

Episode 2 - Teaching Tips within and beyond the Language Classroom (with Dr. Licheng Gu)

Hi, and welcome to our podcast. Teaching and Learning at LUC. We are your hosts. I'm Bridget Colacchio. And I'm Polina Pine, streaming to you from Loyola University, Chicago. We love teaching, and we're excited to introduce you to our colleagues from Loyola. And from around the world who study their teaching practices through SOTL, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Thanks for joining us for today's conversation.

Polina: Hello, everyone. I would like to introduce our today's guest, Professor Gu from Northwestern University. Professor Gu teaches Chinese at Northwestern University. He has been teaching and has an impressive record of teaching for 30 years Chinese languages in America. He was born and raised in Beijing, China. He got his bachelor's degree in China, his master's degree in Australia, and his PhD at the University of Oregon, USA. Professor Gu also serves as East Asia liaison in the office of vice president for international relations at Northwestern University. He has an impressive record of publications. He published five books and he's gotten numerous teaching awards. I think it was seven or more than seven. I already couldn't count. And we're glad to have Professor Gu as our guest today.

Bridget: Wonderful, welcome Professor Gu.

Professor Gu: Oh, thank you so much, Polina and Bridget. It is a great pleasure for me to be here to share with you my experiences in teaching. Well, I have to say that to me, teaching is a kind of art. You can ruin the life of your students and you can enrich the life of your students depending on whether you are an innovative, interactive, or mostly engaging teacher. I learned everything from my father who is a coffin maker and who is the worst teacher as far as I'm concerned in the whole world. Yeah, even though my father was a coffin maker, he attended three years of elementary school in his village in Hebei province, China. Wow. Well, he only had three years of education, but he respected education. And in his limited spare time, besides making coffins, he decided to teach me instead of teaching my two elder sisters and my elder brother. He thinks that I'm someone teachable. So he started spending time with me. But the problem is the way he taught me. He taught me mathematics, which is of course, abacus and not, you know, not laptop, not computer, but abacus in China. He only told me how to do it without explaining anything. He just asked me to memorize all these rules without explaining them, without applying to the minus, to the plus, to the addition, nothing. So every day I was forced to just do the adding, do the multiplying, do everything without understanding anything without using it for any purpose. So after a long time of misery with Abakers, I learned nothing. Even today, I don't know how to use Abakers. That's mathematics. And now let's look at Chinese. He had one book that is, that has all the surnames of the Chinese people. And he asked me to memorize it without writing it, without explaining those characters, without dissecting the characters, you know, different parts of the character, why it is using this radical, why it is using this part, whether this part is representing the general category of the character or the pronunciation of the character. Nothing. So I was just forced to memorize. Let me show you a little bit. Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhou Wu Zhong Wang, Feng Chen Chu Wei, Jiang Shen Han

Yang, Feng Chao Yan Hua, Jian Wei Tang. So when I was becoming a teacher, I felt I had to be a better teacher and better than my father. So I started teaching the Chinese language in the United States. My first job was at Princeton University after I received my PhD degree at the University of Oregon. In Oregon, I studied curriculum and instructions in which I learned a lot of courses on methodology or in other terms pedagogy. And then during my years teaching in Princeton, my mentor happens to be Perry Link, a great master in teaching Chinese. His teaching is very innovative, very interesting, very engaging, and very interactive. That's what I learned from him. And then even my, and of course, more importantly, your teaching has to be funny and interesting. My PhD dissertation happens to be humor used in language classrooms in North America.

Polina: Wow, that's really interesting. Yeah. That is so interesting.

Bridget: There's so many things here, Dr. Gu, to unpack with you. Go ahead. Yeah.

Professor Gu: So if you look at my students' evaluations, many of them will say, oh, this teacher is so funny and so humorous, and make my language class entertain, make me interested in the language. So when I see that as R, it works, but anyway, over the years, I've summarized some things that as a language teacher, you should do. So, you know, Brigitte and Polina, so today's talk might be more related to language teachers. It doesn't have to be Chinese language or Japanese or Swahili. It is mainly how you teach a foreign language, some of the rules or the do's and don'ts that you want to be careful about.

