Research on the Application of Group Discussion Approaches in Graduate Courses

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Abstract. Language ability is an important part of graduate students’ comprehensive accomplishment. It is a basic skill of graduate students to carry out academic activities such as scientific research cooperation and academic communication. Not only in elementary education but also in higher education, teacher-centered teaching is a popular approach in most classrooms in China. As a result, with such a teaching model, graduate students are generally not good at oral communication, lack of communicating skills and strategies. By introducing group discussion approach into postgraduate courses, collecting data through methods of observations, questionnaires and interviews, this study analyzes the attitude of graduate students toward group discussion approaches, and probes into the influence of group discussion teaching methods on postgraduate courses, as well as the concrete harvest of graduate students in terms of language ability. The study found that graduate students have a high degree of recognition for group discussion teaching methods, which enhances their team leadership ability, research cooperation ability, language organization ability, word expression strategy and so on. Therefore, group discussion approaches can be an important supplement to the teaching methods of postgraduate courses.

Introduction

The new era has higher requirements for students. In order to cultivate all aspects of graduate students’ abilities, teacher centered teaching mode is not enough for knowledge learning. Academic discussions between students and teachers require students to have excellent oral skills, language organization, clear views, logical clarity, so that their views could be quickly accepted. In order to get these skills, students should be activated enough in classroom. They need to communicate efficiently among students and teachers. They get inputs from others, then express their judgments and opinions. In these ways, they learn how to be excellent speakers, communicators and team workers.

Teacher-centered teaching mode is used to describe knowledge to students with planned steps, which is one of its strengths. Seminar is a process of resource-sharing and brainstorming, with seminars as the carrier in promoting the academic level of graduate students, improving the innovative thinking ability of graduate students, oral expression ability and the ability to solve practical problems with important values. Teachers and students can clearly express their views, to better carry out postgraduate courses. In current classrooms, when teachers and students’ communicate with each other, or when students need to accurately express their opinions, students tend to be silent or incoherent or simply unable to express their views. It is a common problem in most Chinese college graduate classrooms.

Definition of concepts

Language Proficiency

In China’s Chinese teaching, “language ability” is usually defined as “listening, speaking, reading, writing”, meaning that writing is a ability of productive skill, listening and reading are skills to accept information. Language ability is the symbol of human being different from other animals, rooted in the deepest level of human nature, penetrating into every corner of human life.
Mr. Xu Guozhang, a famous linguist in China, examines the function of language from three aspects: (1) The relationship between individuals, language is the glue of society, and the tool of transmitting information; (2) The relationship between individual and the world, language is the tool of cognition and description of the world; (3) The relationship between individual and culture, language is a carrier.

The word “language ability” in this paper refers to the ability or speech ability of using language, while the ability to use language should be cultivated and developed gradually in the process of human socialization and cognitive growth.

**Seminar-type Teaching.**

The basic hypothesis of group-discussion teaching is that students have potential learning abilities and interest in learning. Teachers guide students to study and cultivate students’ ability and self-confidence. Shuxin Fan also pointed out: “The so-called ‘group discussion’ teaching, refers to the teacher’s intensive‘ on the basis of the teaching of the central and difficult content, difficult problems or controversial issues, through the students independent research and serious thinking, opening classroom discussion or exchange. In the end, teachers sum up and give feedbacks to students.”

**Background**

According to a questionnaire survey executed by some graduate students, it was found that as language proficiency becomes more and more important. Most graduate students found that language proficiency was important for graduate learning. (a) At the knowledge level, 25% of students believe that their knowledge is not enough to support the classroom language, and 3% think that their knowledge is sufficient to support the classroom language. (b) About teaching methods, 65% of teachers still use traditional teaching methods, 35% teachers use question-answer mode, (c) in terms of psychological quality, 80% of the students showing natural, not nervous. 20% of the students in the classroom can’t speak smoothly for being nervous. They can’t express what they want to say. (d) Factors affecting the improvement of language ability include the following: teachers’ teaching methods 50%, psychological quality accounted for 20%, learning level accounted for 10%, classroom environment accounted for 20%. (e) The demonstration of being lack of language ability of graduate students as following: poor language expression, feeling that language expression lack of logic and fluency, appears confused thinking, statements do not work, language expression not enough. People feel that there is no explanation.

According to the research group survey of some graduate students, most postgraduates believe that discussion classroom teaching is beneficial and applicable in the current postgraduate stage, which exemplifies the benefits of graduate classroom teaching. There are also some students to choose classroom teaching and seminar teaching. Among the students who agreed with teachers, teachers’ explanation was more systematic and the teachers’ time arrangement was correct.

