

# Exploration and Practice on How to Improve Non-English Major Students' Public Speaking Ability —An Action Research on English Public Speaking Classes in Kunming University

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## ABSTRACT

As an art form, the purpose of integrating EPS classes into the college English curriculum is not to cultivate college students as professional speakers, but to enhance their language proficiency and critical thinking ability. Through systematic teaching in a selective course of Kunming University, the research aims to discuss how to improve undergraduate students' public speaking ability. Two rounds of action research were conducted, during which data were collected via questionnaire, observation and speech presentation. The findings show that students' public speaking abilities do get some improvement, but more could be done for further progress.

**Keywords:** *Exploration and practice; public speaking teaching; action research*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of globalization, the ability to communicate in English has become one of the most important skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Based on *The Outline of the National Medium-and Long-Term Program for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, "quality education" is the core concept. It proposes the strategic goal of realizing basic educational modernization by 2020, building a learning society, and turning China into a country with rich human resources. In that case, there is a pressing need for cultivating innovative talents in China, like "high-quality specialized talents with excellent skills" and "international talents".

In the past decades, College English teaching in China faced various problems, like "time-consuming, lower efficiency", "dumb English", and "examination-oriented". As an integral part of Chinese higher education, teaching and research on public speaking has become increasingly important. Ren Wen (2007) put forward that, "by combining English language training and development of public speaking skills, the course can help improve students' English language competency, knowledge-learning capability, cross-cultural awareness, psychological quality, thinking ability, aesthetic judgment, which can eliminate the drawback of cramming method of teaching." [1]

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The Teaching of English Public Speaking

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, public speaking is "[t]he act, art, or process of making effective speeches before an audience". Originating from Greek rhetoric tradition which deals with oratory, or the ability to convince and inspire an audience with a specific point of view, the tradition of public speaking has a long history in Western world. Since 19<sup>th</sup> century, American students have studied the art of elocution at college and the more affluent would receive private tutoring (Ferguson, 2007).[2] Each year, approximately 450,000 college students are enrolled in public speaking classes (Pearson, 2006).[3] In American, public speaking is an integral part of higher education; many American colleges and universities offer public speaking as a required course at the undergraduate level.

English public speaking teaching has not been set on the Chinese EFL education agenda until a flourish of public speaking competitions and seminars emerged to attract educators' attention, such as the "21st Century Cup" National English Speaking Competition, "FLTRP Cup" National English Speaking Contest, and the First National Symposium on English Public Speaking in 2007. No matter at school, in the competition, or in the future workplace, the public speaking ability has always been regarded as a vital quality for college

students. Xia Jijia (2010) thinks that the integration of students' wonderful speeches into college English teaching is beneficial to create harmonious atmosphere of learning and improve efficiency of teaching.[4] According to Liu Saixiong (2018), to cultivate students' ability of English public speaking can develop their integrating skills as well as comprehensive quality.[5]

## **2.2. Action Research**

First appeared in America, action research was put forward by John Dewey in 1929. M. Corey introduced it to the field of education in 1953 and this approach has been widely applied among American educational researches since then. Christine Miller A. define that action research is a natural part of teaching. Teachers are continually observing students, collecting data and changing practice to improve students' learning and the classroom and school environment. It provides a framework that guides the energies and determination of teachers toward a better understanding of why, when, and how students become better learners.

Researches on how to enhance students' public speaking competence have sprung up from the perspective of teaching materials, teaching methods, assessments and so on. However, there is a scarce of action research on exploration and practice on how to improve college students' public speaking ability.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

As has been mentioned above, due to the current situation of college English teaching, there is an urgent need for improving college students' public speaking ability in China, not to mention application-oriented universities like Kunming University. Although it has been ten years since students first took part in public speaking competitions of different levels, EPS classes as selective course in Kunming University just started in 2019. Therefore, the researcher carried out two rounds of action research in practical teaching lasting for two semesters and utilized the teaching team in the selective course in Kunming University, which aims to explore how to improve undergraduate students' public speaking abilities.

### **3.1. Research Questions**

Specifically, the following three questions are addressed in this study.

(1) Which aspects of students' public speaking ability can be improved in the EPS classes of Kunming University?

(2) What contents of course can be included in the EPS classes of Kunming University?

(3) In what way can speech videos be used to help students improve their public speaking skills?

