP class next school year for the first time, Dr. Tseng's overview of the background, format and trend of AP test is of great help. By reading Chapter Four, not only did I get a general picture of the test and gain a basic understanding of what to cover in the course, I also see how this test is closely linked to the national standards, and how my course design needs to align with them in order to better prepare my students for next year. I am including both of what I read from the book and what I got out of today's workshop to write my reflections below.

I have learnt national standards in my graduate coursework, have been applying the standards in my teaching, and have heard teachers talk about 5Cs and 3Ms in almost all the workshops I had the opportunity to go. But it is amazing that each time when I read it over again and connect it with my teaching practice, I almost always got some new inspirations or discovered some areas I have overlooked in the past, and I was able to dig more out of the seemingly simple sentences. Like today, two areas came into my mind also and I'd like to share with all of you:

1) To Implement Real Interpersonal Mode of Communication

When the word "interpersonal mode" appears, what I can think of right away is two-way communication. It can be the two-way communication between a teacher and a student and between or among students, and my understanding of interpersonal mode is that if there is information flow in each way, then it is a good interpersonal activity. In today's workshop, Tseng laoshi talked about the differences of mechanic drill, meaningful drill and communicative drill and distinguish to us the definition of each drill. It made me to think what a real communicative activity is. Does the flow of information in two ways justify the activity to be communicative? For example, when a teacher asks students to ask each other about what they are wearing today and the color of the outfit. The answers are predictable and already known, Student A does not need to listen carefully of what Student B is saying to get the answer to the question. Yes, the two students are both practicing asking and answering in a meaningful way, but it does not necessarily make the activity communicative. There is no real communication in this case, because the information that flows is old information. So when we are designing interpersonal activities, we need to think about the importance of "negotiation of meaning", not just be satisfied by getting your students to talk to each other, but to give them problem-solving language tasks so they are able to use newly learnt language skills to negotiate the meaning between each other. For example, instead of having the students asking about what they are wearing, the teacher can do the following modifications to create

information gap: 1) give each student a photo/picture from a magazine and obtain information about the clothing from each other without seeing the photo; 2) give one student a picture from a fashion magazine and have the other student to draw the clothing ; 3) comment and evaluate on a set of photos and state your reasons why you like/do not like certain dressing style; 4) do a count in your own clothing wardrobe and report to your classmate. Etc...

2) Teach Culture in Real Language Tasks

We all have the understanding that language and culture are intermarried and cannot be divided, the key is how and what do we incorporate culture in our daily language instructions. I want to highlight one sentence I read on P125 which I think is very important which I translate into the following: the knowledge of culture is reflected by if the language user can use appropriate language, under appropriate situation, at appropriate time, to the appropriate person. I think this sentence summarizes what all of us needs to keep in mind what we kind of culture skills we want the students to acquire. When teaching culture, not only we teach what we do, and why and how we do it in a certain way. When teaching culture, we teach how to most effectively communicate and connect with the other speaker from the culture background. So when we are greeting our students, think about how Chinese people usually greet the students; when we are teaching in a school setting, always keep in mind the school culture in China and its difference in America; when we are teaching language through stories, choose stories that can reflect core values of Chinese society. In short, always remember the key word “ appropriate” and think about how to raise the awareness of having students use language most appropriately to reach the goal of effective communication.

These are some of my thoughts from today’s workshop and from Tseng laoshi’s book. I feel very honored to be able to join this team, sharing and learning from all the wonderful teachers. And I am looking forward to more sparkles of communication in the following days.

Day 2

In today’s reading, Van Patten posited five implications of acquisition-oriented language teaching. I am going to talk about how I relate to each implication from my personal experience and with what I got from Tseng laoshi’s workshop today.

Implication 1: The More Input, The Better

Optimal input is the key if we want the students to be able to produce more. My understanding of optimal input has two aspects. First, the input needs to be meaningful, engaging, and comprehensible for students. We teach the language through communication. For example, when teaching fruit unit to the class, instead of showing students individual fruit pictures on the

powerpoint and ask the students to read after the teacher, we can actually bring in different kinds of fruit and engage students to participate in a conversation from which they will acquire the language by asking questions, negotiating meaning and expressing their preferences. When students learn the language in meaning, they are not passively memorizing, but actively constructing.

One other inspiration I get out of this part is that input is not only limited what teacher gives in a classroom. A teacher needs to think about how to increase input outside of the classroom. Technology and online resources should be cooperated to extend the classroom language learning to students' afterschool life. And both speaking input and written input are equally important to develop a student's balanced skills in language acquisition.

