

Assessing the Experience of Public Speaking Contest in Moroccan Tertiary Education

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess the experience of public speaking contest in Moroccan Preparatory Classes of Higher Engineering Schools (Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles) (CPGE). The participants of this study were CPGE teachers from different centers in Morocco . The study uses qualitative design. The contents of teachers' interviews were analyzed qualitatively. The results of the study demonstrate clearly that the public speaking contest is crucial for CPGE students to enhance their speaking skills in professional contexts and everyday practices; however, it is challenging for many students. The difficulties CPGE encounter in the public speaking contest are aligned to many factors. Firstly, they do not have the habit of speaking English publicly before an audience. Secondly, most students do not master the skills of public speaking. Thirdly, they are not involved in extra-curricular activities to sharpen their speaking skills. The study ended up by suggesting practical solutions to overcome such challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over the globe, we come across people competent in different research areas and have devoted their life to excel in; however, they cannot communicate what they have accumulated publicly. Most of them have the so called glossophobia or speech anxiety that is crippling their performance and the transmission of their output to the public. Public speaking in this contest is emerging as a crucial vehicle to transcend such stage fright and to empower the individual with techniques of communication. “Public speaking, as its name implies, is a way of making your ideas public- of sharing them with other people and of influencing other

people" (Lucas,2009, p.4). Ideas and knowledge in general are not meant to be accumulated and documented, but rather to be communicated and displayed publicly in an artistic way ranging from providing information, telling a story to motivating and taking acts. Public speaking targets also to overcome psychological barriers, increase self-confidence, improve the memory, develop communication skills, enhance persuasion ability ... etc. All these multifarious functions are treated in the arena of public speaking to develop communication and speech quality since "Nothing in life is more important than the ability to communicate effectively" as Gerald R.Ford affirmed in his famous quote.

For Yamashita and Fuyuno (2015), "Public speaking is the art of delivering a speech with a combination of logic and emotion to a group of people" (p. 215). Effective communication and persuasion is not a new tradition it dates back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle who initiated the three parts of persuasion: Ethos (to persuade others based on the character of the speaker), Pathos (to involve the emotions of the audience) and Logos (to use arguments and logical reasoning to persuade the audience). (Decaro, 2011). Such triangle of thought: credibility, emotions and logic are primordial in any effective and successful public speech.

Public speaking contest in Moroccan CPGE is involving students to follow the pattern of such ethics and esthetic of the art of communication globally. Since 2009, the ministry of national education through the centre national des innovations pédagogiques et de l'expérimentation (CNIP) in Morocco organizes public speaking contest every year providing new theme. The contest is supervised by the national coordinator of the English language who displays to the teachers in CPGE the road map of work and the timing for all competitions: local, Regional and National. All participants get a training before having any contest by their coaches (teachers) to sharpen their skills and performance.

CPGE students are smart and talented students having profiles of engineers that should be mingled with competence and performance. Public speaking contest displays a golden opportunity for them to voice out their skills and to master the techniques of communication. Being good public speakers will open horizons for them to share and voice out their ideas with the English language that is called lingua Franca, namely if they are given the opportunity to further their studies abroad. Many students in CPGE are competent in writing skills but when it comes to speaking, they still find difficulties. Here emerges the role of coaching students and introducing them to the characteristics of successful public speaking.

1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Public Speaking is a skill that trains students to express their views about certain topics publicly. It enables them to enhance the abilities to persuade in different contexts using the art

of public speaking. However, CPGE students encounter some difficulties in voicing out their ideas before an audience. Through a close analysis of teachers' feedback in interviews, it has been noted that students face different kinds of problems in public speaking. Hence, this study aims to analyze these major challenges and suggest possible solutions.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study has three major main objectives. The first objective is to explore how Moroccan CPGE teachers assess the performance of students in the public speaking contest. The second objective is to identify the major challenges of training and assessing public speaking in Moroccan tertiary education. The third objective is to suggest practical solutions for teachers to overcome the current challenges.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1- How do Moroccan CPGE teachers assess public speaking in Moroccan tertiary education?**
- 2- What are the major challenges CPGE students encounter in public speaking contest?**
- 3- What are the possible suggestions to develop students' performance in public speaking contest?**