Bridget: Yeah, I'll be really interested to dig into some of those. I imagine that there will be application to other disciplines and teaching other disciplines outside of language. Oh, that's exactly what I wanted to say. Yeah. So that'll be exciting to think and talk more about that. I'm struck initially, Dr. Gu, as you're talking, the first thing you said about teachers having the ability to ruin or enrich lives sounded so, I'll say, dramatic and critical that there's this weight to the endeavor of teaching that makes or breaks people's lives. And I think that is really striking. And as you shared a little bit of your history, it makes sense how you came to that perspective. And so I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about that idea of the critical importance of the human experience that is education. I feel like that's what you were getting at. And I'd love to hear your thoughts on that before maybe we talk about some of the specifics of what to do and what not to do.

Professor Gu: Yeah. You know, I believe in that, you know, people fall in love at first sight. You know, when you first see someone that's, ah, I really like this person. Oh, oh no, I don't like this person. So the first sight. And then when a student goes into your classroom, no matter if it is a language or chemistry or physics. It is really something that the students are here to test whether they want to pursue it. If the class is introduced as very engaging, interactive, and interesting, then the students will start, and continue to learn. And then the more they learn, the more enjoyment they will get. But if it is something that is for the first class, for example, introduction to economics, macroeconomics, for the first class, you might very well kill the interest of a student in macroeconomics. That happens all the time. I mean, look at the students

at Northwestern University. We give them two years to shop around to see whether they are interested they are really interested in a certain major. So you do kill the interest or arouse the interest of a certain subject. And for language teaching, of course, same as other languages, same as other subjects, I mean, it is the same. You can really make it or kill it.

Bridget: Wow, thanks.

Polina: I actually want to start from the less optimistic side of it. So what do you think can really kill the interest of a student in a certain class? Do you mean to kill the interest of a student?

Professor Gu: Well, it is very easy. The easiest thing to do is for the teacher to spend most of the time of the class talking, talking, and talking without interacting with the students, without leaving time for the students to raise their questions. Talking and explaining is the last thing that I instruct my trainees not to do because the concentration span today is getting shorter and shorter thanks to social media and everything and the students don't really have the ability to concentrate listening to any explanation for five minutes or longer then they tune off. They don't listen to you anymore. They think about something else. So if you don't keep interacting with your students, you will never get your students engaged. And without getting them engaged, they'll get lost, then they'll lose their interest.

Polina: Thank you. And I guess it really brings us to the more optimistic part of the next question. And I think it really connects to the don'ts and do's that you were talking about at the beginning. So would you like to share with us your vision on this?

Professor Gu: Yes. Well, when I think about the do's and don'ts, actually I'm thinking about more like don'ts. Because when you see the don'ts, you know what you should do on the opposite side. Now first of all, before I start sharing with you the 10 don'ts which of course the opposite is the do's. And the three major principles that I have organized, I have, you know, summarized. One is no matter what you teach, the students should be the center of the class. That's number one. And number two is we should explain things in a very concise way but leave more time for discussion, for interaction. And the third, before I go on, I would say that, every time when I train young teachers, I would say in a language class, the instructor, the less you talk, the better. The more students can talk, the better. So organize your activities, and design activities for your students to open their mouths and talk. And the teacher should work very hard to speak less. That's number two, principle. Principle number three is to correct your students' mistakes at the right time, in the right way, either during the class after class or in the papers, which I will explain in more detail. So these are the three principles in teaching.

Bridget: Yeah, could we stick with those for a moment? Because as I'm letting that sink in, the idea of student-centeredness and the instructor talking less and providing timely appropriate corrections if that's correct. Did I get it? Okay.

Professor Gu: Perfect.

