

Students' Experiences of the Adequacy of Public Discourse Subjects to Support Their Speaking Skill

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of second-year students at the School of Foreign Languages, Pingxiang University, regarding the adequacy of the public discourse subject and its impact on their speaking skills. The primary aim is to evaluate how effectively this course supports the development of students' speaking abilities, fostering both confidence and communication skills. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed, utilizing purposive sampling to focus on ten students enrolled in the public discourse course during the 2023-2024 academic year. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, allowing for rich qualitative insights into students' experiences. The findings reveal that students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences, highlighting significant improvements in confidence, clarity, fluency, and resilience. Participants noted that the structured environment empowered them to articulate their ideas more assertively and manage speaking anxiety effectively. Regular practice and constructive feedback emerged as critical components of their skill development, enabling students to refine their abilities. Furthermore, the course was deemed instrumental in cultivating resilience, equipping students to handle public speaking challenges and engage in respectful debates. This study contributes to understanding how public discourse education can enhance students' speaking proficiency and overall communication capabilities. Recommendations for enhancing the public discourse curriculum include regularly evaluating course content based on student feedback, introducing diverse speaking activities, and implementing structured feedback mechanisms. Additionally, integrating technology for self-assessment and establishing continuous development programs focused on advanced public speaking techniques are advised. In conclusion, while the public discourse subject has proven effective in enhancing speaking skills, these recommendations will further improve the curriculum, preparing students for future challenges in public speaking and communication. This research serves as a valuable reference for educators and administrators aiming to optimize public discourse education.

Keywords: Public Discourse; Speaking Skills; Qualitative Research; Communication Education; P.R. China

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the mastery of English, particularly in speaking, has become not just a skill but a necessity for effective communication across cultures and professions. English functions as a vital medium for international communication, significantly enhancing collaboration across borders. Proficiency in English facilitates effective interactions in various sectors, including business, science, and diplomacy" (Jenkins, 2015). Nationally, in countries like China, the demand for strong English communication skills is reflected in educational reforms aimed at enhancing English language instruction to meet the needs of a globalized economy (Zhang, 2020). Locally, at Pingxiang University, the curriculum has evolved to incorporate public discourse as a core subject, aiming to equip students with the necessary speaking skills. However, despite the growing emphasis on public speaking within educational contexts, existing literature reveals a significant gap in understanding how specific courses, such as public discourse, effectively enhance speaking skills among non-native English learners.

While prior research has explored the broader impacts of language education on communication skills, few studies have focused specifically on the effectiveness of public discourse courses in fostering confidence and fluency in non-native speakers (Abdullah, 2010; Lee, 2014). This study differentiates itself by concentrating on the experiences of second-year students at the School of Foreign Languages, thus providing a unique perspective on the direct impact of public discourse education on their speaking abilities.

The motivation behind this research stems from a personal conviction that effective communication is crucial for academic success and professional advancement. Witnessing firsthand the challenges students face in public speaking, I was compelled to investigate how structured educational interventions can address these issues. Furthermore, legal frameworks such as the Ministry of Education's guidelines on English language proficiency underscore the necessity of equipping students with robust communication skills to thrive in a globalized job market.

In summary, this study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature by examining the specific impacts of the public discourse subject on speaking skills among second-year students at Pingxiang University. By addressing these critical issues, the research seeks to contribute meaningful insights that can enhance educational practices and better prepare students for future communication challenges.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are threefold. First, the research aims to find out the students' experiences toward the adequacy of the public discourse subject focusing on gathering qualitative insights into how students perceive the effectiveness of the course in enhancing their speaking abilities. Second, the study seeks to determine how the public discourse subject can support their speaking skills by investigating the specific elements of the curriculum that contribute to improvements in students' confidence, clarity, and fluency in speaking. Third, based on the results, the study may propose recommendations for modifying course content, developing new pedagogical approaches, creating effective assessment tools, and initiating workshops to provide additional support. Furthermore, it may suggest avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of public discourse education on students' communication skills. Together, these objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the

impact of public discourse education on students' speaking proficiencies and address existing gaps in the literature.

