

Self-Reflections

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06/26/2012

The Effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching

In the book *Promoting Professionalism in Teaching AP Chinese*, Chapter 5 & 6 introduces Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies, which are to promote the development of real-life language skills by engaging the learner in contextualized, meaningful, and communicative-oriented learning tasks. These two chapters with comprehensive real examples of applying CLT to Chinese L2 classroom give us vivid ideas of how to teach language in an effective, interested but communicative way.

There are four inspiring teaching strategies that help me to think deeper about “communicative task/teaching”:

First, give students enough time to prepare. In the second example of Chapter 5 (p.152-p.155), teacher gave handouts of language drill to students one day before class, in order to leave them enough time to prepare for the drill. This is a brilliant idea. Teachers like communicative activities, and they expect students to be fully engaged in the communicative classroom. But they forget one thing: students need time to prepare. Tight class schedule doesn't allow students to spend 20-30 minutes to prepare for some really interesting activities. If they prepare the drill in a hurry in class, you cannot expect good language production. It is a good idea to conduct communicative drills in class, but it is a better idea to let students' prepare well before doing the drills.

Second, reduce task difficulty by group collaboration. In the Jigsaw example (p.171-p/174) of Chapter 5, students were asked to combine different paragraphs to be a complete passage. Teacher did not simply divide students into several groups to finish the combination task. She asked students who received the same paragraphs to discuss vocabulary and content of the paragraph together first. Then spread out into different groups to finish the combination task. In this way, students didn't need to struggle by themselves to figure out the vocab and content of their own paragraph, which might affect the result of the task. Group collaboration of clarifying each paragraph reduced task difficulty and improved the effectiveness of language drills, which made the communicative task go more smoothly.

Third, repeat by other students to improve the correctness. In the fourth part of example in Chapter 6(p.197-p.199), teacher corrected Student 4's sentence. Then she asked several students to repeat the correct sentence again and again. This is a very effect mean to reaffirm and to emphasize the correct form of language

structures. Also, other students could involve in the process of language correction. They were reminded of not making the same mistake. Correctness of output of the whole class, as a result, was improved by this simple repetition. Of course, correctness in communication is a very important goal of classroom drills.

Forth, problem solving makes students more involved. The 12th strategy that mentioned in Chapter 5 (p.178) is problem solving. According to my previous teaching experience, problem solving is a very attractive strategy to let students be more involved in language activities. Students like being challenged. They like the feeling of overcoming difficulties. Teacher can ask student to do role-playing. But if they could also solve problems in doing role-playing, they would be more satisfied with the result. So why not design problems in the drills for them to solve?

06/27/2012

Learn From Incorrect Demonstrations

Epilogue: Implications for Teaching (Van Patten, 2002) is a great review of what we learnt today. There are several keywords in this article: meaning-based, interaction, communication, and form. Beside five principles that presented in the article, I also learnt something from two incorrect demonstrations:

Incorrect interaction might result in silence. In IMPLICATION 2, the author gave an example (p.104) to demonstrate how incorrect interaction between the instructor and students resulted in silence on the part of the students. The instructor asked a question that directed to an explanation of a disagreement. The student was sort of slow in processing the question and responding. She could just come up with some words to start the answer. The instructor interrupted her and finished the sentence that led the answer to a totally different direction. This interaction did not save time for other students to answer. Instead, it created a tense atmosphere in the classroom, that when the instructor asked the same question again, there was no response. This lesson told us that given the fact that interaction is a good teaching strategy in FL classroom, and “the more interaction the better”, we still have to pay attention of the content and form of interactions. We should generate effective interaction aligned with students’ meaning and language level. Otherwise, even though we have interactions in class, yet, classroom will turn out to be quiet unexpectedly.

Expect learners to produce what they can’t produce might result in silence. In IMPLICATION 5, the author gave an example (p.112) to demonstrate that asking a question that beyond students’ level is not helpful for students’ language acquisition at all. The instructor asked a “why” question after the student have provided a response to a yes/no question. But the student’s language ability didn’t reach the level of giving an explanation to a “why” question yet. Students attempted to answer but the result was still a silence. Though there was an interaction, or more precisely,

a meaningful interaction attempt, it was still not effective, in that it didn't align with students' language level. The author warned us that "watch out for what we expect of learners", which is quite true. This example also taught us, that a good interaction is supposed to be in alignment with meaning, form and language level. It is true that the more interaction the better. But we should not forget that it is also important to generate comprehensible interactions.

