

# An Empirical Study of “English Speech” and the Cultivation of Students' Thinking Ability in College English Majors

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201815, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *This paper attempts to explore how the students' discernment ability can be improved through the “English Speech” course by teaching observation, questionnaires and interviews for the author's English major sophomores in one semester and combining the Paul-Elder's ability to think. The conclusions are as follows: In terms of thinking elements, “purpose” and “information” elements have been significantly improved. In terms of intelligence traits, “integrity” and “empathy” were significantly improved. However, there is still room for further improvement of students' thinking elements such as “perspective” and intellectual features such as “courage”. At the same time, the author also combined with his own “English speech” course of the main arrangements to provide the corresponding can focus on the cultivation of critical thinking ability of teaching reference.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Critical thinking ability; Thinking elements; Intellectual characteristics*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the cultivation of critical thinking ability of students majoring in foreign languages, especially English majors, has attracted much attention from academic circles. On the one hand, many scholars point out that English major curriculum and teaching methods rarely consider the development of students' thinking ability, such as Qixin He in the several opinions on reform of the foreign language professional undergraduate course education puts it “in language skills training tend to stress the imitation memory ignores students' thinking ability, innovation ability, the ability to analyze the problems and provide independent advice” (Qixin He, etc., 1999:26). On the other hand, compared with other liberal arts students, English majors have fewer specialized courses, and due to the limitation of language ability, the depth and breadth of what they learn are difficult to challenge students' cognition. Therefore, there are limitations on the cultivation space of students' critical thinking ability. (Qiufang Wen *et al.*, 2010) Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that how to reform the teaching content and teaching

methods of various courses of English major so as to improve students' ability to analyze and solve problems has become the top priority.

In the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability, the course of "English speech" has been affirmed by many scholars. For example, as early as 2000, Professor Qinglong Peng's questionnaire survey of 140 students from more than 20 colleges and universities showed that 76% of students believe that speaking and debate in the classroom is conducive to students' ability to think. Dongyu Zhang (2007) through the survey, questionnaires and SPSS software statistical analysis found that setting up a speech activity in a comprehensive English classroom can improve students' thinking ability. Some scholars began to explore the critical thinking ability training of speech courses from the perspective of teaching methods. For example, Lianhong Gao (2012) combined the principles and implementation steps of how to train students' critical thinking ability in English speech courses from the perspective of psychology and rhetoric. Mengjing Wang (2012) took the contest topic and speech draft of "FLTRP cup" national English speech contest and debate contest as reference, and proposed how to improve the critical thinking ability from the aspects of topic selection, speech structure and on-the-spot response.

Although there are some high-quality papers in academic circles to demonstrate the positive effect of English speech on critical thinking ability, few of them can analyze which aspects of thinking elements and intellectual characteristics have been improved by combining specific critical thinking ability models. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore how students' critical thinking ability can be improved through the course of "English speech" through one-semester teaching observation, questionnaire survey and interview of sophomore English majors, and combined with the Paul-Elder model of critical thinking ability.

## 2. Literature review

So far, foreign scholars have interpreted critical thinking ability in many ways. Among many models, the Paul-Elder model of critical thinking ability has been widely recognized in the field of critical thinking. This model focuses on practicality and is widely used in teaching, training and talent selection in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, as well as companies and government departments in the United States. The model includes three dimensions: Elements of thought, standard, and Intellectual Traits.

Thinking elements include "purpose, problems to be solved, data, conclusions and explanations, concepts, hypotheses, perspectives, meanings and results" (Paul, 1995). Paul (1995) pointed out that "thinking elements are the basis of thinking" (p.124). These elements are the key to analyzing and solving any problem.

Criteria include "clarity, accuracy, veracity, relevance, depth, breadth, logicity, importance, and fairness" (Paul & Elder, 2006, p.10). Paul and other scholars attach great importance to evaluation standards and believe that adherence to standards plays an important role in correctly understanding critical thinking ability (Ennis, 1985; Lipman, 1991; Siegel, 1998). According to Paul and Elder (2006), "students

can apply these criteria to make their analysis more logical” (p.8). When students apply these criteria, they can check whether their thought processes are clear, accurate, and relevant to the topic (Paul & Elder, 2006).

Intellectual traits are the qualities possessed by thinkers with critical ability (Costa, 2001). Paul points out that only with these characteristics (modesty, courage, empathy, intellectual autonomy, straightforwardness, perseverance, belief in rationality and sense of justice) can people get rid of their narrow egocentrism and have true openness and tolerance.

