

# Group-activity- and New-lesson-based Student Questioning in College Chinese Teaching

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**Abstract**—Guided by the relevant classroom questioning theories, the author has practiced group-activity- and new-lesson-based student questioning-answering and self-answering model (GANL-SQuASA) in College Chinese teaching for five terms in Tianjin College, University of Science and Technology Beijing. The group activity is focused on the tough points specified in the Teaching Objectives of each lesson to be taught following the students' PPT presentation, after which the usual student questioning and answering happens, but the questioning student has to offer answer to his/her own question and just this last stroke has brought students' potentials into full play and added classroom attraction. At the completion of the course in each term, students found that their critical reading, appreciating, thinking and expressing abilities have obviously improved and they have developed into a habit of researching and a certain degree of academic consciousness which is relatively weak among Chinese undergraduates. The results of the questionnaire also verify that the model is a good try in College Chinese teaching, while the smooth application to other two courses, Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Traditional Chinese Culture proves that the model deserves spreading to the teaching of similar courses.

**Index Terms**—College Chinese teaching, group activity, new lesson to be taught, student questioning, self-answering, classroom attraction

## I. INTRODUCTION

Two major problems have been sticking out in College Chinese teaching among the freshmen in Tianjin College, University of Science and Technology Beijing. One is the low classroom attraction. After more than 10 years of Chinese learning in primary and secondary schools, the students think that they have mastered enough, either the language itself or the highlights in Chinese literature throughout all the times. They should now focus on their major courses and College Chinese as a course can be left out, let alone set as a required one. Under such circumstances, how to ensure that a majority of a class as many as 200 students or more actively attend and participate in the classroom teaching becomes a pending problem. The second problem is that the students' learning concept, methodology and their cognitive level retain at the stage of knowledge and memory. How to shift the students' focus from knowledge mastering to the improvement of critical reading, critical appreciating, critical thinking and expressing abilities (four abilities), how to cultivate their habit of researching into problems (one habit) and how to sharpen their academic consciousness (one consciousness)—all these are to be solved.

There are many trials like task-based, group-activity-based and questioning to stimulate students' learning autonomy, home and abroad, which have raised classroom attraction to varied extents, improved teaching effects and cultivated students' humanistic qualities and the required qualities of a college student. Among all the practices, questioning has attracted much attention in elementary and secondary education, focusing on its functions, classifications and models. Professor Yuanming Yu (2000) from Shandong Liaocheng University, Shangdong, conducted a comprehensive review of Chinese teaching questioning. He generalized the functions into four categories: promoting students' cognitive enthusiasm, cultivating their thinking ability, cultivating their expressing ability in Chinese, and offering feedback information on teaching. He grouped questioning forms from four dimensions: questioning level, questioning in the teaching process phases, questioning content structure and information communication through questioning and into 20 sub-items, among which cultivating abilities of comprehensive questioning and evaluation questioning is what College Chinese teaching is aimed at. Professor Yu listed nine questioning methods, one of which is Repeated Questioning, either in the form of  $Q_{\text{Student}}-Q_{\text{Teacher}}-A_{\text{T\&S after discussion}}-\text{Summary}_T$  or in the form of  $Q_{\text{Student}}-Q_{\text{Teacher}}-A_{\text{Questioning S \& Audience}}-\text{Summary}_T$ . The latter form demands the students' subjective initiative, he stresses. However, his studies are mainly centered on questioning at the primary and secondary education levels. Zhen-shao Song (2003a&b), an associate professor from the Research Center for Basic Education Curriculum, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, proposed three basic questioning models: T-S (Teacher-Student), S-T, and S-S. Under the third model S-S, questions come from the students and are answered by the students. The rights to come up with problems and then get them solved are really returned to the students. Having compared the models with those abroad, Professor Song thinks that domestic researches on classroom questioning are more often of speculative discussion, lacking educational practice. Professor Ru-mi Li and his MA student Cai-ping Chen from Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, specially discussed the concept, value, strategies and operative framework of S-S questioning model (2011). Miss Chen (2012) conducted a study on a Grade-Five math class of 52 students in her internship elementary school for her degree dissertation. She verified the

feasibility of S-S classroom questioning model. However, the inadequate literature on College Chinese classroom questioning is only limited to the combination of questioning arts and comments. Empirical studies are rarely found.

