When a "modern" Chinese meets "traditional" American classes*

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Abstract: While China has certainly taken a great stride in English teaching and learning since its opening up policy about 30 years ago, there's no denying the fact that a lot of concomitant problems occur during its development. This paper explores into two of the hot issues nowadays and presents the author's own experiences in two strikingly different classrooms in China and the United States, and hence some reflections on how to be rational in utilizing multi-media aids as well as research on basic theories.

Key words: multi-media teaching aids; basic theory; utilitarian approach

Thirty years' involvement in English learning and teaching, I have witnessed the development of English teaching in China since 1979. While there certainly is dramatic progress in lots of things, and it's no doubt that some problems still existed nowadays. After a year's study in the Department of Linguistics at UC Berkeley as a visiting scholar, I'm now back to Chinese platform desk and can't help examining our own classes with fresh eyes. Comparing the classrooms of Chinese and Berkeley, I have the impression that, while we mostly take it for granted that American classes are modern by all means, they actually keep up the traditional but essential means of teaching. On the other hand, we're going even further ahead in terms of modern technology, especially computer-assisted language teaching. I wonder whether we're dropping some essential and indispensable traditions. Two things are strikingly impressive.

1. Towards multi-media teaching aids

On Berkeley campus, as long as you are in a library or in any public office, you can have easy access to computer, and with an assigned ID, you can choose to serf or stroll on the net freely. For me, the most fantastic thing is that I can download as many e-resources as I wish for free. This accessibility obviously provides the faculty and students great convenience for research work.

On the other hand, when you walk into Dwinelle Hall or Wheeler Hall, you will find a lot of rooms plainly furnished, some with a round table and some chairs. Others only with chairs attached with a small board on the right-hand side for note-taking, randomly scattering around the room. These are seminar rooms. The moment I walk into such a room, I feel at ease. With all people sitting around the table, or, in a chair without a desk to screen you from others in the room, or even on the bare floor if you come in a bit late—such a setting will easily set you free from any restraint. You feel free to express your opinion, argue against others and come to the chalkboard to clarify your points anytime if there need be. Such face-to-face dialogues on an equal footing with the professors inspire ideas for all.

Back to the classrooms in Chinese campus, every classroom in the university is well equipped with modern multi-media facilities, and the students sit squarely in the orderly lined desks and chairs. Standing or sitting on a platform desk equipped with all kinds of multi-media stuff, I feel segregated from my students. With various ready-made e-version teaching plans, a teacher is always an operator. Lack of interaction in classrooms should at least in part be owed to the electronic fence setting the teacher and the students apart.

In some eyes, I may be calling for a revival of the outdated means of teaching. But what I aspire to is blurring the traditional clear-cut roles of the professors and the students, so as to stir up the sleeping originality in all minds and bring the fresh ideas into full play.

2. Opposite attitudes towards basic theory

In Berkeley, both professors and students are devoted to the pursuit of basic theory. While they present to the world the most productive aspects of their work, most of their daily research lies in their assiduous pursuit of breakthroughs in the basic theory.

At a graduate seminar course of semantics given by George Lakoff (a famous person in cognitive linguistics), there is a keynote speaker (generally the graduates, sometimes visiting professors) to bring up a topic on which he/she has done some previous research for each class. This time, it's turn to Ellen. Ellen is a doctoral candidate working on her doctoral dissertation on frame.

Following up George's brief introduction of the concept of frame, Ellen takes over the class with a simple sentence "Jack walked into the room" on the chalkboard. More than 10 graduates or scholars in the room begin to racking their brains for all kinds of possible framing of the sentence and the like. Heated discussions, violent debates, exaggerating gestures, trying to explain "a hamburger walked into the room", etc. No one ever feels dull. No one ever doubts the significance of such a discussion. It moves on and on until 7 p.m. at the end of the class, two or three of them still in the uplifted mood of arguing about "Jack walked into the wall" and stuff.

Back to the graduate course of semantics I'm giving here in China, when I'm deep in some abstract theory and try to get the students involved, such question as, "what's the use of it" will often come out right before me. Mostly, I can show them how certain theory can be practical in one way or another, but sometimes I'm left dumb on the spot. Yet in China, this utilitarian approach is by no means exceptional. This small question, which has almost become a catch phrase on our university campus, actually reflects the ideology of a whole generation, who claim themselves another "lost generation", lost in information explosion and lost in impetuousness. If such a question were to be asked in Berkeley, most of the classes there would be deserted. But considering the atmosphere at the brainstorming period, I can literally feel the inspiration sparkling among the crowd here and there, at times generating a roar of laughter and at most times thought-provoking.

The effect of such a class is obvious. In every book written by George Lakoff, he acknowledges at least some part of it to be inspired by students in class. According to Yao Yao, a group member of the FrameNet[1], in defining the possible frames of the lexical units collected in the dictionary, brainstorming among the faculty and students has played a significant role.

In another seminar chaired by Russel, another doctoral candidate, he starts with two sentences:

(1) Did I tell you writing a dissertation is easy?

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[1] An online dictionary is compiled by a group of Berkeley linguists and students led by Charles Fillmore. See http: //www.icsi. berkeley.edu/~framenet/ for detail.

(2) What has Sam ever done for John?

We immediately realize that he's going to talk about rhetoric questions. When Russel starts out with a distinction among different kinds of rhetorical questions, George suggests categorizing them into polarity (yes-no) questions and wh-questions. Then the brainstorming begins. Everyone contributes something original, not only about English, but also Chinese, Spanish, German and etc. The discussion on the polarity question that "Is everyone/anyone familiar with metaphor?" is especially fruitful when we come to analyze the effect of rhetorical questions by finding out the degree of questioner's assumption, assumption expected and the most informative answer. Again the discussion goes on heatedly throughout the seminar, with speakers of different languages trying to the same paradigm on their own languages to prove or disprove the points. New questions and new findings keep coming up.

When George tries to make a conclusion at the end of the seminar, he doesn't seem to be convincing enough. But that's the very charm of such a class. If every theory is bound up with a fixed one, then there will be little room for development. It's the very openness that fascinates people and leaves unlimited space for further exploration.

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