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Teaching Chinese Teachers: Jan Kittok

By Jodi Yim James, Staff Writer

Janice Holter Kittok has recently been the World Languages Specialist at the Minnesota Department of Education. She is currently the Content Lead for World Languages in the Minneapolis Public Schools. Kittok has 30 years of experience as a K-12 teacher, college instructor, dean, and educational leader. She has won many professional honors and awards. She also serves on professional boards. Kittok holds Minnesota K-12 Principal and Spanish Licenses.

Kittok is a featured speaker in China in teacher development for teaching Chinese as Foreign Language or CFL pedagogy. She has been working with teacher organizations and school districts on teacher development for many years. Her seminars are so successful in China that she is invited back annually by the Association of Chinese and Mongolia International Schools. Recently I spoke with Kittok about her work with language teachers in the East and West.

Language teachers and teachers in general, mainly teach the way they were taught, Kittok shares. They also follow the curriculum they are given, which again may follow tradition. Kittok has found this true in both the East and West. The problem with this method of teaching is that tradition isn't necessarily the best methodology, nor does it follow brain research of the last few decades.

Kittok is interested in how the brain acquires our first language and applying this research to how we teach and learn our second language. Most teachers do not have a foundation in language acquisition. As a profession, we are held to how we were taught; all subjects in schools do this. In language we think that rote memory, a grammar syllabus, and self-discipline lead to second language proficiency.

The tradition of painful and difficult memorization actually contradicts how the brain acquires learning. Children learn their first language in a compelling, interesting, and comprehensible environment where they are allowed to make mistakes. They learn from their parents and they all succeed, getting better with time, and through lots of errors.

In contrast, errors can drive language teachers nuts. However, if language teachers knew how the brain learns language, they would facilitate language acquisition in a contextual, natural environment. As the brain hears and understands, it seeks patterns and naturally picks up the pattern (grammar) in the context of a comprehensible story (which has meaning). In a classroom, this is not all fun and games. It is repetitive comprehensible input, in context – a story, that allows transference of grammar (or pattern recognition). It is also taught at a pace where the student can learn, with as much repetition as needed.

In both China and the United States, Kittok demonstrates this by teaching a room full of language teachers a lesson in Swedish (generally foreign to them). At the end of a 1-2 hour lesson (with pedagogical sidebars interspersed), the teachers can all read a full story in Swedish with understanding and pronunciation. This is the "Ah ha" moment in both China and the United States, she says. This demonstration also negates the idea that somehow Chinese teachers are different and the lesson is only for Westerners. ALL teachers do well with the lesson, because our brains are all hard-wired for

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language acquisition in the same way. The myth of who can learn a language from either the West or the East is dispelled quickly.

In our language teaching professional development, there needs to be a paradigm shift from the past to what science tells us about the brain and language acquisition. Language can be used in context, first at a very simple level with stories, and then increasingly more advanced with complex stories. Grammar is introduced in a meaningful fashion along the way. The brain will notice the patterns. Teach the context, and then the rules. When students have heard the stories they will not resist the rules. As teachers, we want language to be organized but it is not. It is messy and random and yet the brain is wired for this, when set in stories and with context.

In the case of teaching Chinese, the Chinese teachers teach about China from the first lesson. The students get two for the price of one. They learn both the language and about Chinese culture at the same time. The beginning stories are quite simple, however they are both in Chinese AND about Chinese culture. Slowly students build up a vocabulary in Chinese, listening and speaking, then reading, and finally writing.

The Chinese teachers in China have told Kittok that in the past they emphasized writing characters. However, today computer usage in China is so prevalent that they are emphasizing listening first, speaking second, reading third, and writing last. As she reflected on this, she shares their viewpoint in teaching Western languages. Listening and speaking are definitely the most important aspects even though we have traditionally required mainly written work for tests and homework in our language classrooms.

We have assumed that only our best and brightest could learn Chinese. This is not so. We have felt strapped for time and money in our schools. However, if a room full of adults can learn a complete story in Swedish in a scant 1-2 hours, imagine what we can do as language teachers when science meets language teaching. This is her challenge and dream.

"More students motivated by success to learn new languages and study the world's cultures will lead to more respectful and peaceful communities within the United States and throughout the world. Peace comes through understanding. World language teachers are everyday peacemakers." -JHK

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