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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/46p0p9fn>

Journal

L2 Journal, 6(1)

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Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/L26123392

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Teaching Chinese as a Second Language: From Taiwan to the United States

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“Don’t bring missions such as carrying forward Chinese culture...etc. into your Chinese language class...it is a language class after all.” I still remembered this warning our professor gave us in the first class meeting of our graduate program at the Institute of Teaching Chinese as a Second/Foreign language in Taiwan. This was very different from my experience teaching Chinese as a first language (L1). To make students identify themselves with their country and be proud of their culture were crucial for L1 teaching in Taiwan. However, the main goal for second language (L2) teaching was to only teach students the language. This was the teaching standard set by my professors who were at the forefront of Chinese teaching almost 20 years ago. Since teaching Chinese as an L2 was still a relatively new profession at that time, very few people could distinguish the difference between L2 and L1 Chinese teachings. I can understand why my professors had to remind us not to fall into the pattern of L1 teaching. The L1 and L2 teachings are catered to completely different background of students after all.

I had been teaching Chinese as an L2 in Taiwan for several years before I came to the United States. There are many differences between teaching Chinese as an L2 in Taiwan and teaching it in the United States. The foreign students who study Chinese in Taiwan were usually highly motivated and diligent. Many of them were fascinated with Chinese culture and wanted to know more about the people they met, the culture they experienced or anything they observed in their current living environment. I felt that I was not only a language trainer but also a provider of cultural information. Sometimes I even played the role of mentor when students encountered “culture shock” outside of the classroom. English was not necessarily an auxiliary language in the class because students came from all over the world and spoke various native languages. It became natural to use only Chinese in the class.

It is quite different to teach Chinese as a “foreign language” in the United States. I was defeated and lost much of my confidence my first year of teaching in the United States. First of all, the class size was about 2 to 3 times larger than the class size in Taiwan. With limited time allocation for each student, teaching efficiency became more important in order to cover all of the assigned learning materials. Secondly, the students in the United States seemed to be not as motivated as the students in Taiwan because, in most cases, Chinese as an L2 is just one of their required courses. I had to adjust my teaching techniques and strategies in order to accommodate to this new teaching environment. It didn’t take me too long to get adjusted with respect to these two differences.

My real challenge lies in my insufficient English ability. Some people may say: “You are teaching Chinese after all, English is not necessarily needed.” Although it’s true that English may not be needed in the classroom, it is a required survival skill. Once I stepped out of my

classroom, I needed to use English when helping my students during office hours, when communicating with the department staff, when socializing with my colleagues or friends, even when dealing with my personal life every day. I am living in an English-speaking country after all. I felt that I would be more confident if I were better at English even if I did not need to use it in the classroom.

Being a native Chinese speaker, I have an advantage in teaching Chinese in the U.S. I have a full grasp of all the aspects of Chinese language and culture. I understand and use Chinese idioms, grammar, syntax, pragmatics, tone and intonation properly. I am a source or even the representative of Chinese language and culture in my Chinese class. However, I am living in the United States. How can I offer or convey the linguistic or cultural information to my students when their Chinese language proficiency is still very insufficient? Even though using the L1 in an L2 classroom is still controversial and debatable in L2 teaching in the United States, sometimes I still feel that using English helps to explain grammar, tasks or cultural information in my beginning class. In my intermediate or advanced Chinese class, there are also times that I need to use English to correct my students' translations of ambiguous or incorrect words.

Fortunately, creating an immersion Chinese learning environment in a U.S. classroom seems to be the mainstream of the Chinese teaching profession. Many Chinese teachers believe that speaking only Chinese in the class is a matter of course because it is a Chinese class after all. In addition, after a couple decades of effort, the Chinese pedagogy profession has developed a very efficient way of training and drilling which can help students gain beneficial learning outcomes within a short period of time. Therefore, I can still teach my students efficiently and effectively without using too much English in my class. This kind of teaching method puts a lot of emphasis on drills which might be too mechanical and dull sometimes. Therefore, I need to play games or design interesting activities occasionally to make my class more lively and fun. This method seems to have worked for years, and my students like it too. However, drills are drills after all. Activities and games, though helpful, won't change their dry nature. Students change year by year. They don't have the chance to repeat a course. It was actually me, the teacher, who started to feel dull and shallow after years of teaching the same classes.

