

# **AN ACTION RESEARCH ON THE CLASSROOM TEACHING OF ENGLISH PUBLIC SPEECH**

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## **Abstract**

During the first semester of teaching English Speech, two major problems have arisen. The first problem is that students showed no interest in appreciating the famous English public speaking. That is to say, they cannot digest the “put-in”. Secondly, students who were not speakers in a certain class were doing something more than attending to the speeches, such as reading newspaper, chatting, reading their own speeches and so on. Observation, questionnaire and interview have been carried out so as to find out reasons to the problems. A conclusion has been reached about how to solve the two problems and then implemented. Firstly, those speeches with video material have been picked to be shown to the students, which will be more vivid and easier for students to follow in classroom teaching. And next, some adjustments on classroom management have been executed. The two solutions justified themselves in the section of action. The final conclusion: classroom learning has been promoted. Classroom interaction has been strengthened.

**key words:** action study    English speech    teaching pattern

## **1 Introduction**

English speech class is a very new subject in my university. Traditionally only a few elite students are instructed and trained in order to compete in some contest. Most students are just passive audience, enjoying no right to attend to it actively.

An investigation (see appendix 1) to a class of 30 students and an interview with a student in another class have shown that common students also want to be trained and practice English speech. Students believe their confidence can be improved and their public speaking ability(not only English ) needs urgent promotion, though they are not elite students and don't want to attend some contests. As a teacher, I also believe English speech is a valuable part of English literature. To instruct students to appreciate it is an effective way not only to help them with their mastery of the language but also to familiarize them with some culture and history knowledge.

Based on the investigation, I began the classroom teaching of the appreciation and practice of English public speech one and half a year ago. However, during the first semester of teaching English Speech, I have found the classroom teaching was not as easy as I had expected. I collected four famous speeches from some celebrities of G. B. and U.S.A. to give students “in-put”. I explained some difficult language points in each speech. That would cost altogether 2 hours for each speech. Each time after appreciation of an English public

speech, I would divide students into 4 groups to prepare a speech of any topic they were interested in. In the following week, 4 representatives of each group would have a competition and one of the winners would be awarded. Then in the next turn, another representative from each group would have to compete with others again.

I expected the classroom teaching would be efficient and instructive. But after a semester I have found some problems with my teaching and could not find some help. For there has been no such class in my university and not any teachers have tried to teach English speech to a class of students. Therefore I didn't have opportunity to exchange with others and could not obtain some instructions from some experienced teachers and professors. Facing this dilemma, I decided to do an action research to promote my teaching of English Public Speech.

## **2 Planning**

### ***2.1 Problems***

The first problem I have met is that I found students showed no interest in appreciating the famous English public speaking. That is to say, they cannot digest the "put-in". Secondly, only four students spoke each time and most students had actually nothing to do because I found them doing something more than attending to the speeches, such as reading newspaper, chatting, reading their own speeches and so on.

#### ***2.1.1 Possible reasons***

In order to solve the two problems, I have tried such ways as observation, questionnaire and interview to find out their reasons.

First of all, I asked a colleague to come into my classroom and pretended to be a student so as not to influence the performance of the students. Before the class, I discussed with her about the first problem and the possible reasons. She knew exactly what to observe in my class, i.e. to observe the students' reaction toward the handout of the public speech that I would deliver on that day. During the two hours of attending to my class, she observed and noted down some of the students murmuring. During the break, she tried to participate in the talking and discussion between the students. After the two hours, she concluded that the speech itself was too hard and beyond the students' appreciation. They were exhausted after reading once. Such a conclusion was based on the students murmuring as "So many new words!", "Oh, it comes again!", "So boring!" and so on. During her talk with students, she found they were not interested in reading anything in class and were tired of reading comprehension.

Then I conducted a questionnaire (see appendix 2) investigation based on her observation and obtained the similar conclusion.

