

Joyful Teaching in Chinese: Exploring Participatory Teaching Approaches

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Chinese language education is our native language education. How to help students develop a love for Chinese and effectively improve their language proficiency is our shared pursuit. In teaching Chinese, I always keep in mind that “interest is the best teacher”. By starting with “stimulating students’ interest in reading”, I strive to create a classroom atmosphere that fosters a love for reading. The new curriculum advocates for students to learn through self-directed, cooperative, and inquiry-based approaches. Teachers, throughout this process, serve as guides and organizers of learning activities. We should establish a democratic and interactive learning relationship with students, which requires us, as teachers, to care for them, show patience, respect, and provide guidance. This creates a harmonious and resonant learning environment.

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Reflections Triggered by Real-life Examples

One day, after returning home from kindergarten, my son began completing his daily homework—writing two rows of the number “8”. As his tender voice reached my ears, he said, “Mom, the number ‘8’ is written from right to left, look...” I couldn’t help but wonder: Could writing a single “8” really make him this excited? (He’s never acted like this before!) I looked down and realized his “8” was written beautifully. I couldn’t resist praising him: “Sweetheart, your ‘8’ is even better than mine—perfectly proportioned and neatly aligned. Great job!” Hearing my praise, he eagerly continued, finishing the two rows assigned by his teacher in one go. Then he said, “Mom, I want to write a few more rows and finish this page”.

It suddenly dawned on me: This is the power of success as motivation. That day, he indeed completed an entire page of “8” voluntarily. This experience made me reflect deeply.

On another occasion, my son learned to assemble a jigsaw puzzle under his father’s guidance. To my surprise, he kept at it tirelessly for over two hours, refusing to sleep, completing puzzle after puzzle. This sense of accomplishment fueled his motivation to keep going. A four-year-old child could exhibit such focus, driven purely by the experience of success. Once again, I found myself deep in thought.

As a Chinese language teacher, I’ve long been exploring what kind of lessons can truly spark students’ interest in learning. From lesson design to homework assignments, I’ve made constant efforts and improvements. Yet, I struggled to achieve good results. Some students remained distracted in class; others failed to complete

their homework. Much of my after-class time was spent on laborious guidance and urging students to make up for incomplete assignments. Exhausted both physically and mentally, I kept questioning myself: “Am I heading in the wrong direction?”

Through continuous reflection, I finally identified the problem. The reason my lessons failed to engage students and why they were unwilling or unable to complete their homework was simple: I had been out of alignment with my students. For so long, I had focused on improving my own professional skills—a pursuit that, in hindsight, was my one-sided effort. The students weren’t actively engaged; they couldn’t experience a sense of success in learning. Without that, where would their motivation come from?

I quickly adjusted my teaching approach, striving to implement participatory teaching that genuinely emphasized the students’ role as the primary participants. This shift in teaching philosophy brought a fresh wind of change into my classroom. It awakened not only my students but also me. Together, we began to grow and thrive in a newfound sense of joy and fulfillment.

How Participatory Reading Transforms Extracurricular Reading From Quantity to Quality

Human spiritual growth is much like physical development; the need for “nourishment” is also stage-specific. At certain ages, people should read specific masterpieces by renowned authors. If this reading phase is missed, not only do we lose the desire to read, but we also fail to absorb the “spiritual nutrients” essential for that stage of growth. The principle of matching books to age groups serves as the primary guideline for guiding students in their reading.

Learning Chinese naturally cannot be separated from extracurricular reading. Although I have continually provided students with methods for reading extracurricular books and recommended reading lists, the results have been minimal. Their hands are still filled with nothing but comics. Why are comics so captivating to them? This, of course, is inseparable from the influence of modern societal trends—namely, the rapid development of the internet. Having grown accustomed to this kind of fast-paced, mainstream “fast food” culture, students are understandably unwilling to engage with dry and tedious texts. As a result, their hands are inevitably occupied by products of the fashionable culture they admire—comics.