Methodology

Population. The study focused on second-year students enrolled in the public discourse subject at the School of Foreign Languages, Pingxiang University, during the academic year 2023-2024. This population was chosen to gain insights into their experiences regarding the adequacy of the public discourse subject in enhancing their speaking skills. The target population included students who had completed the public discourse course during their first and second terms.

Sample. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for this study. The sample consisted of ten second-year students who had completed the public discourse course and were willing to share their experiences. This sampling method ensured that the participants possessed relevant insights directly related to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Only second-year students who had enrolled in the public discourse course during the specified terms were included.
- Students from other academic years or disciplines, as well as those who had not taken the course, were excluded.
- Participants were required to provide informed consent to partake in the study.

Data Collection. Data collection took place exclusively at the School of Foreign Languages. The following steps were followed to gather data:

Permission Secured. Approval was obtained from the department head to conduct the study, ensuring compliance with institutional policies.

Class Observation. The researcher observed the selected class to gain contextual insights into the teaching methods and student interactions related to the public discourse subject.

Interviews Conducted. Structured interviews were conducted with the ten selected students. An interview guide was utilized to explore students' experiences and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the public discourse course in enhancing their speaking skills.

The key components of the interview guide included:

- An introduction that explained the purpose of the interview and assured participants of confidentiality.
- Core questions focus on the effectiveness of the course, its impact on confidence and fluency, application of knowledge, support for speaking skills, and overcoming challenges.
- A conclusion that invited participants to share any additional insights.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify, analyze, and report themes within the qualitative data collected from interviews. The analysis process followed these key steps:

Familiarization with the Data. The researcher read and listened to interview transcripts multiple times to develop an understanding of students' experiences.

Generating Initial Codes. Relevant features of the data were identified, and initial codes were developed based on students' responses.

Searching for Themes. Initial codes were grouped into potential themes that captured broader patterns within the data.

Reviewing Themes. The identified themes were refined to ensure coherence and consistency, with each theme connected to multiple codes supported by student responses.

Defining and Naming Themes. Each theme was clearly defined and named based on insights gained from the responses.

Producing the Report. The themes and supporting extracts were integrated into a coherent narrative, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the findings.

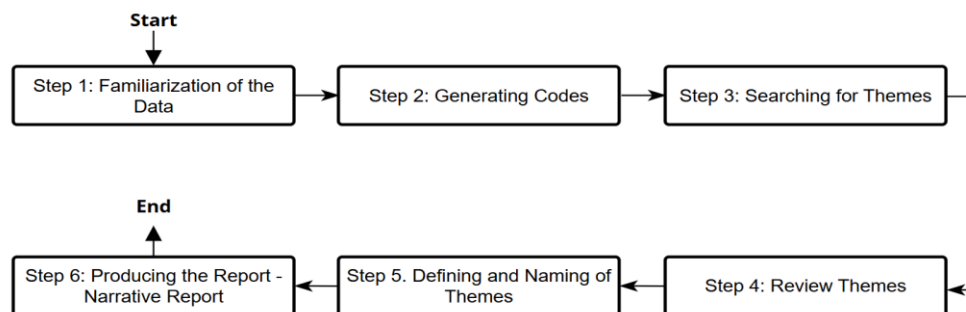


Figure 1. Data Analysis - Braun and Clarke (2006) Model

Ethical Consideration

In this study, several key ethical considerations were prioritized to protect participants and ensure a trustworthy research process:

Informed Consent. Participants received precise information about the study and consented voluntarily, understanding their rights.

Confidentiality. Participants' identities were protected by removing identifying information and using pseudonyms.

Right to Withdraw. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences, ensuring their participation was voluntary.