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 PUBLIC SPEAKING AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Students in CPGE are future engineers who are supposed to have great impact on society. They are not just technocrats who master their discipline, but they are opinion leaders who can create change and influence positively the public opinion about current societal issues. In this regard, "leadership involves influence, it occurs among people, those people intentionally desire significant changes, and the changes reflect purposes shared by leaders and followers" (Daft, 1999, p.5). Leadership skills are acquired and developed through the art of communication that is the process by which the message is transferred by the speaker to the audience. Hence, public speaking contest operates in such paradigm of boosting communication skills that empower and sharpen the public discourse to fit the targeted audience. Students in CPGE spend most time focusing on scientific subjects: Maths, Physics, Sciences of Engineering.... etc. they are overburdened by much work and rare when they find time for other activities that enhance their latent skills. Most of them when they finish study and go to field work, they find difficulties of integration as the knowledge accumulated in study

most of it not used. They have to look for other alternatives to adopt and adapt the new market needs depending on their own pro-activity and creation. Thus, initiating leadership and communication skills are of great importance as they push them to think and behave like a leader: describing and identifying what is occurring around, explaining and analyzing and taking decision later on. Those are the habits of future leaders and highly effective people who are able to make change in varied realms as stated by Stephen Covey (Covey ,1989) .

2.2 PUBLIC SPEAKING AND CRITICAL THINKING

The world today is marked by rapid changes and easy access to information and knowledge due to modern technology. Different discourses: social, political, economical, educational etc are invading us. However, are these discourses rational and following the pattern of logical thought? We, too, as receivers and consumers of such delivered discourses do we analyse and question them following a systematic way of thinking? I can venture and say that we rarely do. Questioning and analyzing require critical thinking which is “The careful application of reason in the termination of whether a claim is true”. (Lucas, 2009, p.3).

It is a method of spotting gaps and flaws in the arguments of displayed discourses. Public speaking contest in CPGE emanates from such frame of thought that aim to develop and sharpen students' skills as critical thinkers able to decode and decompose irrational arguments and providing logical and rational ones. Tertiary education in the 21st century tends to offer optimal conditions for students to question, interact, and debate to develop their thinking skills. (Beniche, 2023)

While preparing their written copies, students are supposed to provide original pieces of writing and avoiding some common and prevalent logical fallacies as Ad Hominem, Either-or / white-or- black, Bandwagon, Slippery Slope and Appeal to emotions. Critical thinking, then, as a complex mental process involves us to pay attention to details, to select relevant information, analyze carefully and skeptically, make judgments, and meta-cognitive thinking such as reflection and higher-order planning. (Cottrell, 2005).

These fallacies among others are flaws and mistakes in reasoning that should be avoided in public speaking and listening as well, and we should question the unquestioned since “much of what we remember and believe is flawed or simply wrong. Our brains seem to constantly generate false observations, memories, and beliefs- and yet we tend to take the truth of our experiences for granted” (Novella,2012, p.9). Meta-cognition or thinking about thinking itself is the rational paradigm that decipher facts from opinions and claims through logic and reason. On a daily basis, we come across varied cultural icons and patterns that reshape our conscious

and unconsciousness to subdue easily to its ideological framework without defensive tools or resistance. Hence, critical thinking skills are counter-discourses to empower and free us from the clutches of deceptive and consumerist ideologies.

2.3 PUBLIC SPEAKING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The ultimate goal of educational projects for any nation is how to create a good citizen, well-educated and involved in society development. It is a very complex process that recruits many experts in the realm of education and other disciplines. Education and civic engagement is a real challenge since acquiring knowledge and mastering skills are not sufficient as they are not an end in themselves. They should be mingled with the spirit of pro-activity and engagement. According to Thomas Ehrlich “civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes”. (Ehrlich, 2000). Civic involvement and engagement are the outcome of a good education and the practical side of the true meaning of citizenship that is crucial in social change and progress. Public speaking contest in Moroccan CPGE emanates from such educational paradigm that aims to enhance students’ fluency and rhetoric to raise awareness about current thorny issues, describing, discussing, analyzing and taking acts later on. The power of words has great impact on people, namely if they are well structured artistically and felt deeply. Great speakers all over the history of mankind(Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther king, Nelson Mandela , Malcolm X) have remarkable impact on the audience and have led to the emancipation of many nations from the clutches of totalitarianism, slavery, colonialism and ideological manipulations.

