

Chapter 2

Guidance from Chinese Culture: Linking Learning with Life

After some time of experiment, using contextualized learning to teach elementary Chinese was proven successful. But it did not stop at this point, because contextualized learning of foreign languages have a natural link with an ancient Chinese literary theory of poetic conception.

As a Chinese teacher, I always appreciate the beauty of poetry, including poems written by Guo Moruo, Ai Qing, Wen Yiduo, Pushkin, Petofi, Isakovsky, and many other Chinese and foreign poets living in both ancient and modern times. I first encountered the idea of poetic conception in Wang Guowei's *Comments on Ci* (Ren Jian Ci Hua), by way of which I discovered Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wen Xin Diao Long). They are the classics of ancient Chinese literary theory. The idea of poetic conception is extensive and profound, and is able to enrich contextualized learning with its aesthetic elements.

It is a rich literary heritage, just like a precious pearl. Why the ancient Chinese poets can produce so many well beloved works? The answer is that the poets first established themselves in a context, from which emotions are stirred. Imagination is driven with emotions, and words flew out to form poems, including those of lasting fame. Elementary school writing cannot be compared with classical poetry, but they also require emotions in them. The students are not short of emotions by any means.

However, students fear writing, and teachers fear teaching it. It is difficult to find a topic and make appropriate assessments. When teachers sat down to design the writing assignment, they fail to come up with a good topic or title. When students finally see the assignment, they are even more clueless. Writing is drudgery for both teachers and students.

The solution is to establish a context, which furnishes a topic. The ancient literary theory can influence and enrich today's "essay composition theory". Essential elements of poetic conception can be utilized to reform classroom writing assignment. This idea has support from Suhomlinski's comments on observation. Therefore, I first chose the nature as a typical context.

Children are naturally akin to nature, and man is the child of nature. Teachers should bring students to nature. The nature carries on a dialog with students through

the green mountains, fresh water, vast fields, trees and flowers, bridges and creeks, and bird and cicada chirping. The rising sun, twilight, stars, drizzles and snowflakes bring out students' admiration and imagination. The beauty of nature is like an endless textbook for them.

It is best to let students start from observing nature. Teachers must choose contexts that are understandable and enjoyable to children. Even before I encounter the idea of poetic conception, I especially like to bring students to nature and receive fresh first-hand impressions.

In order to find an ideal spot for observation, I would walk long distances or ride a bike alone to visit the field and creeks. I once had a plan to bring first graders to see the sun rise. In order to get the best observation site before sunrise, I woke at midnight and rode my bike in darkness (which was quite a challenge), stood on a big bridge and waited patiently. Twilight appeared on the eastern sky, and the first rooster crowing could be heard from the farm yard nearby. Darkness was gradually driven away by the dawn. Very soon, crimson morning glow showed up with a gilded frame, which was spectacular. Ah! The long-awaited sun popped out with a red face and lit up the whole earth. Peasants were carrying their creaking baskets filled with fresh vegetables to sell in the city. Bikes began to pass by with crisp ringing bells. Someone seemed to be looking at me from behind, and could barely figure out that this is an elementary school teacher, gazing at the new sun for the sake of teaching the students in her class. The sunrise had majestic beauty, but I realized first graders do not have enough vocabulary to describe all that they see. Therefore, I changed the plan to take them to a high place and let them have a bird view of the town they live in. Looking to the east, there was a vast field and a tower built from ancient times. Looking to the south, cars were running on the road, further up which looms the facade of five small hills. One of them is a famous Buddhist sight, Lang Mountain. Yangtze River was flowing beneath the hill. Although students could not actually see the river right at that moment, the scenery is brought to their minds through imagination and memory. The students said: "If we go further to the south, we will reach scenic Nantong City." "There are mountains and rivers over there." "The five hills stand by the river, like five sentinels guarding our city." The established context is not like a boring class, but like a game. Students learned while they play, and could not wait to tell the teacher what they saw.

After we returned to school, the students finished the first oral composition: Beautiful Hometown. Phrases and paragraphs came to the students effortlessly. This was the first fruit of contextualized writing exercise.

In the second semester of first grade, spring came to town with a gentle breeze. It was a good time to observe nature. The teacher and students walked on a park bridge. We paused and saw the river below. The teacher asked: "Please take a look at the water. How is it going? What does it look like?"

"The ice and snow have melted." This is a word they newly learned from the textbook.

“The water flows gently.”

The conscientious observation turns children’s attention to the world around them.

We walked on through the bridge and looked all around. “How do the willow branches move in the wind?”

“Willow branches are dancing to the spring breeze.”

“The willow trees have given out green leaf buds.”

