
Observation, Interview and Analysis
of Teacher Zhang

Observation, Interview and Analysis of Teacher Zhang

Xin Wang

Observation, Interview and Analysis of Teacher Zhang

The assignment of observing, interviewing and analyzing a teacher has been fascinating for me because I have been reading Weimer and McKeachie's effective teaching theories and practices for the last a few weeks and was eager to see an educator put some of these theories into action. The teacher who I observed was Teacher Zhang, who sincerely cared about his students and was respected by many. He also had a reputation of being an effective teacher by providing customized teaching strategies that fit his students' varying needs. I admired him and wanted to observe his class long before I had this assignment. So I was very happy that I finally had a chance to do so. I observed one of his adult language classes and interviewed him afterwards. The class was held on Monday evening from 6:30 to 8:00 in a language institution classroom, and there were seventeen adult students aged from mid-20's to early 50's. One of the students was a new transfer student from another level class. My observation and interview with Teacher Zhang inspired me in many ways because he naturally and skillfully incorporated many of the principles and theories that I have been reading and learning into his classroom teaching. There are a few key points that I would like to mention in my analysis that Teacher Zhang inspired me most significantly, and they are directly related to the Research-Based Principles for Improving Teaching and Learning and Weimer, McKeachie's effective teaching theories and practices that I have studied for the last a few weeks.

First, Teacher Zhang skillfully applied the effective teaching theory of making connections between the already known with the fresh unknown information. According to the Research-Based Principles for Improving Teaching and Learning Principle III "Learners can

Observation, Interview and Analysis of Teacher Zhang

remember more when they make meaningful connections between what they already know and what they are learning”, Teacher Zhang applied this principle successfully throughout his entire lesson. For example, in the beginning of the class, when he reviewed the homework and the knowledge that was learned in the previous class, Teacher Zhang connected the previous knowledge with the new content, making sure that the students understood why they learned what they did in the previous class and how it would relate to what they would be learning next. To be detailed, the students learned how to use measure words properly in a given context in their previous lesson, and the new lesson which was about how to order food in a Chinese restaurant by speaking proper Chinese was rooted on using the accurate measure words. As a result, the students did not merely understand why they learned the measure words in the first place, more importantly, they also made a rational connection to their new learning experience. Thus, the students were engaged and eager to learn from the class with Teacher Zhang.

Another example was that not only did he build on the classroom knowledge, but Teacher Zhang also incorporated some of their life experiences into the lessons by using metaphors in order to guide the students to be active learners. One way that he did this was by connecting their life experience of going to restaurants and ordering food, and then explaining to the students that they would be expected to follow the same restaurant manner to order food in a Chinese restaurant, which was to become their homework. The only difference between what the students had been doing and the new learning task was that they would need to order food in a different linguistic environment. As Meimer states that a currently prominent educational theory about the relationship between learners and content: “Constructivist approaches emphasize

Observation, Interview and Analysis of Teacher Zhang

learners' actively constructing their own knowledge rather than passively receiving information transmitted to them from teachers and textbooks (Meimer, p 11)." I am not sure whether Teacher Zhang had read Meimer's active learning theories, but he did excellent work on guiding the students to be active and constructive learners.

Moreover, Teacher Zhang encouraged the students to be more active in their learning by providing immediate feedback to them. In *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*, Svinicki and McKeachie state that "we haven't taught well if students haven't learned; so the ultimate test of our teaching is evidence of learning (Svinicki & McKeachie, p 336)." To ensure the students understanding and mastering their learning objectives, Teacher Zhang constantly checked in with the students in order to help them understand what he was explaining. Additionally, Teacher Zhang also made corrections and suggestions for improvement of pronunciation and sentence structures and he made sure to individually supervise each peer learning team and give them constructive feedback as they were working in groups. Even though Chinese language was a completely different and mostly difficult language for the students to learn, Teacher Zhang applied many effective strategies, in this case, providing constructive feedback for overcoming the challenges that the students were facing. He also paid equal attention to the students' needs as a whole and as individuals.

In my interview with Teacher Zhang, I discovered the reason that Teacher Zhang deftly and naturally led the students to be active learners was rooted in his teaching philosophy. When I asked him about his philosophy on how learning occurs, he said that "everything is built from the base upwards." Meaning that, like a building, the second floor could not be built without the

Observation, Interview and Analysis of Teacher Zhang

first floor. Additionally, there needs to be a way to connect those floors (or that information), and that was where the stairs came in to connecting the knowledge. Teacher Zhang's teaching philosophy was essentially to guide the students to 'find the stairs' by giving them the motivation and skills to 'climb them', so that the students did not feel pushed and overwhelmed.

As a student myself, Teacher Zhang's teaching philosophy is especially valuable to me. By exploring and discovering the information and making connections between the "old" and "new", I have become more familiar thus more comfortable with unknown content and context. It can also help me to be more confident and thus more motivated and encouraged to continue learning because it helps me to acknowledge that I had successful previous learning experience that is built right under the new learning achievement. In other words, when students feel that they are in control of their own learning, rather than being pushed and lessoned, the students are more likely to be effectively learning (Weimer, P 1).

After all, what characterized Teacher Zhang's teaching style, in my opinion, was that he applied the Research-Based Principles for Improving Teaching and Learning successfully to guide the students to be more active learners. As what he believed that a teacher's fundamental responsibility was to lead the students to find 'the stairs', the connection between what they already know and the new information they will be learning, so that they are interested, motivated and encouraged on their own to learn. A great lesson I have learned from observing and interviewing Teacher Zhang was that I saw a successful application of "active learning occurs when students use mental and physical energies to make meaning (Dr. Direx)" in real teaching circumstances. Teacher Zhang did not merely demonstrate different strategies to me

Observation, Interview and Analysis of Teacher Zhang

that can be applied into effective teaching and learning. Much more importantly, his teaching philosophy is the root that demonstrates his self-discipline, dedication and diligence. He stressed that teaching is not merely about 'teaching'. In my understanding, teaching is about knowing the students, assessing their individuality and being able to teach them in a way that they will understand. A Chinese saying “教书育人” perfectly explains that while an educator is guiding the students to explore the connections between the already known and the unknown, he is also responsible for using human ethical standards and his own charm to demonstrate how valuable a real life experience can be, so the students are supported, tutored and guided to explore, discover and pursue their own identity and integrity in their life-long learning process.

Reference

1. Svinicki, M., McKeachie, W., & Others. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Thirteen Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2010.
2. Weimer, Maryellen. *Learning Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
3. Barbara Gross Davis, *Motivating Students from Tools for Teaching*, Jossey-Bass, 1999.
4. Montgomery, Susan, M & Groat, Linda, N., *Student Learning Styles and Their Implications for Teaching*. CRLT Occasional Papers No.10. The University of Michigan, 1998.