

Spring Grass (Chuncao 春草) Materials Introduction

不闻不若闻之，闻之不若见之，见之不若知之，知之不若行之；学至于行之而止矣。

-荀子

Xunzi said, “It is better to have heard about something than to not have heard about it at all; it is better to have seen something than to have only heard about it; it is better to know about something than to have only seen it; it is better to have put something into practice than to have only known about it. Learn things until you can put them into practice; then you can stop.”

How many of us have taken the easy way out in our classes and delivered our material in such a way that students could demonstrate their mastery by proving on a paper test that they “heard” what we said? How many of us have shown our students a Western-made documentary about life in China and convinced ourselves that, having “seen” Chinese life, our students get it? How many of us have given our students a ‘cultural notes’ reading and told ourselves – and our administrators – that they “know” Chinese culture? For that matter, how many of us have had our students read and discuss an article about the Chinese economy and said, “now you know Chinese business”?

Over 2250 years since Xunzi’s death, his wisdom remains relevant to we who teach Chinese as a foreign language. We can take this quote as a model for how we design courses, the instructional cycle for a single unit, pedagogical materials and even daily lesson plans. We first start by giving the students language that they did not have before and may not have been able to get on their own (闻). Then, we provide information about the context in which that language is used (见 and 知). Many, if not most, educators recognize the importance of doing (行) in language learning, but as Xunzi implied, we need to experience the doing stage in order for knowledge to become appropriate action.

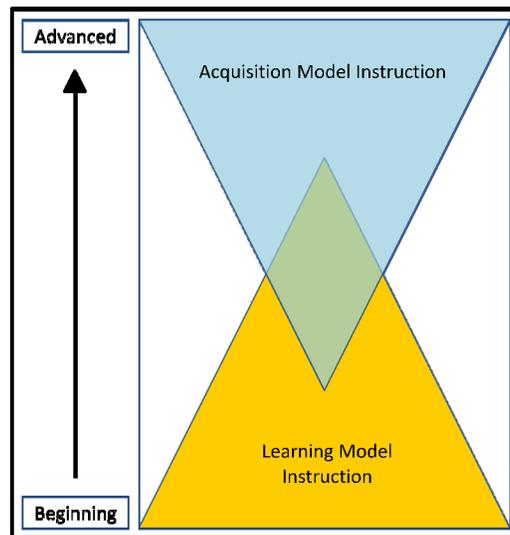
The materials you hold in your hand are designed to make it easier for you to elicit “doing” Chinese from your students, and to increasingly do so in a way that says to their Chinese-speaking peers that “I am also an articulate highly-educated individual.” There is still much to learn after completing this course; at the Ohio State University, students complete the equivalent of three more levels of intensive Chinese before being called qualified to work in Chinese in their field. For many students, however, the course for which these materials were created will be the last Chinese course taken before graduation and entry to the working world. It is our intention that this course will effectively teach these students “how to fish” (授人以渔).

The “Performed Culture” Approach

The Spring Grass (named after the original novel *Chuncao* 春草) course and materials were designed using the “Performed Culture” approach to foreign language instruction. We hesitate to call this a methodology, as that term often implies exclusivity of method. The Performed Culture draws upon many philosophical and pedagogical traditions to create a set of guiding principles that can be applied to a number of methodologies. Using these materials does not make you a traitor to the pedagogical methodology of your current program, nor does it lock you into using certain textbooks

for the other classes in your program. Used as intended, these materials *will* help you deliver a course in which students are the center of instruction, and ideally, “they will think they accomplished everything themselves” (百姓皆谓我自然—Laozi).

The foundation of the Performed Culture approach is Xunzi’s idea that “knowing is doing.” If our students cannot do the target social or linguistic task, then we have not successfully taught it. The target tasks change over the course of a language program. According to Walker’s Intersecting Triangles below, as students enter advanced level instruction, they take the discrete chunks of language and culture knowledge that were delivered to them at lower levels and begin to use them to acquire new knowledge from native sources, analyze it, and produce increasingly complex and individual language performances, both spoken and written.



Students taking this *Spring Grass* course should be at or above the point where the triangles are at their narrowest intersection. A carryover from Learning Model Instruction, students are given vocabulary lists for each chapter of the novel and episode of the TV series, yet, as newly-advanced learners, they must find out what the vocabulary means on their own. Students thus know what lexical and grammatical items are necessary in order to meaningfully engage the material, but they must achieve understanding of those items through their own research and analysis of the native context in which those items are used. Students in this course operate in a linguistic environment primarily created by and for native speakers. Instead of the teacher being an agent of information delivery and the students being passive receptacles of knowledge, the teacher is a coach and the students are engaging the culturally authentic materials as players in the game, not observers. Students are able to acquire the meanings as intended for other native speakers, as opposed to meanings that were specifically constructed for consumption by non-natives, which may be sugar-coated or simply rehash now-canonical themes of Chinese revealed culture.