Minimizing Harm. The researcher created a supportive interview environment to avoid emotional distress.

Data Security. Collected data were securely stored, with limited access and protective measures for both digital and physical documents.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents a narrative analysis of the qualitative data collected from interviews with ten English Major students at the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University. The objective of this study was to evaluate the students' experiences regarding the adequacy of public discourse subjects in enhancing their speaking skills. This analysis draws on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, revealing key themes that emerged from the data.

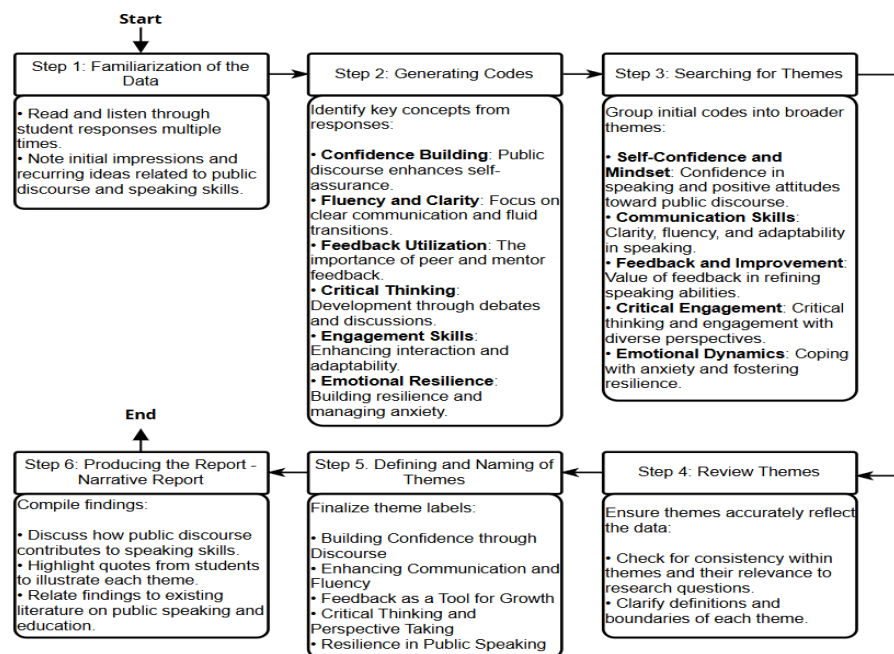


Figure 2. Thematic Data Analysis using Braun and Clarke (2006) Method

The data for this study were obtained through qualitative interviews with 10 English Major students from the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University from the 2023-2024 academic year.

The participant group comprised 2 males and 8 females. All participants had previously completed the public discourse subjects: Public Speaking I (The Art of Public Speaking/Introduction to Public Speaking) during their first year (second semester) and Public Speaking II during their second year (first semester). This information was gathered through a questionnaire, where participants responded to

questions numbered 1-5 and a supplementary question regarding their experiences throughout the learning process of the public discourse subjects.

Responses were gathered through open-ended questions that prompted participants to reflect on several aspects of their learning experiences. These questions included inquiries about the effectiveness of public discourse in improving speaking skills, the impact on confidence during speaking practice, the contribution to fluency in speech, the application of knowledge gained from the course, the support provided in developing speaking skills, and the overall usefulness of the course in overcoming challenges related to public discourse.

The responses were rich and varied, reflecting a range of experiences and insights regarding public discourse. Participants expressed unanimous agreement on several key themes, including the enhancement of confidence, fluency, and critical thinking skills. Specifically, students felt that public discourse provided a supportive environment that boosted their self-esteem and helped them visualize success in speaking engagements. Many noted improvements in their ability to articulate thoughts clearly and transition smoothly between ideas, attributing this to the regular practice and feedback mechanisms embedded in the course.

1. How do the English Major Students of the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University evaluate the adequacy of the public discourse subject?