So how can we change this situation? The only effective way is to help them truly experience the joy of extracurricular reading through exposure to classic works by renowned authors. This would naturally lead to the disappearance of fast-food cultural content. Guided by this approach, I began to make changes to my methods.

Making the Most of the First 5 Minutes: Motivating Students to Value Extracurricular Reading Through Speeches

“All beginnings are difficult.” If I were to assign tasks all at once, it would inevitably lead to feelings of apprehension among the students, ultimately backfiring. Therefore, I took the lead as an example for my students. On the first day, I delivered a three-minute speech before class, sharing my experience reading a particular book and the impressions it left on me. My efforts were met with applause from all the students, immediately gaining their approval. In fact, I was demonstrating to them that giving a speech isn’t difficult; anyone can do it and do it well.

Once I set the example, the students began to show an eagerness to give their own speeches. Seizing the opportunity, I assigned the task to them: group leaders would lead by example, and every day two students would

give speeches lasting no less than one minute and no more than three minutes. This pre-class activity quickly gained momentum. Initially, students chose extracurricular books to prepare for their speeches. Over time, their choices of reading material evolved, with books like *Robinson Crusoe*, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, and *101 Habits Every Good Boy Should Have* gradually replacing comics.

Through their speeches, I saw the knowledge they gained and their personal growth. This practice not only became an essential pathway for accumulating extracurricular knowledge but also had a dual impact, enhancing their character and personality.

Making Full Use of Reading Journals: Combining Reading and Writing to Build a Consensus

Keeping reading journal has always been a necessary step for aspiring writers. Previously, my students' reading journals merely reflected a perfunctory approach: randomly copying excerpts and writing a few sentences of reflection before submitting them as completed assignments. This was just doing homework for the sake of doing homework. How could I change this situation? The answer lay in focusing on the *experience*.

I guided students to make reading journals something they *wanted* and *felt compelled* to write—thus providing them with a sense of accomplishment.

Step 1: Surveying Preferences

By collaborating with class leaders, we conducted a questionnaire titled “What Kind of Reading Assignments Do You Like?” The results revealed that students preferred assignments closely related to their interests, such as copying excerpts they found intriguing, writing reflections without word limits, or simply reading without writing if they had no strong impressions. Some even suggested writing diaries instead. This discovery was invaluable to me.

Step 2: Leading by Example

In line with their preferences, I participated in this new type of reading assignment alongside them. I occasionally wrote and shared my own reading journals to set an example and inspire them to complete their work earnestly. Through this process, I discovered that students had many untapped talents and perspectives, which made this task highly effective.

Step 3: Sharing and Exhibiting

We regularly shared and showcased outstanding reading journals. By exhibiting well-written assignments, students felt encouraged and motivated to improve their own work. Over time, the quality of their submissions naturally increased, bringing me great joy as a teacher.

Maximizing the Daily 30-Minute Extracurricular Reading Session in a Reading-Rich Environment

The daily afternoon reading period in our school's book-rich environment became the students' best opportunity for extracurricular reading. However, some students struggled to focus. Upon investigation, I found that some did not bring books to class, while others lacked parental support, as their parents feared extracurricular reading would distract them from their studies.

Realizing that these issues stemmed from deeply ingrained mindsets, I took action: For students who forgot to bring books, I set specific rules requiring them to leave a book in the classroom's reading corner to ensure they always had access to reading material. For parents who did not support extracurricular reading, I used class blogs and platforms like WeChat to communicate with them frequently. I also turned students' reading reflections into images and shared them with parents via WeChat. Over time, parents began to change

their attitudes, and the students, influenced by this supportive environment, started to enjoy the daily 30-minute reading session.

The once noisy classroom transformed into a space of silent, focused reading. I, too, cherished this valuable time alongside them. Remarkably, their behavior began to change as well.

