

Strategies to Improve College Students' Writing Skills of English Informative Speeches

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Abstract. In the past two decades, the emergent trend in integrating public speaking into the English curriculum of Chinese universities has represented the beginning of a new era in Chinese English education. How to write an informative speech is an indispensable part of a public speaking course. Based on an analysis of three informative sample speeches, this paper aims to explore a solution to help students in Kunming University improve their writing skills of an informative speech, which mainly focuses on its structure, namely, beginning, body, and conclusion.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, people have regarded public speaking as a vital means of communication. As its name implies, public speaking is a way of making your ideas public by sharing them with other people and influencing other people. [1] Given its importance, it's not surprising that public speaking has been taught and studied around the globe for thousands of years. The integration of English public speaking courses into my school's teaching syllabus fully shows the significance attached to this course for its function of building up students' confidence, broadening their horizons and improving their comprehensive English abilities.

Public speaking to inform occurs in a wide range of everyday situations, ranging from the business manager explaining next year's budget, the architect reviewing plans for a new building, to the tour guide showing historical sites and the teacher in a classroom. An informative speech tells the audience about a process, event, concept, or object.

Your audience will be more receptive to your efforts if you take the time to assemble your thoughts in a logical manner. Well-organized speeches have several benefits for the audience, that is, easier to understand, easier to remember, more credible and more enjoyable. [2]

Now that people will live the rest of their life in a globalized world, with an enormous amount of information at all times and places, the need for English public speaking to inform will almost surely touch college students at some time. No matter it is for an assignment at school or a speech in a contest, no matter what the subject of the informative speech, there are some writing strategies they could follow to make a successful informative speech.

2. English Informative Speeches

It is the age of information now and information has situations in all aspects of life. Nowadays, people would averagely absorb more than 20,000 words of information daily, ranging from the Internet to television to cereal boxes. [2] As a speaker, you often need to organize and communicate the information you already have. Speeches to inform are the most common type of talks. [2]

2.1. Related definition

Inform, to tell someone about particular facts (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Inform, to give information or knowledge to others (Dict.cn). Information, facts about a situation, person, event, etc. (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Informative, providing a lot of useful information about something (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

As an indispensable part of the public speaking course, what an informative speech is. Informative speech, a speech designed to convey knowledge and understanding; it is completely unbiased, which is used solely to give information.

2.2. Types of informative speeches

No matter what information a speaker wants to convey, there are four major types of informative speeches, namely, speeches about objects, speeches about processes, speeches about events, and speeches about concepts.

In *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the word “object” refers to “a thing that you can see or touch but that is not usually a living animal, plant or person”. While the word is used in defining informative speech, it includes anything that is tangible, visible, and stable in form. The following table is some examples of topics on objects.

Table 1. Topics of speech on objects

Sahara computers the Eiffel Tower	killer whale Sichuan masks Japanese garden	Suzhou embroidery Du Fu
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Informative speeches about processes explain how something is made, how something is done, or how something works. [1] It could focus on the major rituals of a traditional India wedding, or the common methods used by acrobat to perform acrobatics on the stage. It also could be the procedure to assemble a Lego, or even how a nuclear power plant works.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines an “event” as “anything that happens”. By this definition, here are examples of suitable topics for informative speeches about events.

Table 2. Topics of speech on events

Divorce cyber crime	depression typhoon	World Cup Paralympics
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Concepts include beliefs, theories, ideas, principles, and the like, which are more abstract than the three above types of speeches. The speaker may want to inform the audience about the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, or the theories of evolution. He or she may also want to inform his or her listener about what constitutionalism is.

3. Writing Features of English informative speeches

Regardless of the topic or type, a speech is made up of three main parts, namely, an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The opening should immediately catch the audience’s attention and tell the audience what you will be talking about. The body is the main part of the speech and consists of the facts or ideas the speaker wants to present. And the conclusion is the final opportunity to convey one’s message and main points in a manner that will help the audience remember them.

In order to have a general view on how to write an informative speech, the author would analyze the writing features based on three informative speeches, one is “Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit” choose from *The Art of Public Speaking*, the other two are the one delivered by the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Theresa May in the International Labor Organization and the one “The Great Wall of China” presented at the University of Wisconsin.