Group topic-presentation in class in PPT is a common scene in China's college classrooms. The topics are often picked up randomly, not of a logic series. The activity is more focused on the PPT contents, often finished at the end of the presentation. The questioning phase is weak. The attention duration and the attentiveness of the audience are hard to ensure, and the questioning followed is often not that indispensable. College classroom questioning is more of a function to check the knowledge taught, improvising questions and leading-in questions to reading being frequently adopted. One-way questioning is most often used and the questioning level is low, in which students have fewer opportunities to think independently and they can hardly break the thinking framework set by their teacher.

In order to cultivate the students' four abilities, one habit and one consciousness mentioned above, the author of this paper tried a model of group-activity- and new-lesson-based student questioning-answering and self-answering (GANL-SQuASA) in College Chinese teaching on 2773 students of all the arts students in Tianjin College, University of Science and Technology Beijing from February 2014 up to now covering five terms. A student self-answering (SA) is added to the traditional questioning routine following the group's PPT presentation, which is a variation of the latter form of the Repeated Questioning described in Yu's paper. Both require the questioning student to answer his/her own question. The difference is that in the author's model, new-lesson-based group PPT activity precedes the questioning and the questions asked are of college level, with depth in themselves, and demand more critical thinking. The questioning model is based on the tough points of the new unit to be taught. Having been informed of the rigid College Chinese Course Regulations (CCCR) formed by the author, almost all the students have to preview the new lesson and think over the contents, identify the tough points and think out the questions to ask and the answers to them. The teaching and learning effects are obviously improved after each term and as they know more about the lesson to be taught, they become more interested in participating in the classroom activities and in the course. Actually, this empirical study covering five terms and three courses is an extension of the previous trial conducted by the author of the Group-Activity-Based Student Questioning model covering three terms of College Chinese teaching. Having received positive responses, the author was encouraged to perfect it, and after making some variations in the model, she extended the application to other two similar courses. (Zhang, 2015)

## II. PRACTICE OF GANL-SQUASA

At the first class of each term, the course College Chinese is briefly introduced, including the group activities and the questioning model, the purpose of the arrangement, the importance and the score percentage, all elaborated. CCCR is stressed. Score is an important factor to drive freshmen to work hard. After two classes (i.e. two weeks) of learning and imitating, the experiment starts from the third week for the rest of the term, about 12 to 13 classes. Each time, there are two groups to present their work in PPT. Each group consists of four students or more, grouped at their own will. 7-8 minutes' PPT presentation should be focused on the tough points specified in the Teaching Objectives of the Course Syllabus and the Course Schedule which were already shown and shared at the first lecture. The specific topics were definitely formulated in the Assignment of the lesson one week before, so the students have a week for preparation. To ensure that the audience listen to each group's presentation, think critically and participate in the activity, an SA (self-answering) is added to enforce the presenter to think widely about the content to be delivered and the potential questions to be asked. Questioning is in two forms, questioning autonomously or being asked to question, so that it is possible that each student has the chance to question. This measure helps the students go all out into the new lesson, go deeper into the contents and develop the four aimed academic qualities, the one habit and the one consciousness.

The Procedure of GANL-SQuASA is as follows.

- 1) Students' group-activity- and new-lesson-based PPT presentation (GANL)
- 2) Teacher's comments on the GANL PPT presentation
- 3) Audience questioning on the presentation (SQu<sub>questioner</sub>)
- 4) Presenter answering the question (A<sub>presenter</sub>)
- 5) Questioner self-answering his/her own question (SA<sub>questioner</sub>)

Steps 3 to 5 can be repeated by different students

- 6) Teacher's comprehensive evaluation

The addition of SA<sub>questioner</sub> to the model raised students' attentiveness throughout the whole process, and the student in question has to elaborate why he/she asks the question and gives his/her answer based on what he/she has seen from the PPT presentation combined with what he/she has acquired through preview of the new lesson and his/her internalized knowledge and experiences. Again, the score consideration drives him/her to deeper original and creative independent thinking.