The author argued that regardless of whether one adopts a comprehension-first curriculum, it is important to be sensitive to students' production abilities. I strongly agree with this, because speaking has always been the hallmark of acquisition. Classroom interaction/communication plays a key role in language production. It is necessary and worthy to devote more efforts to understand what is good classroom interaction.

06/28/2012

Keyword: meaningful

In the morning session, the brain lady Dr. Ruth Ferree did a very interesting experience with us. She showed us 24 words and divided us into two groups. We were asked to count those words by two different means, by sound and by meaning, but were not told to memorize them. When later we were asked to name words that we saw, apparently the group that counted words by meaning did a better job than the other group that counted by sound. The result gave us very strong evidence that we should teach language in a MEANINGFUL way. I heard about this teaching principle many times. But result of this experience is so powerful that I could not help to rethink about this principle and my teaching style. The main idea of this STARTALK program, I believe, is to help us to teach Chinese more effectively, which means to teach in a communicative and meaningful way. I start to show my attention to the word "meaningful" after this great workshop. I hope that it would help me to do better in my practicum.

Key-word: student-centered

"Student-centered" was mentioned a lot of times in our STARTALK workshops. And in Integrated Performance Assessment section, we participated in many student-centered activities. Being a student in these activities, I could feel how effective student-centered activities. Because I had to think, discuss, present and be very engaged in class. I could learn from professor and from my group partners. More importantly, I learnt actively. We were asked to come up many Integrated Performance Assessment plans. We kept brainstorm and tried to create an interested but practical assessment that includes interpretive, interpersonal and presentational performance. To be honest, I felt so tired to come up good ideas. But after we finished the mission, I felt very satisfied about myself. I couldn't believe I could be so creative. It was a very good training. It pushed us to think

hard to approach the goal of teaching efficiently. Task-based, communicative, meaningful, IPA, student-based – these are the most impressive words for me during this week. These words helped me rethink my previous teaching habit. I am afraid that I will be very busy with modifying my course plan after this program finishes.

06/30/2012

I often heard about people discussing about Chinese immersion programs because we have 17 elementary schools doing Chinese immersion education in Utah. Many people told me that these programs are pretty successful. When I visited a 2nd Grade Chinese immersion class this May, I was so amazed by those little kids' performance in class. They acted almost like their Chinese peers in China, under their Chinese teacher's instruction in class which is only in Chinese. I was very curious at that time: how these Chinese teachers made that happen?

In this STARTALK program, we are going to teach a Chinese immersion 8-day course. From next week, we are going to make things happen as well! I am the only teacher who has almost zero teaching experience at K-12 level, not to mention immersion programs. In these few days, from Dr. Tseng's lectures and other teachers' experiences, I started to have a clue of how K-12 Chinese education looks like and noticed differences between teaching Chinese to K-12 students and to college adults. Especially in today's teaching demos, Hsu laoshi and Lin laoshi gave us real-classroom-like examples of how to teach in the first day of an immersion class. I saw how they avoided using English to introduce new words, to conduct language drills and communicative tasks. They answered my question of how Chinese teachers made "the magic" happen.

Dr. Tseng kept remind us of reading the observation checklist carefully. Because it tells us how to do well and what should be avoided. For example, Teacher may do in-class ongoing comprehension checks after conducting meaningful drills. Also, in today's reading, I noticed a lot of details of teacher's gestures, time management, teacher-student interaction, and etc. For example, when teacher wants students to pay attention to him/her, he/she may stand to show the authority; when teacher wants to listen or discuss, he/she may sit on table to show that he/she is a good listener, to show the equality. Detail is the key of success. Reading observation checklist and today's reading assignment helped me pay attention to more details, which I didn't notice at all before.