3.1. How to write the beginning

The first impression is important. That is also the case in writing a speech. A poor beginning of a speech may so distract listeners that they could never get interested; while a good one could be an excellent confidence booster.

Table 3. The beginning part of the sample speeches

<p><i>What do you think of when I do this? If you said “Yoga,” you are absolutely correct.</i></p> <p><i>For 5,000 years, people have been practicing yoga to enhance their mental, physical, and emotional health. “Yoga” comes from the Sanskrit word meaning to “unite” or to “join”. As Stella Weller says in her book <i>Yoga: Finding Balance and Serenity in Everyday Life</i>, yoga is the practice of uniting one’s mind, body, and spirit.</i></p> <p><i>I having been practicing yoga for over eight years, and I’m in the process of getting certificate to ...</i></p>	<p>Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit</p>
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<i>In China there's a saying, "You won't be considered a great person until you've been to the Great Wall." I visited the wall last year while I was in China. I don't know if it made me a great person, but I do know that the wall is indeed great.</i>	The Great Wall of China
<i>Presidents, Prime Ministers, Director-General, Ladies and Gentlemen, This year, we mark the centenary of the International Labor Organization, an agency born of the blood-shed of the First World War, dedicated to building a better tomorrow, and inspired by a simple yet vital goal: to end "injustice, hardship and privation" in the workplaces of the world.</i>	Theresa May; in the International Labor Organization

As we can see from Table 3, there are striking differences between these three speeches. Firstly, the three speeches are delivered on different occasions. The top speech is on a general occasion, a yoga practitioner or a yoga master. The middle and the bottom ones are both the public address in a formal occasion. Secondly, when writing the opening, three speakers adopted different techniques, which were clearly demonstrated in its contents and effects.

In the first speech, the speaker tries to capture the audience's attention by adopting a yoga pose and asking a question about it; then the origins of the word "yoga" are explained, and finally, the speaker does establish her credibility to tell her own experience of practicing yoga. In the second speech, the speaker tries to gain the attention by quoting a famous Chinese saying related to the Great Wall, "You won't be considered a great person until you've been to the Great Wall"; and then establish his credibility by describing his recent trip to the Wall. In the third speech, the speaker also tries to get the attention of her audience by saying the significance of the event.

3.2. How to organize the body

The body is the main part of a speech and consists of the facts, messages, or ideas a speaker wants to present. The amount of information that would be included in the body part will be limited by the amount of time available to the speaker. Firstly, the speaker needs to decide what facts or ideas he wants to convey in his speech. It can't be too many or too little. Most listeners will remember only three to five main facts or ideas. [3] For a five-to-seven-minute speech, three facts or ideas are enough.

Table 4. The body part of the sample speeches

<i>Breathing has been an essential part of yoga for centuries. There are four major steps in the breathing process. The first is inhalation; the second, pause; the third, exhalation; and the fourth, a pause ... Now that we've learned about yoga breathing, I'm going to move to yoga postures. I'm going to demonstrate three postures that I find extremely beneficial to me—the tree poses, the triangle bow pose, and the king of the dance pose ...</i>	Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit
<i>Today I would like to share with you some of the wonders of the Great Wall. I will focus on the three major stages of its construction, moving from the first phase during the Qin Dynasty, to the second phase during the Han Dynasty, and concluding with the third phase during the Ming Dynasty. Let's start more than 2,000 years ago, when the first parts of the wall were built. The beginning of the Great Wall as we know it dates back to 221 B.C., when ... The second major period of construction for the Great Wall occurred during the Han Dynasty, which ... The third major building period of the Great Wall occurred 1,100 years later</i>	The Great Wall of China
<i>Today, the ILO can look back with pride at what it has achieved through a century of tireless work with employers, trade union and governments. Safer workplaces. Fairer conditions. Better pay. It has been a hundred years of steady progress, a hundred years that have built the foundation on which we stand today as we gather in Geneva to look to the future of work—and to ensure that future works for us all ...</i>	Theresa May; in the International Labor Organization

Among these three speeches, the last one is the longest, which lasts more than 20 minutes. However, no matter how long the speech is, the body part follows a certain structure. In the first

speech, the speaker moves into the main parts directly after the brief introduction of the origins of yoga. Firstly, the yoga breathing process is demonstrated step by step; then three major yoga poses are introduced with the demonstration. In the second speech, the speaker talks about three major stages of the Great Wall’s construction followed by the time sequence, from the Qin Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, which could sketch an outline of its development. In the third speech, even though most of the body part has been omitted here, we still could tell that the speaker would focus on three major points in the speech, namely, “Safer workplaces. Fairer conditions. Better pay”.