Implication 2: The More Interaction, The Better

Interactions can be divided into communicative interactions or non-communicative interactions. The foreign language education I have received involved a lot of interactions but mostly exchanging of known and non-personalized information (audio-lingual approach). This kind of interactions drew both the teacher's and students' focus to the forms rather than meaning. You can fill in the blanks with the right form of a verb in a sentence without knowing the meaning of the whole sentence. Under this scenario, students are not actively constructing meaning and they lose the opportunity to produce level-appropriate output. To elicit student output to its appropriate level, we need to provide them ample opportunities in a class. In a teacher-led interaction, teacher needs to focus on student's response and in term, ask questions to further develop conversations based on students previous output, to push the student to be able to expand his or her thoughts on this by further explaining, including details, comparing and contrasting. In a student-led interaction, activities should be designed in a way that provide scaffolding to support students and activities should be designed in different modes so students can make different forms of output.

Implication 3: All Learner Production Should Be Meaning-Based Or Communicative

This implication emphasizes on the communicative nature of learning production. The example provided here about structured output is very interesting. We see from the example that tasks with a grammatical focus can also be communicative if designed properly. One example I can think from the Chinese teaching example is that when we are teaching "Ba" structure, instead of explicitly teaching the grammar, we can also give the students a meaning-based task to achieve the same process. For example, we can ask students to work in pairs to instruct each other how to decorate a new classroom and where to place or put different furniture and classroom supplies around in the room.

Implication 4: Focus on Form (Or Grammar Instruction) Should be Meaning-Based And Tied to Input or Communication

Just like what Tseng laoshi said in today's workshop, in a classroom communicative classroom, does not mean we give up teaching grammar. Teaching grammar is necessary and should be part of the learning process for students to achieve accuracy. But the concern is how to teach

grammar so students' focus on the language is not just on grammar, but on the communication. In this chapter, the author introduced "input enhancement" which I summarized below:

Input Enhancement: Focus on form	Communicative interchange	Recast
		Confirmation Check
		Clarification Request
	Comprehension task	Text enhancement
		Structured input

In short, the focus here is to pay attention to both form and meaning.

Implication 5: We Should Watch Out for What Expect of Learners

When I read this part, I recalled what Yang Laoshi summarized what Tseng laoshi said in her workshop years ago: students' output is depending on teacher's input . I totally agree with this. I think it makes sense not to require students to produce as much as they are receiving in the initial stage of their language acquisition. Just like babies, they first actively listen for a period of time before really talking. Enough input at the beginning stage improves students' sense of language and by not requiring students to talk very much in the initial stage lowered their affective filter so they will feel more comfortable to produce language as they build up their ability.

Day 3

Workshop

In today's workshop, we explored how human brain works in second language acquisition. To me, this is a fascinating topic. It is also very interesting to see from a foreign language teacher's perspective how the research findings in neuroscience can be applied and reflected in our classroom. Dr .Ferre's presentation is full of hands-on activities. So even though the concept can be very abstract, we effectively learnt the content by doing. This is something to remember in our own teaching: students learn best by using the language to complete the task. That's also the essence of tasked based learning that Tseng laoshi emphasized in the previous two days.

In today's workshop, when Dr. Ferre asked us to explain discuss the analogy between how brain works and the UPC bar codes system, I at first did not get the connection. But after discuss with my partner, we together found out the similarity and got a better understanding of the concept of "pathway" that Dr. Ferre wanted us to focus. To me, the process of learning once again reminded me how important it is to allow students to discuss with each other so they may learn from each other and work together to solve a problem. Teamwork is just a beautiful thing.

Through the studies of the neuron networks, we once again see how meaningful and emotional connections help build pathway for learning. One interesting fact to notice is to establish a pathway, there are different combinations of connections we can build. Just as the saying goes, all roads need to Rome. Learners' neurons networks are wired differently and therefore, if as a teacher, the more kinds of stimulus we can put, the more connections are going to be built in a student's mind which will foster learning to a greater extent. The other interesting fact is that

once a pathway is connected in a human brain, it does not mean this pathway will be permanent. Constant revisit of previous learnt materials will provide continuous stimulus to the human brain to prevent the pathway from fading fast. In fact, the L1 studies suggested that the minimum of 12 meaningful repetitions of input is necessary for a learner to establish the pathway in his or her brain.

One of the other highlights of today's workshop is the concept that we construct the meaning by ourselves. Given the same picture, some people saw a young lady, some people saw an old woman. The stimulus is the same, we construct the meaning. Given the same word "beach", my partner related to sea world and natural scenery; but I relate to healthy –look tanned people and what they participated on the beach. The stimulus is the same, we construct the meaning. And different life experiences shaped our emotional connection to a word. The application I get from this point is that, never assume other people will think the way you are, and respond same the way you do. Each person is a unique individual and this uniqueness needs to be shown in a language classroom. As a teacher, we need to personalize our teaching content, allow students to express their point of view and value that.