Bridget: Okay. I don't need any timely corrections on that. Okay. So I think that's so simple and yet it's hard to do and a lot of our colleagues I think struggle with that. So I wonder if I want this to kind of sink in for people who are going to be listening here in contemplating the ways that they're approaching how they plan their teaching that takes them away from those things, that takes them away from thinking of their students first and maybe thinking of the content first and away from talking less and just filling the space with all the things that they know. So I wonder, is there anything else that you can do to help flesh out those three principles for people to begin to understand how those in and of themselves, before we get to the list of don'ts, can be applied in someone's classroom?

Professor Gu: Okay, let's look at the student-centered design of the course or that particular session of the lecture of the class. So first of all, from the beginning, when you design this particular session of the class, you really want to think about the current preparation of the students. Are they ready for this topic? How much they have already covered in the previous lectures? So you then based on that you design the activities. That's number one. Number two is you do not spend time to elaborate and explain and explain. You spend the time to design the activities that the students can do to get the point. It's not how you explain it, but how you get the students to work on it, and then based on what they do with the instructor or with other students in a small group or in a pair, they get the idea. So that's how the students can be the center of the class.

Bridget: Yes. That reminds me of, it's sort of a silly analogy, I guess, but people talking gets your body healthy, you can't listen to someone describe how a treadmill works or the value to your muscular structure of doing resistance training. You actually have to do it. Someone can talk about it and demonstrate it over and over again, but if you don't get out there and move your own body, it's not going to benefit you at all. And that just came to mind that there really is this need for students to do the thing, whatever the thinking is, whatever the analyzing is, the practicing and languages obviously applying and doing the speaking or the writing that they need to actually get out there and do it. That is, again, so simple, but I feel like we miss it a lot.

Polina: You know what? It also reminds me, since I was born in the Soviet Union and there are many people who came from the Soviet Union to the United States and the way the languages were taught there. Many of us, have been learning the language for years and years and years. Yet, when we come to the United States or any other English-speaking country, we realize that first, we don't understand the word. Second, we open our mouths and we cannot say a sound. The question is, why? So, and maybe just because we were so much focused on the theory without really opening our mouths and talking. And even I remember how we learned English. We had topics. So, we just memorized the topic, and we stood up and we just, you know, spewed the topic word to word without understanding just maybe similar to how you were taught the math when you were a kid

Bridget: I wonder if there's something about, you could talk to us, Dr. Gu, about, especially in a language, I was just talking to a friend about this, the need to practice knowing you're going to make mistakes. And in so many ways, our education system is set up expecting, or at least

students internalize, the expectation that they're supposed to only put forward the right answer or only put forward the perfect, correct idea or analysis or pronunciation, whatever the subject might be. I feel like maybe behind some of this is embracing the messy process of lots of mistakes that are required in education. Could you talk a little bit about that? Is that part of your understanding too?

Professor Gu: Yes, I fully agree with you. First of all, no matter what you learn, either it is mathematics or chemistry or any foreign language, student making errors is a common error. They should be encouraged to open their mouths to practice even though they make errors. But the issue is, after they make the error, what do we do? That is going to make the big difference. For example, as an instructor, when a student says something not correct, that happens all the time, of course. And the instructor should very gently and promptly untimely point it out, okay, this is the way you want to say. Then give a good example and let the student have an opportunity to practice that again. And then this is of course, in classroom interaction. But after class, when a student turned in something, I never give them an A or a B or C, no, I always make very specific corrections and suggestions. And then after that, the student has to turn it in again and show me the corrections the student did. So that students always learn something from the mistakes that they make.

Polina: My question is, what if the student makes that many mistakes that while speaking, let's say every second, every third word is incorrect. So is it more useful to correct the mistakes on the fly or wait until the student finishes and then to correct? What do you think would be the best practice in this case?

