Innovation in Language Teaching: The New TCSOL Certificate

It is the mark of a strong organization to recognize emerging trends and adapt them for its own. Teacher College is no different. As the world becomes smaller and the means of interaction easier and simpler, changes must be made to communicate more effectively with people of different backgrounds and cultures. The Certificate Program in Teaching Chinese to Students of Other Languages, or TCSOL, is a new TC program that reflects this idea. Dr. ZhaoHong Han, Associate Professor of Language and Education, recently received a $20,000 Provost's Investment Grant for Program Development Initiatives. The grant became seed money for TCSOL's development, and its first class of students entered TC this fall. The Certificate Program is a collaboration of three groups: TESOL and Applied Linguistics at TC, the Chinese Language Program in East Asia Languages and Cultures (EALAC) at Columbia University, and Asia for Educators at SIPA. Dr. Han remarks that the cooperation of the three schools creates an opportunity for "pooling our strengths together and building on our strengths."

American demand for learning Chinese has led to a "severe shortage" in the number of qualified teachers to meet it. Furthermore, as most of the United States is an "input-poor" environment for Chinese — that is, people hoping to learn the language have little exposure to it outside the classroom — having qualified and capable teachers is all the more important for students to learn the language well. The new Certificate Program is a way for Teachers College to help address this fast-growing demand for learning Chinese here in the United States. While there are not enough teacher education programs for Chinese, they are on the rise. This makes the climate ideal for TC to establish itself as a strong choice for people looking to pursue this option.

Dr. Han reports that the first class is an incredibly dedicated group of 16 students, who meet 12 weekends during one academic year to take classes. Dr. Han notes that the students are also a diverse group, including English majors, students who have earned or are earning an M.A., doctoral students, and people who have been Chinese teachers in private schools. There are also several students looking for a change in career; the demand for teachers of Chinese makes this Certificate Program particularly attractive. This diversity of backgrounds, (continued on page 12)
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she explains, has made class discussions incredibly dynamic and stimulating. All the students in this class had to meet a high level of Chinese proficiency in order to be accepted. When they graduate, they will be looking for teaching jobs “either here or elsewhere.”

Classes are conducted primarily in English since they will be teaching students whose primary language is English. The students and professors occasionally switch to Chinese in order to explain particular concepts. The courses themselves are not about raising speaking proficiency among participants but about explaining, to some degree, how the language works in order to explain it to future students. The students receive opportunities for “microteaching” before working with students in the schools. Professor Han remarks that although having classes all weekend can be taxing for the students, the quality of their work has been excellent. The students, through writing in their course journals, reciprocate this sentiment, writing about their excitement for and interest in their classes, as well as their respect and admiration for Professor Han.

The Program is already growing in popularity, with people contacting TCSOL about applying to and collaborating with the Program. Professor Han says the TC community has offered much support. Currently the Program is trying to reach out to other institutions, among them the Asia Society in New York City, the Association for the Teaching of Chinese, and a government-funded office in Beijing. The growth process, as with any program or organization, is challenging. As the Program develops, it will ideally establish its own brand and expand in terms of both the number of participants and institutional partnerships. Overall, a strong indicator of growth will be the number of people who contact the Program instead of vice versa. There is some indication that this has already begun. Based on the level of skill and dedication of the current students, the Program seems likely to grow in the future. So while spending twelve weekends in intensive study may sound difficult, Professor Han admits that “if we want to do something good for society... we have to stretch ourselves.” This seems like an excellent motto for the Program and an important life lesson as well.