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INFORMATION ABOUT THE JOURNAL

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«KLAD” journal admits for publication various types of articles: original research, review articles, short reports or essays, reflections, case studies, methodologies and cases in english; containing the results of fundamental and applied research in the field of philosophy and identity, history of kazakhstan, pedagogy, linguistics and methods of teaching languages, translation, and tourism.

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PART 02

KAZGUU LIBERAL ARTS DIGEST

RESEARCH
PAPERS

COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The academic competition for a good grade which only limited number of students could get became a part and a parcel of modern curriculum. Since competitive environment may have a number of different effects on students, the problem of learning in competition in all its aspects is a focus of this research, which sets the purpose to look at the experience of learning in competition on the basis of philosophy course case. The methods used for this aim is qualitative case study. All the data collected from five interviews of KAZGUU students who enrolled in English-based philosophy course in 2022 spring semester and faced competition for an A-mark were analyzed with the help of singling out axial and thematic codes. Consequently, five themes characterizing the experience of learning in competition were identified: (a) motivation to study, (b) primary instincts, (c) stress, (d) mediating role of tutor, (e) acquiring qualities and skills.

INTRODUCTION

Competitive environment seems to be an essential part of the studying process of some of the learning programs. The meaning of “competitive situation” itself is, as Epstein and Harackiewicz (1992) suggest, is a setting where only a restricted number of people can assume the reward. There is likely no single answer as to what impact competition in learning produces on the students. However, it seems that it might possibly negatively affect the learners’ motivation leading to deep discouragement and impairment of self-perception. Moreover, assuming that goals of the competitors are opposite, in the study setting it may result in the disruption of peer relationships. Hence, the problem of this study is multifaceted and associated with learning in competition in all its aspects. The research focuses on the particular case that took place among KAZGUU students in English-based philosophy course in 2022 spring semester where A-mark could be acquired by only five students and aims to study the experience of learning in competition in the constraints of this case.

Overarching research question:

What is the experience of learning in competition by KAZGUU students in philosophy course? Subsidiary questions:

How did KAZGUU students view competition in philosophy course?

How did KAZGUU students view peers they competed with?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies on the topic of competitive environment suggest certain perspectives on the subject, which will be discussed further. For instance, Van Nuland et. al. (2004) conducted the study with the use of crossover design, where the students were tested in a competitive and non-competitive environment, graded on their knowledge before embarking on the study and after each tour. The results showed that the competition promoted increase in encouragement in students when applied on the level of game-based activities. Similarly, Corell et. al. (2018),

having conducted a quasi-experimental control group with medical students and assessing the participants before and after the experiment, found out that competition enhances the performance of the students.

At the same time, conducting mixed method study on grade 7 students from Taiwan, Chen et al. (2018) arrived at the fact that competitive element may result in worse knowledge acquisition. In a similar way, Chan and Lam (2008) carried out the study on grade 7 Chinese students using stratified random sampling and dividing the children into competitive and non-competitive groups. This study showed that in a competitive setting the children started experiencing troubles with self-esteem and perceiving own ability to do well. Similar findings were reached by Lam et. al. (2004), who conducted experimental study and found that students in competitive environment compared to those in non-competitive setting tend to opt for less complicated assignments and evaluate themselves much lower when experiencing failure. From the paradigm of qualitative research competitive environment was studied by Kowalski and Christensen (2019) who conducted interviews with high school students to learn how competition affects their engagement into the studying process and academic results. The findings demonstrated that it depended on how the students perceive their abilities and how high the stakes were, suggesting that high-stake competitions may demotivate students and provoke stress, especially among high-achievers. In university setting such high-stake competitions can be exemplified by various assessments based on bell-curve, which may not only discourage learning, but also, as the quantitative research of Burley and Megan (2017) suggest, undermine peer collaboration with students being less likely to help their peers who are as successful or more successful compared to them.

Aforementioned ambiguous findings create a gap in knowledge on the subject of learning in competition which this research

is attempting to fill. Moreover, since the majority of studies on similar topic are sited in America, Europe, or Eastern Asia and few of them consider particular cases, this study will build upon existing knowledge from new perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Since the unit of analysis of this research is case characterized by program boundaries (particular course) and time boundaries (one semester), the strategy of inquiry chosen is basic qualitative case study (Creswell, 2009). The recruitment has been conducted through purposive sampling via personal net of author's connection. All the five participants are KAZGUU students, were enrolled in English-based philosophy class in 2022 spring semester, and admit the presence of competitive environment in the course. The data has been collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions carried out in Russian for the convenience of the participants. Before interviews written informed consent has been acquired with one copy remaining for participants. The interview consisted of three parts. First, according to Creswell (2009), the questions to establish rapport and collect demographic information have been applied. Then, grand-tour questions about the overall view of competition and experience of competition in philosophy class have been asked supported by specific and probing questions. Interviews have been finished by concluding question to add something on the topic of the research and thank-you statement in the form of chocolate bar. The data analysis has involved processing stage and actual analysis stage. The first stage has comprised conducting and audiotaping interviews, transcribing them verbatim, and reading through transcripts to get overarching sense of data. The second has included deriving axial codes from open codes or participants' words, developing axial codes into thematic, and interpreting themes. To ensure the reliability of the findings, the transcripts of the interviews were re-

checked while replaying the audiotapes to make sure no information is left out or miswritten. In addition, throughout the analysis all the axial codes were checked for the shift in their definitions and underwent cross-checking with each author analysing the codes of one another. For the validity of the findings, axial codes were subjected to member-checking and peer-debriefing and all the negative codes were also presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

