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TE891- 730

Language Variation in  
Classrooms

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*Final Course Project: Critical  
Assessment of My Curriculum*

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This paper is a self-analysis of my curriculum-- I will be analyzing myself using the language theories I have studied for the last six weeks. This curriculum is about teaching Mandarin Chinese to children who are 4 to 6 years old, and have no foundation of the language. The class was held on Monday through Friday, and each class was 3 hours long. This paper will address the theories and strategies I have learned from the course, which forced me to think more critically, and apply these new thoughts to adjust my curriculum, in order to teach more effectively and socially equal.

### ***Part I: My Language Ideology***

How to educate people with various languages has become a hot issue discussed among scholars, policy makers, educators and members of civil society. Edward Finegan, a linguistics professor at the University of Southern California, delineates the difference between the descriptivists and the prescriptivists, started the dialogue by asking: what “correct” language should be, and whom should decide what is standard. I agree with him, that “languages naturally adapt to [different] situations of use and also reflect the social identities of their speakers (Online article: *What is Correct Language*, Edward Finegan).” Thus, “linguistic variation is inevitable and natural (Online article: *What is Correct Language*, Edward Finegan).” At the same time, while scholars, educators, and policy makers debate whether AAE and Chicano English should be a variation of English or their own languages, it showed that the

two main languages have been categorized, and also that languages can be grouped. Based on the prejudices people receive from speaking differently in *Language Prejudice and Language Ideology*, the author Lippi-Green states these stories “provide evidence of what many people would acknowledge without dispute: we rely on language traits to judge others (Lippi-Green, p.290).” Thus, “this is not a cultural phenomenon particular to our place and time, but a human behavior that is characteristic of all language communities. Language is – among other things – a flexible and constantly flexing tool for the emblematic marking of social allegiances (Lippi-Green, p.291)”. After all, both language and culture are fluid and not definable, and we live in a society with groups as well as individuals. Because “speakers choose among sociolinguistic variants available, and their choices cluster together in ways that are obvious and interpretable to other speakers in the community (Lippi-Green, p.291),” therefore, “this process is a functional part of the way we communicate (Lippe-Green, p.291).” Thus, teaching with respect to the language variations of the students is essential in my classroom. However, as an educator, it is essential to build upon the language students enter the classroom with; adding tools to their language tool box instead of immediately identify them as “wrong” or “incorrect.”

If the students in my class did not speak any Chinese, I understood that they spoke their native language English, first to express themselves and communicate. I did not encourage them to communicate in English, but I certainly understood it was part of their transition process from English to Chinese. In my opinion, there is no

“bad” or “good” English, and therefore, I did not care if they spoke Standard English or not when they asked me if they could go to the restroom, or to be able to get a drink water of water.

As my students were total beginner Chinese learners, I used English to teach Chinese. In the beginning, the percentage was 70% English and 30% Chinese, and after one month, the percentage changed to 60%/40%. Therefore, during my class instruction and assignments which demonstrated the curriculum was more focused on using English to help students develop Chinese learning skills. While I was speaking English to guide students, I tried to speak Standard English, and while I was teaching Mandarin Chinese, I was speaking Standard Mandarin. My students came to the classroom with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thus they spoke variations of English, as well as Mandarin Chinese. For example, two of my students’ parents were Taiwan immigrants, so even though the two students did not know how to speak Mandarin, the language influence from their parents gave them a Taiwan accent when they spoke Mandarin. I continued to teach them the Standard Mandarin, and did not accuse them of being wrong for speaking it with an accent. Instead, I continued to focus on building their language skill, such as vocabularies, character writing, Pin Yin phonetics and sentence structure.

### ***Part II: A Critical look at 6 Classroom Activities***

To look more in depth at my curriculum, I will now look at six activities, two oral, two reading and two writing, from my unit, and analyze whether they match my

personal language philosophies as well as the strategies given by Echevarria and Graves.

### *Two Oral Language Activities*

**No.1 oral language activity:** learn and sing a Chinese greeting song Ni Hao Ge (from Lesson 1 Class Activity 9:50 – 10:20).

The lyric of the song is: ni hao. ni hao ma? wo hao. xie xie ni! ni hao. ni hao ma? wo hen hao. xie xie ni!

