Active Learning Classroom Research Profile

Chinese 102A: First-Year Chinese for Non-Heritage Learners

Instructor: Nyan-Ping Bi, Senior Lecturer

- 49 students enrolled, mix of Freshman through Graduate students
- Class met twice a week for 50 minutes in ALC 136
- Students also met in quiz sections MWF for 50 minutes

Active Learning in First-Year Chinese

Nyan-Ping Bi runs her 50-minute class with energetic efficiency. Well before class begins, students are already seated in their table groups, practicing the day’s vocabulary. A slide on the display provides their conversation prompt; today it’s the weather. Bi greets the class promptly at 9:30 and a chorus of students respond. She quickly begins with questions on the day’s topic, calling on individual students or an entire table to answer. Whether hesitant or confident, Chinese fills the room; English is rarely spoken in class. Bi coaches students in their responses, then leads a recitation for the whole class.

The first group activity quickly follows: Bi displays a slide of a woman and her young son and encourages students to “devise your own formula for making comparisons in Chinese.” She provides examples of what such a “formula” might look like, then leaves the podium to circulate among tables. One student at each table is the designated “recorder” for each team, typing answers on a laptop or tablet connected to the display. Bi spends seconds at each table, prompting students to reflect--“When you switch A and B, what else has to change?” Bi instructs all students to get up and look at other groups’ responses. She chides them when they’re slow to rise, “Did you eat breakfast today?” A minute later, she calls them together again as a class. “Did you all see Table 4’s answers?” she asks as she projects Table 4’s responses to all monitors. After a brief discussion of the exemplary work, Bi leads a round of applause for Table 4.

In the activities that follow (none of them more than 5 minutes in length) students apply their “formula” to compare the weather between Seattle and New York, discuss how to indicate a change in the weather from clouds to rain, and how to tell someone that the temperature has increased from 45 to 55 degrees. In the first activity, students converse at their tables; in the next, they speak to one another in pairs, then find another pair across the room. In a third activity, they are back collaborating with their table groups, writing Chinese characters on the walls. Between each activity, Bi heads back to the podium to quickly round up the class, call on individual students or groups, and provide clarifications to all.
The pace of the class is fast; Bi is never still. She circulates among the students, asking questions, checking for understanding. She passes out markers to students during the writing activity, urging them to the board where they correct one another’s errors (“Wait, you wrote that wrong—” “Oh, I did. Ha! Thank you!”). As they finish the exercise, Bi encourages students to walk around the room and look at other tables’ work. At one table, a student returns grinning, thumbs up, “Good job, team!” When another group is able to explain the exercise and their answer in flawless Chinese, Bi compliments them, and the class applauds. Another slide follows in which the students have to figure out the meaning of specific Chinese characters in example sentences. Bi encourages students to help one another as they puzzle over the grammar. The final slide asks students to assess themselves on the day’s learning objectives. When class ends, students pack up their belongings, say goodbye to Bi and their classmates, and erase the boards as they go. The 50 minutes is up in no time.

**Pedagogical Goals and Challenges**

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<th>Teaching and learning goals:</th>
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<td>● Get students practicing the target language—listening, speaking, reading, writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Keep students focused and engaged</td>
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<td>● Maximize learning for all students, even those underprepared</td>
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<td>● Create a sense of community, with students helping one another to learn</td>
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<th>Pedagogical Challenges</th>
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<td>● Teaching a large introductory language class using active learning strategies</td>
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<td>● Utilizing time efficiently</td>
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<td>● Keeping class structure consistent (and conserving energy) for two sections taught back-to-back</td>
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In the quarter we observed her, Bi taught two sections of Chinese 102 back-to-back with each class composed of 40-50 students. Although the class size was much larger than the introductory language learning courses Bi had taught previously, Bi was determined to teach in ways that maximized student talk, rather than teacher. Months before she was scheduled to teach the introductory course series for the first time, Bi began investigating active learning strategies and requested to teach in Odegaard’s ALCs.