### **3.2. Participants**

Participants in this action research are students from the selective course provided by Kunming University, "English Public Speaking: Theories and Practice". The course has been set up for two semesters continuously. The researcher's teaching partners (another four English teachers) will be also involved in this research.

### **3.3. Research Procedures**

In 1946, Kurt Lewin describes AR as "plan—action—observation—reflect--plan". This research follows the basic process which not only contains four steps mentioned above, but also contains at least two rounds of research circle.

### **3.4. Research Instruments**

In this action research, several instruments were used including questionnaires, tests (speech presentation) and interviews.

## **4. THE FIRST ROUND OF THE ACTION RESEARCH AND REFLECTION**

Since the AR in the context of university is of great value and there are relatively urgent needs for non-English major students in Kunming University to improve public speaking ability, the present study was carried out among 110 students. The first round of the action research started from September of 2019 to January of 2020, lasting for nearly 4 months. There are 2 class periods each week.

### **4.1. Planning**

It is the first time for teachers in Kunming University to integrate EPS classes into the college English curriculum. As a matter of fact, all the teaching partners of the research have had some previous experience in training students to take part in some English-speaking competitions, like "FLTRP·ETIC Cup" English Public Speaking Contest. Based on *The Art of Public Speaking* written by Stephen E. Lucas, the Manual of Toastmasters International (Competent Communication), some well-chosen speech videos and

TED talks, the first round of the teaching action is conducted as planned.

The concrete action plan is as follows, which is going to be implemented in 12 weeks.

**Table 1.** The first round of the AR

Week	Topic	Expected outcome
1-2	Introduction	To help students have a general knowledge of English public speaking (What is public speaking? Why to do public speaking?)
3-4	Selecting a Topic and a Purpose	To help students grasp the skills on how to select a topic and purpose
5-6	Structure and Language	To help students grasp the skills on how to outline their speeches and how to use their language
7-8	Informative Speeches	To help students have a deep impression about four types of informative speeches and how to make an informative speech
9-10	Persuasive Speeches	To help students have a deep impression about three types of persuasive speeches and how to make a persuasive speech
11-12	Inspiring Speeches	To help students have a deep impression about inspiring speeches and how to make it

**4.2. Action**

**4.2.1. Ice Breaker**

In order to have a preliminary investigation into all the participants’ present public speaking competence before taking the course, all of them are required to have an ice breaker, so-called the first speech project. All the participants will introduce themselves to their fellow classmates, and give information like background, interests and ambitions, which needs to be limited to 2 minutes.

**4.2.2. In-class Teaching**

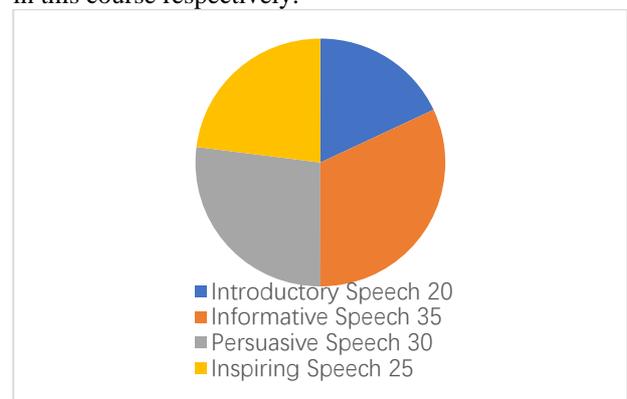
With the aim of helping all the participants master some basic skills in public speaking, six topics are involved in the 12-week-teaching cycle. All the topics are intently bound up with the well-chosen chapters from the book *The Art of Public Speaking*. The syllabus for a

12-week course can be seen in Table 1 above. In each public speaking class, the research team offers the students some materials including handouts on the specific topic and speech videos so that they could learn something relating to improving public speaking abilities. Activities for students to practice the skills learned from the course are followed in the next week. The concept of “Learning by doing” has been emphasized.