Reflections on the Reading Materials

Liang laoshi's article of *How to Learn Teaching Techniques from Classroom Observation* discussed five aspects that a new teacher can observe in a language classrooms: 1) Teacher's body language; 2) How the teacher tries to achieve the teaching objectives; 3) How the teacher tries to control the class time; 4) Teaching techniques; 5) Interaction between teacher and students in the classroom. Within the five sub-topics, Liang laoshi pointed out many micro-techniques on what and where to observe in a language classroom. This article is very practical because it listed in details all the things that a teacher needs to be paying attention to. In Chinese, there is a saying that the person who knows the business will see the meaningful details while the person who does not know the business will just see unimportant movements. Liang laoshi's article summarizes her years of experiences in her teaching and teacher training; it guides teachers to "notice" the meaningful details. Reading through this article, it is helpful to remind teachers, no matter an observer or someone being observed, something minor but can make difference if you pay attention to the details.

The very most reason of signing up for Tseng laoshi's Startalk program is because the program is set up in the way that I will have the opportunities to observe others and being observed and critiqued by others. I personally think the most effective way to improve teaching techniques is this way. It will raise our awareness no matter if we are observing or being observed. I am glad to revisit Liang laoshi's article this week so I can be more prepared for next week's practicum training.

Day 6: Reflection 1

What made UVA Startalk program a highly effective one for Chinese teacher trainees is that the program is set up in a way that teachers have ample chances to collaborate, to reflect, to be critiqued, to revise and refine on the details of a lesson and eventually to challenge the teachers to teach better. Although each teacher is only responsible for three hours during the whole

practicum which is even much less than a teacher's length of teaching in one day, the preparations beforehand required a lot of thoughts and collaborations, and it is a I have been teaching by myself in my local school for three years. For the last school year, I had six levels of students to teach on a daily basis. With such workload, most of my time was spent on planning and grading. I rarely got any chance to revisit my lessons and reflect on my own teaching. My primary purpose of participating in the UVA Startalk is to make up this area. I have to say the program really satisfies my needs. Before teaching in front of students, each of us gets twenty minutes to rehearse in front of all teachers. And this pre-practicum session is critical. I have not gone through a formal immersion teaching training and my understanding of immersion and what works for a zero-beginning Chinese class in an immersion setting is not clear. After the pre-practicum critiques, I receive many constructive suggestions; some of them never came across my mind before. So I really value this experience and feel thankful for an opportunity to be advised by some of the most enthusiastic professionals in this field. Below are some of my thoughts:

- Understanding of an immersion classroom: My previous impression of an immersion Chinese classroom is a classroom where both the teacher and the students speak and listen to only Chinese. So when designing my activities, I put full-page detailed instructions of activities in English. And I thought it is fine for students to read the instructions in English and do the activity totally in Chinese. But I neglect the fact in an immersion setting, to maximize students' input and output in the target language, the less English influence/interference, the better. If an activity can be explained through modeling, then no English should be used. My method of putting step-by-step English instructions works against the principles of immersion teaching.
- Simple activities can work magic in the novice classrooms. One other mistake I made before the critic session is that some activities my group designed might be creative but to carry out the activity required too many explanations. And for a zero-beginning classroom, to use complicated activities to achieve simple goal is a waste of time. I agree with what Tseng laoshi comment on our activities: if an activity cannot be explained through modeling, then we should probably consider whether this activity is appropriate for the beginning classroom.

After the critique session, I revised the lesson. On the second day, the lesson I taught met most of my expectations on myself and I think this has to do with all the comments I received before teaching the lesson. But the major area I need to work on is time management. I used a large portion of the class time on error corrections and reviewing on the previous contents and did not finish all my lessons. For next session, I will focus on managing the time of my activities by estimating the length of each activity.

Reflection 2

In the second practicum session, I taught the third period of the class. In this period, I need to review what previous two teachers have taught and integrate them into the performance-based activity. The task I need to accomplish this time is different from the previous one. In the previous teaching practicum, I need to introduce new vocabulary in context whereas this time all new vocabulary and structures were introduced so I need to create opportunities for students to try to apply what they have learnt previously to new situations.

