

# The Application of the Discussion Method of TCFL in North American Universities to College English Teaching in China

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**Abstract:** The methodology of discussion is widely used in senior Chinese language courses in many North American universities to guide students to explore deep cultural and ideological implications related to many socio and cultural phenomena in modern China. The success of this language teaching methodology has also brought inspiration to college English teaching in Chinese universities. This paper aims to explore the application of the discussion method of TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) in North American universities to college English teaching in China. Though with some challenges, the discussion method not only effectively promotes student engagement through active learning and enhances their speaking and listening skills, but also develops students' critical thinking ability and cultivates humanistic care in them.

## 1. Introduction of the Discussion Method of TCFL

Many Chinese language programs in North American universities have adopted the traditional teaching model pioneered by Mr. Zhao Yuanren, a leader in modern Chinese linguistics. These language programs are well known for their mature mode, remarkable teaching effect, and students' outstanding language communication skills, such as Princeton University, University of Notre Dame and other well-known private universities, as well as public universities like the University of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, etc.

The methodology of discussion is widely used in senior Chinese language courses in many North American universities. Professor Zhiping Zhou in Princeton University mentions students' discussion about the storyline and character descriptions in Chinese during the class Selected Readings of Chinese Classical Short Stories [1]. Professor Zhu Yongping in University of Notre Dame also points out that the textbooks used in senior Chinese courses contain deep cultural content and ideas, and most of the senior grade students have been to China, which provides a broad space for the design of discussion questions to stimulate students' interests, inspire students' association ability and guide them to discuss about cultural and ideological implications [2].

There are many commonalities and similarities in the concepts and methods of second foreign language teaching, therefore the success of the methodology of TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) in American universities has brought inspiration to college English teaching in domestic Chinese universities.

This paper aims to explore the application of the discussion method of TCFL in North American universities to college English teaching in China. As a College English lecturer, the author also had experience working as a teaching assistant in the Chinese Language Program in the University of Notre Dame in the US, and has participated in its Chinese Language Summer Program -- Notre Dame in Beijing. So the author's experience of observing and teaching Chinese classes is a good source to apply the discussion method of TCFL to college English teaching.

Such discussion method, or "seminar" style, refers to a class at a college or university in which a topic is discussed by a teacher and a small group of students. Seminar-based teaching originated from early German universities. German naturalist Humboldt proposed that the role of professors in higher education is to guide students' research interests, and college students must take the initiative to do research on their own [3]. The seminar teaching method now has become a mature teaching

method widely used in higher education in western developed countries.

The theoretical basis of discussion methodology in education is the Constructivist learning theory that knowledge is the process by which learners actively construct knowledge with the help of other people (including teachers and learning partners) and the necessary learning materials. Teachers are the organizers and promoters of meaning construction in the teaching process, rather than the imparters and inculcators of knowledge; the knowledge provided by textbooks is no longer the content taught by teachers, but the object of students' active construction of meaning [4]. In terms of language acquisition, students are active constructors of the meaning of language knowledge, not passive receivers. A language class should also be student-centered and realistic contexts relevant to the theme should be created. Discussion component in a language class is a manifestation of constructivism in which the teacher guides students, throws out the topic for discussion, and furthermore digs into the issue, allowing students to discuss freely and express their views and opinions consciously based on the required language knowledge.

## **2. Examples of Discussion Topic Setting in Senior Chinese Language Course in North American Universities**

Senior Chinese courses in American universities involve abundant social and cultural contents; in class course instructors usually lead students to have discussions comparing Chinese and American societies and cultures. Questions raised by instructors are often enlightening with the depth of thought and cognition, aiming to stimulate students' passage expressions. And their distinctive textbooks provide a variety of topics that students are interested in and able to discuss for classroom discourse interaction [5].

