

# Chapter 5

## SoTL and Beyond: A Transformative Journey of Teaching and Learning From Russia to China

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### ABSTRACT

*Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has profoundly enhanced the author's teaching and professional development. SoTL introduced the author to a scholarly approach that enriched her teaching philosophy and created an engaging classroom environment. This approach bridged teaching with research, fostering continuous improvement, reflection, teaching innovation, and collaborative projects based on SoTL principles. However, for SoTL practice to be successful, mentorship, explicit training, and a community of like-minded educators are essential and should be encouraged at the university level. In this section, the objective is to present the author's journey as a SoTL practitioner, introduce how SoTL brought meaning to her teaching inquiry, provide an overview of SoTL endeavors, identify the role of reflection in SoTL, introduce related to SoTL professional development and teaching impact, and explain present and future of SoTL in her context.*

### INTRODUCTION

Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has profoundly enhanced my teaching practices and professional development. SoTL introduced me to a scholarly approach that enriched my teaching philosophy and helped create a more engaging classroom environment. This approach bridges teaching with research, fostering continuous improvement, reflection, teaching innovation, and collaborative projects rooted in SoTL principles. Through this experience, I discovered that for SoTL practice to succeed, mentorship, explicit training, and a community of like-minded educators are essential and should be actively encouraged at the university level.

In this chapter, I aim to share my journey as a SoTL practitioner, explain how SoTL brought meaning to my teaching inquiry, provide an overview of my SoTL endeavors, highlight the role of reflection in SoTL, discuss professional development and its impact on teaching within the SoTL framework, and outline both the present and future roles of SoTL in my teaching context.

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## Who Am I as a SoTL Practitioner: My relationship with teaching and learning inquiry

As an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturer in my early thirties, originally from Russia and currently employed at one of the Sino-American Universities in China, my teaching journey has been challenging yet exciting.

Upon entering one of the Russian universities to pursue my bachelor's degree in World Economics, I quickly discovered that my English proficiency needed to be improved to understand my instructors. That realization prompted me to embark on intensive four-year one-to-one language training with a dedicated language mentor. The personalized speaking activities and structured, teacher-centered grammar, reading, and writing practices at the university helped me discover what worked best for me as an English learner. That experience was especially precious when I established an English-speaking club at my university, marking my passion for teaching and igniting my lifelong attempt to become a skilled and impactful educator.

After graduating and concluding that economics-related jobs would not make me happy, I spent four years teaching kindergarten kids and adults in the EFL context in China. During those four years, I also completed a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) and slowly realized that I needed more theoretical knowledge besides abundant practical experience. Thus, I went to the USA via the Fulbright scholarship to complete the MA degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (MA in TESL) at Northern Arizona University (NAU), where I was introduced to a more communicative language teaching with students' active involvement in the learning process and their increased autonomy. At NAU, I became interested in classroom research but struggled to understand how to conduct one due to the lack of theoretical and practical background. For example, I implemented a classroom auction idea where Chinese visiting scholars were given fake American dollars during English enhancement classes to increase their engagement and participation. At the end of the semester, those fake dollars were exchanged for real gifts (e.g., magnets, postcards, and mugs) that could remind them of NAU and Flagstaff, Arizona. I felt that it benefited the students and their team building. However, I did not know how to measure its effectiveness, conduct interviews, perform thematic analysis, or even what my research question was and what had already been done in the literature.

After getting the TESL degree in the United States, I accepted the offer from Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU), a Sino-American University in China. For the last seven years, I have continued to identify further what worked for me as a learner during my exposure to Russian and American education and revise my teaching philosophy to improve as an instructor to introduce my students to communicative language teaching that is both systematic and abundant with choices, giving them responsibility for their own learning. For instance, I often conduct a needs analysis at the beginning of the semester, allowing students to choose from various topics that they are interested in learning about, such as AI, psychology, and business.

I was also taking the responsibility for my own learning. For example, in one of the Coursera courses that I took titled *The Science of Well-being*, the instructor had an assignment to discover participants' virtues, such as wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, etc. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which revealed something that I felt before about the enjoyment of gaining new knowledge and skills. My number one character strengths is love of learning (i.e., 'wisdom and knowledge' virtue category), which I believe is invaluable for me as an instructor. Thus, I have continuously been searching for op-

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