

# Double Output of Language and Mind

## —Empirical Research and Analysis on Postgraduates' In-Class English Oral Debate

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### Abstract

In-class English oral debate is to introduce the form of debate competition into English listening and speaking class, with its goal to enhance learners' English output quality, motivate their critical thinking and comprehensive qualities. Based on analysis on unique characteristics of the postgraduates group and this teaching model, the features of postgraduates' in-class English oral debate has been commented, as well as its positive significance on current quality-oriented teaching reform.

**Keywords:** Postgraduate, In-Class English Oral Debate, Teaching Model, Quality Education

### 1. Introduction

In 1992 China Education Commission issued “Syllabus of English on Non-English Major Postgraduates”. It is explicitly stipulated that “Postgraduates’ English teaching should stick to the application-oriented principle and should start from practice, with the goal to cultivate and enhance postgraduates’ application ability.”

More than two decades have passed, non-English major postgraduates’ (hereinafter referred to as postgraduates) Eng-

lish teaching model has closely carried out this principle in the syllabus. As a result, whether graduates cultivated under this principle have matched social practical needs?

Niche-targeting questionnaire survey result from Xie et al (2007) on employers, graduates and on-campus postgraduates shows that employers’ overall evaluation on graduates’ English level is that they have higher proficiency in reading, but are comparatively weak in listening and speaking. It is also shown from this survey that graduates in job think their weak point in English is less proficiency in listening and speaking. The urgently- needed course in English for postgraduates on campus is still listening and speaking. That is to say the survey from the above three aspects are highly matched.

From the oral test result of English National Band VI of postgraduates from Northwestern Polytechnical University, it is shown that oriented by test scores, most postgraduates desperately recite vocabulary, grammar and do exercises in large numbers, ignoring their critical thinking and innovative ability. “Absence of Critical Thinking” in Huang (1998) is emerging among Chinese postgraduates.

To a certain extent, the above phenomenon has reflected that there still exists a big gap between postgraduates’ English teaching model, our social development and talents cultivation goals. How to

break through traditional English listening and speaking teaching model for postgraduates and update current teaching model?

## **2. In-Class English Oral Debate**

Debate is to express one's own view towards an issue on the basis of some grounds, disclosing the opposite side's contradictory and weak points in order to achieve correct understanding and common agreement.

In some western developed countries, the teaching of debate had begun as early as mid-century. In that period, foreign languages teaching methods of many European universities fall into two types, reading and debating. The technique of debating included arguments between two individuals or two groups, as well as another solo debating regarding positive and negative aspects on one particular issue. Since mid-century, debating had been listed as one compulsory course in both Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

In-class English oral debate is to introduce the form of debating competition into English listening and speaking class activities. It has two goals: One is to practice learners' comprehensive application ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing, enhancing their language output quality; Another is to improve learners' enthusiasm and ability in their analysis, judgment, and critical thinking.

## **3. Design and Implementation of Postgraduates' In-Class English Oral Debate**

With reference to the basic procedures of Singapore College Debate, the postgraduates' in-class English debate is designed and implemented. During three years period (from 2009 to 2012), in-class English oral debates were conducted among post-

graduates in Northwestern Polytechnical University in 2010, 2011 and 2012 respectively. Total number of debates is 12 with 96 participants.

### **3.1. Preparation Stage**

Under the guidance of random selection, convenience for after-class discussion, debaters from affirmative party and negative party are divided into groups, with four debaters in each party. The president is responsible for presiding over the debate, language coherence and atmosphere coordination. The final assessment is done by all the audiences. The winning party and the best debater will finally be voted from audiences. The grading standard for each team and each debater relies on five aspects: pronunciation, language coherence, innovative contents, team collaboration and team manner.

The debate topic will mainly focus on hot social issues. The final three titles selected by both teachers and learners from 42 alternative topics are: "Is it advantageous or disadvantageous for enrollment expansion in China higher education?" "A young man should start his career, and then get married. /A young man should at first get married, then start his career." "In current society, under double stress from both family and career, who stands more pressure? Men or women?"

### **3.2. Design of the Debate**

The whole debate can be divided into five parts: debate (including affirmative argument, counterargument, free argument, and conclusion), question-raising from audiences, results announcement, comments from both audiences and teachers. The whole debating process will be done in English.

### **3.3. Research Methods**

The research methods adopted are questionnaires, in-class observations and interviews.

Questionnaires involve closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions cover students' psychological activities before and after the debate, before-debate preparation, in-debate performances and after-debate gains. Open-ended questions involve students' recognition of in-class debate and of themselves. On-site observations are also made on both debaters and audiences. Interviews will make up for some ambiguities in questionnaires.

#### **4. Results**

Based on the implementation effect and the results from questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations, the following three comments are made.

##### **4.1. Postgraduates' Participation Awareness**

Questionnaires show that students participation awareness before and after topic-raising is different. Before topic-raising, only about 11.5% students have the desire for participation. The majority shows anxiety, even with fear for the debate. After the topic-raising, students participation consciousness has been significantly enhanced, some students even volunteer to join in it.

In the preparation stage, the main media that most participants have used are: internet (58%), library references (42%), discussion, communication or discussion between participants or groups (33%).

