# Development of Linguistic Competence and Critical Thinking Skills via English Public Speaking Contest
## A Case Study

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**ABSTRACT**
**This qualitative study was aimed at understanding the areas of participants' linguistic and critical thinking development that facilitated students' achievements in "FLTRP (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press) Cup" English public speaking (EPS) contest. A sample of five college students who were winners of EPS contest was interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique. Students' responses revealed that sufficient input, interaction with peers and teachers played a mediating role in EPS contest and brought significant gains at speaking resource accumulation and ability training, while Q&A (Question and Answer) session triggered their ability to think and respond quickly. The results had implications to future EPS trainers on how to better prepare students' critical thinking abilities and linguistic competence in this field. It is recommended that proper amount of mock contest be held in different classes as practice and preparation for participants' speaking skills before the competition.**

*Keywords: public English speaking contest, linguistic competence, critical thinking abilities, sociocultural theory*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is the act, art, or process of making effective speeches before an audience, it is an act of strategic communication (Lucas, 2007; Yin, 2005). English public speaking (EPS) has been a skill of paramount importance among college students (Y. Li, Gao, & Zhang, 2015; Lucas, 2013; Parvis, 2001; Zhang, Ardasheva, & Austin, 2020) which strengthens the core skills and competencies, not just in oral communication, but also in writing, listening, critical thinking, intercultural communicative competence and overall English proficiency (Lucas, 2013). *The Guidelines on College English Teaching in China (version 2017)* states that college English curriculum should be set to cultivate students' comprehensive abilities, especially cross-cultural abilities and communication competence. However, students in China ranked poorly in their communicative competence which further impeded their ability to communicate cross-culturally.

Despite the importance of EPS contest to students and poor performance of college students in English communication, to date, EPS-related research remains limited. Previous researchers have explored EPS from an instructional perspective, examining ways to instructionally support EPS skills development (Y. Li et al., 2015; J. Wang, 2013; T Wang, 2009; Tong Wang, 2001). Other empirical studies have focused on the cultivations of EPS skills and the ways to develop the participants' talents (Jun, 2019; Lei, Weiwei, & Di, 2016; X. Li, 2015; Qiufang, Xiangdong, & Limin, 2005). None of these studies however, have examined EPS from the participants 'perspective in order to explore the potential influence of the contest on individual student.

Past literature has documented that English public speaking (EPS) can be an effective approach to help students develop communicative awareness, build confidence, use English in a comprehensive way, and more importantly, enhance their critical thinking ability (Wan, 2011, 2013; Zhang, 2009). As EPS enjoys great popularity among college students, it has played a significant role in Chinese tertiary education over the past few decades (Y. Li et al., 2015; Yin, 2005). Since 2002, the "FLTRP (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press) Cup" a nationwide high-level English Public Speaking Contest, has been attracting domestic and international attention. The contest has been of great help to participants in improving their English proficiency, and in cultivating their communication and critical thinking skills (http://uchallenge.unipus.cn).

Despite its importance and benefits it brings to participants to improve language proficiency and critical thinking skills, FLTRP Cup participants still find it hard to achieve the desired results.

To facilitate participants to better perform in this contest, many colleges and universities have initiated some speaking related activities to develop students' public speaking abilities. However, one of the appalling phenomena of students' public speaking practice is that a majority of them deliver their speeches in the form of mechanical recitation which resembled a monologue and showed no connection with the audience (Hu & Alsagoff, 2010). Given the prescriptive requirement set in *Guidelines on College English Teaching* released by China's Ministry of Education in recent years and the problems that exist in students' daily practice of their communication skills, it is vitally important to investigate the winners of the EPS contest and to explore their the strategies for success in EPS contest.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Based on the sociocultural theory, learning goals are achieved through social interaction, which is an important mediation for learners to acquire new knowledge. From this perspective, as participants are involved in English public speaking activities, they acquire new strategies and knowledge of the world and culture. That is to say, participants in English public speaking contest achieve their speaking goals through verbal or body language mediation(X. Li, 2015) (see "Fig. 1").
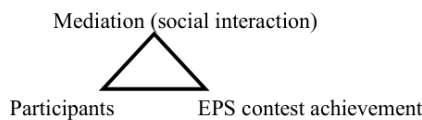


Fig. 1.  Socialcultural Thoery Model.

From sociocultural theory perspective, participants' achievements are mediated by diverse social interaction in the contest context. The mediation can be the speaking venue, attendance sequence, the judges, other contestants, audiences etc. Individuals construct new knowledge as they internalized concepts appropriated through participation in social activities(Mahn, 1999).