The English major students at the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University evaluate the adequacy of the public discourse subject very positively. Their assessments reveal several significant experiences and recurring themes, supported by their narratives.

Significant Experiences and Themes

Building Confidence through Discourse. Students express that the public discourse course significantly boosts their confidence. One student shared, "The course provides a platform for practice, which helps me articulate my ideas more clearly and assertively." This sentiment highlights how the structured environment fosters a sense of self-assurance.

Impact on Confidence During Speaking Practice. Many students note that the course helps them visualize success in their speaking engagements. One participant remarked, "It helps me focus on my message rather than my nerves. I can see myself succeeding in front of an audience." This visualization process contributes to their personal growth in speaking abilities.

Enhancing Communication and Fluency. Improvements in fluency are a common theme. "The regular opportunities for practice and the valuable feedback from my peers have made a huge difference," one student stated. This feedback loop underscores the course's effectiveness in developing essential communication skills.

Feedback as a Tool for Growth. Students recognize the critical role that feedback plays in their learning journey. A student noted, "Constructive criticism from my classmates and instructors helps me

acknowledge my progress and refine my skills." This iterative learning process is vital for their ongoing development as speakers.

Resilience in Public Speaking. The course is viewed as instrumental in building resilience. "Participating in respectful debates has equipped me with the skills to handle challenges effectively," one student reflected. This experience helps them navigate public speaking scenarios with greater ease and confidence.

In conclusion, English major students at Pingxiang University evaluate the public discourse subject as highly effective. They emphasize its role in building confidence, enhancing communication skills, and fostering resilience. These narratives and themes underline the course's significant impact on their development as effective and confident speakers, showcasing its adequacy in addressing their educational needs.

2. How can the public discourse subject support the speaking skills of English Major Students of the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University?

An analysis of how the public discourse subject can support the speaking skills of English major students at the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University, along with relevant student responses from the interviews:

2.1 Support for Speaking Skills through Public Discourse

Building Confidence. Public discourse plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' self-assurance during speaking situations. The structured environment of the course allows students to practice their speaking skills in a supportive setting, where they are encouraged to take risks without fear of judgment. This atmosphere fosters a culture of learning from mistakes, helping students to view errors as valuable opportunities for growth rather than setbacks. As a result, many students reported feeling more confident not only in their public speaking abilities but also in their overall communication skills.

Student 1: Absolutely, it boosts confidence by providing a platform for practice.

Student 2: Yes, it sharpens clarity by requiring precise communication of ideas.

This confidence encourages students to participate actively in discussions and presentations.

Enhancing Clarity and Focus. The course significantly improves students' clarity and articulation of thoughts. Through various speaking exercises, students learn to express their ideas more effectively, which is essential for engaging an audience. Furthermore, public discourse encourages fluid transitions between ideas, which contributes to overall speaking fluency. Students become more adept at organizing their thoughts in real-time, resulting in smoother, more coherent presentations. This enhancement in communication skills not only aids in public speaking but also translates to everyday conversations and professional interactions.

Student 3: Absolutely, it helps me visualize success in my speaking engagements.

Student 4: I think so, it teaches me to focus on my message rather than my nerves.

This focus is essential for effective public speaking and can reduce anxiety during presentations.

2.2 Improving Fluency through Practice

Engaging in debates and discussions within the public discourse course is instrumental in fostering critical thinking skills among students. These activities require participants to analyze different viewpoints critically and construct compelling arguments. Students learn to appreciate diverse perspectives, which not only enriches their understanding of various topics but also enhances their ability to engage in respectful and informed discourse. This development of critical thinking equips them with the tools to navigate complex discussions and articulate their positions effectively, a skill that is invaluable in both academic and professional settings.

Student 5: Definitely, it allows for valuable feedback from peers and mentors.

Student 6: Absolutely, it provides regular opportunities to practice speaking.

This consistent engagement helps students become more comfortable and articulate in their speech.