Table 1. The biggest gains.

| 1. Improve social communication abilities | 25% |
| 2. Mobilize the enthusiasm of the course participation | 25% |
| 3. Enhance team collaboration abilities | 15% |
| 4. Improved language skills at the academic exchange level | 35% |

Table 2. Needs the most improvement.

| 1. Discussion between students is not high | 41% |
| 2. Can’t hear classmate’s speech | 35% |
| 3. Takes a lot of time to prepare for the seminar | 24% |
Reasons for Insufficient Language Skills

Teaching Methods

At present, the language abilities of graduate students can’t be effectively improved. There are many reasons. First of all, there is not enough opportunity to exercise. Data collected by the survey showed that in most of the classroom with traditional teaching methods, students’ enthusiasm is not improved. There is no opportunity to practice language skills in the classroom, majority of teachers pay attention on the transferring of knowledge, not on the improvement of abilities. In many cases, teachers have the only right to speak and give questions. Students are boring in this kind of classroom. And they can’t get enough opportunities to think independently. And at the same time, the length of attention concentration is very short. According to the survey, it is found that in a small group with group teaching methods, each person has their own statement of expression. It is going to give students a platform to speak freely. From this kind of teaching activities, graduate students could get more experiences on how to conduct a research. Students’ innovative ability and strict logical thinking ability would be improved too. So, this teaching method would greatly activate the enthusiasm and initiative of students. In a study for a common theme, students express their views, gradually colliding with the spark of thinking, getting unexpected results. In the communication, students need to clearly express their views with good language skills, so that people could understand and be willing to continue to pay attention. They need some certain opportunities to exercise themselves. Such study of teaching methods provides an opportunity.

Psychological Quality

Psychological problems affecting the language abilities of graduate students: (1) Shyness. Many students experience shyness and embarrassment during their expression. And they can’t communicate with other properly. (2) Inferiority psychology. Inferiority is a kind of psychological state that individuals despise themselves when they interact with others. (3) Tension. Tension is a psychological state during students’ psychological preparation in language expression. Proper tension would make students extremely excited. But excessive tension would make students brain blank, nervously shaking, language stuttering, confusion of mind. Students are afraid of teachers. They would be afraid that their answers would not be affirmed by the teachers. At the same time they feel that answering questions will get everyone's attention, if the answer is not good, students will laugh at them.

If in the classroom with an atmosphere of equality and harmony, students will performance with their own vigilance psychology. Everyone speak and think freely under the teachers’ successful guidance.

Learning Dimension

In order to participate graduate class discussion problems, students need to have a sufficient reservation of knowledge. Otherwise, they can’t understand teachers’ questions correctly. And they could not get credits in this kind of activities. They will lose confidence. Again and again, they don’t like to answer teachers’ questions. Graduate courses are different from undergraduate courses. The training of postgraduate education is often based on the excavation of in-depth research in specific fields, to achieve a breakthrough in a specific subject area, to create a critical and innovative ability of academic innovative talent.

For teachers, it is very important to prepare lectures well. If a course is hard to understand, students will lose interests and feel bad about the teacher. In this kind of case, communications between students and teacher would be difficult to move on in a right way.

Classroom environment

In a serious environment, students are usually highly nervous, being slow to think and afraid to answer questions. With psychological tension for a long time, students would be unwilling to hand up and answer questions. For a nice classroom environment, teachers and students would like to talk to each other with free thinking. They can hand their thinking and oral expressing, without any
psychological stress. The teacher would be willing to encourage students to give questions. Wrong answers are not going embarrass anybody. Both teachers and students would have wonderful experiences. They benefit from each other.

**Application and Discovery of Group Discussion Teaching Mode**

Traditional teaching mode is generally teacher-centered teaching method, where the classroom is fully planned and handled by teachers. Students are being taught with no right to interrupt teacher with questions. In this survey, it is not difficult to find that, even in graduate courses, most classrooms still take this teaching mode. In some class, there would be a little interactive-teaching. But the percentage is small. For instance, in a course conducted by a famous professor, there was only a small percentage of time that communication between teacher and students happened. Students were mostly in a negative position to learn what the professor wants to tell them. They have no chance to express their judgment. In this kind of environment, it is difficult for students to practice their oral abilities and improve their language skills. With the traditional graduate training mode, courses are usually carried out in the first academic year. Then in the following two years, students spend time on writing their graduation dissertations, having internships, searching jobs and other relative activities. Because these students are used to being arranged and lack of judgmental abilities, they usually couldn’t find a proper thesis topic to deal with. And confusions happen during their research.

Group discussion teaching approaches change the situation of students being in a passive acceptance position. They could get rid of rote memorization. Students are enjoying their communications. They could learn from each other. During the discussion, they know how to speak to teachers, how a interrupt a speech properly, how to share their opinions. And without consciousness, they become excellent on communication. In order to get this kind of data, we set up a data colleting group. This group observed the differences between teacher-centered teaching mode class and group discussion mode class. Some participants are interviewed. Some teachers’ feedback also has been collected.

