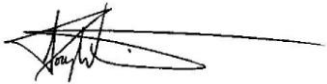


A RESEARCH INTO IMPROVING THE EFFICIENCY OF COLLEGE ESL PUBLIC
SPEAKING CLASS BY MULTIPLE TEACHING APPROACHES

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Abstract

A RESEARCH INTO IMPROVING THE EFFICIENCY OF COLLEGE ESL PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASS BY MULTIPLE TEACHING APPROACHES

Under the Supervision of Kory Wein, PhD

It has long been a popular research topic for Chinese ESL teachers to seek more effective teaching methods in English public speaking classes. Nowadays, ESL learners in college have fewer opportunities to practice their speaking English and receive ineffective feedback from instructors. The environment of English speaking is not authentic enough for students to avoid the influence of the first language. Teachers need to find many new ways to enhance students' learning abilities and provide a positive learning atmosphere. Using great speeches to teach the skills of public speaking is considered to be an effective tool for students. This paper reviews the literature on the multiple approaches to improve the teaching efficiency, such as the role-play activity, computer-based learning mode. Compared to other teaching approaches, using speeches help college ESL students learn from the logical thinking ways and delivery strategies to improve their communicative competence.

Keywords: public speaking class; ESL; communicative competence; multiple approaches.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Scholars of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching Huang and Xu (1999) suggest that the focus of ESL teaching should shift from linguistic competence to communicative competence. Chinese students, for example, often spend more time on English grammar than they do on other needed skills. While Chinese ESL learners can achieve high scores in some nationwide written tests, most of them have difficulty in oral communication, especially public speech.

There are a variety of opinions on how to develop the communicative competence of college ESL learners. The efficacy of an English speaking class may be influenced by three factors: the students' basic grammatical knowledge English, the instructors' teaching methods, and the students' attitudes toward the feedback from teachers. Harmer (2000) holds the opinion that students should enjoy English speaking tasks and emphasizes the importance of students' learning motivation. Yin (2005) holds the opinion that teachers must clearly identify educational objectives and employ well developed teaching methods. The methods that can improve the learning process of ESL speaking have been the focus of teachers. For instance, teachers in China place a premium on some in-class activities, such as group discussion and role-play activities, instead of stereotypical drills and exercises.

American presidential speeches, especially President Obama's speeches, are very popular among Chinese ESL learners because his speeches use stylistic language, rhetorical expressions, and exhibit impressive thinking. Wang (2011) conducted a study on the rhetorical devices used in President Obama's speeches and holds that presidential speeches can be an effective teaching tool to develop ESL acquisition. Students can understand those speeches better by analyzing the figures of speech and learn to use better delivery skills.

This paper will first review the literature on the speaking or speech problems that Chinese ESL learners have and review the most frequently used methods and techniques used in public speaking classes, including using American presidential speeches to improve the efficacy of speaking classes.

Statement of the Problem

The problems to be addressed are as follows: what are the problems in ESL public speaking classes in China? How can American presidential speeches develop ESL learners' communicative competence?

Definition of Terms

Communicative competence: refers to both the grammatical knowledge and social knowledge to speak and behave appropriately. This term was developed by Hymes from Chomsky's 1965 notion of *competence*.

ESL: Acronym for the term English as a Second Language

Linguistic competence: refers to the comprehension of language knowledge, including grammar, linguistics knowledge and understanding of sentences and passages. Lehmann (2007) thinks linguistic competence should contain both language ability and language knowledge.

Public speaking: refers to speeches delivered by English speakers to express concerns or persuasive ideas. In this paper, ESL learners in China are the target analysis samples.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to analyze the problems of ESL public speaking classes in China and to study the usage of American presidential speeches as supporting teaching materials. Furthermore, this paper will discuss the possible ways to improve the efficacy of public speaking classes.

Significance of the Study

There exist many problems or unexpected results in ESL public speaking classes. Chinese ESL learners are usually unable to deliver effective speeches. Language's interpersonal communicative function is widely reflected on both formal working situation and private conversation. Developing methods to increase students' communicative competence is of great importance.