2.3 Utilizing Feedback for Growth

Constructive feedback from both peers and mentors is highlighted as a crucial component of the learning process. Students reported that receiving specific, actionable feedback enables them to refine their speaking skills effectively. This continuous loop of feedback helps students identify their weaknesses and understand areas that require improvement. Moreover, the collaborative environment encourages students to give and receive feedback, fostering a sense of community and collective growth. As they apply this feedback to their practice, students witness tangible improvements in their speaking abilities, reinforcing their commitment to ongoing development.

Student 7: Definitely, it helps me recognize my growth, which is empowering.

Student 8: For sure, it equips me with relevant examples to support my points.

Feedback allows students to refine their skills and build upon their strengths.

2.4 Fostering Resilience

The course also plays a significant role in helping students manage speaking anxiety and build emotional resilience. By providing regular opportunities for practice in a supportive environment, students gradually become more comfortable with public speaking scenarios. This exposure helps diminish feelings of nervousness, allowing them to focus on their message rather than their fears. As students learn to embrace challenges and view public speaking as a valuable skill rather than a daunting task, they develop a greater

sense of resilience. This newfound comfort not only prepares them for future speaking engagements but also instills a belief in their ability to succeed in various public speaking contexts.

Student 9: Definitely, it enhances my ability to engage in respectful debates.

Student 10: Absolutely, they help me build resilience in public speaking scenarios.

This resilience is crucial for coping with the pressures of public speaking and engaging in discussions effectively.

The public discourse subject supports the speaking skills of English major students by building confidence, enhancing clarity and focus, improving fluency through practice, utilizing feedback for growth, and fostering resilience. The insights from student responses illustrate the course's multifaceted benefits, making it an essential component of their education at Pingxiang University. This comprehensive support prepares students not only for academic success but also for future professional communication challenges.

3. Output may be proposed

Facilitate Workshops on Public Speaking Techniques

To build on the findings regarding students' confidence and skill development, the researcher can organize workshops that focus on advanced public speaking techniques. These workshops could cover topics like storytelling, body language, and audience engagement strategies. By facilitating these sessions, the researcher can provide students with additional resources and tools to further enhance their public speaking capabilities.

Conduct Longitudinal Studies on Skill Development

The researcher can initiate longitudinal studies to track the progress of students' speaking skills over time. By conducting follow-up interviews and assessments at different stages of their academic journey, the researcher can gain deeper insights into how public discourse subjects continue to influence students' skills beyond the course duration. This data could inform curriculum adjustments and highlight the long-term benefits of public discourse education.

Implement Peer-Led Discussion Groups

In response to the positive impact of collaborative learning highlighted in the findings, the researcher can establish peer-led discussion groups. These groups would allow students to practice speaking in a less formal setting, encouraging them to engage with diverse viewpoints and refine their arguments. The researcher can oversee these groups to ensure that they are structured effectively and provide the necessary support for students to thrive in their speaking development.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the significant impact that public discourse has on students' speaking skills and overall confidence. Participation in public discourse enhances self-assurance while also improving communication abilities, critical thinking, and emotional resilience, all of which are essential for effective public speaking. One of the most compelling themes identified is the enhancement of confidence among students. Public discourse creates a safe and supportive environment where students feel encouraged to express their ideas and take risks. This is particularly important in the context of public speaking, where anxiety and fear of judgment can inhibit performance. By fostering a culture that values learning from mistakes, the course empowers students to approach speaking engagements with greater self-assurance. This finding aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the role of supportive educational environments in boosting student confidence. The ability to view mistakes as learning opportunities not only aids in developing speaking skills but also contributes to a more resilient mindset that students can carry into various aspects of their lives.