Professor Gu: Very good question. Yeah, this is a very practical question. Now, first of all, you want to grasp the main problem. You know, if the mistake, for example, when one sentence is uttered from a student, if something is so critical, so crucial, that distorts the whole meaning or the whole intention of the student, you'll fix the main problem. And as to the other problems, you can leave it behind. You can handle that later. But for the time being, make sure the message is clearly delivered by the student in a correct way. That's number one that you want to correct. So the other minor ones handle that in the next day or the following steps. For the time being, right now, the major issue. And then the next issue is the timing when to do that. I would wait till the student finished the whole paragraph or finished the whole thing. But in my mind, I remember that. And then I will usually, usually pull him over after class and explain to him, this is the way you do it. But for some simple and quick fixes, you want to tell him, no, this is the way you want to say it. This is how you pronounce this word. Then you can do that very quickly. And I have trained my students to hear me correcting them. And then they make the, then they correct themselves in class and do that again. So I always ask them to do several things. One is to learn from your instructor. Yes, you paid for this. You deserve the right to learn from your instructor, but you should also learn from your own mistakes. Not only that, you'll also learn from your classmates in the classroom.

Polina: That's exactly what I wanted to ask.

Professor Gu: Yes, and then you are also going to learn from the mistakes that your classmates made. And also every time I always ask the students, raise questions. Every time when you have a good question, ask. And if you are not asking, listen to the questions raised by others. It could be very well your question. You know, it is not a question for him individually, but it is a question that might be something that you are not thinking about. So I'm always asking the students to raise questions and learn from each other, learn from the instructor, and learn from your own mistakes.

Polina: So it actually raises personally in different pedagogy technique in classes of different size. And I'm especially curious about languages, right? Because languages, like you say, it's student-centered approach. Students need to talk, students need to open their mouth and really speak and not afraid of making mistakes. And I'm thinking now, so many times, many students like to have tutoring sessions or peer-to-peer tutoring or have private teachers. So I would imagine that the pedagogy techniques that are applied are different, whether it's peer-to-peer tutoring or if it's one student tutoring or five students or let's say 200 students. So I'm wondering how different the pedagogy techniques are then and also is it possible at all to teach languages in 100 student environment?

Professor Gu: Well, now we're talking about the size of the class. No matter the size of the class and no matter what the subject is, the instructor should always make his class interactive. He will have no time to ask each individual of the 200 students a question, but at least he should be able to ask five or 10 students in a one minute lecture, ask a few questions, because the questions will make people think. So always ask. And then even if students don't get a chance to answer the questions, not all of them, and then the questions will help them, will help all of them think. And then if it is a smaller class, and then give more people opportunities to voice their thoughts, their concerns, their questions. And also think about the magic of group works, of pair works. You know, you can always design your class in such a way that each small group, like four or five, they can get a chance to interact with each other and design your questions in such a way that they have to engage with each other. And also don't choose just, okay, now let's divide out yourselves into 10 groups of the 200 students. Have fun in the coming five minutes. No, you have to do two things. The first thing is you'll go around the big lecture hall and listen and just pretend to listen to people if you're not really listening to them, but usually we do, right? And you just chime in here and there, go around. That's number one. And number two, one of the assignments at the end of the discussion, have the representatives of some of the groups report back. And then, you know, this is not only let the other students hear what the other students say in other groups, but also give them a sense of responsibility. They have to discuss, they have to draw a conclusion, they have to report back. Anything without reporting back doesn't have good results. So the students always feel that, wow, I have to accomplish something, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go to handle different sizes of the classes, you really have to design your activities.

Bridget: I feel like what you're describing is the need, you're describing what your class looks like a month in, where everyone has been socialized to the kind of learning environment that you've set out for them, where they understand what feedback is about and that it's welcomed.

They understand that making mistakes is welcomed and that that's okay and expected. They understand what's supposed to happen out of group work.

So I guess I'm wondering what are the ways that you help to create that kind of community where the students sort of know the path of learning that you're taking them on and buy into it? so that they are able to take advantage of all of the things that you've set up for them in the way that you intended. What does that look like as you're setting up your class, as you're getting things started at the start of a new term that allows them to understand what you're expecting and bringing them into and then get on board?