The objective of this activity was that “students would be able to use greeting words in Chinese by singing a song.” When we had this activity, because our students did not know any Chinese, I first translated the lyrics into English, then, I sang the song to my students, after that, I asked students to sing with me. After I read the strategies that Echevarria and Graves suggested, I realized that I basically used two strategies. The first one was offering additional language support, which was the translation part. Second, I used modeling to teach the song. However, the two strategies I used could have been used more in depth, and I could have used more strategies.

The first additional strategy I would use is using Multimedia (Echevarria and Graves, p.57). I would play a video that demonstrates how people greet each other in different regions and countries, including basic greeting words and greeting customs. Even though without translating and explaining, students would later have a much better understanding of the Chinese greeting song, because it is related to the context

and content they have just watched. Second, to deepen the strategy of Modeling (Echevarria & Graves, p.55), besides just singing the song, I would also stress the learning subject of Chinese greeting to the students by using facial and body language. Third, I would offer additional language support to the students who still have difficulty understanding this song, such as translation, repetition, slowly speaking, making a recording for them to take home, etc. Last but not least, I would also use the Peer Learning strategy; students would follow the teacher's instruction and interact with each other.

**No.2 oral language activity:** 演双簧 (from Lesson 3, Game Time 9:50 – 10:20).

The content of the activity is three sentences:

1. wo you da yan jing (I have big eyes);
2. ni you xiao bi zi (you have small nose).
3. wo mei you da zui ba (I do not have big mouth).

The objective of this activity was that “students would be able to listen and speak the three sentences by working with their team member to say and act.”

This game is from a traditional Chinese Art. The first person stands in front of the second person, and pretends to speak while the other does the body movements. The second person hides behind the first person and gives the real voice. The two people need to cooperate well in order to “speak” and make the body movement at the same time.

This art performance was well designed; however, the game that is based on this

art form did not go very well due to a lack on classroom structure. After I read Echevarria and Graves, I realized that these strategies would be very helpful for this activity.

First, the strategy of Academic Engaged Time (Echevarria & Graves, p.63), Echevarria and Graves stated that “there is a high correlation between students’ achievements and the amount of time students are actively engaged in learning tasks (Echevarria & Graves, p.63).” One of the reasons that the game did not go well was because we ran out of time when we tried to do the performance. So this strategy teaches me to use time valuably, such as starting class on time, reducing the calm down time, having interns pass out the worksheets, etc. The second strategy I would adapt in my classroom is Hands-on Manipulative strategy. In this activity, I would use Mr. Potato Head to teach the facial feature vocabulary, students would have their own Mr. Potato Head and pull the part off when I said the word in Chinese. The third strategy would be Modeling. In the class, I only modeled once by myself, and many students did not understand what it was about, so they were very confused when I asked them to perform. However, after I learned this Modeling strategy, I would have my intern and I model together before we introduce this activity. I would also choose a student to model with me to show the rest of the class what it is about and how fun it would be.

### *Two Reading Activities*

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**No.1 Reading Activity:** Litter Tadpoles Look For Their Mother (from Lesson 3 class

activity 10:30 – 11:00)

The book is a picture book with easy Pin Yin (Chinese phonetics) and English. It is about little tadpoles trying to find their mother. They asked the goldfish, turtle, chick, shrimp and frog whether they were their mother. By the process of looking for their mother, the little tadpoles learned the unique body features of their mother and themselves.

The objective of this activity was that “students would be able to recognize body features and be able to make sentences that combine basic colors, numbers and the body parts, such as ta you 1 ge bai se du pi (She has a white belly).”

Here is how I did this activity. First, I brought up a question before reading: what does a chick’s mother look like? While doing this step, I used some pictures I drew which were from the strategy Teacher-made Pictures (Echevarria & Graves, p.57). I put pictures up of different animals, such as cow, pig, sheep, and asked the students if they were a chick’s mother. Students laughed and said ‘NO’. Then, I sent the handout with mixed animal babies and animal mothers, and asked the students to do team work that would help each other connect the mother with the baby. As Echevarria and Graves state, *interaction between students* is one of the most important component of teaching effectively (Echevarria & Graves, p.61). I asked the students to pair up and let them interact with each other to modify their later reading. After finishing the handouts, I used the strategy of modeling, by reading the first page. Students were interested and could not wait to read the next page by themselves. While we were



reading together, I used the strategy of using consistent vocabulary and appropriate repetition (Echevarria & Graves, p.61), for example, I was consistently making sentences that combined colors, numbers and the body futures, which was the learning goal for the students. I also repeated the key words, such as hong se (red), tou (head), tui (leg), etc. Echevarria and Graves state that “Repetition, or natural redundancy, reinforces language (Echevarria & Graves, p.60).” I implemented this strategy into the reading activity, which helped students increase their comprehension, as well as mastering the key words and sentence structures.

