

A Language and Cultural Practicum Course in Nanjing: Maximizing the Students' Use of Chinese

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Introduction

This paper examines an experience-based language course operating in the field during an intensive language training program in Nanjing, China, during the summer of 1999. The objectives are to report on the design success of our “language and cultural practicum” course, and thereby address best practices and challenges of experience-based language learning. In addition to four hours of classroom instruction each morning, students participated in an afternoon practicum course in which they were required to go off campus and interact with the Chinese community at large and gather specific information for specific assignments. Assets of the practicum course were its flexibility of design, allowing for student self-design of exercises, efficiency in tracking the students' whereabouts and structuring of their time, and production of an overall synergy of language learning by consciously exercising spoken skills in the field, reinforced with written practice in a daily journal write-up, capped off by a daily presentation during the evening debriefing class.

General Program Description

During the summer of 1999 the author directed the second annual University System of Georgia “Summer Program in China,” sponsored by the Asian Council of the University System of Georgia and administered through the International Center at Kennesaw State University. The

group was comprised of seven university and two high school students whose objective was to study intensive Chinese language for six weeks in Nanjing, China. The students registered for two three-credit classes to be described in detail below. In order to give the students a relatively rounded view of China on the whole, in addition to language studies in Nanjing, the group toured cultural and historical sites extensively during the seven weekends of the trip. Geographically speaking, the students were introduced to a large swath of China, first flying into Beijing for three days of sight-seeing and cultural adjustment, and then taking an overnight train 12 hours to Nanjing for language study at the Johns Hopkins/Nanjing University Center for Chinese & American Studies (hereafter, the “Center” [a.k.a. Zhong Mei Zhongxin, in Chinese]). Weekends were spent touring the cities of Nanjing, Yangzhou, and Suzhou, where the students spent two days and two nights on a home stay with Suzhou University students. After five weeks of study based in Nanjing, the group took a train to Shanghai for two days of sightseeing before flying back to the States.

Parallel Courses: Classroom Instruction and the Language and Cultural Practicum Course

The students were required to register for two three-credit classes, the first of which was an intensive Chinese language class taught five days per week by the Chinese faculty of the Center, from 8 am to 12 noon each morning. The total time of classroom instruction was approximately 85 hours (given 10 minutes for breaks each hour). While the target size was a maximum of three students per class, pre-trip assessment found three different levels: five students at the intermediate-beginner level; three students at the low-intermediate level; and one student (incidentally of Chinese ancestry) at the low-superior level. These levels would generally correspond to second semester of first-year Chinese, second-year Chinese and fourth-year Chinese, respectively. To accommodate the superior student, an individual instructor was employed for two hours each morning, based on the idea that such intensive one-on-one instruction is at least equivalent to, if not better than, the four-hour classroom schedule of the three- and five-student classes. Maximum class size was stretched to five

students (although future budgeting will, we hope, accommodate breaking the class into two and three).

In addition to this schedule of classroom instruction, the author/director personally taught a three-credit “language and cultural practicum course” (hereafter referred to as the “practicum”), which had the express goal of keeping the students focused on the task of learning Chinese while they were outside the classroom. Participation in the practicum is viewed as crucial to maximizing the students’ use of the language environment in the relatively short, six-week duration of the program. As will be described below, the practicum was conceived as essentially a mechanism to force the students to interact on a daily basis with the Chinese community at large outside the Center. In other words, the practicum required the students to translate their classroom Chinese skills to real world Chinese by applying what they learned to functional uses.

Though it may sound paradoxical, the practicum met in a classroom twice a day. First, the students met briefly after lunch from approximately 1:00 to 1:45 on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, in order to be briefed on that day’s assignment. They then went off campus to conduct their practicums. Next, the students returned and wrote up their experiences as a journal entry to be turned in at the nightly, 7:30 to 8:30 pm debriefing session. Every Thursday, as a variation on a fourth-weekly practicum exercise, students attended a lecture on Chinese culture, history, or society given by the faculty at the Center, and were assigned to write a journal entry on that topic for that night’s debriefing class. Given the students’ level of comprehension, these lectures were delivered in varying mixes of Chinese and English.