Hsu laoshi, Lin laoshi and my fellow classmates are experienced K-12 Chinese teachers. In the following two weeks, I can observe their teaching and I believe that I am going to learn a great deal from them, of course, with the help of observation checklist and today's article as well. Through observations and practices, step by

step, I believe that I could also be a good K-12 (immersion) Chinese teacher in the future. And I am going to make “the magic” happen!

07/01/2012

Reflection on technology workshop

In my opinion, the best way of learning is learning while doing something fun. Something fun is not necessary to be a game or a song, but things that are attractive to me so that I can fully focus on doing them and feel enjoyable. We are living in a high-tech era. We are doing so many fun things by using technologies. Hence, introducing technologies into second language classrooms is the need of this era and a future tendency.

I am so glad that I learnt a lot of technological tools used in Chinese classroom in Zeng laoshi's workshop. Using smartphones to type Chinese is a very idea to stimulate student's interests, because they can apply this skill later to text simple Chinese sentences to each other in their daily lives. Zeng laoshi anticipated what kind of problems teachers might face with while we introduce technologies into classrooms. He showed us many useful software programs to assist us, such as CE Star, QQ input, Calibre, 播音王.

I like 文林, a software program that can explain vocabularies in a Chinese passage automatically. It is very useful for my advanced-level course at BYU Chinese Flagship. I always encourage my students to read more news or column articles in Chinese that are written for Chinese readers. By using 文林, students can save time to look up words in a dictionary. They can read more and do more self-studies in their limited free time. Zeng laoshi also recommended Live Mocha, an online language buddy website. I am also going to introduce this to my students, so that they can have more chances to talk to real Chinese people living in China, without too many troubles or paying too much finding a language exchange partner.

Reflection on mini-teaching demo

I would like to use one word to express my feeling on mini-teaching demo: bittersweet.

Bitter part: 5 minutes is really short. I thought hard, discussed with partners a lot, and made a lot of changes to come up with a 5-minute demo. But I didn't do well in time management while presenting the demo. I didn't have time to show an interpersonal communicative activity that I've planed for a long time last night.

Sweet part: I received very useful feedbacks from Dr. Tseng and other teachers, which can help me to get rid of my previous teaching habit and move forward. I also

learnt from other teachers' mistakes. All details helped me to be more aware of every single part of my teaching style and teaching strategy: relaxing facial expression, smile, not push students too hard, giving instructions before giving hand-outs to students, logical expansion from words to phrases to sentences, and so on. I am really excited and look forward to applying these and performing better in our real teaching.

In general, the most impressive things I learnt about in the mini-teaching demo are: time management and communicative activities.

07/05/2012

Reflection on 1st Teaching

Kids in 8th-grade class are very cute. I really enjoyed teaching them today, though Fang Lilong fell asleep for a couple seconds in my class (He looked really tired today).

Things I didn't do well today are:

1. There was a typo of today's date on my PowerPoint! I should've not make that kind of mistake at all. I will definitely double-check my PowerPoint every time before class in the future.
2. Time management. I spent quite a long time to teach date (几月几号) and birthday (生日), and didn't leave enough time to teach day of the week (星期).
3. Teacher-centered's portion was too much. I could feel that I talked a lot in class. I should give more time for students to talk and practice next time.
4. Plus, I didn't know how to help students to say the sentence out when they were struggling how to do that. This is what I should learn from other teachers when I observe other them teach. I was not patient enough to wait for students' output. I should wait patiently for students to finish their sentences in the future, even if they speak very slowly.

Things I did well today are:

1. The interview activity about celebrities' birthday was quite successful. Students were very active and productive.
2. When I asked them what date is their birthday, they had difficult to answer because they are still not very familiar with big numbers. So I let them put their birthday down on the Avatar paper and let them say the sentence “我的生日是__月__号”. Then when I asked their birthday again, they could answer right away.

Big step from mini-demo to practicum:

In my mini-demo, I used mechanical drills. I was still not sure about what are really meaningful and communicative drills. I didn't get rid of my previous teaching style at all. After receiving criticism from other teachers, from my mistakes, I finally understood what are communicative or meaningful activities. So when I designed my practicum, I made many changes and put real meaningful drills and

communicative activities. From mini-demo to practicum, I made a big progress: stepped forward from mechanical to meaningful and communicative.

