

# **Capstone EFL portfolio**

**English as a Second Language (EFL)**

**Teaching English to Speakers of  
Other Languages (TESOL)**

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## **Abstract**

This Capstone ESL Portfolio is a synthesis of my understandings about teaching and learning, as well as practices in how to best serve speakers of other languages (ESLs) in the Chinese University settings. I reflect upon the knowledge and practices that an effective ESL teacher needs to know and should actualize in my future teaching to maximize students' learning opportunities and facilitate their language and content learning.

The portfolio consists of three parts: 1) philosophy of teaching 2) demonstration of teaching via the artifacts and 3) reflection on future instruction. In the first part, I synthesize across Brandl's Communicative Language Teaching Theory, Gay's Culturally Responsive Teaching, as well as Krashen's Affective filter Hypothesis to develop my own brand-new philosophy of teaching to ESL students in Chinese University. In the second part, I enumerate the artifacts that I have created during my studies at Peabody College, and align them with the TESOL Standards to showcase my understandings and insights in the domains of Planning, Instructing, Assessing, Identity and Context, Language Proficiency, Learning, Content and professionalism. Each domain is illustrated with 1-2 artifacts, with the separate analysis focusing on four major elements of teaching: learners and learning, the learning environment, curriculum, and assessment. In the third part, I reflect upon my gradual shift in vision of teaching and learning, the prediction of potential challenges in future instruction, and then the feasible solutions have been proposed to address the challenges and difficulties.

## **Teaching philosophy**

I used to teach in a Chinese university for 4 years before coming to Vanderbilt. Most of my students were identified as struggling learners. They lacked motivation to learn and had very low English proficiency. I ascribed their poor English skills and low motivation to their laziness and low language aptitude. I even thought that their prior English teachers did not do a good job. Nor did their parents. Therefore, I tried to cram as many interesting and useful language materials as possible for my students, hope they could catch up with their English skills, meanwhile, I also taught my students the test-taking skills to help them pass the College English Test (Standardized assessment). To my disappointment, most of my students showed no interests at all, some of them even told me explicitly that they want to get a “C” to pass the English class. Then they played with cellphones, took naps or did something irrelevant to kill their time in my class. Usually, it took me a lot of time to manage the class, and I was upset and frustrated. Trying to figure out why instead of engaging in language learning, they would rather waste their time in the class. I thought that I was doing the best for them, but they did not appreciate at all. I had hard time figuring out it was students’ learning attitudes or it was my bad teaching that turned them off to English learning.

Four years of teacher-centered instruction to the same group of struggling learners, made me at my wit’s end of how to engage them in language learning, when I was ambivalent about should I quit teaching or keep going, I got the chance to do the translation and interpretation for the university president during a business trip to America and Canada. Talking to the professors in the American universities, and had first-hand experiences by attending the master students’ visit day, made me determined to

pursue my master degree in America to improve both my English teaching and researching skills.

Time flies, I came to Vanderbilt in 2013, since then I have been in the English language learner's program for almost four semesters, and I have learned a lot about the well-developed education theories and teaching approaches, which are proved to be effective and engaging to students. I couldn't wait to apply them into my practicum teaching for the past two months. It turned out to be that I had a really hard time shifting from a teacher-centered instruction mode to students-centered mode. I think being in the authority role in the class and lecturing are so ingrained in my mind and culture. It may take me a while to transition. I did adopt the students-centered mode for my practicum teaching; however, I felt very "strange" being lazy and taught nothing during 40 minutes class, even though my students did get lots of opportunities to speak in English. I guess that I am still not used to being new "me" doing the "communicative language teaching", my new identity got affirmed and acknowledged by my practicum mentor and supervisors' constructive suggestions and unflagging support. During the practicum class I also found that my students were using the language in meaningful contexts, and learning a lot from each other, and were making progress little by little. Compared with my practicum teaching, my prior lecture-based teaching was dry and boring. If given second chance, I would like to adopt the communicative language teaching approach, and create more interesting activities to engage them in learning the language by using it in meaningful context. I also want to practice the culturally responsive teaching, by modifying the instruction content, so that it could draw on students' language and cultural background, and students will have much easier and fun way of learning the language.

