

The Application of Inquiry Learning Approach in the Teaching of English Public Speaking

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Abstract: *The inquiry learning approach, which emphasizes the development of students' ability to identify, analyze and solve problems independently or under the guidance of their teachers, is highly compatible with public speaking instruction. This paper aims to explore the application paths of the inquiry learning approach in the public speaking course and the effects of its implementation on enhancing students' participation, strengthening their speaking confidence, promoting their independent thinking and autonomous learning.*

Keywords: *Inquiry Learning Approach, Application Paths, English Public Speaking, Effects*

1. Introduction

Since the advent of the 21st century, English Public Speaking Course (EPSC) has gradually and extensively been incorporated into Chinese university curriculum^[1] due to its inherent advantages in fostering students' proficiency in English application, intercultural communication, critical thinking skills and research capabilities. In 2010, my university set up this course specifically for non-English majors. Ever since then, I have been teaching EPSC and have witnessed its evolution and transformation over time. Drawing from my own experiences as well as those of other instructors, it has become evident that students exhibit limited attentiveness during lectures on public speaking skills while lacking sufficient opportunities to apply these skills in actual speech scenarios; moreover, their critical thinking abilities require immediate enhancement. To address these issues comprehensively, I endeavored to implement inquiry learning approach in my teaching methodology with the aim of promoting student engagement in classroom activities alongside fostering their critical thinking aptitude and autonomous learning capacities while bolstering their confidence in public speaking.

Inquiry learning is a new learning concept, strategy and methodology, which generally refers to learning through exploring problems. Since the late 1980s, with the change of talent cultivation mode and the large-scale implementation of education reform, inquiry learning approach has begun to receive attention. Inquiry learning is a student-centered learning approach that is guided by teachers and planned, executed, and evaluated by students themselves. It can serve as an independent course, using research topics and projects as carriers^[2]. Under the guidance of teachers, students have the leeway to explore and study natural, social, or real-life problems. It can also be integrated into specific course teaching as a learning method, stimulating students' autonomous learning potential, enhancing their innovation and research abilities, and providing huge space for students' personality development, independent thinking, and free creation.

In recent years, inquiry learning as a new teaching approach has received attention from domestic scholars, but most of the researches have focused on basic education in primary and secondary schools, in which a separate course is set up to provide students with more opportunities for extracurricular learning and practice. The study on inquiry learning approach in college English teaching has also achieved some desirable results. Researchers have explored the characteristics of inquiry learning, and the implementation methods and effects in college English teaching. (Sun, 2008^[3]; Zhong, 2009^[4]) Some action researches have been conducted to examine the application of this learning application in English listening, writing or reading courses (Yu, Lu, Wang & Wang, 2013^[2]; Wang, 2018^[5]), while other researches focus on the establishment of inquiry learning models in the online environment (Liu, 2008^[6]; Zhang, 2013^[7]; Zhao, 2013^[8]). According to literature research on CNKI, inquiry learning often appears together with teaching methods such as “cooperative learning,” “task-based teaching,” “project-based teaching,” and “self-directed learning,” indicating a close theoretical connection and internal unity of ideas between them (Li, 2022^[9]). However, the exploration of detailed application

paths of inquiry learning in classroom teaching is lacking in the above-mentioned studies, and research on inquiry learning approach and its effects in public speaking course still needs to be enriched.

This study will explore the application of inquiry learning method in the teaching of public speaking, a course with intrinsic emphasis on students' initiative in choosing topics, collecting evidence, organizing ideas, writing a logical and coherent speech draft before actually speaking. The whole process of topic choosing, material collecting and organizing as well as the writing and editing is, if not all, the process of inquiring into a problem and producing a desired result. Hence, the effective teaching of public speaking relies much on the successful application of inquiry learning method, and the adoption of inquiry learning can greatly promote the effectiveness of teaching. Whether teachers of this course realize or not, they are unconsciously encouraging students to do a certain kind of inquiry in some parts of their teaching. The problem is that inquiry learning is not carried out in all the steps of teaching. Also teachers are not thoughtfully using this method to enhance the effectiveness of teaching, so how this method changes the effect of teaching with regard to students' attitudes toward the course, involvement in class activities, mastery of public speaking skills as well as critical thinking ability is not examined. This study, based on a the practical teaching experiment of a whole school year, aims to elaborate on the application paths of inquiry learning mode in the whole teaching process and examines its effects on student's learning attitudes, class involvement, mastery of the public speaking skills and critical thinking ability.