The teacher also looked through children’s eyes. It was a vivid spring sight with graceful willow dance. Many students wrote about willows in their journals. Zhou Wu, the smallest student, wrote five entries. The urge to express is awakened in them.

The students are also taken to the park to see red plum blossoms. Their joy burst out in a song about the blossoms. Bees buzzed around the blossoms, and students counted with their little fingers how many bees they saw. The students and teacher were all immersed in the context.

The students were later taken to see magnolia flowers. The white flowers bloomed on the tall magnolia trees. The whole setting containing the tree, the flowers, and the deep blue sky as a backdrop was very impressive. The students saw intuitively how different colors contrast with and complement each other.

The students walked on to the lawn and sat around the fountain. The fountain sprayed water continuously, and drew out the students’ happy song. The teacher and students recite sentences from their textbooks: “The fountain water sings a happy song. The birds are chirping, and the children are singing.” All people present entered the context of spring. Some students observed: “Mrs. Li, look, the grass is poking its head out from the earth!” How vivid is the word “poking”! This sentence remained fresh in my mind to this day. The students passed by the zoo, and happened to see a peacock spread its tail. They commented: “Look, it is having a beauty contest with spring!” This kind of observational activities must be guided with a teacher’s experience and intuition.

After reading *Comments on Ci* and *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, theoretical support was found for benefiting students with observational contexts. Students accumulate writing materials from observing the world around. Their feelings are active in this process, giving them an impetus to express and write. The observational activities are actually specific contexts that students enter. They offer opportunities for language learning, which are pertinent to real life, and give students inspiration. Students’ observation, thinking, and imagination are integrated in the whole process, making learning an enjoyment for students and teachers.

Practice cannot be hastened. It will not go further if theoretical thinking is left aside, and new knowledge can only be discovered through combining practice with theory. New theories produced by practice must be utilized in further practice. This cycle should be repeated to bring education to a higher level.

I would pay a field visit before each observational activity. My first consideration is on how to draw out students’ feelings with external objects, so optimized contexts must be chosen. To reach this goal, I spare no efforts to visit different

places. One day, I introduced an essay titled *Beautiful Wild Flowers* anthologized in *Complementary Reading* I compiled to the students, in order to go with a teaching session about plants. The students could feel these wild plants and sense their beauty. That essay has poetic language: "There are many kinds of wild flowers. They are beautiful little things..." The students need to be brought to the world of real wild flowers. However, feelings do not move easily with only general observation. Therefore, I walked to river banks and footpaths in the fields. I collected wild flowers, learned about them, and asked questions to herbal experts. Among these wild flowers, dandelions are most capable of exciting children's happiness and imagination. I found a cluster of dandelions under the ancient city wall. Their yellow petals are lined up in a circle. Their seeds are soft and light, clustered like a fluffy ball. When the wind blows, the seeds may be scattered. I was really afraid that the children might miss this sight.

After choosing the location and objects for observation, I chose a time and a process. Early next morning, I brought the students there. The wild flowers were covered in dew, as one student said: "Dewdrops are putting on a pearly necklace for the wild flowers. It is round and bright under the sun." I recited with the students: "There are many kinds of wild flowers. They are beautiful little things..." And "How lonesome would the field be, if there are not these wild flowers scattered among the reeds?" I called to the students: "Let's go and find them. You are the true children of the earth, and able to find some wild flowers." The pupils then rushed to the field like bees and butterflies. They collected different kinds of wild flowers with bubbling enthusiasm. Very soon, they come back to me in small groups, and asked me to tell them the names of the flowers.

"Mrs. Li, what is the name of this tiny white flower?"

"Let me think. This is shepherd's purse."

"Mrs. Li, this flower is like a little bluish bell. What is its name?"

"Oh, it has a funny name, speedwell."

"What about this one?"

"Look, it has pink flowers and purple leaves and stems. Its name is beautiful, purple reed."

Several pupils repeated my words: "Purple reed, how beautiful it is!"

A quiet girl came to my side gently, holding a bunch of flowers, and asked: "Why the little white flowers on this weed are like little wheat ears?"

I took them in my hands and said: "Look at the little white ones on this ear. They are so small and light. It moves the first when wind comes, so people give it a name which is very easy to remember: wind weed."

More children are taking their collections to me, and I was running out of resources. I said: "Let's call them unnamed wild flowers!" With wild flowers in their hands, and strange names coming to their ears, the pupils were very happy. They fell in love with the flowers, gazed at them, and described what they had in their hands at their best.

The learning contexts should be continuous, with more and more vividness for each step. They should have close features and climaxes.

