

Analysis of College Students' Participation in Language Classrooms

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Abstract: There are already many literature studies on the phenomenon of low classroom participation and lack of speaking among Asian students. Previous literature has shown that the academic success of university learning is closely related to classroom participation. Classroom participation promotes communication between teachers and students, helps students establish critical thinking, and enhances students' confidence. Nevertheless, students' enthusiasm for classroom participation is still not high. In this paper, through the literature research method, the problem of students' participation in the language classrooms in college is analyzed. The study shows that flipped learning, online discussions, and incorporating classroom participation into classroom assessments can help students actively participate in language classrooms. These reasons and corresponding methods provide alternative, correct, and effective teaching guidance for Chinese language classroom teaching.

Keywords: Classroom participation, Language participation, English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Students' classroom participation reflects their enthusiasm for a certain course. In many university classrooms in China, teacher-centered classrooms are very common, resulting in a phenomenon that teachers are giving lectures and students are listening but rarely speak or participate in the classroom. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the classroom where Chinese college students learn English. Students have experienced cramming education for a long time, from elementary school to high school, where teachers have always been the protagonists of the classroom, while students are seen as containers for receiving knowledge. Previous studies have shown that in terms of psychological factors, students' language anxiety, willingness to participate, embarrassment, and fear of pronunciation and grammar errors can also cause college students not participating in the classroom [1,2]. Gender, age, classroom size, culture, teacher characteristics, and classroom atmosphere all have an impact on The willingness of students to join in language classrooms [3]. In addition, many studies suggested that student participation in the classroom led a forward direction to students' development In terms of personality, way of handling things, and interpersonal relationships. Although classroom participation has many benefits, there are too many factors that interfere with it, which is still a difficult problem to solve. This article also evaluates some solutions. This paper evaluates the reasons why university students are reluctant to speak in class and how to guide English-as-foreign-language (EFL) students in China to actively discuss and exchange ideas in class.

2. Current Situations of Classroom Participation in Chinese Universities

Chinese students generally remain silent in class, and low students' participation has become a common place in language classrooms in universities. Many scholars have found that Chinese international students are very passive in the classroom, are accustomed to speaking less, and not good at seizing opportunities to speak in the classroom [4]. Meanwhile, it is believed that the silence of undergraduate students in language classrooms is formed by their past educational habits and experiences [5].

Chinese students have grown up in a teacher-centered and cramming-style classroom since they started receiving education, forming a fixed teaching mode where teachers impart knowledge but students do not speak. The cramming style of education makes the curriculum more utilitarian, less participatory, and less attractive [5].

Besides, Heller-Murphy and Dwyer [6] concluded that students with no confidence, low English proficiency, and fear of making grammatical and oral mistakes tend to remain silent in EFL classrooms. According to Bailey [7], when learning a foreign language, classroom language anxiety arose from the need to complete classroom tasks in languages other than L1. To sum up, the current situation of language classrooms in Chinese universities is characterized by low student participation, a fixed classroom model for teachers, and the need to improve students' language abilities.

3. The Benefits of Classroom Participation

3.1. Benefits Analysis based on the Students' Perspective

Involving students in the classroom is very significant. For students, participation in the classroom first makes the classroom more dynamic and easy to understand, which indirectly enhances the quality of teaching [8]. In this situation, students have more motivation to learn and will perform better in class. Classroom participation promotes students to be fully prepared before class. Flowerdew et al. [9] pointed out that students' fear of making grammatical and other mistakes in front of their peers. However, encouraging students to participate in classroom discussions no matter whether their pronunciation, grammar, or the use of vocabulary is correct or not can help build up the students' confidence, gain more experience in spoken English, and improve their language level as a result [10]. Long-term active participation in classroom discussions can also affect students' personalities, making them more inclined to become outgoing and willing to communicate with others [11].

Then, classroom participation can also help cultivate students' critical thinking abilities [12]. During the student group discussion process, students try to find solutions to the problem, rather than the teacher directly providing answers. This process is a process of critical and independent thinking for students.