##### **4.2. Language Input & Output**

The survey shows that the probability of debaters' fully understanding of the opponents is approximately 56%. When they could not understand, the ways they would usually take are: requiring for re-statement (75%); Guessing the opponents' ideas from what they caught and forcing themselves to respond (51%); Evading what they could not understand, arguing against the opponents, changing

his situation from being disadvantageous to being advantageous (42%). Debaters who could catch opponents' ideas and had the ability to express their own ideas account for 47% approximately.

##### **4.3. Postgraduates' Recognition**

Learners' recognition involves two aspects: recognition on self-performances in debate and on effect of in-class English oral debate. About 49% students are not satisfied or are not so satisfied with their performances in debate. 63% students think that there is still space for them to improve themselves. It is also displayed that 87.5% learners think that in-class English oral debate is more effective than traditional English teaching model.

#### **5. Features of Postgraduates' in-Class English Oral Debate**

The analysis on the above research results has shown some features of postgraduates' in-class English oral debate as well as its differences from traditional listening and speaking teaching methods.

##### **5.1. Transformation of English Teaching Model**

It is proved in constructivism that teachers' role is not to pass on knowledge. It is acknowledged in this theory that knowledge is gained through meaningful constructivism under certain circumstances (under social and cultural background), with help from others (including teachers and learning partners), and by applying necessary learning materials. In-class English oral debate has produced an authentic environment for learners' to express their minds. In the whole process, the learners have been transformed from passive "sponge" to take in knowledge into active "organizers", participants, team cooperators, guides and listeners. The fading-out of teachers' control over the debate has provided much more flexi-

ble space for learners to freely voice their minds.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) have classified foreign languages learners' motives into two types: instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Currently, Chinese postgraduates' learning motives are significantly shown in Li, Gao & Qian (2003) as "double motives", involving both of them. Being an English learning method, debate has offered the best motivation for learners. The pragmatic one is to win victory over another team; the long-term one is to enlarge knowledge and enhance their own ability. Combination of the two motives has formed an optimal English learning environment for the postgraduates.

Topic design is pivotal for in-class English oral debate. One significant, suitable topic is a key element to motivate learners' desire for debate. Learners' active participation awareness has promoted language input and output, which has naturally resulted in second language acquisition. It is pointed out by Rod Ellis (1990) in her "topic hypothesis" that "Second language acquisition can only be facilitated under such situation that learners can propose and control a topic."

The change of evaluation in oral debate manifests in its scoring standard, assessor and teachers' assessing language. Except for focusing on correctness and fluency of language expression, content consistency, innovation and team spirit have become another focus. In-class English debate has assigned the role of assessors to all audiences. Duty and commitment promote all audiences to listen to debaters carefully, paying due attention to whole language and innovation, making fair and objective evaluation.

## **5.2. Double Output of Both Language and Mind**

Swain (1985) emphasizes that output is an important element for foreign lan-

guages acquisition. If learners hope that their second language is both fluent and correct, comprehensible input and output are both needed.

In-class English oral debate is both debaters' and audiences' proving process of target language hypothesis with their own "pushed output" (1985). In this whole process, debaters have caught attention to their own language problems and have learned English mentality by revising English structure, or by matching or connecting language forms with the meaning they attempt to express through debaters' "negotiation of meaning" (1985). If this process can not go forward as expected, a new cycle of "negotiation of meaning" (counterargument, free debate) will soon start. Therefore in the debate, language learners' interest is not only on language recognition, but also on language output. Alteration of language input and output promotes (forces) debaters to master language forms, to fluently and correctly use these forms to achieve automation of language input and output, improving language output quality. In the argument, debaters are being broadened from narrowly pure language forms, expressing their minds (point of views) by using language forms, achieving double output of both language and mind.

## **5.3. Enhancement of Learners' Comprehensive Qualities**

In preparation for the debate, what the learners have gained is not just rich language materials, broadened view, open-minded thought and knowledge integration, but more the development of learners' self-initiative learning and co-op learning ability. In the debating process, students' swift mentality, responsive language ability and critical thinking have been practiced to a big extent. At the end of the debate, titles of "The Best Debater", "The Winning Team" awarded as well as teachers' or audiences' appreciation and

recognition have effectively promoted learners' self-identity. Their self-confidence has significantly been strengthened. In English learning environment in China, self-confidence enhancement is the most critical achievement for learners (Li, Gao & Qian, 2003). Overcoming their weak mentality of being shy or unwilling to speak English in public, they have developed their self-confidence to face English confidently. This tremendous change has, to a large extent, transformed postgraduates' English learning perception and cognition, achieving the ultimate goal of comprehensive qualities.

## 6. Conclusion

Research result shows that the new teaching model of in-class English oral debate has provided enough space for learners to pursue, discover, explore and voice their minds. The traditional English classroom has been transformed into a debating or discussion room. In the argument, learners are shown to be improved in correctness and fluency in language content. And more importantly, they are exhibited in qualitative change in their logic mentality and English learning conception.

Knowledge learning, independence learning and knowledge researching are three tertiary stages in higher education teaching methodology. Specialty of postgraduates' group determines that their teaching process lies in transitional stage from knowledge learning to independence learning, to knowledge researching. Adapting to special features of this par-

ticular group, postgraduates' English teaching should be reset to involve more discussion or inspiring courses on improving learners' abilities on critical thinking, innovation and argumentation, which will play an active and constructive role in quality-oriented English teaching reform.

## 7. References

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