There might be three reasons causing students showing no interest in appreciating wonderful public English speech. 1. The speech itself is too difficult to understand, let alone appreciate. As we all know some famous speeches by American presidents or statesmen are quite difficult in language itself. 2. The teaching pattern of explaining the difficult language points in the speech is too outdated for students. They might feel it is like a reading

class. Therefore they showed no interest in it. 3. Students don't like to listen to audio materials, since it is too difficult to catch and is not vivid.

To solve the second problem, I interviewed an experienced professor and a student in the class. I first interviewed the student and asked him what he did when it was not his turn to speak. Once the student began, he kept on talking about his feeling and thought about the class of English public speech. It was very productive though beyond my control and expectation. From the student's speech I knew that they really liked to speak in topics that they were interested but they also found sometimes my assessment was not fair; and that they didn't attend to the speeches of other students because they did see any point in doing that.

Then I interviewed an experienced professor and asked her opinions about how to manage and organize oral activities in such a class as English public speech. From our discussion I drew the conclusion that students should be encouraged and inspired to participate more in the class.

### ***2.1.2 Possible solutions:***

I drew my conclusion about how to solve the two problems based on my discussion with my colleagues, the observation and advice of the colleague, interview with the student, and some advice and information from papers on related topics.

As regards the first problem and its possible reasons, I decide to carry on the following methods. Firstly, I try to select those speeches with video material, which will be more vivid and easier for students to follow in classroom teaching. These speeches may not be delivered from such celebrities as presidents, prime minister or laureates. I have to guarantee its readability for the level of non-English-majored postgraduates. That is to say, the speech itself is not supposed to be too hard. Then I decide to stop explaining difficult language points of speeches in class. Instead I will give students the Chinese versions for them to read by themselves after class. I will spend no more than half an hour on answering their questions and pointing out some beautiful and excellent sentences in the speeches. Then I will mainly focus on the background of the speeches and cohesion and organization of the speeches. In this way, a speaking class will not be converted into a reading class, but a long passage will be comprehended. I will try to keep all these activities within one and half an hour. Then I will spend another half an hour illustrate part of the speech by reading and speaking new and difficult words, long sentences, thesis statements, climax sentences and some humorous sentences.

As for the second problem and its possible reason, I decide to promote the management and organization of the students' activity. I will not group them and there will be no winner in each turn. All the students will speak in turn and four of the winners will come out and be awarded at the end of a semester. Four speech topics will be given to all the students at the beginning of a semester and they will volunteer to choose one of them and register their choices. And then according to their registration I will divide them into four groups. There will be only four or five students within each group. Then students will have to make faster choices when registering. Each time a group of students speaking the same topic will compete with each other and all the rest students will assess them. Consequently, they will always have something to do in each speaking turn. Finally I decided to put them into practice in the

following new semester.

### 3 Action

I conducted my action toward those problems in classroom teaching of English public speech in the following semester. Here is a time table of what I did in the first speaking turn.

Length of time	Teacher's activity	Students' activity
50 minutes	Underline some sentences in the first speech; read some difficult words for students to follow	Read those words loudly
50minutes	Play video material; underline gestures, tones and postures of the speaker; group the students;	Attend to the video material; find out the topic they are interested in and register themselves
50 minutes + 50 minutes	Assess the four contesting students along with the rest students; make a short comment after each contestant and an introduction to the new.	The four students in the first group make their prepared speech and impromptus speech, and answer questions The rest grade the four.

★ The handouts with both Chinese and English versions of the speech appreciated have already been provided to students one week ahead of the class.

The first speech is the easiest one among all the five speeches I collected for the students to appreciate. Therefore it took only 80 minutes to appreciate it. When the contestants were making their prepared speech, all the rest students had to grade them according to a grade sheet (see appendix 2). Then some of them had to raise questions to the four contestants. All the topics of the impromptus speeches were collected from students. After the first contest, I collected all the grade sheet but didn't declare the result. For I told students they would still be assessed once more by their performance in the following speaking turns as judges and question markers. If they could volunteer to raise a question to the contestant, one point would be added to their final score.