**4.3. Observation**

Based on every step of classroom observation, we conclude that a majority of students are involved in various speaking activities in class. Classroom teaching is the combination of teachers’ explanation, demonstration and students’ participation, presentation. The format of communication is interactive, which aims to help students become more confident in expressing themselves and more critical in thinking. Taking the project “Selecting a topic” as an example, after the teacher explains some basic information about how to choose a topic for a speech, students are asked to have an in-class activity. Each group would get a list of topics which contains 20 broad speech topics, and then find their own topic. Student-centered environment enables students to learn to think and speak autonomously through group discussion and presentation. Through this activity, students learn to dig deep into a broad topic and then narrow it, which fully proves that “the first step in speechmaking is choosing a topic”. [6]

Over four months, all the topics have been presented and practiced. For the final presentation, all the participants are required to give a 3-min prepared speech with optional topics. Based on the spot observation, 110 students successfully present their speeches, including four types of speeches mentioned in this course respectively.



**Figure 1.** Final presentations in the first round of the AR

Compared with their first speech (the ice breaker), students discovered public speaking skills they already have and skills that need their further attention. Most students already have had the awareness of selecting an appropriate topic, organizing the speech, and getting to the point.

#### **4.4. Reflection**

Many scholars have proved the importance of public speaking in the teaching of college English (Ren Wen, 2007; Lu Dinyuan, 2008; Geng Yuqiu, 2010). Geng Yuqiu holds the view that EPS course can improve students' communicative strategy according to his own empirical study. [7] As mentioned above, the research makes attempt to find out whether students' public speaking abilities could be improved through EPS course. Aiming at exploring students' positive changes in public speaking and problems remained in the whole process, questionnaires and interviews were conducted before the final presentation. The questionnaire was given to each student in the class, which consists of multiple choice and open questions. Students were required to finish it in five minutes. An interview with randomly selected students was conducted at the end of the course.

Firstly, most students have a preliminary knowledge of public speaking. 60% of the students agree that it is important to select an appropriate outline which allows listeners to easily follow and understand; 70% of the students think that a speech will be more effective if the speaker can support his main points with statistics, stories, examples, and facts.

Secondly, most students take a positive attitude toward our EPS course. When being asked whether it is indispensable for undergraduates to take public speaking class, only 11 students are not sure about that. 71% of the students hold the view that they learn something from the course, for example, how to outline the speech, how to give an introductory speech.

Thirdly, most students are looking forward to improve their public speaking skills in delivery. For question 11, "What would you like to learn from this course in the future", 66% of the students expect to learn skills in delivering a speech, for example, how to use body language and vocal variety.

### **5. THE SECOND ROUND OF THE ACTION RESEARCH AND REFLECTION**

The second round of the action research started from March of 2020 to June of 2020, lasting for nearly 4 months. There are also 2 class periods each week. For this round of the research, there are 50 students signed up for this elective course.

#### **5.1. Planning**

Based on the first round of action research, a certain percentage of students in Kunming University express their expectations of improving their public speaking abilities in delivering a speech. The adjustment was made in the second round of the action research after further exploration and discussion with other teachers. First, reform the content of the course. As shown in the following Table 2, topics like "the speaker's voice", "the speaker's body", and "using visual aids" are included in this round of the research. Second, reform in the choice of speech videos presented in class. In the previous round, the teaching team is free to choose their own speech videos. While in this round, there are 3 speech videos shared by all the teachers, which can help students appreciate the speeches from different perspectives.

**Table 2.** The second round of the AR

<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Expected outcome</b>
1-2	Introduction	To help students have a general knowledge of English public speaking
3-4	Selecting a Topic and a Purpose	To help students grasp the skills on how to select a topic and purpose
5-6	Organizing the Speech & Using Language	To help students grasp the skills on how to outline their speeches and how to use their language
7-8	The Speaker's Voice	To help students grasp the skills on how to use the speaker's voice, like volume, pitch, rate, pauses, vocal variety and pronunciation
9-10	The Speaker's Body	To help students grasp the skills on how to use the speaker's body, like personal appearance, eye contact, gestures, movement
11-12	Using Visual Aids	To help students have a deep impression about the adoption of visual aids in public speaking, including its categories, tips for preparing and presenting them

#### **5.2. Action**

By analyzing the data in the first round, namely, classroom observation, questionnaire and interview, the following hypotheses have been formed.

1) Most students have a positive attitude for improving their oral English. But there is a striking difference between spoken English and public speaking.

2) When using speech videos in public speaking course, the primary concern for teachers is not to ask students to watch, but to teach them how to watch, appreciate and think.

Since hypotheses on students' problems and possible solutions had been proposed, the following is what to be done in the second round of the action research.