FINDINGS

As the result of analysis, the total number of 260 axial codes was discerned. Thirty-four codes were left uninvolved either because they were met not in all the interviews or collided with the main themes. In accordance with their similarity, other codes were distributed into 5 following themes including motivation to study, stress, primary instincts, mediating role of tutor, and acquiring qualities and skills. All the excerpts to support rich and thick description of themes are provided in Russian not to distort nuances of meaning by translating participants' words.

MOTIVATION TO STUDY

The largest theme derived with the 62 axial codes is motivation to study. All the five participants to this or that extent reported on being encouraged by the competition in the classroom to answer on lessons, participate in discussions, and, thereby, learn the course material. At the same time, the nature of this motivation was idiosyncratic and individual for all of them.

First, for some of the students their high goals to get an excellent mark in competitive environment served as a source of motivation. For example, Participant 3 emphasized that competitive setting combined with her desire to get the highest score made her stay tuned to keep up with other students. She revealed that "...из-за того, что среда конкурентная, и тем более я хочу быть лучшей, эм, это

способствовало на мое обучение то, что я читала, хоть и на уроке, читала, занималась и старалась." Similar idea was expressed by the voice of Participant 2, who claims "...если я хочу быть первой, если я хочу быть лучшей, то я буду стараться для этого. Я не буду просто сидеть, я не буду просто прокрастинировать. Ээ, я буду предпринимать какие-то действия для того, чтобы оказаться на этом месте."

Apart from the reward in terms of grades, some students were also inspired to compete and study by the praise from their parents. For instance, Participant 2 reporting on her feelings when outperforming others mentioned "я люблю слушать похвалу, в свою сторону, особенно, когда это касается родителей. Аа, мм, я всегда-всегда стараюсь, так скажем, получить это одобрение от родителей." Similarly, Participant 1 also underlined the role of parental approval by saying "я чувствую такую эйфорию от победы, что я смог, я сделал и звоню родителям, чтобы они написали."

However, while some of the participants admitted being positively empowered by their aims, others acknowledged that risk to be outperformed by more successful peers in competition prompted them to pay efforts in learning. To illustrate this point, Participant 4 described how comparison with other competitors fueled her motivation to persevere. She stated "...и как бы, когда ты видишь эту картину и понимаешь, задумываешься, вот чем я хуже этого человека, и ты начинаешь точно так же, как бы активничать." Thus, high bar to reach, parental reward, and the risk to fall behind competitors functioned as motivational force for students in philosophy course.

PRIMARY INSTINCTS

The next theme occurring in the data was connected with primary instincts to win and surpass others in competition and contained 58 axial codes. It was present

in the description of participants' attitude to winning and peers and partially explained their relationships in the group as well as feeling while getting desired reward.

To begin with, all the participants on this or that level shared about their overt focus on the mark which some of them closely associated with natural instinct of human beings to get the best for oneself. To illustrate this point, Participant 4 expressed that prioritizing reward is normal by saying "...все мы люди, мы все хотим хорошую оценку получить, и когда у тебя в предмете 40% твоей оценки зависят от твоей активности понятное дело, то, что никто не хочет получить за это ноль."

However, in some cases excessive focus on winning turned into the rivalry for the desired reward. For example, Participant 3 said "...ты видишь своих вот сокурсников как мм... Как своих соперников за оценку хорошую, потому что ты знаешь, что только 10% от всех мм... учеников получают только хорошую оценку." In addition, for some of the participants this rivalry showed up in interpersonal relationships. By Participant 1 the competition in the philosophy course was perceived as a factor creating opposite goals and destroying friend ties. According to his words, "это подрывает ваше общение, потому что, ну, в любом случае там как бы один за всех и все за одного. Но, именно в плане конкурентоспособной среды там каждый сам за себя идет." Therefore, the primary instinct to get the highest mark and win presupposed applying all the means to get the reward sometimes at the cost of interpersonal ties.

STRESS

The third theme derived is theme stress appearing in the narrative concerning the atmosphere in the class and general impressions of learning in competition. It consisted of the total 45 axial codes and recurred through all the five transcripts to this or that extent.