Below are two examples of discussion topic setting in the fourth-year Chinese language class of The Chinese Language Summer Program -- Notre Dame in Beijing (University of Notre Dame)

### Example 1.

The lesson “教科书,如何选材施教?(Pedagogy and Ideology: A Textbook Approach)?” examines issues regarding material selection (e.g. the moral education) for textbooks of Chinese language and literature, and discusses textbook reform in China and its implications.

In class the course instructor led a discussion on the following questions:

- Do American students have language and literature class in primary or middle school? What is the learning content and what are the class activities? What are the teaching objectives?
- From your standpoint, should moral education be included in the teaching objectives of a language and literature class?
- Do you think Chinese textbooks should keep up with the times or include classics only?

### Example 2.

The lesson “见微亦可知 ‘住’?(Housing and Architecture: A Window Into The Home?)” explains characteristics of Chinese housing and the role of fengshui, and expounds on cultural concepts underlying particular types of architecture.

In class the course instructor held a discussion about the phrase “门当户对” (door to door; perfect match for marriage) in the textbook:

- When it comes to marriage, Chinese people pay great attention to “门当户对” (the equal status and perfect match). What does that mean? What about Americans?
- Do you think “门当户对” makes sense? Can you cite some examples to illustrate your point?
- Some people say, “True love happens between two souls of perfect match”. Do you agree?

These discussion questions guide American students to have comparative reflections on both Chinese and American cultures based on authentic context and personal experiences. The questions are quite open, accessible and thought-provoking, which could bring about various and even contrary opinions from students of different backgrounds or positions.

The content of Princeton's fourth-year Chinese language textbooks is also related to many important socio-political, historical, and cultural phenomena and issues in modern China. This will easily lead to discussions, arguments, and verbal confrontations between students of different

cultural positions, injecting vitality into the discourse interaction in the classroom. In these discussions every student feels free and spontaneous to voice their opinions and the class is always interactive in a heated atmosphere [5].

### **3. The Need of Application of the Discussion Method of TCFL to College English Teaching in China**

The target of domestic college English teaching is to cultivate students' comprehensive English application ability. It is mainly based on literacy skills through learning text and related vocabulary, and supplemented by listening and speaking skills. Under the weight of traditional spoon-fed education methods and college entrance examination, Chinese students have adapted to the traditional English teaching model for exam-oriented purposes, and have become accustomed to passively accepting teachers' opinions and standard answers, neither willing to think nor good at thinking.

For Chinese Students College English is a compulsory course they have to take to earn credits. Many students have poor expression ability and weak language communication skills; many dare not to express their views in English though they have learned the language for almost ten years. Moreover, most classes are still teacher-centered, with the teacher dominating the class most of the time; students are occasionally asked to answer questions. In such classes students are still learning language knowledge, but not really using the language to express themselves and communicate with others, as the intrinsic function of a language itself.

However, with the rapid development of globalization, English should be a bridge of communication with other parts of the world, not just the book knowledge to deal with exams. An English class should be not silent and dreary, but open, interactive and communicative with students talking and exchanging ideas. If the discussion method of TCFL in North American universities could be successfully applied to domestic college English classes, English could be a carrier of thought exchange through cultural reflection and self-expression.

### **4. The Application of the Discussion Method of TCFL to Domestic College English Teaching**

In domestic College English classes, similar discussion activities or discussion classes could be held to involve the whole class in idea exchanging and contribution. In the joyful and interactive language atmosphere, the course instructor could extend the topic discussion related to teaching materials, enhancing students' critical thinking ability with deep cultural and ideological content, and stimulating students' passion for spontaneous self-expression.

In addition to topics related to Chinese and American cultural comparison, which are fairly optimal choices for class discussions, thought-provoking questions that will bring students' self-reflection and further actions are also ideal options. One fundamental purpose of education is to shape students' characters, and inspirational discussions help build a heart-warming college English class that delivers positive energy and cultivates humanistic care.

