

Claire (Ruicong) Zheng

Language and Literature *Can Be* Interesting

When I was in my elementary school in China, I didn't like language and literature classes, whether it was Chinese or English. I just couldn't understand why some people thought it was interesting or amazing. Language and literature just consisted of words, and they are just the tools used by people in their daily life, nothing more. That was what I always thought the language and literature were before six grade.

At the ending of five grade, my classmates and I were told that we were going to welcome a new Chinese teacher in our last year in elementary school and that she would also be our new head teacher. My friends were excited about having a new teacher, but I was apathetic because I didn't think a new teacher could bring me anything new. Language and literature were boring. It was that simple; no one can change this fact.

On the first day of six grade, everyone brought their books to the class. "Another year sinking into the literature spiral!" I thought, "Read, read, and read; write, write, and write." It was getting close to the class time. I sat in the classroom and imagined the teacher's first sentence: please open to page blah, blah, blah, and today we are going to write blah, blah, blah, predictable and boring. It was class time, and Mrs. Qin, our new Chinese teacher and head teacher, came into the classroom.

The first sentence she said was, "Guys, do you like playing outside?" We answered "yes," of course. "Okay, then, do you like studying Chinese?" she asked. Silence...then we started to mutter, but none of us wanted Mrs. Qin to hear what we were saying. "Okay, the answer is obvious, so let's go outside and have some fun!" she said. Wow, what just happened? We are not going to study Chinese, but go outside? I never thought those words would come

from a Chinese teacher who was supposed to be serious and never smile!

She took us to the Great Wall, which was near the school. Standing on the Great Wall, I found that it was like a giant, winding dragon spiraled along the form of the mountains. If you stand on the top beacon tower and look around, you can see the verdant, endless grass and rolling hills; if you overlook the faraway skyline, you will find that the color of the sky is changing from blue to white and that you still can see the endless Great Wall. Gazing at the giant wall that was built by my ancestors two thousand years ago, I felt very proud, and I suddenly found that I wanted to say something to praise the Great Wall builders. However, I could only say, “it’s so great, so great!” I was trying to think of some other words, the more sophisticated ones, but I only knew “great.” I felt beaten. Maybe because my classmates had the same feeling as I did, we were all quiet. At that time, Mrs. Qin said, “I know you guys want to say something about our Great Wall, but you don’t know what to say, right?” She paused for a moment and then continued, “Chinese courses do seem useless. Of course, we speak and read every day; why do we have to spend so much time on it in class? Not only Chinese, but English and the other languages, too. Languages and literature are boring, but they can enrich our spirit world. If you study Chinese hard, you can write a poem and chant it here, and how satisfying would that be?” Listening to Mrs. Qin, I imagined that I was standing on the Great Wall and reciting my poem. I wished that I could make my little dream come true someday. For the first time, I felt that literature could be such a fascinating thing. “Also, you can both convey your ideas to others more accurately and understand other people’s thoughts more clearly. Language is essential, but not easy. It will make your life better, but you need to treat it seriously.” My attitude towards Chinese changed at that time, and her first writing course opened the door of writing literature for me.

Back in the classroom, we started the class. Mrs. Qin wandered to a classmate's desk in the first row and said, "for us, an essential thing in writing is detail. An essay without any details is not easy for your readers to understand what you are trying to say. Our goal is to let them imagine the tableau we have in our brain by only reading our essays." After saying that, she grabbed a pencil case from that desk and very slowly unzipped it. Then, she looked at me and asked, "Claire, could you describe what I just did?"

"Well, you just grabbed a pencil case and unzipped it," I answered.

"Your description is good, but maybe you can add more details. For example, how did I walk to the desk, how did I grab that pencil case, how did I unzip it, and what did I look like? Try your best to add as many details as you can into your sentence." she hinted at me.

"Hmm, so, you casually walked to the desk... You glanced at the items on it and slowly grabbed the pencil case. You smiled when you noticed the Mickey Mouse on it and unzipped it a little more quickly with curiosity." I tried to use every word I could think of to make my sentences long.

"It's a wonderfully detailed description! I can see the scene just by your words. Good job!" she encouraged me.

Her words were the first positive comment I had ever received from a Chinese teacher. Huh, it's not that hard, and trying to find those "sophisticated" words is kind of interesting because it feels like solving a math problem: it's not unsolvable. I hadn't known how to write details, and her list of questions gave me a clever way to narrate deeply. After that class, I started to carefully observe every item and person around me. I memorized ten sophisticated words per day and tried to use them into my essays. I got higher and higher grades on writing and more encouragement from Mrs. Qin.

Since her Chinese class, I have never considered language and literature boring. The experience at the Great Wall made me yearn to develop my language and literacy skills, and Mrs. Qin's teaching led me to a successful way of writing. It has been seven years since that class, and I'm now studying in America. The language I use is not Chinese anymore, but I still can apply what Mrs. Qin taught me about writing well. Even though competing with native speakers in writing is difficult, my goal is to be the best and to do as Mrs. Qin said—give enough details or explanations—because my target of writing is to convey opinions and make others understand my writing.