## III. DEMOGRAPHICS AND METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted on "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest winners at the provincial level. To best serve the research goals, a sample of five participants (one male and four females) ranging from 21 to 23 years ago were involved in this study (T Wang, 2009). To select the participants, the researcher used a non-probability purposive sampling technique (Yadav, Singh, & Gupta, 2019), since the focus of this research was on participants with previous experience in participating in the "FLTRP Cup" EPS competition.

Participants in this study were five students who were the winners of "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the participants, they were coded from S1 to S5. They had the experience of participating in this competition in the past three years. Ethical permission for the conduct of this study was granted by Gongqing College of Nanchang University in China, and approval to voluntarily participate in the study, was also obtained from the participants. (See "Table I")

TABLE I.        BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

| Name | Gender | Age | major | Prize level | FLTRP CUP |
|------|--------|-----|-------|-------------|-----------|
| S1 | Female | 23 | International economy and trade | National (2) | 2017 |
| S2 | Female | 21 | English major | National (2) | 2019 |
| S3 | Male | 23 | English major | Provincial(3/3) | 2017/2018 |
| S4 | female | 21 | English major | Provincial(3) | 2019 |
| S5 | female | 21 | Chinese major | Provincial(2) | 2019 |

The present study aimed to explore the participants' answers to the following two research questions:

- In what ways could the "FLTRP Cup" English public speaking contest facilitate the participants' linguistic development?

- To what extent can "FLTRP Cup" English public speaking contest enhance participants' critical thinking abilities?

Data were collected from students via interviews which were semi-structured and of 20-30 minutes duration. The interviews consisted of a list of specified questions (see "Table II") established before the interview, however, being semi-structured allowed enough flexibility in the interview protocol to further explore responses and interesting comments further (Coll & Chapman, 2000; Wiersma, 1985). Therefore, set questions such as "what do you benefit most from FLERP English speaking contest?" were asked and then

followed up with explorative questions depending on the content of responses given by the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data was analyzed using a thematic analytical approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

TABLE II.        SPECIFIED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

| 1 | What do you benefit most from FLTRP English speaking contest? |
|---|---|
| 2 | What is your understanding of critical thinking? |
| 3 | What are the strategies to enhance critical thinking through public speaking? |
| 4 | What are the strategies to enhance linguistic competence through public speaking? |
| 5 | What is the most helpful platform to improve your public speaking abilities? |

## IV.    RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Benefits participants' derived from "FLTRP Cup" EPS Contest*

All participants indicated that "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest benefited them a lot, ranging from improving their linguistic competence to developing their thinking abilities. Such experience helped acquire confidence before an audience, develop their thinking and expand their vision toward the world. For example, when asked about the benefit of attending this contest, student 3 (S3) explained: "The most obvious progress in this experience is that I acquired my confidence to appear before an audience, I can control the stage when I am speaking. And the accumulated confidence to attract audience further helped me to be a confident teacher in my current training center." Similarly, the contest gave student 5 (S5) valuable experience in building her confidence and having a better understanding of herself, she explained: "EPS contest enabled me to face a bigger platform, you will obviously know about your own strengths and weakness, the gap between you and other contestants. I think I suffer less from stage fright in that kind of public place. This is my innate advantage to feel comfortable to speak in public."

Participants S1 and S2 (winners of national level EPS) believed that such challenge is not only overcoming the stage-fright, but more importantly, it develops participants' thinking abilities. S1, for example, reflected back by saying "I think the biggest gain for me in participating in the speech contest is the ability to respond quickly as well as the ability to think critically."

Similarly S2 believed that the greatest benefit the contest brought her was to her thinking ability. "For example, if you write the speech manuscript for the first time and finalize it for the last time, you may end up with two totally different scripts". S2 continued to explain: "So you may change your ideas completely, and then analyze this speech from different perspectives on the topic. If you encounter a new topic in the future, you will also learn to interpret it from different angles."

Public speaking is a tough job to all the participants, even native speakers of English find pubic speaking challenging. Sayer (1983), citing a national survey, reports that Americans are more afraid of public speaking than death (Yin, 2005). All the participants believed that the ways to conquer stage-fright and gain confidence in speaking and accumulate more sources of new thinking is to practice more before the contest. Just as Mclonghlin in his book *The Art of Public Speaking for Engineers* said, "You can never attain freedom from stage-fright by reading a treatise. Practice in speaking before an audience will tend to remove all fears of audiences, just as practice in swimming will lead to confidence and facility in the water. You must learn to speak by speaking (Mcloughlin, 2006)."