Professor Gu: Yeah, how can we get the students in learning in groups or in or through interacting with the instructor through their grades, through their examinations, because I do ask them to turn in their group projects as graded works. And also, their the midterms and the finals, I always have interactive dialogues, you know, so that the students have to really work hard in a cooperative way with their partners or friends in a group. And from the very beginning, I repeatedly tell them in Chinese that you are not only learning from myself, but you are also learning from your friends in this classroom. So you really have to start from the very beginning. show them the benefits of learning from each other. For example, every time when a student, when one student asks a question, I always ask everyone, let's listen to this question. Do you have the same question? And after I answer the question, I will say, hey, does it help you who didn't ask this question? They say, oh yeah, it helps me too. So I said, that's why not only learning from the instructor, but also from your colleagues, I mean, from your friends in the classroom. So learning from each other is very important. So from the very beginning, I have already, I gradually, very quickly, build up this friendly, casual environment that people laugh at each other's mistakes. Now, let me give you an example. Sometimes in the class, I ask the students to put on their translations in Chinese on the whiteboard. So I do not only ask one, because I usually ask four or five, come up with a marker and write on write down their sentences over there. So as soon as they finish, I will say, okay, I found some errors over there already. Can you see there your friends' errors on the board? Now, everyone, when you see anything or anything different, anything that you don't think correct or anything very different from yours, come up and use a different colored marker and write that out. So they come up very actively and correct each other. Sometimes their correction is wrong, but it doesn't matter. Then they will learn, oh, then the teacher will say, no, no, no, this correction is not really necessary. Let's stay with this way. But they learn from each other and they find it very, very friendly, very casual, because it is not personal. It is not graded at that time. It is really they are helping each other and learning from each other.

Bridget: And you're taking them on a journey, it feels like, because the shortest distance from this mistake to the correction would be you just pointing it out. And because you're letting their peers weigh in, because you're letting them correct themselves, because all of these things, it's not the straightest line. And I think that that's what I'm gathering, maybe from what you're describing is that the kind of education that you experienced that was here's the thing, here's the right answer, just memorize it. Maybe that was the straightest line from I don't know this to I do know it, but it was a terrible journey. And it seems like and then the result you didn't even

remember the things or you hated what you learned at the end. So it's feeling like you're describing this experience and it's like a journey of education. It's not just the quickest route. from point A to point B, which I think that the addition of humor and relationships and enjoyment of the process is pretty critical to that, it seems.

Professor Gu: Yeah, Bridget, think about the students. What is the biggest enjoyment? The enjoyment is they learn something new, they learn something that they didn't know before. They learned something that they couldn't say it correct, and now they can say it correct, or they couldn't write it correct, now they can write it correct. No matter it is their own mistake, or their friend's mistake, but the most important part at the very end, it is at the final examination. When you put this sentence there in their exam paper, they say, ah, he helped us earlier during the class two months ago, now I'm going to translate the sentence in the right way, and I know what is the correct way. So, he has such a great sense of enjoyment in making a good statement, making a good sentence over there.

Bridget: Right, right.

Polina: I remember when I just started my teaching journey here in the United States. I got a very interesting advice from a person who was teaching languages. And she told me that from her experience, the most important moment in the semester is the first class. So she said that it's very important the way you start the communication with the students and how you set up the class, the notes that you set up the class with. And I'm still thinking about this because it's an interesting thought that I still didn't really feel the application of this because the class, I see that the class every semester, each class is just like an entity that is developing and the mood and the way of teaching and learning changes. And it's like we develop the relationship and I still didn't really feel the importance of the first class. Maybe in future, that's what I'm hoping for. What do you think about this? this thought, this advice about the first class in the semester.

Professor Gu: You don't have to make the first class the best class of your semester, but you have to start creating the culture that you want to see. Let me give you an example. You know, as a student, every time when he walks into a classroom, a new class, I mean, he pays attention to what kind of teacher this teacher is, what does he or she want? how he manages and, you know, he observes. And he will change his behavior dramatically from the previous class or the following class due to the requirement of this political instructor. So in the first day of the class, make your rules or requirements very clear. For example, when I speak to you, When I greet you, all of you have to speak up, loud and clear, together, that's fine. I will say, hello everyone in Chinese, and they will say, hello Professor Gu. And they will say it loud and clear. Why do I do that? Because I do want to have that formality. I do want to have that kind of authority, respect, and also think about the participation. And also for learning a foreign language, you really want to speak up and voice everything in a very elaborate way. And then, you know, what is more? That will make everyone up. I mean, wake everybody up from their sleeping or from their tiredness. So that's number one. And number two, every time, you know, during the first day of the class, you tell them, okay, when I ask you to do something,