Delimitation of the Study

Research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host, with ERIC and CNKI as the primary sources. Keyword searches will include "public speaking," "President Obama's speeches," and "ESL."

Methodology

A brief review of the literature relating to the current practice of teaching English public speaking will be conducted. A second review of the literature will analyze newer or alternative methods in English public speaking classes. Thirdly, the effects of the methods will be discussed. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

A review of the situation of college ESL speaking classes

English speaking class plays an important role in the ESL teaching curriculum and the process of EFL acquisition. Many Chinese scholars have identified or put forth the principles of teaching in speaking classes. Four fundamental principles are

- the combination of practice from both the language ability aspect and the logical thinking aspect;
- trying to use precise expressions as well as making progress from mistakes;
- imitation of the native speakers and creating one's own style; and
- making preparations for public speaking while improvising properly (Hu, 1990).

These perspectives reflect the key points of teaching English public speaking. English public speaking requires step-by-step practice throughout the whole process. Teachers should guide students depending on these core principles. As their teaching methods develop with time, teachers can explore new approaches to make classes more effective. Before the analysis of specific teaching methods and approaches, the basic situation of ESL acquisition, especially speaking English, is the background information that should be reviewed.

The problems in ESL English speaking classes

Some scholars have explained the English speaking problems among ESL learners in China. Gan (2012) did a study on the speaking problems in order to address the implications they have on curriculum development. He concludes three main factors that have an important influence on college students' English speaking learning. The first factor is inadequate opportunities for students to practice oral English. ESL learners are living in a society that uses Chinese as a main language. If colleges are unable to create opportunities to practice English speaking, most

students will have little chance to practice a second language by themselves. Secondly, the curriculum does not put a sufficient premium on the improvement of students' speaking skills. This factor is connected with the lack of emphasis on feedback. The third factor emphasizes that the English speaking environment outside of school is not good enough. Gan analyzes the problems from the perspectives of social background and curriculum settings.

Similarly, Hou (2010) asserts that for Chinese students there are several factors that impede their ability to learn to speak English proficiently: pronunciation differences between Chinese and English, traditional learning methods based on memorizing of vocabulary, and culture differences. For instance, if a college student has the pronunciation habit of a Chinese dialect, it will be difficult to pronounce English words correctly.

Taking a more psychological approach, Mak (2011) conducted a survey of Chinese ESL students' anxiety. He found that the atmosphere of second language speaking classes usually makes students feel uncomfortable and nervous. Hence, students tend to give negative self-evaluations and fail in public speeches. These situations become even worse when the students do not prepare adequately. In-classroom speaking anxiety is considered to be a common phenomenon in ESL classes. The main consequence is that students become shy and unconfident in their ability to give speeches.

The efficiency of an English speaking class may be influenced by three factors: the students' oral English problems, interesting teaching method, and useful feedback in a timely manner. Having only the skills of speaking grammatical sentences is not enough to convey meaning as the first language does. Rybold (2010) analyzed the relationship between speaking and thinking when EFL learners encounter oral problems. He holds the opinion that the solutions to oral English problems are not only learning grammar rules, but also thinking in the second

language's perspective. According to Hu (1990), the speaking difficulties of Chinese EFL learners can be divided into two steps. The first barrier is the beginning phase—to speak out. In this process, students need to overcome the problems like pronunciation, basic sentence structure, quick responses, and so on. After overcoming the previous difficulties, students face the problem of making progress. How can a student interpret the same event in a better way? What is the logical structure of the expressed contents? The second step, according to Hu, is considered the skillful period, where more speaking strategies are adopted to accelerate the improvement. The two progressing steps are well reflected in the following English speaking teaching methods.