Later, I called to the pupils in a loud voice: "There are more beautiful wild flowers over there!" They quickly followed my steps.

We came to a cluster of dandelions, and some children already knew the name. I told them to observe closely from stems to leaves, then to the seeds. According to preset process, I gently plucked a dandelion head, run to an earth ridge like a child, and blew at it. The fluffy seeds floated to the river side like wool... "Where are they gone? Where do you want them to fly...?" Pupils extended the wings of imagination, while they each blew at a dandelion head. Childhood fantasies were also flying to a faraway land with these seeds. It was like a woodcut doll going out of its frame, and changed to many small girls and boys, blowing away the seeds of dreams...

Of course, students are part of the society. They must understand society, and their writing should reflect their thoughts about social life. Therefore, pupils at higher grades are led to observe social contexts and people's actions. This complies with the national curriculum requirement for "lower grades pupils to observe nature, and higher grades ones to observe both nature and society."

When pupils are led to observe social life, I always chose the bright side first. The pupils will hopefully be influenced first by the healthy social ethos before they encounter the dark side. They are still small after all. Their minds need to be nurtured first with the beautiful and bright things. They must be guided to love and pursue the beautiful actions, before they know how to avoid or prevent undesirable actions.

I often observe the world around me with wide open eyes like a child, and chose the best contexts to teach pupils.

After school is over, I took pupils to see how the traffic police work. Big and small vehicles run fast around him/her, carrying people in nonstop streams. The pupils saw the prosperity of the city, and also the hard work of traffic police. Later, I brought them to the streets in old city area. They were narrow with uneven stone-paved roads. The shops on both sides of the road were low and shanty, contrasting sharply to broad and bright new roads, tall buildings, dazzling new shops and running cars. These sights told children that the small city is changing. It has become prosperous with better living conditions and more convenience.

I have also taken pupils to see ship locks. Many barges and sail boats lined up through the ship locks and drove to Yangtze River. The ship lock on this side closes, letting out the boat, and the ship lock on the other side opens. The boats drove from Yangtze River to inland rivers. When pupils saw boats carrying cement, sand or other cargo enter Nantong City, their imagination and thoughts were deeply moved by the vivid scene.

When pupils are brought to well designed or chosen contexts, they become enthusiastic to observe and feel them. Motivated by enthusiasm, they give full play to imagination and thinking, which triggers the desire to express "irrepressibly", as famous Chinese educator Ye Shengtao said. In these contexts, pupils easily use words corresponding to the sounds, colors, and shapes which are saturated with their own feelings. In other words, they "verbalize their visual experience." In this way, vocabulary enters pupils' consciousness accompanied with images and

feelings during the early stage of linguistic development. These words are stored in their minds, and ready to come out when pupils need to use them. After this process, writing becomes easier for pupils, and turns from a bitter burden to sweet bonus for them. Their thinking and creating ability, as well as emotional health also benefit unexpected development.

The role of feelings in writing is no longer a vague idea. It has become clearer and more concrete. Context observation is a truly effective way to improve students' writing skills. Contexts are pupils' everlasting source of inspiration. Their vocabulary becomes vivid and infectious when used in contexts. They cannot keep themselves from using those lively words to describe what they see. Contexts provide inspiration, language learning opportunities, and aesthetic pleasure. Pupils learn about the world and write about it gradually through learning about contexts.

After some time of experimenting, the results are very encouraging. Pupils began to like writing, and actually have something to write about. Their minds are no longer vacant when they face a given topic. When pupils engage themselves in a context, their desire to express is mobilized significantly, and produces very good essays in an enjoyable process. It is no exaggeration to say that no students fear writing in my class. Everybody likes it.

This result shows that by exploring pupils' emotions, their potential intellect is also developed. Writing is a creative process. When pupils are under the influence of emotions and give full play to their creativity, they can produce works even beyond an adult's writing ability. When the pupils become second graders (in the spring of 1980), they published *Elementary School Pupils' Journal* by Jiangsu People's Press. After this, pupils become more enthusiastic about writing. Driven by inner motivation, more and more pupils publish their works on newspapers and journals. There were not many children's publications back then, but they managed to publish more than 70 pieces. Three pupils even won first prizes in national writing contests held by publications including *Elementary School Writing*, *Little Creek*, and *China Youth Daily*.

The adoption of contextualized learning is critical when viewed in retrospection. Ancient Chinese literary theory of poetic conception has provided inspiration, and enriched the idea of contextualized learning to include not only foreign languages. In today's words, it has absorbed "Chinese characteristics".

Constructing a Paradigm for Children's Contextualized
Learning

Li, J.

2018, XXXII, 228 p. 14 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-662-55610-8