### B. *Participants' linguistic competence development in "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest*

EPS is intellectually and linguistically challenging. The optimal outcome requires participants' linguistic fluency (Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019). Every participant agreed that linguistic competence is a key factor to enable the participants to succeed in EPS contest. And EPS contest assisted in their abilities to convey their ideas in a foreign language. As "FLTRP Cup" contest is an important platform for the participants to polish their language proficiencies. S1 recalled by saying that:

"Before the competition, you need to compose an English transcript, so you should obtain English writing abilities, productive competence and even listening abilities are required, because you are supposed to understand the judges' questions".

She continued to explain:

"Then in the session of impromptu speech, you have to present your ideas instantly in English. I mean that English speech contest is a process of constant enhancing and systematic application of your language. It enables a second language learner to apply their language in a systematic way, thus, it enhances listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities all together at the same time."

S2 and S3 both shared similar opinion that by attending "FLTRP Cup" contest, they upgraded their oral language competence, because they had to do a lot of linguistic practice, such as TED video imitation,

reading foreign journals, etc. to enhance their speaking abilities.

### C. *Participants' critical thinking development in "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest*

EPS, defined as "an act of strategic communication," requires not only technical English language proficiency, but also critical thinking, creative ideas, and logical constructions (Zhang et al., 2020). Past literature documented that EPS skills can facilitate critical thinking and intercultural communicative competence (Y. Li et al., 2015; Lucas, 2013). "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest brought great benefit to participants' development of critical thinking abilities. Student one (S1), for example, recalled by saying that:

"En... I think the biggest gain for me in participating in the speech contest is the ability to respond quickly as well as the ability to think critically. Firstly, the competition requires you to give your own ideas and answer questions in a very short time.

The student continued to explain that:

At the same time, you also need to make an in-depth analysis of this issue, and you are supposed to conduct a detailed analysis of the debating theme and the central topic, construct your own idea and compose an article. After you have finished your speech, the judges may question your some of your points and raise some other ideas correspondingly, you have to respond to the question very quickly, thus, I believe these two abilities are the biggest gain in speech contest."

As student 2 mentioned in her interview, what she benefited most in participating in the EPS contest is the enhancement of her thinking abilities. She explained: "From the first draft to the final copy, I may break my normal thinking patterns and view the issue from different perspectives, in the process of composing speech script, I always try to listen to different voices and search a new and creative angle to lead in my speech".

Speaking and thinking are closely interwoven with each other (Vygotsky, 1997) In light of Kohler's (1920s) investigations on apes between thinking and speech, Vygotsky concluded that "speech is a psychological tool which mediates thinking in its early stage of development. Vygotsky's hypothesis was confirmed in that thinking which develops from practical activity is mediated by speech, by the words. Vygotsky's analysis of the development of inner speech and the role played by social interaction in the internalization process led to his most fully elaborated application of the concept of internalization (Mahn, 1999).

### D. *Strategies to enhance critical thinking abilities and linguistic competence in EPS contest*

Each and every participant attached great importance to increasing input, reflecting on peer contestants and teachers' feedbacks and stimulus of Q & A practice before the competition.

*1) Mediation of sufficient input:* Long (Long, 1981) argues that interaction facilitates acquisition because of the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in such discourse and that provide learners with the input they need.

*a) Reading input as a helpful mediation:* One challenge for many participants in the EPS contest is insufficient materials stored in their mind, which may set barriers for their speaking output. A large amount of reading tasks can actually mediate language acquisition process (Ellis, 2008). The first interviewee (S1) mentioned in her interview that reading a sizeable amount of foreign articles enabled her to focus on the points. Similarly, S2 benefited from reading English journals, she recalled that some official accounts such as *China Daily and Wall Street English* released news every day, the topics are really novel for her and it enabled her to think. S4 explained that "for the preparation of EPS contest, the focal point is reading, as long as I am equipped with enough knowledge, I can output."

Reading is a matter of interaction between a reader and the text. Products for reading in the form of texts are not only themselves outcomes of a writer's writing processes, which involve the cognitive, linguistic, and social domains, but it invites and activate those processes in their readers. It is a compelling association since it embraces the cognitive, the linguistic and the social, within the speaking/listening connection and between that of reading and speaking (Urquhart & Weir, 2014). According to Bernhardt (Bernhardt, 1991), "taking a cognitive perspective means examining the reading process as an interpersonal problem-solving task that takes place within the brain's knowledge structures". She notes that critical element in any cognitive view of reading is that it is an individual act. Grubaugh (1990) also points out that a wide range reading can develop students' knowledge of content and organization of various types of discourse, thus will help them to conceptualize (Grubaugh, 1990).