Compared to first year Chinese (beginning level), third year Chinese (advanced level) has more opportunities to explore more topics about culture, and the class discussions are in depth. Students are able to explore the Chinese culture, know about Chinese peoples' real life and learn why Chinese people do and think in their particular way. English is almost not needed in the classroom. However, it's getting more frequent for students to make semantic or translation mistakes in their homework. It's usually caused by over generalization of their mother tongue. It's my duty to know why my students make these kinds of mistakes and to correct them properly. If I, as an L2 teacher, can be more proficient in my students' language and culture, it will help me do this job more easily. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Since I am living in the United States, I need to use English and know what Americans do.

I start to improve my English and pay more attention to what happens in America. Besides my busy teaching work, I study English by myself continuously. I read English grammar books, online news and the books I find interesting. I occasionally listen to radio and watch TV programs or movies. I buy some college courses on-line to explore and open myself up to different topics. When my schedule allows, I audit the courses that our school offers. I found auditing class is an especially good way to understand and observe how an American teacher conducts a class. It is really a good opportunity to reflect on my own

teaching by observing other American teacher's teaching. Sitting in the audience as a student provides me an alternative perspective to see what I would expect from the teacher. The observations help me to see, through my students' eyes, how they feel in my class. This experience will further stimulate me to improve my teaching in the future.

I have a friend who also teaches Chinese in the United States and who has a very effective way to reduce her weaknesses and strengthen her advantages as a native Chinese teacher. She has a curious nature and is interested in all kinds of knowledge. She has become like an information collect or from both Chinese and American society. She reads newspapers; watches local TV programs, movies and online videos, etc. She will look up the information when she hears any new terms or things her students say that she doesn't know. All of the information collected has become part of her teaching, and it stimulates her students' learning. For example, she used to take a popular American cartoon figure that almost every American kid knows as an example to explain and practice Chinese grammar patterns. The activity successfully impressed her students. She has rich information in many areas that she is able to share with her students. The students are surprised at how much their Chinese teacher knows about their local culture and that has certainly shortened the distance between them. In some ways, she is not just playing an authoritative role of Chinese linguistic and cultural information provider but she is also part of their community and local culture. She has demonstrated a very successful model of being trans-lingual and trans-cultural. Definitely, this will be a direction that I will be heading for.

I was modeling a monolingual native speaker when I was teaching Chinese in Taiwan. My job was to help my students to understand my language and culture and to be able to use them properly when living in Taiwan. My students and I were like two individual monolingual characters standing on opposite sides. My goal was to pull my students from their side to move closer to my side. However, the ideal setting for teaching Chinese as an L2 in Taiwan does not seem to work in the United States, where the living environment and students' learning motivation are quite different. It seems to be unrealistic to force my students toward my side completely. The students are living in the English-speaking environment. It is hard to find a place to speak Chinese other than in their Chinese classroom. Even if we create a monolingual atmosphere in the classroom, their learning will be interrupted and fragmented when they are outside the classroom. They need to switch language codes back and forth, which has increased the difficulties of learning Chinese. Using the same L2 teaching methods that I used in Taiwan will not get the same results in the U.S. teaching environment. What is probably needed is that the teacher also plays a multilingual or bilingual role. By doing so, I feel that I can make my teaching more attractive and digestible to them. What I did not realize before is that I have already been demonstrating to the students a multilingual and multicultural model every day without knowing it. My students can see and sense my presence as a Chinese who lives in the United States, breathes in Chinese, thinks and acts mainly in Chinese with some American impact. It is like parents influencing their children by demonstration and without words.

It is almost a consensus that the best way to learn a foreign language and gain a better understanding about the culture is to live in that country at least one year. Everybody agrees that studying or travelling abroad can be an eye-opener and might have a deep impact in your future life. Being in this globalized era, we may not have the chance to study abroad, but we receive information about other cultures every day, mainly through the public media. On one hand, the mass information we receive can help us to know about other cultures. On the other hand, it is also possible that we can develop a stereotype of a particular culture

without a chance to personally experience it. The best way to eliminate the stereotype of misunderstanding is to learn the other language and experience the other culture directly and deeply. I am so fortunate to be able to live in a multilingual and multicultural environment in the United States. Through my exploration, I was given another chance to see my language teaching from another perspective, instead of putting all the emphasis only on the linguistic elements in the class. How to balance the offering of linguistic elements and cultural information in my class is a new challenge for me. I am still not sure how to do it skillfully, but it has offered me a clear direction to explore.