Even though the reading activity was quite successful, it would be even better if I applied the technique of Overhead Projector that was recommended by Echevarria and Graves on the page of 57. I would use the overhead Projector to stress the key words and sentence structures, while we were reading to emphasis the learning objectives.

Strategies I would adapt to my classroom for this activity: Multimedia (Echevarria & Graves, p.57): the teacher plays video of the Chinese traditional art first. Without much explanation, students have the basic understanding of what this is. Modeling (Echevarria & Graves, p.55): the teacher needs to model first with the assistant in order to make students have a better understanding. Peer Assistant Learning (Elizabeth Heffernan, the principal at Riverview Elementary, West Side School of Excellent in St. Paul, Minnesota, 2007). Students practice with their peers. Reducing the linguistic load of teacher’s speech. Natural but slower speech

(Echevarria and Graves, p.61): from the whole process, teacher does not have to speak too much to explain, because the video and teacher's modeling have already helped students understand. To the students who still have questions and difficulties, teacher needs to remodel and use simple, clear language to explain. Offer additional language support: English translation and explanation. To the students who have questions of what this game about, what he/she should do and how to do it. Teacher will need to offer their native language English support.

**No.2 Reading Activity:** Two Tigers (from Lesson 5 class activity 10:30 – 11:00)

The book is a picture book with easy Pin Yin (Chinese phonetics) and English. It is about two tigers who were running fast and passed by many interesting and fun activities. They did not tell the readers why they ran so fast until the last page: they were going home to see their cousin, so they could play together!

The objective of this activity was that “students would be able to name three different activities: ti zu qiu (play football), zuo you xi (play games), zhuo mi cang (play hide and seek).”

Here is how I did this activity with the students. First, I used the strategy of modeling (Echevarria & Graves, p.55), which was reading the first page, then asked students to read after me. When we finished reading each page, we interacted with each other, and discussed what this page was about. Before we moved on to the next page, I wrote the main phrase, such as ti zu qiu (play football) on the white board to stress our learning goal and leaded students to read again. In the end, I tested each

student by pointing at the picture and asked how he/she would say it in Chinese. Overall, students were able to recognize the three main activities, however, they were not very engaged because this activity was mainly teacher centered, not student centered. After I read the theories and strategies that were recommended by Echevarria and Graves, and how Mrs. MacPerson implied these strategies to her reading activities with Alex and other students, I realized that this activity could be taught differently. First, I could use the modeling strategy more in depth. Since I had over 10 students, I would split them into two teams. I would lead one team, and my assistant would lead the other. Echevarria and Graves state that students with teacher's modeling "benefit from concrete, step-by-step procedures presented in a clear, explicit manner (Echevarria & Graves, p.55)." Team students up into smaller groups, students would benefit with more clear and specific instruction by the model. Second, I would ask students to interact differently. Instead of "discussing", actually answering questions to the teacher, I would pair them up with 2 to 3 people's group and encourage them to discuss together and respond to each other's questions. Elizabeth Heffernan, the Principal at Riverview Elementary, West Side School of Excellence in St Paul, Minnesota, claimed that peer-assisted learning "gives the teacher an opportunity to see how the students are comprehending whatever is being taught, and it also gives the students an opportunity to be involved in a way that might not be as intimidating as if they were called on by name, one at a time (Transcript of Practical Peer Learning, Elizabeth Heffernan, 2007)." I would also adapt the

commitment of Active Participation (Faltis & Coulter, p.117) to my classroom. To be more concrete, instead of writing the learning content on the whiteboard myself, I would ask the students to repeat after I read, and I would encourage students to be an active participant and to think and write by themselves. I would also encourage them to discuss with each other and help each other. Therefore, this reading activity would not be so boring after all.

### *Two Writing Activities*

**No.1 Writing Activity:** to write numbers from 1 to 10 in Chinese Characters (from Lesson 6 writing practice 11:10 – 11:35)

The Chinese characters from one to ten are quite easy in the beginning; however, from the numbers four to ten, students need to take more time and effort to master. The objective of this activity was that “students would be able to recognize and write Chinese characters from number one to ten.”