To ensure the cultivation of the four abilities, one habit and one consciousness, four points should be taken care of throughout the practice of the model. Firstly, make certain that each student actively participates in the SQuASA activity by clarifying the importance of their questioning to the development of their required qualities and to their course score. Score varies between autonomous questioning and being named to question to encourage students to question actively and form really good questions. Secondly, strictly control the time for SQuASA to no more than 5 minutes, the purpose of which is to cultivate the students' consciousness of time allocation and control and to ensure the

smooth continuation of other teaching activities. Thirdly, clearly demand the difficulty level and the depth of the questions asked. Train the students to make use of their time inside and outside class, and to take the advantages of all the resources available, paper materials and e-data, library and the Internet to get familiar with the contents of the new lesson; and train them to find questions in the PPT presentation, analyze and think critically, raise challenging questions, search for the solution to the questions, and develop all these into a habit. As to those questions raised just to get scores, the teacher should ask the questioner to raise one more or two more questions until he/she treats it seriously and thinks hard. For good questions, higher scores will be rated. Fourthly, definitely demand original views in the questions and the answers. The students are not allowed to repeat whatever others say without thinking and understanding. Rather they are encouraged to have clear viewpoints and original ideas, acceptable to the class, with a view to cultivating the abilities of independent thinking and expressing themselves logically as well as creating an atmosphere in which academic discussion, idea communication and mutual advancement are healthily promoted.

In the first two weeks of SQuASA activities, there are cases in which some students refuse to pose or are unable to find any questions. It is mainly because the students have not adapted themselves to the model, at which time, teacher's patience and guidance will be of critical importance. The teacher should help the students develop confidence in themselves; at the same time, the teacher should believe that it is not that the students are unable to find and come up with questions, but that they need time to adjust themselves to college learning style and some practice to get themselves raised to a higher cognitive level. It also could be that the students have not quite got what the PPT presentation conveys and cannot grasp the gist to form any questions. In this case, a little more time should be allowed for the students to read on the scene the PPT pages, think critically on the spot and find questions to ask. The approach enhances the students' improvising performance and makes it clear that the whole class has to take the SQuASA seriously. As to those few from some provinces and cities where dialects are more often used than *putonghua*, one more opportunity is given if needed. Nevertheless, the students should be made to realize that the GANL-SQuASA will go through the whole course (i.e. the whole term).

The following is one of the GANL-SQuASA processes.

GANL PPT topic assignment (given a week before): A brief introduction to *Book of Poetry*<sup>1</sup>, covering its contents, features, value and the evaluation received. One of the members presents their group work in the form of PPT.

After the teacher's comment, a student comes up to the platform with questions based on GANL PPT contents either voluntarily or being named. GANL-SQuASA starts.

SQu<sub>questioner</sub>: Just now you said *Book of Poetry* consists of 6 categories. Can you go into detail with "ritual and banquet poems"?

T: Your question is too simple. Think deeper and ask another question.

SQu<sub>questioner</sub>: Just now you said *Book of Poetry* has exerted a great influence on the literature of later generations. Do you think we need to learn *Book of Poetry* today? If yes, how should we learn and use it?

A<sub>presenter</sub>: (answers SQu<sub>questioner</sub>'s question)

T: Your second question is a thoughtful question, and your own answer to it?

SQu<sub>questioner</sub>: (answers his/her own question)

T: (gives comprehensive evaluation)

Almost all the students take the GANL-SQuASA activity seriously, spending much time in/out of class preparing, raising questions and answering them enthusiastically. Since they have done a lot on the new lesson beforehand and in the activity, more than 90% of the students in class open their textbooks and participate in the class teaching and learning following the progress of each lesson, which is not easy in a College Chinese classroom, whose task is to cover literature from pre-Qin days to modern times in 14 to 15 lectures in terms of content.