For instance, I will spend time to know my students and their specific learning needs, and adjust the instruction to accommodate their learning needs, meanwhile, provide scaffolding to facilitate their learning. Following are my elaboration on my teaching philosophy:

### **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the SIOP Model**

According to Brandl (2007) and Richard (2006) communicative language teaching mainly features student-centered instruction, along with interactive and collaborative learning. Teachers also need to create meaningful and communicative language activities to engage and facilitate students' language learning. Their role has also been shifted from lecturer and authority to the new ones as moderator and facilitator in the class to scaffold students' language learning, in the mean time, students need to take the initiatives to be proactive to conduct their language learning collaboratively with teachers and their peers.

The SIOP Model refers to the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2012), it shares many similar features with CLT and aim for high-quality instruction for students, such as cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, comprehensible input and the development of background knowledge. Though it is a new model, it has been proven to be an effective approach to integrate content into English instruction and would promote students' learning more effectively.

CLT and SIOP both promote language learning by using the language in meaningful context, they also advocate communicative and collaborative learning (Brandl, 2007), to be more specific, they require teachers to provide multiple opportunities for students to speak and use the language in meaningful contexts, in the

mean time; teachers also need to give students more freedom and support in their own ways of learning (Townsend & Fu, 2001). For instance, cooperative learning could enhance students' communicative skills with each other, and generate more extended oral productions. The interactions could not only afford students' more chances to learn about their peers' perspectives about language and content learning; it will also foster students' how to work in diverse groups and their appreciation about cultural differences and diversity. However, teachers need to be aware that collaborative learning could also be very detrimental if not handle well. Students may either dominate the group project, or be intimidated by the group dynamics. Teachers should act as facilitator to make the collaborative work accessible and meaningful for every group member.

Rich and comprehensible language input in meaningful contexts could boost students' language learning. Students' learning will only occur when the language input are meaningful and relatable to students' already existing background knowledge (Brandl, 2006). This CLT principle coincides with the SIOP Model's features, which require teachers to know students' specific learning needs via survey and daily interactions, and adapt the curriculum or language materials to accommodate their learning needs. In addition, teachers also need to provide appropriate speech, clear explanation of academic tasks, and a variety of techniques to scaffold students' language learning (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2012). For instance, incorporate the transnational community literacy and funds of knowledge into the instruction would be a good way to draw on students' background knowledge and facilitate their learning.

As Jimenez and colleagues (2009) point out, "It could also help students learn about diversity in their communities and help English-language learners become more

fully engaged in their literacy and content learning. It could also help teachers better understand their ELLs and foster meaningful relationships with and among students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds” (pp. 16-18).

Although CLT’s eclectic approach to teaching has been in accord with learning principles is approved by research findings in SLA, and affords great flexibilities for different programs and learning needs (Brandl, 2007). It is not a Panacea to problems in foreign language teaching, and can’t be simply categorized as discrete or integrated language skill teaching, instead, it should take into account the quality of teaching materials as well as the embedded culture and content during future instruction.

I will shift from teacher-centered approach to students-centered instruction model. Apply CLT and SIOP features to my future instruction, give students lots of opportunities to use the language in meaningful context, and let them construct the meaning inside and outside classroom collaboratively. Also I will provide timely scaffoldings and feedback, to help students overcome learning obstacles, and boost their motivation to achieve language proficiency.

### **Culturally responsive teaching**

Gay mentions (2009) “it uses ways of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching subjects, processes, and skills. It cultivates cooperation, collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for learning among students and between students and teachers. It incorporates high-status, accurate cultural knowledge about different ethnic groups into all subjects and skills taught”(p. 45-46).

Culturally responsive teachers have unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students (Gay, 2009). I will try to change my deficit view

of students by treating them as people, who have different strength and weakness, and won't judge them only on their academic performance. Instead, I will get to know them, their families and friends, find out their specific learning needs and difficulties they may have. Adopt the relevant accommodations to accommodate their learning needs, and manage to help them overcome the obstacles both academically and socially.

