Micro-course Contest of Foreign Languages in China: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract: The present paper is a detailed analysis of the problems and solutions in Micro-course Contest of Foreign Languages in China. The contestants' problems as well as those of the judges are summarized and critically evaluated, and corresponding solutions to both types of problems are provided.

1. Introduction

Micro-course Contest of Foreign Languages in China (MCFLC for convenience's sake) is held annually and the year 2020 will witness its sixth session. MCFLC has grown and matured over the past five years. While numerous teachers benefit a lot from the process of preparing for their micro-classes, there still exist some problems concerning MCFLC. By pointing out the relevant problems, contestants, together with judges, can seek ways to improve MCFLC to ensure students' effective learning and fairness of the contest.

2. Body

2.1 Contestants' Problems and Solutions

The key word "micro" suggests that one of the prominent features of a micro-class is its shortness. As a rule, "the time duration for a micro-class should be no more than 10 minutes" [1]. The required duration for a typical micro-class is 5 to 8 minutes, usually no more than 8 minutes. But several contestants' video clips last as long as 10 minutes and even longer, obviously breaking the contest rules. Students are likely to be running out of patience for a lengthy micro-class. Therefore, teachers should first attach uttermost importance to the duration of time for a micro-class. As long as a micro-class can expose the essence and concentration of a teaching point, the shorter the time length, the better learning effect a micro-class will provide for students.

Despite the accuracy in pronunciation and intonation and fluency, some contestants fail to make a qualified micro-class because it lacks a focus. A micro-class will never be a super one if it intends to contain too many points of view. For instance, a teacher in her micro-class lectures her students on a text passage, explaining vocabulary, structure, difficult sentences etc. just like a traditional class. As is known to all, the main function of a micro-class is to solve a specific problem that

students may encounter in their studies. From this perspective, the teacher's micro-class is more like a MOOC than a micro-class. So the solution to the lack-of-focus problem is to elaborate on a point and make a micro-class specific-problem-based.

Another problem that is prevalent among contestants is that many of them tend to give facts to students, lacking the very creativity and originality. For example, some teachers may talk about the magic number seven or natural disasters. Their micro-classes are nothing but piles upon piles of facts. There is no point listing all the facts in another language in a micro-class, as students can always be better informed and educated through many other channels than a micro-class in this information age. Teachers should at least summarize the facts to be presented in their micro-classes. To do a better job, teachers are supposed to be able to voice their own opinions on a particular issue. To some extent, teachers should not only impart knowledge or transmit information to students, but also enlighten them in one way or another to cultivate their comprehensive thinking abilities.

"According to the data analysis of the contestants' works from the first session of MCFLC, of all types of contents, culture and listening and speaking contents account for as high as 46%" [2]. A lot of contestants choose topics such as Chinese or Western culture, public speaking, writing etc. They opt for such topics possibly not because they are helpful to students' learning, but because these topics tend to give their creators more room for making high-quality micro-classes. Actually these topics are all content-based rather than language-based. Quite often, the contents of such mini-lectures are nothing but some common senses. Students benefit little from such micro-classes because they can easily understand everything in their native tongue. If students can easily understand everything in a foreign language, it only indicates that these students are terrific English speakers. In a sense, it is insignificant to offer such simple content to students with high English proficiency, because for them such simple ideas are just not worth learning. Many students have trouble understanding such mini-lectures not due to its simple "content", but relative complex "language". When it comes to learning a foreign language, what students desire is not information, knowledge, common senses or thought, but the opportunities to practice learning. It is just too ridiculous for a teacher through his or her micro-class to teach students how to give a speech. Students can learn how to deliver an impressive speech all by themselves without the slightest hint of difficulty as they are common senses. Even though students have mastered how to give a super speech after the teacher's mini-lecture, most of them may still be unqualified public speakers because they can never learn linguistically from the teacher's micro-class as language in the micro-class is not the focus. It is equally ridiculous for an English teacher to teach students Chinese culture such as acupuncture, a subject with so many specialized terms. Sometimes even the teacher him or herself has difficulty pronouncing all the terms accurately and fluently. How can the teacher expect his or her students to talk about acupuncture with a foreigner with accuracy and fluency just through a 7-minute mini-lecture? The students have to practice themselves to be able to talk about the subject freely. In addition, students have easy access to the learning materials online or in the library, which may present better learning both visually and aurally than the teacher's micro-class.

Some contestants produce very fantastic works, but their sole purpose is to win prizes for their own interests. They carefully design and make their works once a year for the contest, not for the students. They may even appeal to their students, colleagues and family members to vote for their works. However, in reality, they seldom have the habit of making micro-classes on a regular basis and showing them to their students before class. Under this circumstance, micro-class making is by no means a regular activity for teachers. Instead, it has become a self-sufficient thing that has nothing to do with students' learning in the actual learning and teaching practice.

2.2 Judges' Problems and Solutions

A qualified judge needs to be a language specialist who has the right aesthetic tendencies. What is more important is that the judge must be patient and do a lot of research before he or she grades his or her candidates. Obviously and unfortunately, some judges are just not that qualified. And their disqualification leads to the unfairness of the play. In reality, misjudgments mostly occur in the province-level contests.

Some contestants' works resemble those in previous sessions, but are still given a high score. Obviously, the experts involved have not done enough research and consequently made terrible mistakes. A teacher enters the final stage by using a machine to dub her micro-class, but the experts have not discovered the truth. One expert even compliments on it, claiming that the pronunciation is clear and beautiful without realizing the artificial nature of the "human" voice. Still in the fifth session held in 2019, there are many mistakes both grammatically and technically in a teacher's work, but it manages to reach the final stage and win a prize. The undiscovered mistakes made by the contestants show either the judges' casual attitudes or their disqualification.

So what are the solutions to these above problems created by unqualified judges? My suggestions are as follows. First, currently there are only about three judges for each contestant's work. More professional judges (at least seven or nine) are needed, and the highest and the lowest marks should be both abandoned. Second, professors should not necessarily be chosen as judges. Instead, judges should be chosen based on their own true merits. They should have the micro-class-making experiences and be recognized for their English proficiency. Dumb judges for an English contest are never needed. Judges must have the ability to speak in English face to face with the contestants. Third, cross-provincial mutual evaluation is truly indispensible. A contestant's work from one province should be graded by judges from another two provinces. Fourth, judging procedures should be published in detail to all contestants. The major procedures may include: Who are the judges? How many judges are involved? What are the judging criteria? And how are the judges to judge?

3. Conclusion

To ensure students' effective learning and fairness of the contest, the paper lists some problems of MCFLC and offers corresponding solutions. The contestants' problems and solutions are as follows. First, several contestants' micro-classes last too long, and thus the time should be reduced to required criteria. Second, some micro-classes lack a focus, talking extensively. To solve this problem, contestants should elaborate on a point, aiming to solve a single academic problem for their students. Third, some contestants tend to give facts or simple content. Consequently, as teachers they should reflect on their teaching and try to teach something more meaningful by being more creative. Fourth, some contestants take part in the contest for the sole purpose of winning prizes. As to the judges, some of them have adopted casual attitudes or are just unqualified. To change the situation, more responsible judges with high English proficiency are needed. Besides, cross-provincial mutual evaluation and published procedures are also necessary. With the joint effort made by all contestants and judges, MCFLC is sure to have a more promising future.

References

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[2] Zhao Na. *Features of Micro-classes and Tips on its Design. Journal of Henan Institute of Science and Technology,* 2016 (10).