Teaching Mandarin Chinese at San Diego High School

By Xiaoyuan Li, CI/SDSU Hanban Teacher

As a member of the 2013 Confucius Institute program, I had the opportunity to teach the Mandarin Chinese language and culture for three years at San Diego High School of International Studies in the United States. The Chinese program was first introduced to this school when I just arrived there, and everything started from the beginning. Every school year, I was assigned six classes, over 100 students. During the three years, the level raised from Mandarin Chinese 1-2 to Mandarin Chinese 5-6.

Learning from my previous experience and other teachers’ advice, I carefully prepared what I believed to be an effective curriculum for the particular age group and carefully observed my students and their learning patterns and customized my teaching materials and delivery mechanisms to maximize their learning effectiveness. After three years, I felt so proud when I saw my American students speak fluent Chinese and write beautiful Chinese characters. Some of them participated in the Chinese Bridge Camp and passed the high level of YCT. Some showed great interest in Chinese and had the intention of doing the future job related to Chinese.

On May 13, 2016, my students participated in the Chinese Bridge Proficiency Contest and were awarded the first place and the second place in Group A of secondary schools. One of them earned the chance to observe the 9th Chinese Bridge Competition in China this fall.

For 2015 summer vacation, I didn’t go back home to visit my family. Instead, I stayed and took charge of the Chinese language course of the 2015 Chinese Summer Camp, which was organized by Confucius Institute at San Diego State University. The campers ranged from 6 to 12 years old, which was a challenge to me, because I had zero experience of teaching the little kids. Along with the project coordinators and volunteers from CI/SDSU, I asked some elementary teachers for advice and painstakingly designed and crafted to infuse elements of Confucius’s Six Arts in the curriculum and cultural activities. The educational experience was much more interesting and enjoyable. I was very happy to see these campers’ interest in the Chinese language and culture grows deeper and stronger as days passed.

San Diego is a popular tourist destination, where people can do a lot of activities. I enjoyed hiking and sightseeing, pizza parties or barbecue with my friends in my free time. However, I also went through some extremely hard times like a serious car accident, burglary, the loss of my father-in-law, etc. Teaching in a strange environment, we will inevitably encounter circumstances never experienced before. As long as we maintain our faith and hope, we would find solutions to every challenge we might come across.

Through my effort and dedication, I won my American colleagues’ respect and great support. The math teachers even applied a fund for the Chinese program. What was most surprising and impressive is that my colleagues prepared a potluck for me behind me when they got to know I would leave. Surrounded by the Chinese atmosphere in that room they created, my tears swam in my eyes. Besides, I received a certificate of Appreciation of Outstanding work from my principal.

Three years passed by quickly. Although my family and I made certain sacrifices during these years, I obtained more than I had expected, and such precious and unforgettable experiences will bear in my mind forever.