3.3. How to conclude your speech

Like any good speech, it not only needs an eye-catching beginning but an impressive ending. ^[4] American poet Longfellow once said, “Great is the art of beginning, but greater the art is of ending”. When it comes to the above sentence, Longfellow was talking about poetry. But his insight into the significance of a closing remark is equally applicable to public speaking.

Table 5. The ending part of the sample speeches

<p><i>Donna Farhi, the author of five books on yoga, emphasizes that yoga affects the whole body and the whole person. “Each movement,” she says, “demands that we hone some aspects of our consciousness and use ourselves in a whole new way.” As yoga practitioners have known for centuries, a few simple movements can do a whole lot of good.</i></p> <p><i>Thank you.</i></p>	<p>Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit</p>
<p><i>In conclusion, the Great Wall of China enjoys a rich history. Built over the course of more than 2,500 years during the Qin, Han, and Ming Dynasties, it is a magnificent feat of human engineering. While the wall no longer continues to defend China from invaders, it does continue to play a central role in Chinese culture and international identity. Now that you know a little more about the wall, I hope you have a fuller appreciation of why it’s regarded as great, not just in China, but throughout the world.</i></p>	<p>The Great Wall of China</p>
<p><i>So this week, as we look to the future of work, let us say once and for all that modern slavery has no place in the modern world.</i></p> <p><i>And let us commit ourselves to a future in which all the people of the world can be employed in dignity, safety and freedom.</i></p> <p><i>A future in which men are not trapped in debt bondage. A future in which children are not forced into backbreaking labor. A future in which women are not shipped around the world and sold into prostitution. A future in which modern slavery becomes a thing of the past. That’s the future of work I want to see. And that is the future of work that we can and must deliver. Thank you.</i></p>	<p>Theresa May: in the International Labor Organization</p>

Based on table 5, no matter which way the speaker would adopt, the closing remarks are the speakers’ last chance to convey their messages and main points in a manner that will help the audience remember them. In the first speech, after having expressed how yoga could unite the practitioner’s mind, body, and spirit, the speaker uses a quotation to lead into her closing remark, restating the significance of practicing yoga, “Each movement demands that we hone some aspect of our consciousness and use ourselves in a whole new way”. In the second speech, to make sure the audience does not continue to focus on the architectural features of the Great Wall, which would bore and distract the audience, the speaker draws the conclusion literally and visually. In the literal sense, the speaker concludes the speech by emphasizing its magnificent feat, not only to “defend China from invaders” in history, but also “play a central role in Chinese culture and international identity” in modern times. In the third speech, the speaker mainly focuses on looking into the future. Through adopting the rhetorical device “parallelism”, the speaker calls on everybody to create a future with “safer workplaces, fairer conditions, and better pay”.

No matter what kind of closing remarks the speakers are using, the ending part could achieve two major functions. One is to let the audience know you are ending the speech; another is to reinforce the audience’s understanding of the main messages and central ideas. The speaker could end with a quotation, summarize the speech, or even make a dramatic statement like Theresa May did in the third speech.

4. Conclusion

Informative speeches may be categorized into four kinds, that is, speeches about objects, speeches about processes, speeches about events, and speeches about concepts. No matter whether our students are trying to talk about yoga or the Great Wall, there are three major tips they could follow to make the speech a successful one.

4.1. Organize the speech

As a speaker, you must be absolutely clear about what you want your audience to know or do at the end of your speech. They could be more receptive to your major message if you make the efforts to organize your ideas in a logical manner. The beginning should immediately catch the audience's attention and tell them what you will be talking about, the body part should express your major message and ideas clearly and completely, and the ending should tie up everything. [5] In a word, a successful and impressive speech must consist of three parts, that is, the opening, the body, and the conclusion.