A review of multiple approaches in teaching English public speaking

Teachers in China want to seek effective and interesting teaching methods to motivate students. Some methods are regarded as excellent ways to arouse students' speaking desire, while others offer numerous speaking resources and learning materials for the target students. To some extent, every approach has its own advantages to help educators facilitate the improvement of students. As to the development of new instructional technologies, many teachers use multimedia and computers to assist them in the classroom.

Role-play teaching activity

One of the most popular used teaching activities in Chinese ESL English speaking classes is the small group role-play activity. It is thought to create an atmosphere for learners to practice social contexts of communication and that applying this method for a period of time results in high class participation (Jamalvandi & Aliakbari, 2010).

Some studies have proved that the role-play method is helpful to arouse students' emotional response. Dinapoli (2009) studied the use of dramatic role-play to develop students' emotional

aptitude. He holds the view that “drama gave the students more opportunities for encountering contextualized exposure to the language, in which they could experience the signaling value of natural and more spontaneous communication.” In other words, role-play makes the students understand more clearly the cultural context, so they can understand the language from a different perspective. To some extent, a positive emotional attitude is of great significance in English speaking class.

Liu (2010) studied the impact of the role-play teaching method for improving student motivation. According to Liu, students participating in role-play activity turn out to be more interested in English speaking class than those taking oral English tests. His study mainly focuses on the motivation of the students for improving oral efficiency.

Multimedia-supported teaching approach

There are also other teaching methods employed in the English speaking class. Many of the current English speaking classes incorporate video or audio teaching material and computer-based resources. The extensive use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in China has greatly changed college English teaching methodologies (Lu, Hou & Huang, 2010). Lu, Hou, and Huang analyzed the efficiency of computer utility in audio-video speaking class. For a second language learner, interactive conversations are of great significance, as they put language grammar into practice. It is meaningful to help the ESL learners acquire English speaking skills. Computers can offer vivid practical situations and standard pronunciations to learners, and they can give feedback right after oral practices. This type of teaching method emphasizes the idea of “learner-centered” education. In an English audio-video speaking course (EAVSC), students can get access to the digital language lab and practice their English speaking on the Internet. Then the teachers can supervise the class and give feedback to students.

Shih (2010) pointed out that using new Internet-based teaching and learning models can improve the students' learning in English public speaking classes. His focus is the establishment of "a blended teaching and learning model combining online and face to face instructional blogging." In this process, video and the internet are the essential components. Furthermore, students can give immediate feedback to their partners and teachers.

In order to help students acquire skills in English public speaking, Li (2009) suggests that setting precise targets for English speaking classes is of great importance. Since different students may come across their own problems in English speaking class, each of them should focus on the specific difficulties by making progress in certain kind of public speaking skill, such as the aspects of logic, accuracy, fluency and rhetorical devices. The specific objectives should be discussed by teachers and students together.

Shafer (2010) came up with ways to enhance public speaking skills by putting the practice schedule into every phase of the curriculum. Shafer argues that teaching English public speaking needs to not only occur in the classroom but outside of class as well. Teachers should offer basic public speaking skills to students and leave room for self-improvement, instead of just requiring the documents after class. Shafer's theory emphasizes that oral presentations do not mean reading a previously written script to an audience. A good public speech contains more strategic elements such as appropriate body language, pauses in each sentence, acceptable core values, and so on. Multiple class requirements are in a position to help students establish comprehensive public speaking behaviors.

Great speeches as public speaking teaching materials

The most efficacious methods of teaching English speaking to ESL learners are those that focus on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and logical thinking. From this perspective, many

scholars have tried to determine what method can enhance students' English speaking skills from all four of these levels. Many teachers add great speeches into their teaching content. In recent years, American President Obama's speeches have become popular among teachers and students in China's universities. Many scholars, such as Wang (2011) and Ye (2010), have studied the language features and the insightful thinking within his speeches in order to help ESL learners improve their public speaking abilities.