Believing in the power of public speaking in making change, many institutions and non-profit educational organizations globally have made it a concern and a real engagement as they offer training for free and creating clubs worldwide. A case in point, Toastmasters International that offers a program of communication and leadership which targets to develop public speaking and leadership skills. It has changed the life of many members as they overcome glossophobia and have become professional public speakers. A striking witness is the engineer, Muhammed Kahtani from Saudi Arabia, the world champion of Public Speaking 2015 Toast Masters International who used to stutter and have difficulties while talking in his childhood. Due to public speaking clubs and determination, he has become a professional public speaker, civic engager and opinion leader influencing people and creating social change.

Creating spheres for learners to awaken their latent skills is crucial in educational paradigms since it displays new horizons for learning and practicing. This is the concept of service-learning in which students learn through action and reflection and take responsibility to express and share. An appealing example is the film *Great Debaters* that is based on a genuine story in which the professor and debate coach, Melvin B. Tolson, at Wiley college in Texas motivated and encouraged students to form the school's first debate that went to compete with Harvard in the national championship. Such inspiring and creative idea made a radical and a turning point in students' life. The Public speaking debate was seized as a platform to voice out their oppressed and silenced thoughts against discrimination, marginalization and poverty that the black community was experiencing in the 1930 s. The provided debating stage was a space to call for civic and human rights and that all people are created equal regardless of their race, class, faith or gender.

Educational sphere, then, is “one of the few public spaces left where students can learn the power of questioning authority, recover the ideals of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, expand their capacities to make a difference” (Jacoby, 2009). It is a fertile ground for planting the seeds of future leaders and civic engagers who are the iconic figures of societal change and development.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study resorts to a qualitative method design. Interviews display to researchers and detailed qualitative data to understand deeply the participants' experiences, how they describe them ,and the meaning they create of those experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).This qualitative study explores how CPGE teachers assess public speaking performance , the challenges they encounter in Moroccan tertiary education and the practical solutions to overcome such difficulties.

3.1 Participants

10 Moroccan experienced CPGE teachers from different centers participated in the study. 2 females and 8 males. The study was carried in April 2023.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments used to conduct this study were semi-structured interviews with CPGE teachers from different centers in the whole Morocco. They were used to get the feedback of teachers about students' performance in public speaking contest, the current challenges and the

effective solutions to overcome such difficulties. Many Moroccan CPGE teachers from different centers participated in this study through answering pertinent questions related to the research questions. The interviews were followed up online via mobile, email and WhatsApp. 10 CPGE teachers were involved in the study and the language used was English as all the interviewees are teachers of English.

4. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The data were gathered directly from the interviewed CPGE teachers who have accumulated a long experience in teaching and coaching students in public speaking contests, the shared documents about the public speaking contest by CNIP that frame the contest from the local, regional to the final and the checklist used to assess students' performance.

5. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

For the analysis of the collected data, the study used a qualitative design. Teachers' opinions about students' production in public speaking contest were analyzed in a qualitative way.

6. RESULTS

This study used semi-structured interviews to make an in-depth understanding and analysis of the major issue and find answers to the research questions. The interviews allow CPGE teachers through their experiences in teaching and coaching to display their views in details about students' perfections and imperfections in public speaking contests and to suggest practical solutions for a better performance. The interview questions were pertinent and already prepared to target the issue under scrutiny.

The deep analysis of the semi- structured interview with CPGE teachers leads to the following major points:

Most CPGE teachers believe that the public speaking contest is crucial for students to enhance their speaking skills in professional contexts and everyday practices ; however, it is challenging for many students and it requires more practice and training to be developed and well performed .

- A CPGE teacher (1) with experience of 9 years states that “Language can never be well acquired if not put into practice. PSC is a good opportunity to hone verbal skills and body language. It helps students deliver a speech in front of the audience and jury members and gain the experience of talking and convincing”.

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- A CPGE teacher (2) with experience of 12 years believes that “Public speaking skills are essential in professional settings, and improving them can increase the chances of success in interviews and presentations. Additionally, such contests can help students improve their self-confidence, critical thinking, and communication skills. Ultimately, these abilities can contribute to their success as engineers and future leaders in their fields”.

- A CPGE teacher (3) with experience of 8 years thinks that including PS contest for CPGE students “Give more value to English speaking as it is only assessed in written exams in Morocco, discovering and encouraging talented speakers, celebrating the success of Morocco in EFL, sensitizing students of the importance of speaking skills and their effect on their lives, their communities, and the world as a whole”.