I will point to you even, you know, usually, you know, in the first day of class, I don't know their names, right? I'll just point to you and you should respond immediately. Don't ask, are you asking me? And also don't ask, don't say, I'm not sure what to, I'm not sure whether I'm correct. No, no, no, cut all the crap. Just go straight to the answer because we have no time for those formalities. So because we only have 50 minutes. So you set up all those rules and make it a very efficient, interactive, and lively, and loud and clear class. So every time when a student speaks, no matter if this is quite a shy student or someone else, he or she has to speak up and participate in a very active way. And also, when one student asks a question other people have to learn to listen. Because I always ask, did you hear his question? Is this also your question? You know, otherwise, because a lot of times students can be absent-minded and, you know, when someone is asking the question, they'll tune it out because the professor is not talking with the student, only another student is talking. No, no, no, no. I said, you know, you really have to learn to pay attention to each other. And I also ask the students to pay due respect to each other. So that's what I mean by listening to each other, not only listening to the instructor. So all these rules, you can tell them at the beginning of the class, but enforcing it, in two or three sessions, they all follow the rule in your class. Maybe the next hour they go to the different class, the culture is different, but the culture you built in your class is very important in the first day of the class.

Bridget: Yeah. And I'm struck by, I think you and I probably have maybe different ways of going about pedagogy, but your structure and rules and clarity are in the service of building relationships that let them learn in the culture of your classroom. And I do the same thing. So I'm just really struck by the focus still being on the student experience, still being on connecting with each other and connecting with you through this very clear set of parameters and expectations where they know what's expected of them and they know how to succeed then in the direction of the learning that you have set out for them. So I'm just really struck. I think it's really amazing. I am thinking in the interest of time, maybe there's a couple of your don'ts from your list that we didn't get to. We are just having so much fun talking about everything. So I wonder if there are a few things that you could share with us and with the listeners from your list of what not to do.

Professor Gu: Well, actually, you know, through your good questions, I've already covered most of them. But let me quickly look it through and see if there's anything that I missed. Okay. Now as an instructor, you should never always praise your student when they ends, given an answer encouraging for sure, but be helpful. Uh, be analytical of the students offerings. I mean, uh, their utterings is very important. And also, don't just give a grade, don't just give a score. For every mistake a student makes, you have to give them the correct answer. That's easy. But also explain, look at this step, you got it wrong. You have to give a correct model for them to follow. And then for the class, if it is a decent sized class, you have to make sure that all the students are getting involved, not only a few active ones. So in my class, I seldom, very interesting, Bridget, I seldom ask the students any answers. Anyone wants to answer this question? I seldom do that. Please, please. You know, I direct because I want to equally distribute my questions. Otherwise, you know, those lazy ones will never get involved.

Polina: Lazy or quiet ones, right? Because especially I look at the classes you teach and I think, okay, so in chemistry or math, we can ask students to write the answer on the piece of paper or use a clicker question, a quick clickers or use, I don't know, finger pointing such as one, two, three, but in language you need to speak. And what if you are shy or quiet or introvert? So of course, So how to increase the experience of these students in our classrooms?

Professor Gu: Yes, get everyone involved. No child left behind.

Polina: I like it.

Professor Gu: And then for foreign languages, I will never ask a student to make a sentence after I teach them a certain structure of the sentence. Otherwise, the students can make those weird mistakes are unique to himself and there's no way to continue. So I always set up a scenario and ask students to have conversations with me or with other students following that particular structure. And I also don't teach those most popular special jargons popular in internet or anywhere. I want to teach the basic ideas, the basic principles that the students have to learn. So between the popular and the most crucial elements, I choose the most fundamental important parts. As those most popular ones, I leave it to the most advanced students who wants to learn it after class and I never test on those special jargons they picked up on the street and popular today in internet in their social media. Yeah. And I always gave feedbacks immediately, as quickly as possible.

