

Creativity-Based Language Teaching

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In my Chinese language classes here at Truman, I have been experimenting with my *creativity-based language teaching* (CBLT) method to promote the creative use of Chinese as the goal of learning. This method is founded on the principles of learning sciences. It situates vocabulary and grammar learning in interactive, communicative, and real-life activities, enabling learning and use to be concurrent and contextualized. Learning Chinese in this way leads to integrated and dynamic knowledge of the language, which is easy to apply to new contexts.

Traditional second-language (L2) classes typically start from a vocabulary list and a set of grammar points, and then proceed to the text or dialogue. Words and expressions are usually presented in decontextualized vocabulary lists. Grammar items are taught in a similarly decontextualized manner, separate from real communicative contexts. Students are introduced to speech or conversational activities only after they have learned the vocabulary and grammar. The assumption is that knowledge is built in a layer-by-layer manner. Students start from the bottom layer. After they finish learning the knowledge at the bottom layer, they are ready to move up to the next layer. This linear approach to foreign language learning leads to the accumulation of knowledge in disconnected chunks. Knowledge thus acquired is not only forgotten very easily but is also difficult to apply in new unpredictable real-life situations.

In contrast, CBLT situates L2 learning in a rich, associated web of meaningful communicative contexts. Students start from real communication needs. They learn and use the language at the same time and in real-life settings. There is no separate vocabulary and grammar teaching. Students begin to engage in communicative activities right from the start. They learn vocabulary and grammar only when needed, and vocabulary and grammar learning is embedded in communicative activities. Learners can ask the teacher to support them whenever necessary. In other words, vocabulary and grammar learning in the CBLT approach always occurs in real contexts and is simultaneous with the communication process. For example, when learning a lesson on online shopping in Chinese, students first observe and model me in shopping for different things on Chinese online shopping sites. Then, they start their own online shopping experience with my assistance. In this process, they learn Chinese by doing things in Chinese in real Chinese contexts (e.g., consulting me, searching for things to buy, comparing prices, and making decisions). They have my scaffolding, and they can interact with me as well as their peers. After shopping, students need to use Chinese to tell the class about their online shopping experience. In so doing, they must use the target language in articulation, externalization, and reflection.

Teaching Innovation Essay:

This method proves to be effective and rewarding. As students from my Chinese classes remarked, “I thoroughly enjoyed the creativity-based activities.” “This has been my favorite class, even since freshman year. I plan to continue learning Chinese for as long as I can.” “[Professor Wen] cares about his students and always wants to find the most effective teaching methods.”

To learn more about this teaching method, please contact me for my article:

Wen, Z. (2020). Creativity-based language teaching for L2 teachers in China. *China-US Journal of Humanities*, 5, 55–69.