07/07/2012

Reflection on 2nd Teaching

After mini-demo and two practicums, I summed up a pattern of how to teach efficiently, step by step:

1) meaningful introduction of new words and structures (teach in context, use authentic materials) → 2) mechanical drills → 3) meaningful pair practices → 4) communicative activities for groups or the whole class.

In my second practicum, I applied this pattern to my class. It worked quite well. Step 1: Student learnt new words of locations 故宫, 长城, 王府井, 天坛, 鸟巢 through watching a video *Welcome to Beijing*. I didn't need to explain to them what these words mean. They knew that these are famous landmarks in Beijing by the mean of watching the video. Step 2: Then they practiced pronouncing these words by mechanical drills. Step 3: After that, they paired up and practiced using these words in a meaningful conversation : “北京有什么?” “北京有故宫、长城……” Step 4: After they learnt the structure “先……再……”, they applied these words of locations in a communicative activity: make a three-day plan touring in Beijing. They not only practiced using new words, but reviewed words they learnt in the last class also. I was very satisfied with their output. They could produce long sentences combined with time, “wan to do sth.” structure, words of activities, and words of locations in Beijing.

But there are some details I should be more cautious next time:

1. Don't forget to correct students' pronunciation while being communicative in class.
2. Modify activities to make it more time-efficient. Reduce time when students have to wait for others to finish a task. Let them complete the task at the same time. Let students use as much as class time to talk.
3. Make activities more personal. Design activities that students can talk about themselves, so that they can apply what they practice during activities in their real lives.

Last but not least, I would like to discuss how I think about “guessing games” in L2 classrooms. In this STARTALK program, I am training myself to be more creative in designing classroom activities. However, I am not a big fan of guessing games because, in my own opinion, it is neither meaning nor communicative. We cannot deny that guessing games are interesting. Students may have fun in guessing some numbers or guessing what other people are doing. But these are purely mechanical drills of vocabs. These activities are more likely to practice guessing skill, or

cognitive ability in another word, instead of to practice language skills. In order to make good use of class time, I prefer to leave more time for students to practice conversations in different types of context or real life situations.

07/11/2012

Reflection on 3rd Teaching

Today was the last day of class teaching. I was responsible for the last section of today's class, which was a review of what they learnt in the past days. After two practicums, I was more familiar with how to leave time to students and let them perform more. However, review class is sort of a new thing to me. I was not quite sure how to design it well. During teaching rehearsal, Hsu laoshi gave me a very good advice of preceding a pair-work communicative activity. She suggested me to combine four small pair dialogues into a big one with 8 questions and answers. I might under-estimated students' language ability on the 7th day of this immersion program. I should give them a chance to "show off" sentences that they learnt in this big dialogue. It was quite successful. Students really enjoy doing this big dialogue, though they still struggled with parts of it. It did help students build up their confidence in using Chinese in a long conversation.

I designed a big project for students to finish in the second half of my class, after the review. It was an interpersonal and presentational activity. They were required to design a three-day plan of touring in Beijing, putting word cards of weather, transportation, activities, and landmarks of Beijing on a white cardboard. And then present it in front of class with several sentence structures. They did quite well in preparing the plan. But, the presentation did not go well. The main issue was I did not give enough time for them to prepare for the presentation. They came to the front without preparation. And the result was that they could not give organized presentations fluently. From this not-so-successful experience, I learnt that I should leave more time to students to prepare for what they are going to say, instead of rush to let them improvise and perform. I should've let them present to each other after well preparation, rather than asked them to present to the rest of the class without preparation, due to the time limit. They are still novice learners, after all, that they need time to prepare for what they want to say.

All in all, I am still happy with what I tried to do in my 3rd class teaching, because I tried my best to make the classroom more communicative, meaningful and interesting. This is a big step from what I was to what I mastered to do after all the trainings. It is hard to change old habits. But I not only got the idea, but also made changes. I did feel myself growing up day by day in this program. And that's the most important thing for me coming here: to learn, to grow.