2. The application of inquiry learning in teaching public speaking skills

The theoretical foundation of inquiry learning mode can be traced back to the Constructivist Learning concept (Bruner, 1960, 1961^{[10][11]} ; Piaget, 1964^[12]; Vygotsky, 1978^[13]), which emphasizes the active construction, social interaction, and situational nature of learning, believing that learning is not about teachers' imparting knowledge to students, but rather the process of students' actively constructing their own knowledge system. So in teaching public speaking skills I changed my way of spoon-feeding students with the know-hows to inspiring students to explore and inquire by themselves.

In our university, we have been using *The Art of Public Speaking* compiled by Stephen E. Lucas^[14] as our textbook. Teachers of this course usually present the speaking skills with PPTs and explain the details in person. After the lecture on speech skills, teachers will organize students to do speaking tasks and meanwhile put the skills in use. According to my teaching observation, students are not very interested in the speech skill lecture, in part because they have already known something about it in their previous learning or speaking experiences, and in part because the detailed explanation is rather monotonous and exhausting. Moreover, when students need to do the speaking tasks, which seem to be given "out of context", they need some time to switch on the brain and tune in, so the discussion or speaking performance is not as satisfying as expected. Considering these factors, the author adopted inquiry learning method to encourage students to explore by themselves the underlying principles in public speaking or the secrets of making a compelling speech.

First, instead of explaining the skill directly, I tap into the knowledge that students already have. The teacher can design questions related to the target skill, asking students to share their ideas in class or discuss with their partners to find out more about it. For instance, when teaching the skills such as "analyzing the audience", "beginning and ending the speech" "using visual aids", I first asked my students to discuss questions related to the teaching content. For example, the following questions can be asked. "What aspects of your audience would you like to know before you speak to them? Do you think your audience's knowledge about your topic will make a difference to what you will say and how you will say? ", "How do you usually start your speech? How many ways do you know to start a speech?" "What types of visual aids do you often use? What are the benefits of using visual aids?" Most of the time, they can come up with important ideas in their discussion. Then I would add some points or ask students to read the textbook to find out more about this skill. Afterward, I played speech video or asked them to read a sample speech so that they could find out and analyze the skill they had just learned in real speeches. This sample speech is carefully chosen by the teacher, so the speech content can be the starting point for further discussion, and can activate their thinking about their own speech topics. In the following teaching, the teacher can design oral activities based on the speech content they have watched or read, encouraging students to put the skill into use. After the oral work, the teacher can ask students to make comments on the performance and evaluate how the skill is used in their work. In this sense, the learning process forms a closed loop, with all the steps closely linked and integrated into a whole. (refer to Fig 1)

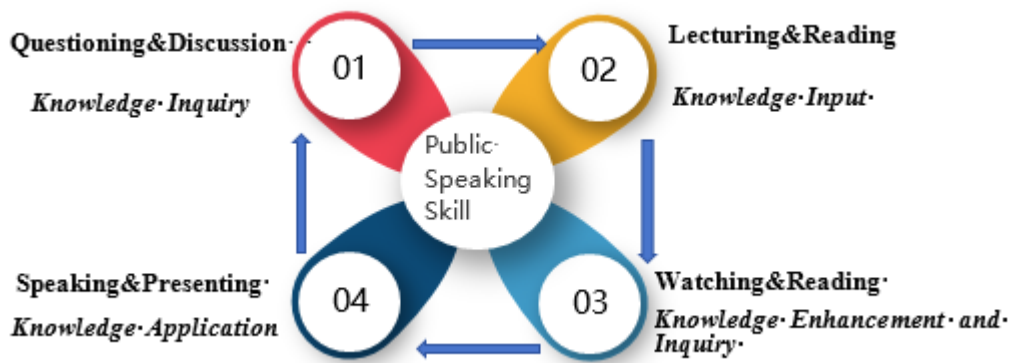


Figure 1: The Learning Cycle.

For some public speaking skills, such as “organizing the body of the speech” and “outlining the speech”, students are asked to do some written tasks to learn the ropes about the skills and truly understand the effects of using the skills. For instance, when teaching students the different orders adopted in arranging the main points, I divided the class into different groups, asking them to use different orders to write on the same topic---Green Life. Before they started writing, I sent some reading materials, ranging from internet articles to news reports, to the class WeChat group. Each group of students should discuss which order to choose based on their specific purpose and central idea, also they had to search relevant information on the Internet. When they finished writing, one student from the group would present their work in class. Other students and the teacher could make comments and give suggestions. They made a lot of mistakes at the beginning. For instance, the main points chosen do not serve the specific purpose, the central idea cannot cover the all the main points, or the order of the main points is not logical. However, they learned the application of different orders quickly through the exercise and improved their work with the help of their peers and the teacher. Some groups even exhibited great creativity in using time order or spatial order to arrange the main points. Above all, since they all write on the same topic, they can see the same topic can be approached from different perspectives and can be developed in different orders, their critical thinking is thereby enhanced.