Through data classification, we can find that the main gains of graduate students from classrooms with group discussion mode are as follows:

**Improved Social Communication Skills**

Traditional classrooms, especially big classes with large number of students, it is difficult for students with different major backgrounds to benefit a lot. They couldn’t communicate fully and establish an effective academic network. In contrast, in group discussion centered courses, students from different professional backgrounds are formed into teams. They could communicate in depth being guided by the same topic. In the academic exchange of research, mutual understanding was being enhanced. They would make a lot of friends, sharing different cultures, knowledge, opinions with each other. With deep discussion, they would understand professional contents in a more professional way.

| Student A1 | “Group activity is suitable, I like it. ““Let us make more friends in a short time.”” |
| --- | --- |
| Student A2 | “Interact more with their classmates, learn more, and promote communicative competence.” |
| Student A3 | “Through communication and interaction, to know more like-minded friends.” |
| Student A4 | “meet a lot of people, unlimited to their own small groups.” |

Table 3. Comments on whether group discussion centered teaching method could enhance abilities for social communication.
Motivation to Mobilize Course Participation

The new curriculum model of group discussion approaches can effectively arouse students’ enthusiasm, changing the inefficient state of passive learning. Students discuss common topics so that each student has opportunities to participate. In this way, students would have a deeper understanding of the point of knowledge. The group discussion teaching method has changed the traditional classroom mode. Students’ negative and passive situation to accept knowledge has been changed. In the classroom, they exchange ideas, producing sparks of thinking, and greatly improving the efficiency of classroom teaching.

In an efficient and productive classroom, students should have a variety of ways to participate the course, exchanging their opinions and views. Students are also participants in the classroom, rather than bystanders. In such a classroom, the atmosphere is active and positive. Group discussion teaching methods could create a more open and enjoyable learning environment. One student gave his feedback: “From the whole class, more people in the classroom, more active the learning atmosphere is. There is no boring. It is very easy to mobilize the enthusiasm of students”.

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Table 4. Comments of the respondents on whether the group discussion teaching method can arouse the enthusiasm of the course participation.

| Student A1 | “Because a lot of times the students are together to discuss the completion of the problem, so that we promote learning, class, communication more motivated.” |
| Student A2 | “Because it is not the teacher has been speaking, but the students participate in the discussion, arouse the enthusiasm of students.” |
| Student A3 | “Group discussion teaching methods to change the traditional teaching methods, teachers mainly play a leading role, easy to mobilize students’ enthusiasm and initiative.” |

Enhancing Team Collaboration Capabilities

Teamwork is very important for scientific research. Accomplishing a subject or project requires the cooperation of researchers of different fields, with different abilities to better solve related problems. Through the cooperation of the diverse group, every member plays some role. They could not only address problems independently, but also work together as a team. Group discussion teaching centered class is a fit platform for students to learn how to be a good team worker. In order to do well in the class as a team, they need to learn how to find a role in a team, what kind of task to take, how to communicate with others, how to lead the team toward a right direction. From these processes, students would develop their abilities to be an excellent team worker.

Table 5. Some respondents’ views on whether the group discussion teaching method could enhance the team collaboration ability.

| Student A1 | “Because a goal being done by a team could reach far more further. If there is no team, no PK, then there is no victory. Within a team, it would be more motivated to do something to challenge oneself.” |
| Student A2 | “Group discussion courses are the most important part in team spirit and philosophy. There should be a leader among team members. At least, there should be a spiritual leadership in one team. Otherwise, it would be a mess.” |
| Student A3 | “It is conducive to collaboration between students and the cultivation of team awareness.” |

Improving Language Skills at the Academic Communication Level

The previous three abilities are connected to language skills. Whether it is social interaction,
teamwork, or classroom participation, it involves the improvement of language skills. More importantly, it enhances the language skills at the academic communication level.

Postgraduate courses are professional and highly academic courses. Through a group of research-style classroom forms, graduate students can use professional terms or expression norms for academic communications at a high frequency, thus enhancing academic language skills. The course requires groups to identify a research topic, forming normative academic reports, and presenting and communicating in the classrooms. During the academic reporting session, students engage in warm and effective communication on different professional issues. In this process, students accumulate more professional knowledge. At the same time, they also gain the abilities to use professional language. This experience is very meaningful for the professional growth of graduate students.

Summary

In a word, through an all-round interaction of teaching and learning, the group discussion teaching methods would create an active classroom atmosphere. A nice classroom environment with group discussion teaching can fully mobilize the enthusiasm of graduate students to learn. Graduate students could exercise their thinking ability and expression ability, improving the comprehensive qualities essential to be a competitive academic scholar. As one student’s comment, “The greatest advantage of this teaching method is the possibility to allow students to communicate on their own way, no longer limited to books, limited to exams. It really let students understand the most real ideas within us. What is more, the process is mutual. You not only express your ideas, but also listen to others. This would help students get a deeper thinking. They could benefit more from group discussion courses.

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