#### **4.1. Matters Needing Attention**

When the course instructor applies the discussion method of TCFL to College English classes, special attention should be paid in terms of the characteristics of the course and its students:

First of all, for either cultural related or thought-provoking discussion, a topic should be progressively addressed. An authentic context should be set up, and related questions be asked step by step so that the topic can be drilled down layer by layer. The instructor should put forward the questions, control the pace and lay out the framework of the discussion.

Furthermore, ideal topics and questions designed could be easily approached from multiple perspectives, leading to various open answers. Thus each student in the class can explore his or her own answer to the question, resulting in a warm interactive discussion atmosphere. In the class the instructor, as the discussion facilitator, puts forward questions gradually but would never give standard answers. Even at the beginning of discussion, the instructor could inform students that

there will be no standard answers to the discussion questions, and any reasonable answers that could be justified are totally acceptable.

Besides, the instructor could take some incentive measures to motivate students to actively participate in the discussion. As mentioned previously, most Chinese college students are inclined to keep silent in class, even if some of them already have answers in their mind. So encouragement from the instructor is very essential, which could be more effectively supplemented with incentives of grade bonus. For instance, if students who participate in the discussion would get extra bonus for their usual performance, they would be more motivated to step out of their comfort zone and challenge themselves.

Lastly, the instructor plays the role of a facilitator rather than a lecturer throughout the discussion. The instructor needs to step off the platform and walk among students. Most Chinese students are very timid to express themselves in English in front of the whole class, and even when they take courage to do this, they are still quite nervous and usually speak in a low voice. So when a question is proposed and one student volunteers to answer the question, the instructor should be ready to prompt the student who struggles with his or her answer, to ask follow-up questions to help clarify meaning, and to sum up the student's answer to make it clear to other students. In ESL teaching, the functions of interactional modifications, clarification requests, and comprehension checks are fully manifested in the process of meaning negotiation between the student and the instructor [6]. Actually in an English discussion class the dialogue firstly takes place between the student and the instructor, and then extends to idea exchanging between students.

#### **4.2. An Application Example of Discussion in a College English Class**

An example of a discussion class on a reality show in the author's college English course Learn American English from American TV Series is demonstrated as follows:

The reality show What Would You Do broadcast on ABC sets up elaborate realistic scenarios with actors testing real controversial subjects to see what ordinary American people would do when faced with an ethical dilemma. In the episode played in the class, a kind-hearted lady led a homeless man into a restaurant and gave him \$20 to buy some food, but soon after the lady left the place, the bartender took away \$20 from the tramp and ordered him to leave the restaurant immediately. At the sight of this scene, people in the bar had varied reactions and behaviors.

The controversial situation set in this scenario is a very ideal topic for discussion on one's ethical choice as well as observing cultural differences.

Discussion questions are designed as below:

- 1) Do you think tramps have the right to dine in a restaurant?
- 2) Do you think the bartender has the right to take away \$ 20 from the tramp?
- 3) What would you do if you were a guest dining next to the tramp?
- 4) What would you do if you found the tramp on the curb and would like to help him? Would you do the same thing as that kind-hearted lady?
- 5) What would you do if you were the bartender?
- 6) What would you do if you were the restaurant manager?
- 7) What would you do if you were the restaurant owner?
- 8) Recall the reactions of those ordinary American people in the video. Who impressed/ touched you most? Why?
- 9) If this happened in the society in which we live, what do you think the people around would do?
- 10) Why is there a big difference in the responses of Chinese and American people? Where do you think is the cultural root?

All the questions are open-ended ones providing authentic context in which each student could come up with his or her own answer. In other words, for one certain question students would contribute various statements and interpretations. The class is no more a platform that imparts knowledge to students, but a stage where everyone could explore, reflect and voice their own opinions.

Furthermore, after the discussion on questions 3 to 7, the instructor could conclude and highlight that when we explore the same issue from different perspectives or with different identities, our positions and practices are likely to vary greatly. However, in real life when we encounter issues or contradictions with others, we always tend to judge it from our own standpoint, so often feel aggrieved or even indignant. Such self-reflection is quite inspiring and thought-provoking to young college students.