A second tenet of the Performed Culture approach is that performance is the basic unit of communication, and the cultural context of communication defines the meaning of the performance. Performances in Chinese should be ones that can be repeated in some form after the course is over to achieve personal goals in the target culture. For example, it is an invaluable skill to be able to narrate a story in Chinese such that native speakers who are not paid to interact with foreign learners understand the narration and *want to continue listening or reading*. We as teachers will pay attention to the end because it is our job; native speakers in the working/social world will eventually ignore or

avoid non-native speakers who cannot tell a story that is coherent according to an audience's expectations.

A third basic principle of the Performed Culture approach is that an individual's inventory of stories and his or her ability to relate them at appropriate times and in appropriate ways is how other people rate that individual's level of knowledge and wisdom. By the time our students graduate from college, they are able to relate a fair number of stories in their native language, but when tasked with doing the same in Chinese, their ability often falls far behind. Native speakers of Chinese may consciously grant that non-native speakers sound more intelligent in their own language than in Chinese, but they cannot avoid the reality that interacting with a learner who cannot relate stories in a manner commensurate with their "true" level of sophistication and education invariably limits the level of interaction. And, of course, the only way to train a learner to perform at that level is by "doing" it--repeatedly.

***Spring Grass* Materials Components**

Advanced learners should be exposed to more and more realia in their coursework, but as long as they are somewhere in the upward-pointing triangle of learning model instruction – as most degree-seeking students are – there needs to be some amount of pedagogically-adapted materials accompanying the originals. In the case of the *Spring Grass* course, the materials include:

1. The original novel;
2. An online e-book with audio, mouse-over dictionary and search tool;
3. The TV drama adaptation with synchronized-scripts;
4. Lesson plans with teaching tips;
5. And demo teaching videos for the instructor.

With these tools, students are better able to engage the original novel and TV series by:

- Hearing the pronunciation of characters they do not recognize in the book
- Seeing the characters for words they do not recognize in the TV series
- Being able to look up words in the book or TV scripts using mouse-over or internet dictionaries
- Taking classes in which the lesson plans create an environment for using literature as a medium for language instruction

And the instructors will benefit from the demo videos and lesson plans by:

- Observing the instructional cycle suggested in the lesson plans
- Learning the techniques the teacher uses to elicit responses from students
- Understanding the common questions raised by students

Objectives of the *Spring Grass* Course

First of all, this course is not a literature course or a film/television studies course. The objective of this course is to improve the ability of non-native speakers of Chinese to relate stories orally and in writing

that average native speakers will understand and appreciate, and that will contribute to the learners' establishing an educated person persona. If the course for which these materials were designed were a literature course, it would delve into issues of themes, symbols and critical theory. Especially for language instructors with a background in literature, it is important to be aware of this distinction and to avoid turning the class into a literature class. There is certainly ample material in this novel and television series to conduct a literature class, but such a course would, by definition, be training students to analyze literature for future work in academia, not training students to be able to relate stories to Chinese native speakers in their future social and professional lives.

In short, the objectives for students in this course are:

- To be able to orally narrate stories in a linguistically accurate manner such that native listeners are willing to continue listening because they make sense.
- To be able to narrate stories in writing such that native readers are willing to continue reading because they make sense.
- To be able to write expository essays with clear and convincing arguments such that the experience can be refined and applied to writing at higher levels of education and/or in the workplace.
- To develop strategies for working with authentic material, which learners do not usually have time to achieve 100% comprehension.
- To demonstrate understanding of the historical and cultural background of the Chinese society from the 1960's to the 2000's.
- To cease being a *student* of Chinese dependent upon teachers to digest the authentic Chinese experience and become an adult self-managed *learner* of the language and culture. Adults rely on first-person engagement with authentic culture to continue developing expertise.

Structure of the *Spring Grass* Course

These materials were designed for a one-year sequence of classes that meet for about one hour each day, five days per week. Instructors may choose to apply the materials at a different pace, depending on their local circumstances. You will find in the provided syllabi and lesson plans a cycle of instruction that can easily be stretched out over the course of a longer period of time as necessary; for example, what is done in five days at one institution can be completed in 10 at another. This is entirely up to the user to decide how close the students should get to achieving the objectives of the course in the time that is available.

These materials are designed such that the focus of instruction changes between the beginning and end of the course. The first half of the course (one semester, in a daily one-hour format) the focus is on developing skills giving oral narration of events from different points of view. The cycle of instruction requires students to first watch the television show and then read the closest chapter in the book (there is not always a one-to-one correspondence), mimicking the pinyin-before-characters and speaking-before-writing principles found elsewhere in Chinese language pedagogy. In the first half of the course, students spend more time with the television show and more time preparing for and then delivering oral performances in class. Each week, a cultural theme is drawn from that week's book chapter or television episode that guides discussion of the material. This allows students to focus on what the Chinese author, Qiu Shanshan, and the television show's scriptwriters thought are relevant

to native readers/viewers, rather than focusing on what a language teacher may think is relevant for foreigners (though there is admittedly much overlap in the two).

In the second half of the course (normally spring semester), students shift their attention from the television series to the written novel. Though they will have been engaging both media up to that point, the move to focusing on the novel coincides with a move to focusing on narrative and expository writing of increasing length. In order to provide students with sufficient input to produce intelligent analyses, supplemental readings relevant the weekly theme are provided.