Returning the Right to Learn to Students: How Participatory Classrooms Significantly Enhance Students' Self-learning Abilities

In the teaching process, I deeply realized that only through personal experience can learning be truly remembered. For students, teaching something once can often be more beneficial than learning it ten times. With this in mind, I began experimenting with having students take on the role of teachers. I started with composition lessons, which immediately excited the students.

Starting With Clear Composition Requirements

For each composition lesson, I would assign preparatory work in advance. But how should I assign the tasks of teaching and evaluating compositions to students? I began by establishing a "Composition Department" in the class, comprising students who were particularly skilled at writing. During the first lesson preparation, these students, under my guidance, completed the task successfully.

Although I was initially hesitant about how well the activity would go, I pretended to step aside, allowing the members of the Composition Department to lead the class in learning about composition requirements and methods. The outcome was surprisingly positive.

Peer Evaluation: From Students, for Students, and by Students

I guided the composition evaluation process by first standardizing and announcing the grading criteria in the class (e.g., whether the theme was clear, whether details were vividly described, etc.). Each student then used these criteria to evaluate another student's work. After receiving peer feedback, every student revised their composition drafts before rewriting them neatly.

Sharing and Improving Together

For the final drafts, students shared their compositions within their groups and also with the entire class. Each group would select one member to present their work (students were assigned numbers and took turns presenting). Afterward, I provided comments and summaries. Through this process, students not only completed their assignments but also fully experienced the writing process. Their skills improved naturally and significantly.

Encouraged by the success of this approach, I became more ambitious. I dispersed the members of the original Composition Department across the class, creating specialized teams such as the "Growth Team" and the "Footprints Team". Our composition lessons turned into lively, highly anticipated events each week. The students and I found great joy in growing together through this process.

Inspired by the success of composition lessons, I extended this participatory approach to Chinese language lessons. I divided tasks into smaller parts, allowing students to take on roles from lesson preparation to delivery. Starting with simpler texts, I gradually moved on to ancient poetry and even classic works by renowned authors.

Though minor issues occasionally arose, I, acting as a fellow "student", would step in to ensure the class proceeded smoothly. The results spoke for themselves. It became evident that all education should start by sparking students' motivation and creating meaningful experiences.

Participatory Essay Writing: From “I Can’t Write” to “I Want to Write”

Essays are something teachers often write, but could students handle them? Drawing inspiration from the composition lessons, I confidently implemented an essay-writing assignment.

Weekly journals had always been a source of frustration for students. While diligent students excelled, others either copied or scribbled random thoughts. I dreaded grading such work. So, I decided to start with a personal essay about my own experience grading assignments, expressing my thoughts and emotions. After reading my essay aloud to the class, I explained that essays could be as simple as writing whatever came to mind.

With this example, the students found essay writing much more approachable. After the weekend, I was pleasantly surprised by the fresh and creative submissions they turned in on Monday.

I continued the practice by writing and reading short essays with themes like “The Warmth Around Us” and “The Beauty in the Details” before assigning new journal topics. Unsurprisingly, the students began producing more diverse and rich content. I couldn’t help but feel immense pride in their progress.

Writing a 1,000-word essay takes a teacher only about 20 minutes. Dedicating 10-15 minutes each week to writing these example essays not only sets a standard for students but also helps the teacher grow. Over time, this becomes an invaluable and rewarding practice, yielding immeasurable benefits for both students and teachers.

Conclusion

In Chinese language education, cultivating students’ interest and enhancing their language proficiency have always been central pursuits. Guided by the belief that “interest is the best teacher”, this article reflects on participatory teaching approaches that emphasize self-directed, cooperative, and inquiry-based learning. By fostering a democratic and interactive classroom atmosphere, students are guided to actively engage in their learning process. Practices such as participatory reading and writing, motivational activities, and creating a sense of accomplishment have proven effective in sparking enthusiasm and improving outcomes. These experiences highlight the importance of aligning teaching methods with students’ needs to create a harmonious and joyful learning environment.