In order to get her students reading, writing, and speaking Chinese as much as possible in a 50-minute class, Bi knew she had to structure class time effectively and efficiently. The activities in Bi’s fast-paced class change frequently and are designed to get students working together and relying on one another to learn. Students were required to complete assignments outside of class time and come to class prepared. During class, students were often physically moving about the room to speak with other students, write on whiteboards, or review the work displayed on other groups’ monitors. Although Bi found that students were clearly not used to getting up from their seats during class (“Some students seem stuck to their chairs”), she is convinced that “when students are moving, they have a deeper experience of what they are learning.”
There were multiple ways in which Bi also encouraged students to take a role in their own learning and to assist one another. At the start of the quarter, students were asked to sign their name next to one of several roles that would make the groups run smoothly based on what they could contribute (e.g. “good at time management;” “good at writing Chinese characters;” “bring my laptop to class”). Students were frequently asked to rely on one another for finding an answer, to discover a language “rule” that would help guide their future learning, and to reflect on what they had learned from a particular exercise. Observing success with these tasks, Bi sometimes reinforced students’ inquiry with, “See? You don’t need me—You can figure this out for yourselves”—Not the usual comment one hears in an introductory language course. Bi also clearly identified learning objectives for each lesson and used end-of-class prompts to encourage self-assessment: “What are three things you learned well today and what is one thing you didn’t quite understand?”

In her frequent rounds during group activities, Bi made quick assessments of student learning, coaching and asking guiding questions as necessary. She acknowledged to students when what she was asking was difficult, but also didn’t hesitate to tell the class when she felt they hadn’t prepared. Some students clearly felt nervous about being called on in whole-class activities; given the fast pace, there was little time to slowly articulate an answer. But there was also a sense that students were “in this together,” doing the hard work of learning another language. If a student erred, Bi quickly called, “Can someone help [name of student]?” And if it took several volunteers before a student responded correctly, the final answer was often rewarded with applause. Bi also communicated that errors have value; we witnessed her use them to make a point about Chinese grammar or culture, and thank the erring student for the teaching opportunity. Another day she joked that the word a student had used was not a word any of them should repeat.

Despite her success in creating a positive environment, Bi reported that she still struggled with how to maximize learning for all students, including those less prepared or more hesitant to speak up. “With 50 minutes for class, and 50 students, there’s little time to wait for students to find the right answer and contribute.” She actively utilized students she knew were prepared to help others who were not, or who were struggling, and tried to incorporate a range of activities so that everyone would get something out of class. Bi expressed frustration with some students who she observed knew the material but did not reach out to help their classmates. She also said she “let go a bit” on her goal of using only the target language, since occasionally speaking English eased students’ anxiety and supported their interactions.

Bi tells her TAs, “In today’s educational atmosphere, it’s not all about how well you know your material, it’s also about how well you motivate your students to participate and contribute.” She noted that the ALCs inspired her to push herself further toward that goal, and to thinking “outside the box.” “As an instructor, you have to pay attention to how you pace your quarter, how much students can get out of a quarter, and you have to anticipate.” For Bi, teaching a student-centered class in a 50-minute period meant being extremely conscious of how she managed time and energy: “Group work takes time; using

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—Nyan-Ping Bi
technology takes time. You have to evaluate how much substance comes out of each activity...I’m more aware of what I do, every movement and every second, what I need to do next.”

Student Experience
Bi’s emphasis on participation was clearly felt by students, and they knew their contributions were valued. As one student commented, “She really encourages us, because if you don’t know [the answer], it means another person probably doesn’t know it and it can be corrected.” Students described a high level of interaction between students and instructor and among classmates, leading to both a “demanding” class environment as well as a high degree of accountability: “[It’s] really nice to share class materials with classmates. If I don’t prepare, it will not be nice…”

Students were also aware of how much they were learning in class, and that they were learning as a community. One student commented, “Class doesn’t seem like lecture, but seems like a process to learn with everyone at the same pace.” There was a strong sense among students that how they were learning was extremely effective: “In this class we’re actually applying and figuring out what’s in the book, you’re not just reading the book, as in, off of a summarizing slide.”

Many students cited features of the room as a component of their success. One student wrote, “I can't imagine having a 60 person language class in a regular classroom. The ALC works surprisingly well. We get lots of chances to practice and are able to have a reverse classroom (study at home, review/practice in class).”

Best Practices from First-Year Chinese
Bi achieved a successful active and collaborative learning environment through a variety of practices:

- Clearly communicating how she expected students to take a role in their own learning (e.g. active participation; completing homework in preparation for class; self-assessment)
- Designing activities that required student cooperation and interaction
- Carefully scaffolding substantive pair/small group activities that engaged students in practicing targeted material through a variety of means (reading, writing, speaking, evaluating)
- Conducting constant formative assessment; providing frequent coaching and guidance as needed
- Actively cultivating a “helping” classroom culture and encouraging participation from all students; valuing student participation over correct answers
- Maximizing time spent on task through short duration and quick pace of activities
- Calling each student by name.

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