Here is how I did this activity. I first introduced the Arabic numerals from one to ten on the whiteboard, and asked students to read with me. Then, I spoke in English to explain what we were going to do next, which was introducing Chinese characters that represented the Arabic numerals. After the introduction, I demonstrated how to write the Chinese character “one,” then asked students to write on their small boards. We learned the ten characters by me, demonstrating first, then the students copied is afterwards. In the end, as the assessment, I asked each student to write the ten characters on the big white board in front of every one. The result was two students

wrote perfectly, five students wrote more than four characters correctly, and the other four students wrote less than four characters. I was frustrated because I thought all the students should be able to write the ten characters after the teacher's demonstration and their own practicing.

After I read Echevarria and Graves' effective teaching theories, I self-reflected what I lacked during this writing activity. First of all, students were not actually engaged in learning because they just did what I asked. I again fell to a teacher-centered classroom. To change this teacher-centered to students-centered, I would adapt the Active Interaction and Structural Peer Learning to this activity. For example, rather than telling students to write after me, I would ask them whether they understood, and if there were any questions. I would also encourage them to learn from each other by pairing them up to smaller groups. It is essential to encourage and motivate them so they want to learn instead of telling and forcing them to do what they felt they had to. Meanwhile, from the concern and fear of what was demonstrated by Alex in Chapter 4: *Learning English in an English Class*, I reflected the fear and frustration my students received when they "failed" the assessment. Instead of asking each student to stand up and go to the big whiteboard to take the test, I would take the strategy of Peer Learning (Transcript of Practical Peer Learning, Elizabeth Heffernan, 2007), which encourages students to practice with each other in order to reinforce their writing skills. While they practice together, the teacher would walk around and help the students with learning difficulties.

**No.2 Writing Activity: to write a 3 sentences with “love” in Chinese** (from Lesson 11 writing practice 11:10 – 11:35)

The objective of this activity was that “students would be able to write basic sentences that start with love, such as 爱爸爸 (love father)。爱妈妈 (love mother)。”

Here is how I did this activity. I first took the strategy of using Multimedia (Echevarria & Graves, p.57) to show students the cartoon character 爱, which was not formed with strokes, but many different shapes, such as roof, heart and people. Students were engaged by the pictureized character and eager to learn. Then, I demonstrated students how to write this character. While I was showing them how to write, I spoke English as the additional support language to explain. I also used the strategy of Realia ((Echevarria & Graves, p.57), which was the pre-made special Chinese character writing practice sheet for the students, so the students had a form to follow. After we learned this character, I used the Peer Learning Strategy (Transcript of Practical Peer Learning, Elizabeth Heffernan, 2007) to pair students up, and encourage them to make their stories together. They discussed, argued, shared, and in the end came up with their own three sentences. Like what Mrs. MacPerson did with Alex and the other students, we had circle discussion time. We started from the left, each student had an opportunity to talk and discuss with their group members what he/she loves in Chinese. For the students who were not ready to speak in front of everyone, I respected the decision and encouraged them “maybe next time?” The circle discussion, was like what Alex experienced (*Learning English in an English*

*Class*, p.69), was engaging and exciting. In the end, students finished the objectives and successfully passed the assessment.

In conclusion, my self-analysis of the curriculum that is based on the language theories, strategies and techniques I have learned, powered me to think more practically and apply these new thoughts to adjust my curriculum and activities. To achieve the goal of teaching effectively and socially equal, Echevarria and Graves, as well as the USED (US Department of Education) website demonstrate excellent examples of how to apply the theories and strategies for the educators to use in their own classroom. I agree with Echevarria and Graves that “teaching as an art rather than an applied science (Echevarria & Graves, p.61).” The theories, strategies and techniques could be different components of this piece of art of teaching and learning. For educators, how to use the components and in what way, even more, to create our own strategies and techniques by influencing of the theories to apply them to the teaching art is essential for our education. Meanwhile, I self-reflected what I would have done differently in my classroom if I had learned the theories and strategies prior to making the teaching plan and activity plans. “Effective classroom management has been shown to promote positive achievement in students (Englert, 1984; Brophy & Everson, 1976),” and this classroom management does not merely require teachers to spend time and effort on the curriculum and activity plans, more importantly, it involves professional training and support. If the teachers have them all, their classroom’s management would be significantly different.

*Reference*

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