This paper will combine the two aspects of thinking elements and intellectual traits in Paul Elder's critical thinking model to analyze the critical thinking abilities that English majors have improved and still need to improve through the course of “English speech”.

### **3. Research methods and process**

#### ***3.1 Research question***

How can the critical thinking ability of college English major students be improved through the course of “English speech”?

#### ***3.2 Research objects***

My research object is a college sophomore majoring in English. After the first lesson of understanding, 45% of the students in English have a preliminary understanding of the speech, will also watch TED and other excellent speeches, 30% for English speech limitation on celebrity motivational speech masterpiece, 20% occasionally watch English speech, think speech emphasized personal emotion and celebrity benefit, another 5% don't know English speech, not interested. It can be concluded that most of my research subjects did not have a comprehensive understanding of English speech before taking the course of “English speech”.

#### ***3.3 Data collection and analysis***

Data collection in this study is mainly divided into the following categories. First, 65 questionnaires were distributed and 64 valid ones were recovered. The questionnaire is designed based on the Paul-Elder critical ability model, which is mainly used to understand students' self-evaluation of their thinking elements and intellectual characteristics after learning the course “English speech”. Secondly, I completed 10 one-on-one open interviews. After the final evaluation of my English Speech course, I randomly selected 10 students in the three grades of excellent, good and medium. Colleagues who have also taught the course are interviewed to avoid situations where the author is their instructor and cannot speak freely.

Regarding data analysis, first of all, I will conduct statistics on the questionnaire survey, and draw the students' generally rising thinking elements and intellectual characteristics as well as their specific performance in their speaking ability.

Secondly, I dictated the interview recordings of 10 students, found out their commonalities and differences, and compared the results of the questionnaire survey with the Pual-Elder's critical ability model to conclude.

#### **4. Discussion**

(1) In terms of thinking elements, “purpose” and “information” elements have been significantly improved

According to the questionnaire, the improvement of the “purpose” element and the “information” element in the thinking elements of students after the “English speech” course of one semester ranks first and second respectively (accounting for 24% and 21% respectively). Based on the interviews with 10 students, the conclusion is drawn: in terms of the thinking ability involved in the “purpose” element, students can better understand what the purpose of their speech is and how to choose the topic of their speech. In terms of the abilities involved in “information” elements, students can better find all kinds of data they need through questionnaires designed by themselves and literature search.

First, the “purpose” element emphasizes that students should clearly understand what the ultimate purpose of their thinking is (Paul & Elder, 2005, p4-5). After a semester of “English speech”, students generally reported that they could better understand the purpose of their speech and choose appropriate topics for their purpose.

As zhang said in the interview, “from this course, I know that the purpose of a speech is to inform and to persuade. If it is inform, how should I use various data and examples to persuade my audience? Although I still have some distance from achieving these two goals, I know my goal very well. When I give speeches and prepare speeches, I always have a scale in my mind to reflect on whether such speeches get the results I want.

Not only that, students learned from the reader's point of view, to choose topics that can win the audience resonance, so as to achieve a better purpose of persuading the audience.

For example, Li said, “I used to choose whatever topic I like without considering whether the topic is close to our study and life. Now I know that choosing a topic close to our study and life can attract more attention from the audience.”

Second, the “information” element also plays an important role in the thinking element. Because “all thinking is based on certain information and data. When considering a problem, one should often consider whether the data collected is relevant to the proposition, whether clear and clear enough to draw a reasonable conclusion.(Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 9).

According to the questionnaire survey and interview, the students reported that through a semester's speech, they broke the stereotype of speech and realized that speech not only needs to drive the atmosphere and express personal emotions, but also needs to be a rational exploration based on a series of data. In the author's speech class, the students need to design a questionnaire for your lecture topics, and then to the results of questionnaire survey and analysis in his final speech. In this process, students can know how much the audience knows about their topic, what aspects of their topic they are interested in and what aspects they do not know very well, thus laying a foundation for future data collection.

In reviewing the process of doing the questionnaire survey, Hu said that "I can design and analyze the questionnaire through the selected topics, and the data can be better applied in the article to ensure the accuracy of the data."

In addition to designing the questionnaire, the students also improved the ability to collect information and data. Zhao said, "I checked a lot of information through the Internet, books, etc. to support my point of view, and also did a questionnaire survey. In the process, I got more ways to find information and how to get the data I need through my own investigation."

(2) In terms of intelligence features, "integrity" and "empathy" features were significantly improved

In terms of intelligence traits, students showed the greatest improvement in "integrity" (31 percent) and "empathy" (26 percent), according to the questionnaire. First, in terms of "integrity," students were better able to ensure the truthfulness and credibility of the data they cited. Second, in terms of "empathy," students can better stand on the standpoint of others and think more about what they are thinking about in the speech.