### III. SURVEY RESULTS BY QUESTIONNAIRE

After two terms of trial, a questionnaire survey was conducted in December 2014 to a class of 76 freshmen who had just finished the course for 32 class hours. The subjects consist of 17 English majors, and 59 Visual Communication Design majors. There are 9 questions in all covering

- 1) the necessity of setting College Chinese as a required course,
- 2) perception of the classroom teaching and learning pattern,
- 3) opinions on the classroom teaching and learning pattern,
- 4) thinking dimensions in the reading process,
- 5) viewpoints on classroom group activities,
- 6) viewpoints on the GANL-SQuASA,
- 7) viewpoints on the assignments,
- 8) students' sense of achievement, and
- 9) students' intention to take further relevant Chinese courses.

Apart from the four sick leaves, all the 72 responses are valid. As to the necessity of setting College Chinese as a required course (Q1), 70 students (97%) answer "Yes". As to viewpoints on the GANL-SQuASA (Q6), a large majority

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Poetry* is the first collection of poems in China completed in Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC).

of the students have sensed its obvious benefits (see TABLE I), among whom 72% say they have developed into a habit of forming their own opinions towards things and phenomena (6B), 50% think the SQuASA urges them to listen attentively in class (6A) and about a fourth acquired a sense of achievement when they raise good questions or answer questions to their own satisfaction (6D). Only 4 students (6%) think that an accepted question is enough to get a score and are not willing to make more efforts (6E). Unfortunately, there are still 10% who feel nervous each time questioning or answering, and wish to delete SQuASA (6C). That is to say, they failed to get adapted to the activity and benefited little from it.

TABLE I.  
PART OF THE RESULTS FOR Q6

Q	Choice	Ss	P
6. (Multiple Response) I think GANL-SQuASA	A. urges me to listen attentively in class.	36	50%
	B. gets me to have developed into a habit of forming my own opinions towards things and phenomena.	52	72%
	C. makes me feel nervous each time questioning or answering, and I wish to delete SQuASA.	7	10%
	D. gets me to have acquired a sense of achievement when I raise good questions or answer questions to my own satisfaction.	17	24%
	E. is not that important and an accepted question is enough to get a score and I am not willing to make more efforts.	4	6%

Through a term's training of GANL-SQuASA, most say they are thinking critically when reading (see TABLE II), among whom 68% are thinking about the text author's viewpoints, their own evaluation and different opinions (4C), and 60% will think about the merits and demerits of the article and why it is written that way (4B).

TABLE II.  
PART OF THE RESULTS FOR Q4

Q	Choice	Ss	P
4. (Multiple Response) While reading a text or an article, I think about	A. the gist.	38	53%
	B. the merits and demerits of the article and why it is written that way.	43	60%
	C. the author's viewpoints, my own evaluation and different opinions.	49	68%

Through a term's learning of College Chinese, most students have felt obvious achievements, mainly in that their interest in Chinese literature has been raised and their learning attitude has changed (36%) (8E); so have their methods (25%) (8G). Now they are inclined to learn autonomously and independently as well as collectively. Their attack on a problem has become multi-dimensional, 46% saying they have formed a habit of it (8I), and they can organize their thoughts and are ready to express them logically and fluently (32%) (8J). 44% become interested in Chinese literature and plan to read some literary works (8B). Half of the students have sensed their raised level of Chinese, equipped with a systematic storage of the highlights of Chinese literature, from pre-Qin days to network times, from classics like *Book of Poetry* to web blogs (8C). Regretfully, the students' affection for Chinese literature has not been increased as expected (8A), and there are still some students staying passive throughout (8D, 8F & 8H).

TABLE III.  
PART OF THE RESULTS FOR Q8

Q	Choice	Ss	P
8. (Multiple Response) After learning for a term,	A. I love Chinese literature more.	12	17%
	B. I become interested in Chinese literature and plan to read some literary works.	32	44%
	C. I have sensed the raised level of my Chinese.	36	50%
	D. my Chinese level has experienced little change.	8	11%
	E. my interest in Chinese has been raised and my learning attitude has changed.	26	36%
	F. my attitude towards learning stays unchanged.	4	6%
	G. my learning methods have changed.	18	25%
	H. my learning methods stay unchanged.	2	3%
	I. my attack on a problem has become multi-dimensional and I have formed a habit of it.	33	46%
	J. I can organize my thoughts and am ready to express them orally, logically and fluently.	23	32%

#### IV. EXTENDED APPLICATION OF GANL-SQUASA TO OTHER COURSES

Having been accepted by the College Chinese students, the GANL-SQuASA model is then extended to two other courses, Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Traditional Chinese Culture, on 824 and 13 students respectively. The results are favorable as expected.

Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is a required course set for the sophomores covering one year, 80 class hours in all. The final takes the form of open-book

examination, in which the students are allowed to refer to textbooks or other reference books. Students often pay less attention to it than they do to their major courses. Therefore, how to arouse students' interest, how to increase their head-raising rate even though the attendance rate is high, and how to get the students to participate in the classroom activities have long been tricky problems. In the two terms of academic year of 2014-2015 and the second term of academic year 2015-2016 (the present term), the author has introduced the GANL-SQuASA model. After elaborating the topics drawn from the textbooks for students to be presented and the requirements in the Course Regulations, the classes become activated. The presenting group present their meticulously prepared PPT enriched with text-related references and their original viewpoints, which infects the whole class. The other students cannot help joining in the discussion. Since the activity is new-lesson-based, the lesson goes on smoothly and effectively. Owing to the big class size, only one opportunity is given to each group for PPT presentation and one opportunity for each student to question, yet all can utter their opinions in the discussion.

In the last term, the author taught the selective course Traditional Chinese Culture (TCC) to English majors, 13 sophomores in the class. They had taken College Chinese with the author for two terms in their freshmen year and experienced the GANL-SQuASA model. In order to arouse their enthusiasm for TCC, the author made three adjustments. Firstly, each group was required to make PPT presentation twice rather than once and groups were reorganized with each member cooperating with new mates, aimed at improving their communicating ability. Secondly, the presentation topics were no longer assigned by the teacher. Instead, students had to select by themselves based on the chapter contents to be dealt with, with a view to training students' ability to find problems. The third change was to ask them to hand in a course essay of 1500-2000 words a month before the end of the term based on the contents of all the PPT activities. Title had to be decided by themselves and academic format and style had to be followed, which is not easy for knowledge-oriented sophomores. However, they showed greater enthusiasm as expected with better PPT presentation and more heated questioning. What is more, they built up some academic consciousness and in the process of writing their essays, they grew up academically.

## V. CONCLUSION

Five terms of trial in three-course teaching practice has proved the advantages of the GANL-SQuASA model. It is suitable for College Chinese and the similar courses in Tianjin College, USTB. However, the addition of SQuASA to GANL-based activities is also a tough challenge to the teacher. Though the group activity topic is set by the teacher, the four group members have different channels to draw on the huge amount of information on the new lesson, and the SQu<sub>questioner</sub> may produce many unexpected questions, even beyond the new lesson and the teacher's imaginations. The teacher has to comment on the whole GANL-SQuASA in terms of the macro-effect, the merits and demerits, the data chosen, the resources used, the difficulty level and the quality, the presentation techniques, the academic consciousness and the language and mechanics problems—all these demand much time and great effort of the teacher. The teacher has to think much more, read much more, and widen his/her vision to the highest degree possible. He/She can never make more preparation, which also serves as an impetus to his/her professional advancement and career development. In the process of SQuASA, the teacher, as an observer and judge, should learn to be patient. Impetuous "final conclusions" will silence different, maybe creative and original, views; on the other hand, a learning atmosphere helps cultivate the students' academic consciousness and research qualities. A good teacher can make use of this process to learn from the students to increase his/her knowledge storage. Sometimes students' inspirations can be of unexpectedly much value to the effects and the quality of the whole activity. In case of extreme opinions, the teacher should ease the students' moods and guide their emotions in a positive and objective direction. The variation with the TCC class in self-searching for topics, self-deciding on the whole presentation poses still greater challenges.

The model of GANL-SQuASA has received good comments from the students who have attended the class, the College supervisors and the author's colleagues who have sat in on my class. However, how to improve the students' learning behavior, getting them to participate more actively, from score-driven and being named to actively and voluntarily taking the opportunity to participate in the SQuASA, and how to elevate students' thinking and cognitive level so as to raise higher-level questions still have room for improvement.

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