When studying the different types of speech connectives, I found students were confused by the technical terms and couldn't fully understand the characteristics of speech connectives, so I asked my students to watch a very short TED talk and pick out all the connectives used in the speech. They were supposed to mark the time the connectives were used, name the particular type of the connective and write down the expressions used by the speaker. In order to finish the task, students had to watch the talk repeatedly and paused in the middle to write down the expressions. As a result, they had a deeper understanding of the characteristics of speech connectives and some could even use the same expressions as connectives in their own speeches.

After students have grasped the different orders in arranging main points and the different types of connectives, they feel much more at ease when it comes to “outlining the speech”. I asked students to write a speech outline based on their previous work, i.e. the main points arrangement in different orders. They did a much better job than the former students who hadn't done the writing exercise related to “main points.”

3. The application of inquiry learning in speech practice activities

Besides the use of mini-research tasks in teaching the so called “dry and boring” speaking skills, the teacher can integrate the concept of inquiry learning in the whole process of of speech making, i.e. topic selection, information collection, speech writing as well as speech evaluation and assessment. Through carefully designed teaching plans and activities, the teacher guides students to take initiative in choosing speech topics, searching information from various sources and selecting the materials they will use in their speech, and evaluating other students' performance in a more detailed and professional manner.

3.1 The application of inquiry learning in topic selection

In the phase of topic selection, students can be given general categories of speech topics, like people, events, places, concepts, processes and etc, but they still find it difficult to narrow down and

select a specific perspective for their speech. I encourage them to start from their own life experiences and dig deeper to find interesting angles. For instance, the very first lecture of the course is about how to deal with speech anxiety. Students may work together to brainstorm effective means to combat stage fright based on their experiences or previous knowledge. Next, I will encourage students to take “fear or phobia” as a general topic, discuss related questions in a group of four to five students. The questions can be “What kinds of phobia do people usually have? What are you afraid of? How do you deal with your fear? Have you ever overcome a fear you had? Describe what happened and how you felt afterward. Can you tell your classmates a scary experience you had? Can you recall the biggest challenge you have had so far and how you faced the challenge?” Those questions are closely related to students’ life and everyone is highly involved in the discussion. Along the way, they may also come to realize whether their story is worth sharing or can be developed into a wonderful speech. To further stimulate their thinking on this topic, I show them a speech made by a TED talker about his 100 days’ rejection experiment. I ask my students to figure out the topic and specific purpose of the speech. They are also encouraged to retell the impressive stories they have heard in it. By doing so, students can realize how to find their own perspective under a broad topic and how to tell stories in a vivid manner. With all these warm-up discussions and sample speech appreciation, students now cannot wait to share their own stories about “fear”, and they have come up with wonderful speech topics. Some talk about their first time to attend a competition; some relate stories about their fear of communication or fear of exams; some recall their experience of learning a new sport or musical instrument. When students talk about their own experiences, their speech anxiety is remarkably lessened and their confidence in speaking is gradually growing.

In addition to the suggested topics, the teacher can give students much more freedom in choosing their own topics for speaking based on their own experiences and interests. Students have collected a wide range of topics, including hot issues in society, modern science and technology, Chinese people’s cultural confidence, role models in different fields, important persons in their lives, problems they are facing, life attitudes, job preferences as well as their special talents and hobbies. In a word, they find problems worth discussing from their own life experiences and from the society and culture they are immersed in. This is an important first step of inquiry learning.