Culturally responsive teachers are warm, supportive, personable, enthusiastic, understanding, and flexible (Shade, Kelly & Oberg, 1997), yet rigorous in demanding high-quality academic performance from both themselves and their students (Gay, 2009). Instead of watering down the curriculum and instruction content, I will hold high expectations for my students, and believe them as capable learners. Instill them with a sense of confidence by acknowledging their languages, and culture background as valuable assets for teaching and learning, meanwhile, provide them rich and comprehensible input to facilitate their language and content learning.

Culturally responsive teaching is dynamic; it invites critical thinking and authentic language activity, while language is part of students' identity (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012). Culturally responsive teaching should affirm students' culture and language background. Therefore, I will incorporate the culturally relevant material into instructions to better engage students' learning, and scaffold their learning by bridging the gap between the cultural experiences of ethnically diverse students. Continue to capitalize on the curriculum content of academic subjects to facilitate their higher levels of learning as well as fostering the higher-order thinking skills and better content learning (Gay, 2009).



However, before delivering high-quality instruction, it would be beneficial for teachers to understand the five stages of language acquisition, and select apposite assessments and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies engage students' learning (Brantley, 2007). Since most of my future students would be college undergrad students in China, their English language levels might be between speech emergence and advanced fluency. I will adopt relevant assessment to find out which language acquisition phases they are at and what are their specific learning needs. Then I could provide more effective and tailor-made instruction to accommodate their learning (Jimenez & Rose, 2010).

In my future teaching, I will create a rich and welcoming learning environment; adopt differentiated instruction and culturally relevant materials to accommodate students' learning needs. Also will inform my students that language learning takes perseverance and hard work. It is commonplace to encounter the bottleneck that impedes their progress in language learning; however, teachers should teach students how to break through the "bottleneck on their own", meanwhile, proffer specific scaffolding to support their continuous language learning. When students make mistakes, I will not criticize them; instead, I will let them know that making mistake is very normal in language learning, and what they need to do is keep learning. Since showing care and providing the language as well as emotional support would be a more effective way to help them overcome the learning obstacles, and further boost their motivation and confidence to achieve language proficiency.

### **The Affective Filter Hypothesis**

Do the comprehensible input and culturally responsive teaching enough for students' success in second language acquisition? It seems that Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis states otherwise. He proposes that though some students are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input, they do not acquire language successfully (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Krashen (1982) pointed out " language learning must take place in an environment where learners are 'off the defensive' and the affective filter (anxiety) is low in order for the input to be noticed and gain access to the learner's thinking. "

This is consistent with CLT'S principle that teachers should recognize and respect affective factors of learning (Brandl, 2007). The affective filters have been categorized into three types: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety (Krashen, 1982). Students with high-motivation, self-confidence and low anxiety tend to do better in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, teachers should create a friendly and additive learning environment, and adopt affirmative attitude to make students feel empowered and motivated to engage in language acquisition successfully (Dejong, 2011).

In my future teaching, I will provide comprehensible input in the stress-free and positive learning environment, in which students will feel welcomed and comfortable to conduct their language and content learning. Since my ESL students would be socially mature young adults, they are fully cognizant of whether teachers are doing the best for them or not, therefore, care about them and build good relationship with them would be an effective way to know their learning needs, and deliver proper instructions to promote their learning. Once the relationship between teachers and students are good and healthy,

students will be more willing to share their learning needs and difficulties with teachers (Jimene & Rose, 2007).

In addition, incorporating parents and communities (Funds of Knowledge) into my instruction would be another effective way to promote students' content and language learning. Teachers should be a resource and mediator in support of parents and community participation in students' learning (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992). For example, I will include the students' family literacy and cultural knowledge into my curriculum, invite parents to the class to give talks about their cultures and languages, hold the food and story nights for students of different backgrounds. Meanwhile, I will cultivate a comfortable and friendly environment for parents and community members to engage in students' learning as well. Hold weekend parent school to help parents familiarize with the school routines, and inform them how to help students with language and content learning (Allen, 2010). For instance, teach parents and communities how to capitalize on the connections between English and their own languages to engage their children' language and content learning, meanwhile, parents could learn with their children, and create the supportive and collaborative environment to help them attain the learning proficiency.

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