Questions 8-10 are on cultural differences, which should not be spoon-fed to students but explored by themselves through observation and reflection. An example is the idea of “pay it forward” in western culture—pass the kindness one once received to the next person, which is mentioned several times by the Americans in the video, while in traditional Chinese culture we attach more importance to “pay it back”. Through such discussion the instructor hopes to plant the seeds of kindness in the hearts of these young people, and to convey to them some courage and conviction so that when these young people meet someone in need of help, they can become a force to change the world. At the end of the class two meaningful sayings were also shared: “It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.” “Be the change you want to see in this world.”

A good discussion class offers students not only a stage to employ English to voice their opinions and to have real communication with the instructor and classmates, but also a space to share positive energy and deliver humanistic care.

## **5. The Effect and Challenges of Application of the Discussion Method in College English Class**

### **5.1. The Effect of Application of the Discussion Method**

From the perspective of course instructor, a discussion class is much more effective in involving students in class than a traditional lecture class. Students have growing consciousness of self-expression and idea-exchange. In a lecture-based class most students are passive learners who are pointed by the instructor to answer questions, while in a discussion class a lot more students volunteer to speak out their ideas and the class atmosphere is far more interactive and vibrant.

Here are some students’ feedbacks on the English course in which the discussion method was applied:

“At the beginning of the semester, I found the teacher’s teaching method is largely different. The discussion enables me to think about the questions more often rather than only listen to the teacher...”—Chao Liu

“In the last two terms, thanks to the teacher, I have enjoyed a totally different English class. In this class, I never felt nervous or bored, on the contrary, relaxed but happy. One thing that maybe changed my life was that I was encouraged to speak out my ideas. I used to keep my thoughts in my mind. But inspired by the active atmosphere in class, I gradually try to express my own idea. It feels so good.” – Yan Li

“After I came to this college, only English class could I realize that I am in the university. We are really discussing issues and expressing our own ideas. It is not a place where someone gives you knowledge unilaterally, but more like a stage where you can show yourself. My English teacher cheers me up to speak out and gives us a stage to exchange our thoughts. I really learn a lot here, and some ideas even change my thoughts.” – Jianfeng Chen

### **5.2. The Challenges of Application of the Discussion Method**

Although the application of discussion method of TCFL could effectively enhance students’ participation and offer more opportunities for students to improve their spoken English and expression ability, there are some challenges for the instructor to employ this method in College English classes.

The first challenge is that the large number of students in domestic College English class results in the limited average speaking opportunities in class. In a TCFL class in an American university there are only around ten or even less students, so every student has plenty of opportunities to participate in discussion. In contrast, in a college English class in China there are usually over thirty

students, which means those active students would have more chances to speak in class.

The population characteristic of reserved and introverted personality among Chinese students is also a great challenge for course instructor to apply the discussion method. It's very natural for American students to discuss with their teacher and classmates in class, while as discussed above, most Chinese students are accustomed to be silent in class, which places really high demands on the course instructor to find ways to incent and engage student in discussion.

Another challenge is choosing the suitable discussion topics related to the course content. Textbooks used in TCFL classes in American universities are related to various socio and cultural phenomena and controversial issues in modern China, which offer rich discussion resources. But the contents of College English textbooks are mostly narrations, short stories, or expository writings, leaving less space for discussion in depth. Therefore, the instructor has to make great efforts to develop the topic and design discussion questions that appeal students.

## **6. Conclusion**

Though there are many challenges in the application of discussion method of TCFL to domestic College English class, this method does effectively engage students in class participation, help create an authentic and interactive English learning environment for English as a Second Language learners, and play an important role in promoting students' speaking and listening skills. With exploration of cultural differences and reflection in depth of thought and cognition, the discussion-based College English class not only enhances students' language skills, but also develops their multi-dimensional critical thinking ability and cultivates humanistic care in them.

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