Throughout the course, the instructor must judiciously provide feedback on weekly oral presentations and written work. Students being students, there are usually more errors needing correction than there is time to correct; therefore, instructors must make on the spot decisions about which errors are most critical. We have attempted to assist instructors in this area by describing the kinds of issues that came up among students taking over five years of pilot classes at Ohio State University.

To accommodate the amount of individualized feedback necessary for written work, we suggest that 1/5th of classes in the second half of the course (e.g., once/week for a daily class) be composed of one-on-one review sessions where the instructor points out problems in the first draft of the week's composition that was submitted at least one day prior. It is important that instructors not edit the compositions in such a way that the student merely has to recopy the teacher's corrections. Rather, the instructor should point out problem areas, say what the problem is, and then let the student attempt to make the appropriate correction. Drafts and corrections can be made on computers; however, at this stage of acquiring and internalizing the writing system each student should be required to submit a handwritten version of the final draft before receiving credit for the work.

Finally, using our experience with the historical period in question, with the materials, and with teaching the pilot course at Ohio State, we have provided discussion questions for each week's theme. Some of these questions should be provided to students ahead of time so that they can be intelligent readers/viewers of the target material, while others can be withheld so that students can be asked to come up with their own questions for discussion. The provided answers to questions can remain in the teacher's hands; you may have alternate answers based on personal experience of Chinese culture; feel free and add these to show the breadth of the Chinese experience.

Tips for Teachers and Students

In the unlikely event that a student is reading this introduction, here are the two most important pieces of advice we can give you:

- 1) You will not be able to understand everything you read and see in this course. You must learn how to identify what you need to know in order to engage the material and relate relevant points to a native audience.
- 2) Learn to continually “fail at a higher level”, as Professor Galal Walker puts it. It is possible to complete most of the assignments in this course using only the language you already knew before starting it. If you do that, there is no point in your taking this course. Even if it means risking error, make a habit of 现学现用: using things you just learned.

If you are reading this, you are probably a teacher. In which case, here are a few tips for you:

- 1) These materials were designed for students who have completed three or four years of intensive Chinese language instruction (e.g., at least one hour/day, five days/week). Attempts to use these materials with students at a lower level will result in a focus on lexical items and an inability to engage concepts or create paragraph-level discourse. Building an inventory of linguistic items (learning model instruction) can be done more efficiently using pedagogical materials produced specifically for learners of Chinese as a foreign language.
- 2) The objective of this course is not to complete the instructional cycle for every chapter of the novel and every episode of the television show, though the more, the better. If you do not have time to cover every TV episode and book chapter, we suggest skipping units in the medium that is not the focus of that semester. That is, in semester 1, when the TV series is the focus, skip some book chapters; in semester 2, when reading/writing is the focus, skip some television episodes.
- 3) In correcting students' oral narration and written work, achieving comprehensibility for a native Chinese audience is top priority. After the material is intelligible, then style should be the focus: would a native audience voluntarily continue listening to/reading what the learner has to say? If not, what cues from the novel can the student take to create an engaging narrative or essay?
- 4) The more familiar you are with the material and the cultural and historical background reflected by the material the better, but you do not need to create a persona defined by knowing everything on earth. You are a coach, guiding your students through the process of learning how to find out answers on their own. The more you try to provide all the answers, the less your students will be able to do it themselves. Very often when students are able to provide "answers" that the teacher does not have or does not impart, that role is a powerful motivator for further learning. Eventually, your students will graduate (their parents hope), and need to have the skill of finding and relating answers themselves.
- 5) The material is sometimes melodramatic, and that's OK – it was not intended to become the next *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It was written to be popular fiction, which is what makes it valuable: why does the narrative style appeal to a broad demographic? How can our learners reproduce what makes it appealing?
- 6) Your students will likely go through a period (or periods) in which they are tired of *Spring Grass*. You may need to spice things up with alternative assignments or additional oral performances. However, do not give up on making forward progress. For most students, this will be the first Chinese book written for Chinese readers that they will have read from start to finish. Allow them to reach that point and then to boast of it.

Final Words

Have fun with these materials. Delight in the progress you will see your students make from making disjointed narratives clearly influenced by the English language and their American culture to writing multi-page essays on complex cultural themes that are significant to Chinese people.

Make sure your students periodically have an opportunity to express their own opinions. Even though the primary goal is to have students learn what Chinese people think of the themes and characters,

students enjoy describing their own experiences, and you can help them learn to do so in an appropriate manner.

Tell author Qiu Shanshan what your students think of the characters and events in her story. She is thrilled to have readers from a different cultural background engage her stories and loves to hear about it. You can even make this an assignment for your students. Her blog can be found at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/qss>.

Just as your learners are advanced, we assume that you are a professional teacher of Chinese as a foreign language. We do not presume to tell you how to do your job; we are trying to make your job easier by providing materials and suggested lesson plans with which you can do what you do best. We hope that you will do things with these materials that we never thought of and then share them with us and others who are using *Spring Grass*. Best practices are co-created, not dictated. Let's create them together.