In intellectual characteristics, "integrity" emphasizes that the thinking process is not misled by various prejudices (Hale, 2008). In the teaching process of "English speech", the author emphasized the importance of data in the process of speech, so that students realized the power of data.

Li was very impressed by this. He said: "There is a great shift in thinking in ensuring the authenticity and credibility of the data. In the previous writing, we did not pay much attention to the source and provenance of the data. Just find the data we combine with your own articles and quote them directly or even arbitrarily. However, after the lecture, I know that to respect the data publisher, I will pay more attention to the source of the data, identify its authority, and then quote it. "

Another characteristic that is significantly improved is "empathy." "Empathy" refers to "taking the situation from the perspective of others" (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 14). With the "empathy" thinking, you can jump out of your own thinking mode, think about what other people think, and can reflect on their own words and deeds after the speech, is a very important intellectual trait.

For example, Hua said, "Through this lecture class, I can think about the problem from the standpoint of others, and no longer just listen to one side of the

words. As before, we watched Levinsky's speech video. Before that, my impression of her was just a scandal heroine. I didn't expect that cyber-violent language bullying like a flood of beasts could destroy a person or the whole family. After that, I began to pay attention to the bullied party and pay attention to my words and deeds.

It can be seen that the speech not only improves the students' thinking ability, but also gradually changes their thinking mode, so that they can gradually get rid of the self-centered thinking mode and accept, digest and analyze the thinking mode of others, and finally become more objective, comprehensive and inclusive.

(3) There is still room for further improvement of thinking elements such as "perspective" and intellectual features such as "courage"

Although, most of the students said in the questionnaire and interview that the opening of the lecture course had improved their critical thinking ability. However, the author found that students still have room for further improvement in thinking elements such as "perspective" and intellectual characteristics such as "courage".

First, the "perspective" refers to "from which angle to look at the problem and whether there are other angles?" (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 6). Through the interview, some students said that they have a broader perspective on the problem. For example, Qian said, "When I wrote my homework and speeches, I only thought of a point of view, and then argued. After the teacher taught us how to write a speech outline, I found that I can look at the speech from different angles and can also propose different perspectives".

However, some students said that their perspective is not wide enough. For example, Sun said that "it is difficult for me to get rid of some preconceived subjective thoughts". Zhou wrote in the questionnaire that "my vision is not wide enough, which leads to my narrow way of thinking.

Not only that, but students also said they lacked intelligence in "courage." During the interview, the students honestly expressed that they could not bravely challenge the authority, and they still had the idea of learning from the so-called authority rather than correcting him.

It can be seen that the improvement of students' critical thinking ability is still limited in the course of "English speech" in one semester, especially in the aspects of multiple perspectives and the courage to break authority. This shows that the improvement of critical thinking ability is a systematic engineering, which requires the comprehensive cooperation of various subjects. Secondly, it also reflects that the English majors still need to be more open-minded, and they need to jump out of the learning mode of simple language learning, and to carry out more speculative reading and writing exercises.

## **5. "Speech" course teaching advice**

After a questionnaire survey, interviews with 10 students and a semester of

teaching reflection, the author suggests that the teaching of “English speech” should emphasize logic, and at the same time, it is suggested to highlight the cultivation of relevant abilities in each stage. The author took the main arrangement of “persuasive speech” in his speech teaching as an example, combined with the main ability cultivation of each stage, and proposed that the cultivation of critical thinking ability could be highlighted in each stage. Of course, the cultivation of critical elements and intellectual characteristics should not be completely separated, but integrated into each stage. However, in order to improve the practical operation and more logically carry out the course of “speech”, the author believes that it is still necessary to focus on the cultivation of critical thinking ability in each stage.