3.2 The application of inquiry learning in speech writing process

According to Aristotle, the entire process of speech making can be divided into five steps, i.e. invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. Among the five steps, “invention, arrangement and style” constitute the preparation and writing of the speech manuscript. “Invention” refers to the process of searching and selecting materials, “arrangement” is about the organization of the materials and “style” is related to the use of language. The actual material searching, selecting and organizing should be done before students start writing their manuscript. It is just in this process of searching, selecting and organizing that inquiry learning is embodied fully. These steps are key to the success of a speech, while they cannot be carried out fully and effectively in the classroom teaching due to the time constraint as well as the complexity of individual thinking. However, the teacher can play a role of guiding students to realize the importance of those steps and assign students certain tasks to go through those steps by themselves. In my teaching practice, I usually rely on two ways to help students improve their ability of selecting and organizing materials. First, at the beginning of the semester, I ask all the students to prepare a free speech and take turns to deliver it at the beginning of each class. By “free speech”, I mean they can choose their own topics based on their interests or life experiences. Students are given two weeks to prepare their speech, in which they can search materials from the internet, the library or other sources. They should turn in their first draft for the teacher to read and criticize, and then write the second draft or the third till the teacher approves that the student can deliver it in class. The teacher will give feedback in terms of the evidence, logic, structure as well as language, guiding students to read, select and summarize the materials and then integrate them in their writing. Through the repeated process of writing and rewriting, students become aware of the flaws and deficiencies in their writing and improve their ability in selecting the proper evidence, organizing their ideas logically and express their thoughts with appropriate language. Moreover, I find students prefer to use stories from current news, popular movies and classic novels to illustrate their main points. Some students also learn to design questionnaires to collect first-hand material to use in their speeches. I remember one student chose sleeping habits of college students as her topic. She designed some questions to ask about her classmates and used the results in her speech, which turned out to be very successful and engaging. By searching and selecting information and then organizing all the evidence they have gained, students’ overall research ability has been improved. In addition, students are quick to learn from each other. When they see their peers telling interesting stories, using copious figures and numbers or quotations in

their speeches, they will follow the good example and learn to use substantial evidence in their own speeches.

Second, besides asking student to write a whole speech at a stretch, I also break down the speech writing into different sections and design tasks respectively to improve students inquiry learning ability. For instance, when discussing the different ways of beginning a speech, I asked students to use various ways to write the introductory paragraph. Facing the same topic within a group, they were able to use their own perspective and unique thinking to introduce the topic and lead the audience to the central idea. To enhance their understanding, I gave them sample speech manuscripts to appreciate and drew their attention to how the beginning of a speech successfully and effectively functions. When elaborating on the different kinds of evidence, I gave students several arguments and asked them to illustrate them with proper evidence. Students can form research groups and each group focuses on one argument. They delegate tasks among the group members, some searching and selecting the most appropriate and convincing evidence, some writing and some improving and editing. They learn to cooperate with each other, compromise on some points and be responsible for quality of their work. Moreover, students were asked to watch sample TED speeches and analyze the evidence used in the speech by answering questions and filling blanks with missing information. With carefully designed tasks and activities, students have the chance to put the knowledge into practice and are allowed to make mistakes, learn from their mistakes and learn from each other. Along the way, they gradually internalize the theories they have learned and develop their own thinking power.

3.3 The application of inquiry learning in evaluating speeches

In addition, the inquiry learning method can be adopted in speech appreciation and evaluation activities. As is mentioned before, I often use speech videos in my teaching, but the video watching part, if not carefully planned, can be regarded as a relaxing time by the students and won't generate desired effects. In my class, to fully take advantage of the sample speeches, I usually guide students to discuss the general effect of the speech first, and then I will draw their attention to the particular speaking skill we have learned and ask them to observe how the speaker adeptly employ this skill in the speech. Let's take one activity as an example. After showing students the TED speech "Walk and Talk", I asked students to discuss the specific purpose, the central idea and the overall effect of the speech. Next, I played the video the second time, and asked them to note down the specific and concrete words and expressions they have heard as in that class we were learning "the use of language" in speeches. Through this activity, students realize that in speech writing they do not need big and technical words to impress their listeners, instead small and concrete words are much more effective. For this lecture on the use of language, I also asked students to analyze the language features in the classic speech of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", students found out all the figures of speech and the examples of appropriate use of language in their group research. Hence, their sense of achievement is fulfilled and their interest in English rhetoric is kindled.

What's more, in evaluating students' speech performance, I will also contrive some inquiry learning activities. For instance, I observed that when one student is making speech on the lectern, other students often tune off or listen mindlessly. In order to attract the students audience to listen attentively, I usually design some evaluation forms, in which there are items like "topic selection (interesting or not)" "central idea" "evidence 1, 2, 3..." or "way(s) of beginning" "visual aids" and etc. I use the form to guide students' attention to certain aspects in the speech and remind them to use the skills in their own speeches. Moreover, I often invite some students to make comments on the spot and give one or two specific suggestions after one student finishes his or her speech. The teacher will add more detailed criticism in terms of the ways of beginning and ending, the evidence used, the structure, the visual aids, the rhetoric as well the delivery. Through this evaluation process, students learn from good examples, learn from the teacher's suggestions and find problems to avoid in the coming practice. This evaluation section inspires students to compare, to criticize, and to judge, by constantly doing so, their critical thinking ability is also strengthened.