What I did well:

- I did not put any English on my powerpoint nor on the student's worksheet. I adhered to the rules of the immersion program and tried my best to carry on the "zero-English" requirements. In my regular teaching days, although I used above 80% Chinese, I did not get away with English when I gave instructions on activities, or dealt with disciplinary issues. I never thought of totally getting rid of English in the classroom. But in this program, I tried. With thoughtful planning, it is possible to just use Chinese in the classroom. I benefit a lot from this experience. When I return to my classroom next school year, I know for sure that my target language use is going to increase even more.
- I tried to use authentic materials in my teaching. In this lesson, our theme is "Hobbies". To connect to the hobbies and weekend activities, we come up with the idea of connecting to the Chinese version of Rebecca Black's "Friday". The lyrics have many time words students have learnt and it talks about weekend activities. Students will first do an interpretive task on the lyrics sheet and then listen to the music. Comprehension questions will be asked after the music video and later students will have chances to sing the songs together with the teacher. When authentic materials are used, I see students are more excited into learning, especially when they see how they can use what they have learnt right away in their life. In my future teaching, I will try to use as much authentic materials as possible.
- Our group discussed and designed a "hook" for each class. We are teaching younger kids, so we think it is important to have something unexpected for students to explore and get excited in each class. The hook for the first period is experiencing how to play shuttlecock; the hook for the second period is practicing Taiqi; the the hook for the third period is to sing "Friday". To design a hook for each class is also something I will make sure to incorporate into my daily classroom.
- To personalize the story and invite students to join the teacher to create meaningful situations. Instead of telling students this is how we invite others to do something, and this is how we accept or decline an invitation. I invite students to role-play with me. Through teacher-student interactions, students gain a better sense of how to react in Chinese in a given situation. Students are more interested in the lesson because they are part of it. The teacher use the answers given by the students to continue on narrating stories. I have not

tried this story-telling method a lot in my local classroom, and I certainly see the benefits to make the stories personal and connected to students.

What I can do better:

- I did not do as much scaffolding activities this time as last practicum. In my mind, the purpose of my lesson is more of summarizing what the previous two teachers have taught. But I neglected the fact that these students only learnt Chinese for three days, and they need a lot of practices to reinforce what they have learnt in order to apply their knowledge to a more challenging situation.
- To use authentic materials in the beginning level can be challenging and needs a more thoughtful design on the teacher's side. It is a good idea to have the beginning level students to do word search on the lyrics sheet. But to let them to do word search on the whole lyrics sheet turned out to be too much and can be confusing for some students. Next time, I will just give at most ten lines and have students to search within the lines.

Reflection 3

In the third practicum, we worked differently from the previous two sessions. This time, we collaborated with the other group. Both groups were to teach the same content so we decided to take good advantage of the collective wisdom. Before the practicum, six of us first met and decided what to teach for each session, we went over the flow among sessions. We also brainstormed for creative ideas on different types of activities we could use in the language functions we were going to address. It was an incredible experience. After our first meeting, we roughly came up with the organization of all three lessons and we had come up with some very creative interactive and communicative activities. Then we each worked with our counter-part in the other group to design step-to-step lesson plans. I worked with Wang Tiantian to design the first period class. We discussed in details, especially the procedures of each activities, and each worked on one portion of the class. Afterwards, we went over each powerpoint slides and made revisions to make the class flow better. After the critique session on Monday, I met with my own group member Yao laoshi and Hu laoshi and we rehearsed vertically with Zhong laoshi. With the contribution of each member, I think our lessons are very exciting and full of creative ideas. Overall speaking, it was a very good collaborating experience with a group of innovative teachers.

In my teaching today, I think I did well with recycling of words and building up the sentences from word chunks ; I am also pretty satisfied with the flow of the lessons. However, I did not have the time to do the "lost suitcase" activity which took Tiantian and me a lot of time to prepare. For me, it is more or less a regret. I'd like to carry out the activity and see how the students react to it. But on the other hand, I also think it is important to pace the lesson in a way that students can consolidate the new words and sentences. So I spent a lot of time in the beginning going over basic words and when I finished my first big activity, it was already nine thirty five, leaving me only fifteen minutes to introduce and practice measure words. I made the decision to drop the suitcase game and added two small activities to practice measure words: to

have the students calculate the number of T-shirts in the classroom; and to have students to do catwalk, and have other students describe his/her outfit using the correct measure words and clothing words. Although I change the lessons to fit into the 50 minute time quite successfully, the fact that I had to change the lessons on the spot also revealed my weakness in time management. Teaching five to six different classes per day in my local school, I never had the habit of calculating the time of each activity. It is a very important aspect in preparing lessons, and next year with only three-preps, I am planning to focus on time management and hopefully can improve on that.

I also enjoyed watching other teachers teaching. All the wonderful teachers have given me so much to think over and watching other teachers to teach is my the most valuable experience for me.

Finally, congratulations on my team on finishing three tasks beautifully. From the first collaboration, to the third one, we grow together. I learnt a lot from each of my team member and I learnt how to work well with others. I am very proud to be part of this extremely creative team!