Moreover, group discussions not only involve students in the classroom but also enhance their communication skills. Team division, cooperation, and the unity of different opinions when solving problems among group members all help them improve their interpersonal skills [13]. As students participate in the classroom, they also achieve better grades and their academic performance is also better than just listening to what teachers are saying [14].

3.2. Benefits Analysis based on the Teachers' Perspective

For teachers, as the focus of the classroom converts from teacher-centered teaching to student-centered discussion, the teachers' responsibility in the classroom gradually shifts to turning more content that needs to be taught into group discussions and encouraging each student to participate in the discussions [15]. In this case, the teachers can directly observe the students' group discussions to know how and to what extent the students understand a certain piece of information. When a

classroom is no longer guided by the correctness or error of the problems, but instead focuses more on students' divergent thinking abilities when participating in discussions in the classroom, the teaching burden on teachers will also be reduced [16].

Thus, improving students' classroom participation has enormous benefits for both students and teachers [15]. But despite all the benefits, quite a few students still keep silent when having classes. Research has shown that about 90% of classroom interactions were conducted by less than 50% of the students in the classroom, with only about one-third of the students participating in regular and long-term classroom discussions, and more than 50% of the other students did not join in the classroom exchanges [17]. So realizing the importance of participating in the classroom is not enough; it is necessary to delve deeper into exploring reasons of the unwillingness to join in language classroom.

4. Reasons for Low Student Participation in Class

4.1. Language Anxiety

To begin with, students have language anxiety. When college students participate in the classroom but their answers are judged to be wrong by the teachers, the most common reactions of students are anxiety and fear. As Bailey pointed out in 1983 [7], the phenomenon often occurs when it is necessary to complete classroom tasks in a language other than one's mother tongue, which is often related to spoken language. Thus, when university students use their spoken English to cope with discussion in the classroom, they feel anxious about the reaction from their peers and teachers one of the reasons why more and more college students keep silent when having language classes. In addition, foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is also included in foreign language classroom anxiety. Recent studies have shown that there is an overall negative correlation trend in students' classroom performance with FLCA [18]. Most students, with low English frequency, tend to avoid speaking in classrooms. Thus, silence as a self-protection measure is used to prevent receiving negative feedback, such as being ridiculed by classmates or criticized by teachers [19]. Peer pressure is also one of the reasons for classroom anxiety. When students participate in group discussions, those with stronger abilities will lead the discussion, propose viewpoints, and solve problems. In this case, other relatively silent students may consider their participation meaningless. While participating in the classroom, students need to face peer pressure and anxiety caused by teacher criticism.

4.2. A Lack of Self-Confidence

Lack of confidence in their stored knowledge or existing abilities is also the reason why college students remain silent in the classroom. Based on a survey conducted by Tang [19], it is found that from elementary school to high school, the higher the grade of students, the lower their hand-raising rate is. As academic difficulty increases, students tend to remain silent when they believe that their abilities cannot reach the level of correct answers to questions. Besides, other students reported that receiving negative feedback from their learning experiences has also caused them to lose confidence in speaking and participating in the classroom. Due to the learning experiences in high school, students have become accustomed to silent and cramming education. When students enter university, they continue their previous learning habits. Therefore, although the learning environment has become more relaxed, students still do not adapt to participating in the classroom discussion [9]. In college classrooms, students believe that interrupting the teacher to ask questions is unnecessary [20,21]. Compared to high school students, college students lack the supervision of teachers and parents. Classroom problems such as grammar and long difficult sentences cannot be solved in a timely manner, resulting in unsatisfactory grades in final exams and a decrease in students' confidence in language learning, which is a vicious cycle.