Polina: I have a question. It's just a different topic. So I'm thinking about Chinese characters, right? And as a person who speaks three languages with different alphabets, I find it different to study languages with different alphabets. So is there a difference of teaching Chinese to people whose native language or who are familiar with Asian characters and people who mostly speak Cyrillic languages with Cyrillic alphabet, or people whose native language is Arabic or Hebrew or also English, for example, or French? There is a difference of teaching people with different backgrounds.

Professor Gu: Yeah, the students like Japanese or Korean, when they learn Chinese, they have some advantage in learning the Chinese characters because they are still using some of the Chinese characters. So that's the only advantage they have the same challenges. So there's no special different treatment that they should take in learning the Chinese language, especially the Chinese characters.

Polina: But how about the structure of the language? So which students would have benefit with the structure of Chinese?

Professor Gu: In terms of the structure, Chinese is very close to English, believe it or not, because it is the same structure. For example, it is subject, verb, object, you know, as the old language, like in English. So it is not that difficult. But when you learn a foreign language, structure or the grammar is usually not the most difficult part.

It is very easy for adults, I mean the college students to learn. It is very easy, but it is the appropriateness and also the fluency in speaking. These are the most challenging parts.

Bridget: Yeah, I bet. I bet. I'm wondering, something that we talk about a lot is the scholarship of teaching and learning and the field of taking our pedagogy and studying it, learning the effectiveness of our different techniques. And I'm not sure if you're much involved in that or if you have thoughts about as a master teacher of languages, if you have thoughts about what kinds of questions you might have that you'd want to explore and investigate as it related to your own pedagogy the learning of your students or other questions from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Professor Gu: Well, this is a great question, Bridget, because teaching is an art. And then when you want to summarize it and present it to the general public, I'm not general public, I mean to the field, to the colleagues in the field, you really have to do a lot of research and you have to collect data to support your hypothesis and all these and of course you have to do a lot of literature review and see what is already present or the available in the field. So what I would like to see is more empirical studies. So for example, if you feel that if you suggest that a certain way of teaching is this way then you have to show me the controlled groups result and the experimental groups that you use and see the better result. You want to really want to do that. And also the theories of testing. How do you conduct a valid test so that the students can be rightly, can be efficiently tested? All these needs to be researched on, and I'm very interested in those areas. Yeah. And of course, you know, go to, I would encourage my colleagues, you know, go to those teaching conferences, you know, those annual ones or the local ones, and hear what other people are doing, and see how they explain their research projects, and learn from each other, just like the students, learning from each other in the class. And we as instructors, we should also learn from each other during conferences and workshops.

Bridget: Absolutely. It is very much a parallel process. And I like to think we do all this professional development and as you said, training with educators and remembering that we're still learners, even though we have something to teach that we all still have a lot to learn. That's such a critical, I think, worldview to have as an educator, to remember that we're still learning too. And I think that helps us relate to our students, but then keep improving and innovating what it is that we're doing in the classroom.

Professor Gu: Well, I'm sure that I fully agree with you, Brigitte and Paulina, that we should be learning all the time because, you know, the world is changing with the internet, with the AI, chat GPT. And when we teach languages, when we teach any social topic, and we can easily, I mean, the students can easily get a paper written by AI and something we'd really have to think about how to teach, how to evaluate, how to give exams to our students. And this is the challenges that we are all facing. We have to be really stay in touch with each other with the current new development.

Bridget: Absolutely.

Polina: I guess every decade brings new challenges, but the challenges always come with something, new tools that we can use, right? And everything new that comes up, we just need to learn how to use for the benefit of our field and our field is teaching, right? So just like you mentioned, the new things that come up as ChatGPT and AI, it's just the time to really dive and see how we can use it to benefit our students, to benefit the experience of our students, to develop our students, and just to help them learn the field that we're teaching.