**5.2.1. The First Stage**

The first period is to introduce basic knowledge about public speaking. In the first 6 weeks, the teaching is mainly concerned with the following aspects, what is public speaking, how to select a topic and a purpose, how to outline the speech and how to use language. By doing these, students can have a general understanding of public speaking. For nations, as for individuals, public speaking is a vital way to express ideas and achieve objectives.

**5.2.2. The Second stage**

The second period to introduce basic information on how to deliver a speech in the presence of audience. Although effective speakers know how to outline their speeches, how to use their language accurately, clearly, vividly and appropriately; they still need to know how to deliver the speech, which is the focus of this stage.

Firstly, the speaker's voice is the link between him and his listeners. A lively, exciting voice attracts and keeps listeners' attention. A speaking voice should be pleasant, natural, forceful, expressive, and easily heard, which can be achieved by volume, pitch, rate, pauses, and vocal variety.

Secondly, body language is an important part of speaking because it could enhance the speaker's message and affect the way listeners respond to the speaker, including personal appearance, eye contact, gestures, and stage movement.

Thirdly, as the old saying goes, "One picture can be worth a thousand words". People find a speaker's message more interesting, grasp it more easily, and retain it longer when it is presented visually as well as verbally.

**5.3. Observation and Reflection**

In the second round of the action, the teaching team became more conscious of the teaching process with a pointed adjustment. Teachers spent more time

designing activities to practice students' abilities in delivering a speech. In scaffolding basic information, teachers are more facilitators while students take a more active role in creating learning opportunities in the public speaking course. Judging by classroom observation, students became more active in speaking as well as in thinking. To teach students how to make use of their voice is a perfect example. At the start of teaching, the teacher has already laid out the plan regarding how to give a detailed introduction and help students practice afterward. With the help of activities like "watching the speech videos and imitating", students could practice the way of using voice volume, pitch, rate in speech. Furthermore, when being asked to reflect on the reason why a specific technique is used, students' critical thinking is practiced.

Compared with their first speech (the ice breaker), students could make good use of some techniques to impress their audiences. Most students already have had the awareness of the importance of delivery in public speaking, as shown in the table below.

**Table 3.** The delivery techniques used by students in speeches

The Speaker's voice	Volume	✓
	Pitch	✓
	Rate	✓
	Pauses	✓
	Vocal variety	✓
	Pronunciation	
The speaker's body	Eye contact	✓
	Gestures	✓
	Movement	✓
	Personal appearance	
Using visual aids	Objects	✓
	Photographs and drawings	✓
	Video	✓
	Powerpoint	
	Graphs and charts	

After the second round of the research, it was time to draw a conclusion and reflect on outcomes. With the questionnaire, interviews, and students' final speech as valuable evidence, it was, therefore, safe to say that adjustment on teaching contents was effective for these undergraduate students in Kunming University in some sense. After having taken this EPS class, they were now producing more logical speeches, using more body language and vocal variety, and holding more positive view toward public speaking. However, as there were still problems and disadvantages, it was necessary to revise the plan accordingly in future teaching.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As a popular extracurricular activity for Chinese college undergraduates, public speaking has played an important role (In Chinese) higher education over the past few decades. In recent years, more and more teachers and scholars in China have put more efforts into the teaching and researching of public speaking in order to meet students' growing need for effective communication skills. To institutionalize public speaking as an integral part of Chinese college curriculum, it is necessary for the instructors teaching this course to know the pedagogical tools and processes of public speaking education. [8]

Initially, the writer began the research with three questions. Through two rounds of action research, the following major findings could be obtained. Firstly, the EPS course, which aims to help students grasp some basic knowledge of public speaking, benefits students a lot. They develop their proficiency in public speaking. Specifically, students' abilities on how to select a topic and a purpose, outline a speech, and deliver a speech have been practiced, which can be easily found from post-questionnaire, random interview, and students' final prepared speeches. Secondly, as for such a 12-week selective course, through two different attempts in teaching contents, we could draw the conclusion that each in its way has made an important contribution to improve students' public speaking abilities. Finally, as an indispensable means for students to appreciate excellent speeches delivered by effective speakers, instructors should make good use of the videos. But it is preferable to make some adjustments to the selection and application of the speeches.

There are some limitations in the present study that needs to be modified in the future in terms of the time span and the number of class. In the light of findings of this action research, it would be useful if a similar study is to be conducted in a different teaching situation, like the supplement of language input to provide scaffold in improving students' public speaking abilities.

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