*b) Studying great speeches:* Five respondents indicated that reading and analyzing great speeches played an important part in their speaking contest achievement. They were fully aware that they had to read and learn good speeches before they wrote and delivered good speeches. Carpenter (2003) mentioned that one of the best ways to improve speaking is to study speeches by outstanding speakers.

Through studying great speeches, participants can draw from the emotional appeals, language use and pattern of organization of these speeches, which can be useful to polish their own presentation. They may receive more or different input and have more opportunities for output (Swain, 1985, 1995).

*2) Interaction with peers and judgers:* While preparing for the contest, students commonly sought advice from their lecturers and classmates, including the speech script, their ideas presented, the speaking skills etc. S2 for example, got advice from her teachers, peer contestants and her parents. She reflected back by saying: "For me, I might consult my teacher or classmate and ask them to read my speech script, I would like to hear their voices about it on that topic. And for a period of time, I discussed recent events or several recent hot topics with Zhan (S2's classmate as well as a contestant). The talking may develop into a free talk later with a duration of five to ten minutes, we just say whatever we want to express or talk about our recent state."

Similarly, student one (S1) mentioned: "I obtained different voices and feedback from peer classmates, their words inspired me to be open to a new world of ideas. I embrace points and ideas from different angles and different areas, and this is fantastic for me to enrich my mind." S5 believed that teachers' feedback helped her to build her confidence.

S1 suggested that:

"You can talk to different people constantly and listen to their opinions on this matter, because they may have deeper experience, they may see the issue from a higher level than you. Then you continue to reflect on yourself, reflecting means that thinking about the positive as well as negative parts of your ideas."

It is suggested that teachers need to create multiple presentation opportunities for students to experience and internalize success; this may include speaking aloud with no audience present, speaking to small-groups and to whole- class settings, and when feasible, in virtual public speaking environments (Zhang et al., 2020). Zhang's (2020) empirical research also indicated that others' performances, communication with the audience, and the amount of time and effort invested in preparation influenced participants' performance. In contrast to the teacher, however, students perceived themselves as benefitting more from teacher- rather than from peer-provided modeling and feedback (Zhang et al., 2020).

*3) Stimulus of Question & Answer practice:* All the participants displayed their gains in the Q & A practice sessions before the competition. Student one, for example, mentioned that the Q & A session was very helpful to train her thinking abilities: "when I was asked to answer a question abruptly, I was supposed to organize my thought and my language in a very short time, and I was expected to demonstrate my ideas in a very logical way to impress the audience, this was very tough for me at the beginning". Similarly, Student 4 recalled by saying that: "I found that every time when I was posed a question by the teacher, I tended to think and respond instantly".

Swain (1995) has argued that it is having to actually produce language that forces learners to think about syntax. Based on the output hypothesis, it would seem that, for interaction to facilitate SLA (second language acquisition), learners need to have opportunities for output during interaction. In many second language classrooms as well as naturalistic contexts(Mackey, 1999).

## V. CONCLUSION

As the data showed in the results, reading input, peer influences, teachers' comments, speaking platforms are helpful mediators for the participants to polish their language and develop their critical thinking skills. "FLTRP Cup" EPS contest is a beneficial platform for students to enhance their critical thinking and linguistic competence. Meanwhile, critical thinking abilities are developed and awareness of reading has been enhanced. In other words, "FLTRP Cup" EPS functions successfully in motivating students both in language learning and critical thinking.

Increasing reading input is of great necessity to guarantee sufficient linguistic input. In addition, Q & A sessions have worked effectively in improving participants' critical thinking and quick response skills. On the other hand, participants responded unexpectedly positively to the opportunity to practice speaking in different classes before the competition, as such repeated experience built their confidence, and feedback from the audience and the teachers motivated them to polish their speech.

Admittedly, there are some limitations to this study. Future researchers could do a tracing study to investigate whether there is a significant difference between EPS participants and normal students in critical thinking and linguistic fluency. In addition, the writer hopes to develop relevant courses to develop students' public speaking abilities to be a better speaker and a critical thinker. Also, teachers' voices should be heard. It would be interesting to collect data from the teachers' perspective, and more realistic results could be obtained in this case.

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