Moreover, the improvement in communication skills, particularly in clarity and fluency, is another critical outcome of the public discourse course. Students reported that regular practice and structured speaking exercises significantly enhanced their ability to articulate thoughts clearly and transition smoothly between ideas. This focus on communication is essential, as effective public speaking requires the ability to engage and hold the audience's attention. The findings support the notion that systematic practice and feedback are vital components in developing fluency. As students become more adept at expressing their ideas, they not only improve their public speaking abilities but also enhance their interpersonal communication skills, which are crucial in both academic and professional settings.

The theme of feedback emerged as a vital element in the learning process. Students highlighted the importance of receiving constructive feedback from peers and mentors in refining their speaking skills. This aligns with the concept of formative assessment, which emphasizes the role of feedback in fostering student development. By engaging in a feedback-rich environment, students learn to identify their strengths and weaknesses, allowing for targeted practice and improvement. This collaborative approach not only enhances individual skills but also fosters a sense of community among students, reinforcing the idea that learning is a shared journey.

Engagement in debates and discussions within the public discourse course also cultivates critical thinking skills and perspective-taking abilities. Students reported that analyzing diverse viewpoints and constructing persuasive arguments enriched their understanding of complex issues. This highlights the importance of critical thinking in public speaking, as effective speakers must articulate and defend their positions while remaining open to opposing views. The development of these skills prepares students to navigate challenging discussions, making them more competent and confident speakers.

Finally, the course's role in building resilience cannot be overlooked. By providing ample opportunities for practice in a supportive setting, students learn to manage their speaking anxiety and embrace public speaking challenges. This emotional resilience is crucial, as it allows students to approach future speaking engagements with a positive mindset and a belief in their capabilities. The ability to cope with anxiety and view public speaking as a growth opportunity is a vital skill that extends beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant impact of public discourse subjects on the speaking skills of English major students at the School of Foreign Languages at Pingxiang University. Through qualitative interviews, it became evident that students view these courses positively, recognizing their essential role in enhancing speaking confidence, communication abilities, and critical thinking skills. The supportive environment fostered by the courses encourages risk-taking and learning from mistakes, which is vital for personal and academic growth.

Students reported feeling empowered to articulate their thoughts clearly, engage effectively with their audiences, and manage speaking anxiety. The structured practice and constructive feedback they received were crucial in developing their skills, equipping them not only for public speaking but also for navigating complex discussions in various contexts. Overall, the findings affirm that the public discourse subject is instrumental in preparing students for future communication challenges, laying a strong foundation for their academic and professional success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the specific objectives of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. *Evaluate and Enhance Course Content.* To address how students evaluate the adequacy of public discourse subjects, it is essential to conduct regular assessments and feedback sessions. Gathering student input on course content, structure, and effectiveness can help identify areas for improvement, ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and responsive to student needs.
2. *Support Speaking Skills through Diverse Activities.* To further support the speaking skills of English Major students, the curriculum should include a diverse range of speaking activities. Incorporating impromptu speeches, debates, and peer-led discussions can provide students with varied opportunities to practice and refine their skills in different contexts, enhancing their adaptability and confidence.
3. *Implement Structured Feedback Mechanisms.* Establishing structured peer feedback mechanisms will enable students to engage in meaningful critiques of each other's presentations. This process can enhance their ability to provide and receive constructive criticism, fostering a collaborative learning environment that promotes collective growth.
4. *Utilize Technology for Skill Development.* Integrating technology and multimedia resources, such as video recordings for self-assessment, can enrich the learning experience. This approach allows students to visualize their progress, reflect on their performances, and identify areas for improvement, while also familiarizing them with modern presentation tools.
5. *Propose Continuous Development Programs.* Based on the results, it is recommended to propose the establishment of continuous development programs, including workshops on advanced public speaking techniques and support groups for managing speaking anxiety. These initiatives would provide ongoing opportunities for skill enhancement and foster a supportive community among students.

In summary, while the public discourse subjects at the School of Foreign Languages, at Pingxiang University, are effective in enhancing students' speaking skills, implementing these recommendations will

further improve the curriculum and better prepare students for future challenges in public speaking and communication.

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