*Table.1 Main arrangement of “English speech” teaching, ability cultivation and critical thinking ability that can be emphasized*

The main arrangement of lecture teaching (take persuasive speech as an example)	Speech ability training	The critical thinking ability that can develop emphatically
1. Topic selection	Learn how to write specific speech objectives and main ideas	“Purpose” and other thinking elements
2. Audience analysis	Focus on the audience and learn how to write a design questionnaire to better understand the audience of the speech	Thinking elements such as “problem” Intelligence characteristics such as “empathy”
3. Speech outline	Learn how to complete the writing of a speech outline, including key arguments, points of argument, and transitions between parts.	Thinking elements such as “problem”
4. Opening of the speech	How to attract readers' attention through questions, citations, storytelling, etc.	Thinking elements such as “questions” and “hypotheses”
5. The main part of the persuasive speech	Learn how to write a topical section on persuasive speeches such as “About Facts”, “About Values” and “About Policies”	Thinking elements such as “perspective” Intelligence characteristics such as “courage” Intelligence characteristics such as “self-confidence”
6. Data support and analysis	Learn how to use cases and data to support ideas and ensure that the data is true and valid. Ability to analyze data using chart, pie chart, histogram and chart	Thinking elements such as “information” Intellectual traits such as “integrity”
7. End of speech	Learn how to complete the end of the speech by refining the summary, the first and last	Thinking elements such as “reasoning and revelation”

	echoes, and so on.	
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Combined with the table, the author briefly summarizes the critical thinking ability that can be cultivated in each stage.

1) Title selection: At this stage, teachers can use thinking elements such as “purpose” to guide students to clarify the purpose of their speech, and let students know whether it is “persuasive speech” or “persuasive speech”. Every speech needs to have its own clear purpose, which is the first step to complete a speech draft.

2) Audience analysis: Knowing your audience is the first step to a successful presentation. It's also a way to get rid of the self-centered mindset. At this stage, teachers can teach students how to design questionnaires by thinking of “questions” and other elements (including finding the core questions of their questionnaires, hierarchical and logical design of their own questions, etc.). In this way, students can better understand whether their topic can attract the interest of the audience and other students' cognition of the topic. By investigating their audience, students can better view their topic from the perspective of others, and at the same time, they can better get close to the ideas of the speakers involved. This is of great help in cultivating intellectual characteristics such as “empathy”.

3) Speech outline: In the process of writing the outline of the speech, the teacher should carefully help students analyze the logical relationship between the main arguments and sub-arguments. In the author's lecture, I found that this part is the most direct test of the students' logical thinking ability. As one of my classmates said, “through this course, I can draw relatively rigorous and logical conclusions through my own research, mainly influenced by the outline. Therefore, at this stage, students can focus on thinking elements such as “problems”, and let students divide their main arguments and sub-arguments by analyzing the main purpose of speech draft, and constantly raise some questions by themselves. For example: “does my sub-argument support the main argument? Will my arguments persuade the audience at last? To improve students' logical thinking ability.

4) Opening speech: At the beginning of the speech, the teacher can flexibly use “question”, “hypothesis” and other thinking elements to help students master how to write a good beginning. At the beginning, a question and hypothesis can be raised to attract the attention of the audience. Here, the teacher must guide the students to put forward the hypothesis very well, must have the very strict explanation in the main part of the speech, in order to complete a high quality, logical speech draft.

5) The main body of the speech:

The main part of the speech is the most important part of the whole speech. When writing this part, the teacher can encourage students to use the “viewing angle” and other thinking elements to divulge their own thinking and try to look at the problem from a different perspective. At the same time, students can also be encouraged to use “courage”, “self-confidence” and other intellectual characteristics, encourage them to try to break the previous thinking model, and try to look at the current development of the topic from a new perspective.



6) Data support and analysis:

The use of data is critical to justifying the arguments of the presentation. After my entire semester of teaching, many of my classmates also reported that this was the source of their change of views on speech. For example, Wu said, “before, I was not very clear about data analysis and could not accurately describe various chart trends in English. Now, I can use some examples to analyze and describe with collocation, which makes my speech more convincing.” During this period, teachers can emphasize the importance of “information” and other thinking elements and teach students how to find valuable information. At the same time, “integrity” and other intellectual characteristics should be emphasized to ensure that the data collected are authentic, reliable, and timely.

7) End of the speech: In this part, teachers can highlight thinking elements such as “reasoning and inspiration”, encourage students to draw more logical conclusions, and at the same time, echo the beginning and end of the speech to sublimate the idea of the speech again.

## 6. Conclusion

Through a semester of teaching observation, as well as 64 questionnaires and interviews with 10 students, the author found that in terms of thinking elements, the “purpose” and “information” elements of students have been significantly improved. After a semester of “English speech” course, they can better understand what the purpose of their speech is and how to choose the topic of their speech. They can better find all kinds of data they need through questionnaire survey designed by themselves and literature search. In terms of intellectual characteristics, students' “integrity” and ability to think better from the perspective of others” are more likely to have a first-hand understanding of the thoughts of the objects involved in the speech. However, students still perform poorly in terms of looking at the problem from multiple angles and having the courage to break the authority. They need to be further improved.

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