4.3. Classroom Atmosphere

The last main factor is the classroom atmosphere. As found in existing studies, cultural beliefs in China also play an indispensable role in students' reticence in some language courses [22]. Teachers hold absolute power, questioning the students or interrupting them in class can be seen as disrespectful behavior to some extent [23]. Students often receive critical feedback from their teachers after answering questions incorrectly. Therefore, in this teaching environment, the teacher-student relationship is more tense, and the teaching atmosphere cannot provide students with a relaxed feeling of speaking freely in the classroom. So it is important for teachers to establish a healthy classroom atmosphere and act as a role to encourage students involved in classroom discussions [24]. The essence of classroom discussion should be open, inclusive, equal, and freely spoken [25].

5. Solutions to Increase Classroom Participation

5.1. Flipped Classroom

First of all, flipped learning is an effective method to cope with this problem, which is a teaching method that emphasizes learning autonomy, interactivity, and flexibility. Reversing the traditional teaching model, where teachers distribute videos to students for self-study before class, while in the classroom, more strength is invested in dealing with learning problems, peer interaction, or completing further learning tasks [26-28]. During students' autonomous learning time, they can pause, replay, or search for relevant videos according to their own learning rhythm until they can understand the knowledge; in this situation, students' enthusiasm for classroom participation will greatly increase because they have made sufficient preparations, clarified the problems they want to solve, and have more confidence in responding to classroom tasks [26]. This learning method not only shifts from a teacher-centered teaching mode to a learner-centered one, which means the learning needs and interests of students have been prioritized [29], but also stimulates students' initiative in autonomous learning and active participation in the classroom. Furthermore, once a speaking task is prepared and estimated in advance, it will greatly reduce students' anxiety and thus increase their confidence in language learning [30].

5.2. Online Discussion

Secondly, online discussion can act as a tool to boost students' confidence to speak in class. Many Asian ESL students may feel uncomfortable with classroom discussions involving their unknown fields. This is also inevitably believed by many scholars that students' lack of cooperation and passivity in the classroom is related to Asian culture. However, students are quite talkative and cooperative outside the classroom [31]. So, establishing an encouraging classroom atmosphere is quite significant for students to participate in. Online discussion sessions allow students to have more preparation time for topics they are not familiar with, without the need for particularly timely responses. Moreover, they also ensure students' classroom participation, reducing the pressure on students to participate in the classroom [32]. Teachers must supervise students' online participation. Otherwise, poor management by teachers may lead to some students giving up online discussions, and the selected cases and topics must be of interest to students and can be discussed in depth.

5.3. Self-Evaluation and Peer Evaluation

Last but not least, students' self-evaluation and peer evaluation of classroom participation not only enable them to actively participate in the classroom discussion but also ensure the quality of classroom participation [33]. Teachers also need to rate students' participation. An appropriate

assessment measure should be developed by the instructor. Actually, to successfully formulate a grading rule for classroom participation, Students' own thoughts on classroom participation should also be included [34]. There are a few strategies mentioned in Bean & Peterson's paper [34], including giving students opportunities to ask their prepared questions, conducting some discussions via email; giving the shy students opportunities to use the "card system", increasing waiting time and talking to students who are reluctant to participate after class, which means the professor may also invite students who have not participated successfully in the classroom to office meetings where the lecturer can honestly discuss issues and listen to students' perspectives and concerns.

6. Conclusion

The discussion above has shown the benefits, reasons, and solutions of classroom participation. Participating in language classes can help students improve their language skills, cultivate self-confidence, develop critical thinking, and improve communication skills. However, due to language anxiety, lack of confidence, and interest in language learning, it becomes difficult for students to participate in language classrooms. By using solutions such as flipped learning, online discussions, and incorporating classroom participation into grading, students can prepare well before class and take the initiative in the classroom. But students' lack of participation in the classroom is also related to psychology and other deeper aspects and requires deeper exploration. The new teaching mode also needs to be repeatedly tried in Chinese university language classrooms to discover what kind of classroom mode can stimulate students' motivation to actively participate in language classroom. Regarding addressing the current situation of Chinese college students' unwillingness to participate in the classroom, top-down reforms are needed from schools, teachers, and students to make things happen.

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