

Paper Presentation

9. Experiential Learning: Chinese Language Study Abroad

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In language teaching, practical application is a crucial step that tests the usefulness of grammar rules, concepts, and idioms students have learned in the classroom. And since language is a product of and reflects a particular culture, immersion in that culture, even if brief, can also be highly beneficial.

According to David Kolb's (1984) learning model, the learning cycle contains four stages: concrete experience—observation and reflection—abstract conceptualization and generalization—active experimentation or testing the implication of the concepts. As we can see in this cycle, students in the fourth stage are actors while in the other three stages more passive receivers.

My paper discusses the great advantages of integrating experiential learning of Chinese abroad in our academic classroom. I will use York University's summer Chinese language program at Fudan University, Shanghai, as an example to illustrate the great potentials of active participation in Chinese life. I will discuss how our program shows that experiential learning on the scene bridges the gap between abstract grammar rules and active application, engaging students socially, culturally, and physically in the language environment.

The recognition and writing of Chinese characters is one of the major difficulties when learning Chinese. Mistakes such as missing one or more strokes, placing a stroke in a wrong position, or writing a hook stroke in a wrong direction, are very common among first and second year language students.

At Fudan University, we found how outside classroom activities effectively help students learn characters. Cultural excursions to Suzhou and Hangzhou, cities famous for their gardens and manufacture of silk, help students visualize ancient concepts of Chinese character creation. The concept that garden architecture should, like Chinese characters, observe harmony, symmetry, and balance, absorbed many of our students. At a silk exhibition and fashion show, our students were introduced to both ancient and modern machines that make silk products. There, they perceived how the character signifying silk

and characters containing the silk component evolved.

The art of Chinese calligraphy presented at the Lanting Pavilion in Shaoxing dramatically inspired our students to master more characters and to learn some calligraphy themselves. Later, in the classroom at Fudan University, a painter's demonstration of calligraphy further enhanced their knowledge of Chinese characters. Visits to Buddhist temples were one of the highlights of our study in China. By listening to the monks' rhythmical chants and talking to them, our students further came to understand the root of reserve, inwardness, and endurance in the Chinese character.

Although cultural excursions do not teach students directly how to remember Chinese characters, they largely help them explore the social components of the Chinese language, thus deepening their understanding of the formation of characters. Unlike mechanical memorizing in the classroom, students come to understand the basic concepts of the language by visualizing them in a cultural context. Our students found that they could remember characters much better after these cultural excursions than they did by copying them in the classroom.