No matter what information the speech is going to convey, it needs an "attractive" beginning. In order to catch the audience's attention from the very beginning of the speech, the speaker could make use of some techniques like telling a story, beginning with a quotation, questioning the audience, or directly relating the topic to the audience. Just like in the speech "The Great Wall of China", the speaker successfully gets the audience's attention and establishes his credibility by quoting a famous saying known to every household in China and telling the audience his related trip to the Great Wall. You won't be considered a great person until you've been to the Great Wall. As we can see, the speaker finally puts forward his main idea, "I don't know if it made me a great person, but I do know that the wall is indeed great."

Audiences get only one chance to grasp a speaker's main ideas. Therefore, in the body part, the speaker should be organized strategically. In achieving this goal, the speaker needs to focus on two aspects. Firstly, the number of main points. As it is mentioned before, most listeners will remember only three to five main facts or ideas in a speech. As we could see from the speech "The Great Wall of China", the speaker just focuses on the three major stages of its construction, even though there are other significant facts about the Great Wall throughout history. Secondly, the order of main points. Once the speaker establishes his main points, he needs to decide the order these main points to be presented. Generally, there are four basic patterns of organization used most often by public speakers, that is, chronological order, spatial order, problem-solution order, and topical order. [1] Similarly, the speech "The Great Wall of China" is arranged chronologically through a time pattern, the Qin Dynasty, the Han Dynasty, and then the Ming Dynasty.

The conclusion is the final chance for the speaker to convey his message and main points, from which it will help the audience, remember them. In an informative speech, the speaker could conclude with a summary of the ideas presented in the body of the speech, for example, "In conclusion, the Great Wall of China enjoys a rich history. Built over the course of more than 2,500 years during the Qin, Han, and Ming Dynasties, it is a magnificent feat of human engineering." Furthermore, the speaker also could conclude with a quotation like the one in the speech "Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit".

To sum up, no matter what information the speaker would like to tell the listener, an impressive beginning, a logical body, and a memorized ending would enable the speaker to make an effective speech. [6]

4.2. Use techniques verbally and non-verbally

As a special genre, public speaking is to achieve its special social function, that is, to inform the audience, inspire their emotions, and cause them to echo with the speaker's stance on any topics. There are several techniques for the speakers to use either in preparing and delivering the speech.

Knowledge needs to be absorbed by the brain instead of being crammed into it. [7] In that case, the speaker needs to create a positive relationship with the audience. We can see from the speech made by Theresa May, not only does she express great respect for all the distinguished guests, but she tries to get the attention of her audience by saying the significance of the event. This is also true to the speech "Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit", in order to achieve the goal of getting close

to the audience, the speaker starts the speech by adopting a yoga pose. Based on this, the audience could tell that the speaker must know a lot about yoga.

As a famous saying goes like this, “one picture can be worth a thousand words”. People find a speaker’s message more interesting, grasp it more easily, and retain it longer when it is presented visually as well as verbally. [8] In order to help the audience understand the greatness of the Great Wall, the speaker uses two slides in the second paragraph. The first is a photo of the Great Wall. The second shows how the wall extends across all of China. There are various kinds of visual aids. In the above example, the speaker just uses PowerPoint effectively to help the listeners understand how great it is. Based on a study, visual aids can increase the persuasiveness of a speech by more than 40 percent.

4.3. Use language

Words are the tool of a speaker’s craft. Besides a logical structure and some related techniques in writing a speech, the speaker also needs to use his language clearly, accurately and vividly.

Firstly, to make a successful English informative speech, the speaker’s meaning must be immediately comprehensible, it must be so clear that there is no chance of misunderstanding. In order to achieve this goal, the speaker needs to use familiar words. [9] Taking the speech “Yoga: Uniting Mind, Body, and Spirit” as an example, the following words and expressions are easily found in it, like “practice yoga”, “mental, physical, and emotional health”, “breathing”, “gesture”, “inhale”, “exhale”, and so on. Secondly, using language vividly helps bring the speech to life. Another way to make the language more vivid is through some rhetorical devices, like simile, metaphor, parallelism, etc. In the above third speech, the speaker calls on everybody to create a future with “safer workplaces, fairer conditions, and better pay” by saying “A future in which men are not trapped in debt bondage. A future in which children are not forced into backbreaking labor. A future in which women are not shipped around the world and sold into prostitution. A future in which modern slavery becomes a thing of the past.” Obviously, parallelism in the above sentence, the use of parallel sentences of similar structure and relevant meanings, could emphasize or render force and depth of the speaker’s expectations. [10]

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