During the nightly debriefing session, the students were asked to give 3-5 minute presentations of that day’s experiences from the podium, in Chinese, and respond to questions from the teacher and classmates, also, of course, in Chinese. Moreover, the classmates were quizzed on pertinent details of the presentation on the spot. These presentations often ran long since the day’s experiences usually generated considerable interest among the students.

The primary teaching strategy employed during the debriefing session was to provide the students with immediate feedback on their presentations in terms of style, content, and language. Besides teaching them proper speaking posture and manner of addressing their audience,

the teacher corrected pronunciation and outlined grammar and syntax errors by making detailed notes on the chalkboard behind the presenter so that both the individual student and the entire class could benefit from the suggestions and corrections. The outlines allowed the classmates to see common errors among their peers and commonly led to self correction by those who had not yet presented that evening. These sessions had a kind of crystallization effect—making the students finally put all the aspects of the day’s practicum into perspective in the target language (as well as breaking through layers of inhibition and providing an additional forum for bonding between the students). Written journal entries were then corrected in painstaking detail. In addition to suggesting all manner of word choice, students were asked to practice incorrectly written characters by copying them over properly ten times. Occasionally students were asked to completely rewrite the assignment. The journal entries were returned to the students during the next day’s afternoon meeting so that corrections could be incorporated (at least theoretically) into that day’s assignment.

Details of the Practicum Assignments

The practicum assignments ranged from simple introductory tasks, such as exploring and drawing a map of campus, to more complex tasks like finding and pricing items at a supermarket, or sampling and comparing the variety of means of transportation in the city (bicycle, bus, taxi, pedicab and the motorized semi-enclosed version of the pedicab, called the “mazida”). Students were required to make a minimum of three contacts (in other words, have a minimum of three conversations) with native speakers in the course of the activity. The journal entry was to record at least one of these conversations. Accompanying their one page write-up of the practicum, students were also required to supply a list of 15 to 20 key words and phrases that they used during the practicum, and also a list of at least 3 unknown words or phrases they encountered (sometimes these included “slogans” they noticed written on buildings, such as “conserve our natural resources,” or “keep off the grass”).

Practicum assignments were quite varied. The students started out with very simple exercises and then went on to more complex ones as they became accustomed to the environment and became able to make their

way around the city on their own (it was typically by the end of the second week when they felt comfortable going out alone—initially they went out in pairs). Assignments included the following: make a map of campus; find postal rates for various items to various places; locate and price items in a department store noting items not available in the States; compare and contrast regional cuisines (flavor and price); visit and describe a historical site; compare modes of transportation; explore a library or bookstore; compare and contrast three levels of accommodations for parent's visits; interview locals on a variety of topics (economic development, pollution, tea, etc.); view and critique a Chinese movie. The practicum syllabus detailed specific information the students were required to include with each practicum item listed.

In the interest of continued development of the practicum course, the director would often go out and test a new idea for a practicum (tea and paintings were particular favorites). This facilitated working out some of the bugs in the assignment and refinement of specific information the students were to collect. New assignments were discovered and added to the list of potential practicums within a day or two. Moreover, students were encouraged to design their own practicum exercises, have them approved by the director, and implement them immediately. The most self-motivated students, four out of nine of them, went quickly to these "self-designed" practicums, often based on items they were interested in procuring. For example, one student wanted to have silk clothes made for herself, and so with the help of her Center instructor she found where to buy bolt silk and where to take it for tailoring. A number of students invested time and energy into researching the relative merits of Chinese paintings and teapots. Crucial to each of these exercises was the particularly acceptable, and in fact entirely expected, Chinese custom of haggling for the best prices on the items. Haggling turned out to be an excellent instructional tool, and perhaps the best motivational device imaginable for students at this level of language skill, since they were invested, quite literally, in the final outcome of the interaction. The students were not only invested in the final purchase price, but also invested in the research and comparison of items in terms of both tangible quality and intangible cultural significance. Given the limited availability of funds and physical space for transporting items back to the States, the students found it necessary to be especially judicious in all aspects of their transactions.