Teachers often encounter the situation where students try to pronounce a word or sentence again and again, which shows the ambiguity of grammar rules and lack of speaking experiences. Teachers should listen carefully to the students' expressions and find appropriate chances to provide feedbacks to students. However, the words from teachers are not convincing enough to motivate students learning the logical thinking model of native speakers. Therefore, educators need something authentic to help them think in the second language's way. President Obama's speeches not only illustrate proficient use of English grammar rules, but also motivate the ESL learner to acquire ways of strategic thinking.

Using President Obama's speeches as a teaching approach

Many scholars in China show great interest in the stylistic characteristics of President Obama's speeches. Wang (2009) did a stylistic analysis of the grammatical, lexical, and semantic features in Obama's speeches. All these features contribute to the persuasive and inspirational qualities of his speeches. Furthermore, many stylistic devices are used, such as simile and metaphor. Bai (2010) appreciates the variation in sentence length. According to the study, more than 32% of sentences contain over thirty words. This feature makes Obama's speeches more emotional and convincing.

Since President Obama is the leader of the United States, it is very important to show

sincerity to his people. The use of personal pronouns is an effective way to shorten the distance between him and the audience. Feng (2010) holds the opinion that the frequent use of “we” helps Obama gain much support from the people by establishing a close relationship with them. Ye (2010) also says that instead of drawing people’s attention to Obama himself he leads the whole audience to the fundamental issues that people are truly concerned about, encouraging all the citizens of America to believe in a promising future for the country themselves. Therefore, President Obama’s speeches can help the students learn how to use personal pronouns to shorten the distance to the audiences. These speeches are suitable for EFL learners to acquire English speaking skills from both dimensions of language grammar and insightful thoughts.

Some scholars who are familiar with the speaking styles of Chinese students hold the view that adopting great speeches as teaching materials in English public speaking classes is really effective. Because Chinese students are not good at using multiple devices to support their speeches, it is helpful for students to learn authentic speeches about the language skills and logical reasoning. Liu and Dai (2011) argue that the inadequate aspect of Chinese students’ English public speaking is not grammatical mistakes, or the pronunciation barrier, but the understanding distance between the speaker and the listener. Chinese is a language of high context, while English is one of low context. Chinese students are used to thinking in their mother tongue’s logic. Furthermore, they emphasize the problem that too many “big” words are used in Chinese students’ speeches, which result in little specific reasoning and lack of content. What is worse, some students are reluctant to speak out in such classes, remaining reticent until the end of the class. Zhang (2010) found that many Chinese university students are not willing to take part in group-based speaking activities, especially the non-English major students. Zhang also emphasizes that college students show great interest in authentic English speeches. This

interest motivates student to improve their speaking English by reading to presidential speeches.

The studies above show that it is essential to discover effective teaching methods in English speaking classes in order to make students speak out and acquire key public communication skills. Comparatively, using great speeches as a teaching tool will motivate students and increase learning.

Chapter III: Conclusions and Recommendations

English public speaking is the toughest part for Chinese ESL learners to acquire. In English speaking classes, different students may encounter different problems. Some of them have poor knowledge of grammar, while others may speak English with the influence of their mother language. Therefore, teachers should adopt various teaching methods to help students solve these problems.

The methods studied by numerous scholars are effective and practical in some occasions, including the role-play approach, the multimedia-supported teaching approach, and great speeches teaching approach. The role-play activity can stimulate motivate students to practice their English speaking and offer opportunities to speak in front of a large audience. But this in-class activity cannot give students enough resources to learn. The multimedia-supported teaching approach is commonly used in China. Teachers can find many effective resources to help students improve their English speaking abilities. And most colleges in China have good equipment to support this learning environment. But mechanical drills are over-used. Teaching English public speaking via great speeches, especially President Obama's speeches, is another way to help students think from the native language's perspectives and guide the process of public speaking. Many scholars use President Obama's speeches as a tool to demonstrate the dimensions of the rhetorical situation and the power of language. Using great speeches in the classroom is a creative way to help students learn to speak English.

The best way to improve the efficacy of public speaking classes, it seems, is to use various instructional methods.

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