### 4 Observation

I first asked the student who was interviewed in the last semester to attend to my new class. After a continuous attending of three weeks, he was interviewed by me again and was eager to voice his ideas and reflections.

Next, I asked two of my colleagues to attend to my class respectively. The first one who

attended to my class as mentioned above observed the teaching unit in which a famous speech was comprehended and appreciated by students under the new teaching approach. Next, I asked the experienced professor to my class to observe the teaching unit in which a group of students presented their speeches.

At the same time, I recorded the whole speaking turn of four students' speeches with the help of an mp4.

Finally, I conducted the questionnaire 1 to the new students. The following is all the observation results.

1. The student showed obvious interest in the video material of the appreciated speech by saying that he would want to attend to the class every three weeks. He also agreed that this new approach would save more time in class. Students can have a better comprehension of the speech with the Chinese translation and the video material. And the part he showed most appreciation in the new teaching approach is that I read some new and difficult words and sentences aloud in class for students to follow. For students don't really pay attention to phonetic symbol and they pronounce new words according to their imagination.
2. The colleague who has come to my class twice was first interviewed. She also noted down some of the students' response to the appreciated speech presented in English with the Chinese translation. She found students did have a better and deeper comprehension of the speech and showed definitely more interest in appreciating the video material, following me to read new words and paying attention to some difficult or topic sentences. According to her observation, students are really reading and trying to remember new words. She also observed that some students were even imitating the speaker's stress, intonation and pronunciation in the video when I was underlining some difficult or topic or shining sentences in the speech. But on the other hand, she told me that students would only refer to the translation whenever they ran into some new words and difficult sentences. The problem is that students may depend too much on the translation.
3. The professor who was asked to appreciate the students' speeches commented as follows: students performed better than she had expected; students were more attentive to this oral activity than to other kinds of oral activities such as group discussion, answering question, picture description and so on; the teacher really plays a role of monitor and organizer, which is good; only four students were speaking in a class of 50 minutes, which is too limited.

## **5 Reflection**

The English speech class in the second year becomes better than that in the first year after some adjustment. The conclusion is based on students' assessment, observer's observation and professor's and colleague's appraisal. The adjustment is as follows:

1. Multimedia input materials are presented to students in class to supplement the printed speech text for them to appreciate, to follow and to imitate.
2. Every student is supposed to participate in the class not only as speaker and judge, but also as question marker.
3. The teacher mainly acts as an organizer and a monitor (which is like a hostess in an Evening.) in stead of the traditional lecturer.

From the adjustment and conclusion, we can see that students, esp. students of advanced

level and those between intermediate and advanced level are tired of the traditional class of teaching a reading text by teachers giving lectures of new words and difficult sentences one by one. Next, most students would like to involve in the class by speaking. But in China, it is quite hard for teachers to involve everyone into speaking in a single period. Under these circumstances we teachers have to come up with original ideas and approaches to encourage students to attend to class not only by speaking but also by listening, observing and commenting. Furthermore, motivation, encouragement and interaction are more decisive to a successful teacher than excellent spoken English and intensive knowledge. I don't mean they are not important. Actually they are necessary to a teacher. But a teacher liked by students tend to motivate and encourage students to learn by themselves. Classroom interaction is crucial to decide the classroom atmosphere. Usually in an interesting, relaxing and fun class, students are more likely to speak more and better, which is the major focus of speaking class. Finally, I think teaching is an open system which does not end at somewhere and which wants progress and adjustment. A teacher can always find problems with his or her classroom teaching because the subjects to whom we are teaching are subjected to change. Therefore, every teacher needs to do research on his or her class ever semester. As is mentioned, there are still problems that I have not resolved and there are new problems after adjustment. I will have to think up and search for new solutions. I firmly believe problems will crop up after new solutions are applied. I will keep working on them.

### **References**

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