Sometimes the students' self-designed practicums were culturally oriented, like an epic, though ultimately unsuccessful search for a statue of Chairman Mao Zedong somewhere in the city of Nanjing, or walking across the Great Bridge over the mile-wide Yangzi River, the third longest river in the world, on which Nanjing is situated. One student presented his Yangzi River expedition so successfully that this author immediately went out the next day to explore it with the result of adding it to the practicum list.

Such a proactive effort to get the students out of the classroom and into a unique, and sometimes intimidating, environment to employ the language that they were learning in class (as well as that which they had learned prior to going to China), had the additional effect of forcing the students to cope with their varying degrees of culture shock and homesickness, which can immobilize some. The practicum course also assisted in structuring their study/activity time and helped to keep them on track—that is to say, keep them on task in their effort to advance their language skills. Thus, with specific tasks to perform and the flexibility to design their own assignments, the practicum served as a kind of “designed” free time away from their Center teachers and the director. Although the students' whereabouts were known most of the time, the mere fact that they were out of the classroom, off campus, and exploring the community, seemed to give them a sense of freedom from structure, or at least helped to maintain the illusion that they had the time and freedom to explore the China they were busily constructing in their consciousnesses.

Managing the Students' Time

Having only six weeks to raise the students' speaking, listening, reading and writing levels is a relatively short amount of time. The two courses put quite a demand on the students' time since they received significant pressure from their classroom teachers to study a large number of hours in addition to class time just to keep up with their new vocabulary. In a post-program questionnaire, the most advanced student, the one with strong spoken skills, reported spending anywhere from one to three hours daily doing the practicum exercise. The students uniformly said the practicum was the most significant part of the learning exercise (although

the home stay was the overall best single experience). Other students reported having spent anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours in the off-campus aspect of their practicums. The student who spent thirty minutes reported that in his case he felt his written Chinese was so bad he would often spend hours trying to write up the journal entry, extending sometimes into the middle of the night, long after the debriefing session. Another student felt that writing also took up too much time, requiring long nights with the dictionary. However, the same students who reported this complaint, in retrospect said the laborious exercises were the best thing for improving their Chinese—a kind of love-hate relationship.

There is an art to maintaining pressure in this kind of language “boot camp,” as one student lovingly referred to it. The director had to keep in close contact with the Chinese teachers in order to keep abreast of their schedule of tests and assignments so that he could determine the extent to which pressure could be put on the students during the practicum. It was necessary to know just about everything that was going on in both the students’ classes and their lives, but at the same time not be a constant overbearing presence in the classroom or dormitory hall. It was important to balance the need to observe the students in operation and keep them busy with interesting assignments, with their need for space and time away from the director, the central authority figure. At the same time, the director felt an obligation to be available most days and evenings for consultation, and wanted to take maximum advantage of the “learning moments” outside of the classroom. Such learning moments often occurred while walking by the students as they were chatting in the hallway, even late at night, and fielding questions on Chinese language and culture. In fact, it became somewhat of an inside joke that the students would switch the subject of their conversation to “their Chinese studies” so that they could impress the director with the “earnestness” of their endeavor. The hallway sessions amounted, in essence, to a continuous tutorial as problems with pronunciation, remembering and writing characters, and so on, were constantly addressed.

As the course progressed, different ways were found to design a high degree of flexibility into the choice of practicum assignments to both meet the individual student’s interests and language level, and also to compensate for the stress that arose from the time demand on the students. When the students found themselves faced with unit tests and

final exams in their classes, they were allowed to reschedule some of their practicum assignments. For example, the students had some interesting experiences on the weekend trips, especially during their home stays in Suzhou, which they wanted to write up for their practicum journal, and though technically not part of the assignment, this was substituted for a practicum on the day before a test.

Conclusion

The language and cultural practicum course was a relatively formalized way of extending student learning beyond the classroom to explore the local culture and society and simultaneously enhance language skills. While no formal assessment of the students' language learning was done, my strong impression is that the practicum contributed substantially to both the students' aggregate experience of China, and, specifically, to the development of their language skills. In the future, it is advisable to conduct a formal pre- and post-test of students' language abilities, as well as surveys that measure student learning outcomes. As the program builds on this first-year success, we plan to implement such important assessment instruments.