Bridget: Yep. Thank you so much for your time for your insights. It's such a pleasure to hear about your teaching mastery, even in a different discipline. There's so much that I learned from listening to you, and I hope others will as well.

Professor Gu: Thank you so much, Polina and Bridget..

Bridget: Wonderful. Thanks so much. Bye.

Reflecting the episode

Bridget: Wow what an interesting conversation. Stick around for a few more minutes while we reflect on the episode.

Polina: For me, it was really interesting as a person who comes from hard sciences. Yes. So I'm always. First of all, as a student, because doctors go expertise, I was looking at it as a student because I was the one who learned two other languages to speak.

Bridget: Right.

Polina: And I still remember how different was my experience as a student back in the country where no one speaks English on a regular daily basis. So when I was the student not immersed into the language environment, and then I picked up my Hebrew already in Israel in the environment where everyone was speaking the language. And I remember how different was the experience. And it's just interesting what Dr. Gu said that it's student-centered learning, basically what he said, and active learning. So what he was talking about, he was talking about active learning.

Bridget: Right. Exactly. Exactly. Which we talk about all the time at Loyola as the way that we want people to proceed. The things that struck me, one, about how he's creating this culture where they're learning and being so intentional about what that community culture is going to be like that is intended in a student-centered way to optimize their ability to learn. It is sort of like being immersed in like you were just saying, being immersed in the country where a language is being spoken is the best way to learn it. He's creating that immersion experience, it seems like, in his classroom. And it sort of strikes me that no matter the discipline, we all could do that, and maybe we all should do that, is creating these cultures where you're gonna be immersed in the language of clinical social work, in the language of biochemistry, in the language and culture of sociology or economics, whatever it is, that I feel like there's something about taking students to

like a different place when they come in your classroom that is clearly so impactful for how the students are able to learn.

Polina: Yeah, it also brings me back to conversations with my students. So each time I teach different within the subject that I teach, the teaching approaches, they are similar yet very different. And I wouldn't say teaching, I would say even learning approaches. So students always would come to me and biochemistry and would ask, so how to study efficiently in biochemistry class? Should I drill the problems from the morning, from dusk till dawn or from dawn till dusk? Should I don't know, rewrite my notes. And I always say no. Probably the most efficient way to study would be to speak the biochemistry, to talk the biochemistry. And even during the pandemic, I remember, the students would share with me their techniques. They would put their stuffed animals in their bed and they would teach the stuffed animals biochemistry.

Bridget: I love it.

Polina: So just like Dr. Gu said, right, you just need to open your mouth and speak. And it's just like you said, you can speak the social sciences language, you can speak Chinese language, you speak English language, you can speak math language, you can speak chemistry language, but you need to speak, you need to be active in explaining the topic.

Bridget: Right, yeah. And I think that there's something about that touching people's sensibilities about the learning process that creates enjoyment. When we do learn things, when we master something, when our minds are expanded, when we put the puzzle pieces together and it finally makes sense, that is enjoyable. The humor and the joy, being able to make mistakes and that that's okay, all of that, it just feels so positive and uplifting. I think the way that education is really supposed to be is this place where we feel gratified and satisfied and joyful in the learning process, which I think is what innately, I think that that's how we're built. I think that's what it's supposed to be like.

Polina: Learning students from other students. And it really seems to me that the magic of teaching and learning, right, it's being in a society, in the community, and raising the community, inclusive community, which is important, right? It's a part of the learning process, right? Of course I can open up Duolingo or I don't know, YouTube and just watch the YouTube. But the question, will this lead me through the same experience? Will it bring me to the same final point? I don't have an answer for this.

Bridget: Right. Yeah. Yeah. But something about the collective and the enjoyment and being immersed, all of these things are clearly sort of what this is all about. And what a great conversation. I'm so glad that we were able to talk to Dr. Gu and hear from him and learn from him over the last hour or so. That was really great. It's a privilege.

Polina: It's a true privilege. It really is. Yeah.

Bridget: So thank you again to Dr. Gu to our listeners. We're glad to have you and we hope you will join us next time. Take care. Thank you.