First of all, all of the five interviewees felt tension and pressure in the classroom provoked by the necessity to compete and limitedness of the reward, which triggered negative emotional response from them. For example, Participant 3 characterized the conditions as stressful by saying "[атмосфера] довольно-таки стрессовая. Ну, для меня, может для кого-то не было, но для меня она была немного такая стрессовая, и я переживала и... как бы... не такая легкая атмосфера, не было так легко, не было так спокойно, просто."

Furthermore, partially the presence of stress was seen in physical and emotional state of the participants. For instance, Participant 5 told about her before-class worry and dispersion of attention. She reported:

"...вот из-за того, что я пытаюсь делать ээм все возможное с моих рук, у меня, то есть я не знаю, что может где-то у меня ошибка, я не знаю за что взяться, то есть у меня сразу начинается стресс некий."

Similar response was noticed in the excerpts from Participant 4 who portrayed her preparation for classes as following: "Я помню, как каждый раз перед началом пары я так прям судорожно листала вот все свои конспекты, что-то искала новое, чтобы можно было ответить преподавателю." Thus, academic competition in philosophy class made participants feeling stressed out, restless and strained.

MEDIATING ROLE OF TUTOR

The smallest theme formed from the collected data is theme-mediating role of tutor. The total number of axial codes included in this theme is 29. It was characterized by giving chance to everyone in the competitive setting, involving students in the process and appreciating additional work and motivating students to study.

All the participants enrolled in the course shared that tutor gave an opportunity

for less active students to get additional points by creating additional tasks; hence, contributed to the equal conditions in the classroom. For example, Participant 5 said “... преподаватель очень классно придумывает, что она делала некоторые задания, которые там 20 баллов весили, типа цитирование сделать, и это [неактивным студентам] позволяло хоть немного получить какие-то хоть поинты.” Moreover, professor tried to engage these students in the lesson and awarded any activity. For instance, Participant 4 said that “... на передних партах, обычно сидели те, кто стремился получить как можно больше поинтов и преподаватель видя это, специально начинала сзади, задних парт, чтобы дать возможность тем студентам ответить.”

Apart from that, students reported that tutor not only strived to involve less active students in the process but also richly rewarded those who showed more interest in the subject and payed more effort to study. For example, Participant 3 shared “...кто хорошо готовился, у них было больше преимуществ, потому что она оценивала хорошо их высказывания, их ответы и давала им больше, соответственно, вот этих баллов.” In addition, Participant 5 emphasized that in order to get more points they are to give more complex and creative responses. For instance, “...за очень хорошие ответы она иногда давала по 2, по 3 поинта, и ты перед тем как ответишь, реально думаешь, что вот нужно не так поверхностно ответить, а намного глубже и как бы чтобы получить больше.” Considering everything, tutor managed to create equal conditions in the classroom, engaging students and motivating them to persevere in studies.

ACQUIRING QUALITIES AND SKILLS

The last theme derived is acquiring qualities and skills that consisted of 35 axial codes. It is divided into two subthemes such as acquiring qualities and skills necessary for

the studying process and those linked to everyday life.

All of the participants mentioned that in the process of learning they obtained skills that helped them in the course and in their studies. Namely, they reported that they developed a habit to independent learning, habit to be active on the lesson and determination in studies. For example, Participant 5 highlighted the necessity to search for additional materials and study by yourself “... как я упоминала раньше, я много чем пользовалась, я не оставалась на одном, что вот что есть силлабус и все, я только это буду читать нет. То есть я максимально старалась находить дополнительные материалы.” Furthermore, Participant 4 pointed out the importance of determination in learning “... и мм после философии я поняла то, что нужно стремиться учиться, нужно рвать и метать, как бы это так в переносном смысле нужно рвать и метать, нужно грызть гранит науки.”

The other aspect of this theme is qualities and skills needed in life. All the interviewees underlined acquiring skills and qualities same as critical thinking, coping with stress, concentration and resilience to loses, which are to help them outside of the university. To illustrate that, Participant 4 stated: “Но мне кажется, что наоборот, предмет помог как бы развивать этот критическое мышление, вот это вот в стрессовой ситуации обыгрывать.” In the same way, Participant 2 stressed the need to be resistant to failures: “Я вынесла то, что не нужно быть самокритичным. И то, что даже если у тебя не получается, то всё равно нужно идти до конца.” Briefly, enrolling in the philosophy course resulted in the acquisition of qualities and skills connected with education and life.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the experience of learning in competition in philosophy course was both motivational and stressful experience of

competition, which was driven by primary instinct to win, sufficiently mediated by a tutor and lead to the acquisition of qualities and skills. However, despite the commonalities in experience, the opinions of the participants could differ and each perceived competition in their own way. Chiefly, the competition in philosophy course was viewed partially as an attempt to surpass others and get high marks and partially as a source of anxiety. In a similar way, peers in competition were perceived differently ranging from enemies to role models to look up to.

In the long-term, the findings of current research could be furthered by both quantitative and qualitative studies. The special importance could be given to researches looking at two or more cases of learning in competition using comparative case study to give a deeper insight into the problem.

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