4. The effects of the application of inquiry learning

After adopting inquiry learning approach in my class, I observed an increasing participation of students in class discussions and presentations. They gradually became interested in exploring speech topics and supporting materials by themselves or with the help of their teacher and classmates. More and more students would ask questions after class and turn in their speech manuscripts for suggestions.

In the final speech making test, they exhibited improved critical thinking skills in that they were able to find their own perspective for a chosen topic and illustrate their thesis from different angles and with abundant evidence. Based on the questionnaire I gave out to the class at the end of a school year, the effects of implementing inquiry learning in English public speaking course can be summarized as follows.

4.1 The effects on students' attitudes towards public speaking

In my university, English public speaking course is offered to freshmen non-English majors. Most of them have never had the experience of making public speeches in English before, and some have extreme fear of speaking in public, let alone speaking English in public. But after a year of training and practice, their attitudes towards the course have changed markedly. From the 25 respondents, it has been found that 72% of the students consider EPSC as the most challenging in their first year study in college, but 76% of the students claim their attitudes towards public speaking has changed and their nervousness for public speaking has been overcome to some extent in the one year study of this course. As for their willingness to take part in speech contests, 64% of the students show a positive attitude and 20% show a very strong enthusiasm for taking part in various speech contests. When asked about their greatest gain from the course, 68% of students choose "speaking confidence and courage," only second to the number of students who choose "public speaking skills," which reaches 92%. From the results, we can see that students, though aware of the challenges of public speaking, gain confidence in speaking English and some even would like to take on new adventures by attending speech competitions.

4.2 The effects on students' mastery of public speaking skills

As mentioned in the former section, when asked about their greatest gain from the course, 92% of the students pick "public speaking skills." To examine further, it has been found out that the top three skills that have impressed them the most are "speaker's voice and body", "beginning the speech", "outlining the speech", which account for 28%, 24% and 20% respectively. And the most useful skills chosen by the students are "supporting your ideas" and "beginning the speech", accounting for 80% and 64% respectively. 92% of the participants claim they can use the skill of "supporting your idea" in their writing tasks. As for selecting a perspective for a given topic, 56% of the respondents believe they can always find the speech topic they are interested in and choose a unique perspective. These results show that the inquiry learning approach is most effective in the teaching of public skills, and are very effective in improving students' confidence and overall speaking and writing skills.

4.3 The effects on students' learning attitude in general

Besides learning from the classroom, students learn autonomously after class to improve their English. The questionnaire results show that 76% of the students watch English movies and TV dramas, and 68% watch videos of famous speeches and do follow-up speaking in their spare time to improve their speaking and listening. Among the 25 students, only 3 students choose "seldom do listening and speaking practice after class". When asked about the teaching style of the teacher, 84% percent of the students think the teacher asks a lot of questions to activate their thinking and guide them to explore by themselves. In regards to the question "In which way do you think your teacher helps you the most", 96% of the students choose " teachers' comments and suggestions ", 72% give credit to "teacher's proofreading work on their manuscripts" and "enlightenment on their English study as a whole". In general, all the students are satisfied with the EPSC, among them 60% are very satisfied with the course instruction. To summarize, students benefit a lot from exploring and learning by themselves either in or outside of the classroom. In the classroom instruction, teacher's guidance, comments and suggestions give them the most help, and they have not only made progress in their public speaking but also their English learning as a whole.

5. Conclusion

This study has found that inquiry learning can be applied more extensively and profoundly throughout the entire process of teaching public speaking. The introduction of inquiry learning approach transforms the teacher-dominant class into student-centered class, with teachers as classroom managers, facilitators and guides, making students the main body of learning, encouraging them to

actively acquire knowledge, discover problems, solve problems, and think critically. The effects of the implementation of inquiry learning in public speaking course are significant. Students no longer consider the public speaking skills useless or dull, they actively put them into practice in their own speeches. With teacher's help and encouragement, their confidence in English public speaking has been significantly enhanced. Most students take initiative in finding their own topics, collecting and selecting materials, writing and rewriting their manuscripts, which showcase an improved enthusiasm in learning and improving. Students benefit a lot from the group work in classroom as well as their teacher's detailed analysis of their speeches. The overall effects of their speech presentation have improved remarkably in terms of the logic, structure, language of their manuscript as well as the delivery.

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