- A CPGE teacher (4) with experience of 13 years views that PCS helps in “Boosting students’ linguistic and cultural, critical thinking competencies. They are supposed to take Moroccan and French exams; therefore, they need to show their knowledge (mastery) of the English language and be able to use it at the professional level once they graduate”.

A CPGE teacher (5) with experience of 13 years views that PCS helps students to :

-Develop their soft skills such as communication (expressing ideas efficiently) and creativity (coming up with original and ingenious ideas).

-Overcome their stage fright and manage their stress, hence become more confident while speaking publicly.

- Broaden their knowledge about the PS topic; they tend to do research and gather enough information and arguments that they may include in their speeches or use them while answering the jury members’ questions, which may boost their argumentative and persuasive skills.

- Enhance their professional skills as well as their personalities.

II- CPGE teachers assess the performance of students in public speaking contest through the use of specific rubrics and a unified checklist suggested by the CNIP:

In the beginning, some CPGE teachers suggest no checklist to encourage students to participate .Later on , they focus on certain PS techniques such as eye contact, body language, clarity, main pointsetc. Most teachers use rubrics including:

The written script (content) , the delivery skills (fluency, pronunciation, intonation, voice projection) paralinguistic (body positions/movements, facial expression) ,engagement, overall impression and time management (respect of the allotted time 5 minutes). The unified checklist suggested by the CNIP is used by CPGE teachers to know the points that have to shed

light on while coaching their students. It is the same checklist that is displayed to the jury members in all public speaking contests in Moroccan CPGE (local, regional and national) to score students' performance. Here is the unified checklist in Moroccan CPGE suggested by the CNIP in the public speaking contest (2022) about the following topic :

“Transforming education to conquer 21st century challenges”

Speaker's name: اسم المشارك (ة)				
Speech title: عنوان نص الخطاب				
Assessment criteria	Scale: 0, 1, 2, 3 or 4 Point(s)			معايير التقويم:
0	4			
Unsatisfactory or poor	Substandard or meets minimal requirements	Satisfactory or meets middling requirements	very good and meets most requirements	Outstanding and meets all requirements
Speech Evaluation Grid				
CRITERIA				Mark
ORGANISATION AND DELIVERY SKILLS				
Pronunciation: stress, intonation, rhythm tone and pitch rate				/4
Use of paralanguage: eye contact, posture, gestures, and facial expression				/4
Mode of delivery: fluency, articulation, voice clarity & projection				/4
Speech organization¹ (Introduction, body & summary) and timing (5 minute-speech: or ± 15 seconds) Points deducted: (1,2,3)				/4
CONTENT				
Speech content , purpose, relevance and significance				/3
Originality , creativity, and perspective				/3
Incorporates deep and interesting supporting details , stories and examples				/3
Accuracy: correctness, grammar and richness of vocabulary				/3
OVERALL IMPRESSION				
Level of confidence, persuasiveness and enthusiasm for the topic				/2
TOTAL score				

(CNIP, 2022, p.13)

The use of a checklist aims to display an analytic scoring which is a detailed examination of candidates' public speaking performance that is completely different from the holistic scoring that deals with the speaking performance as a whole. In the assessment of speaking, rubrics are common and used to assign tasks and score students' performance. A rubric is a document that describes a certain assignment in details. It is "a counts, and document that articulates the expectation for an assignment by listing the criteria, or what describing levels of quality from excellent to poor" (Herawati, 2011, p.446)

III- The major challenges CPGE students encounter in public speaking contest

- According to most CPGE teachers, many factors are behind such difficulties in PSC:
- Fear and anxiety, lack of preparation, ineffective time management, delivery and a lack of confidence.
- Timing of the contest is not suitable (since 2nd year students are rarely interested in participating, I recommend that the contest be held in spring when all 1st year students can have the chance to participate.
- Stress, monotony, lack of originality, time for training, and fierce competition.
- Students most of the time find it very challenging to use rhetorical techniques & master delivery strategies that are necessary to efficient PS.
- The greatest difficulty is the stage fright.
- There is also the sad fact that students are overwhelmed by the overloaded program, especially in scientific subjects, which leaves students limited in time to devote to PS.
- Time to rehearse is not enough and sometimes lack of commitment from coaches.
- Logistics and coordination between CNIPE and regional directorates
- Accommodation and transportation facilities.

IV- CPGE teachers' suggestions to develop students' performance in public speaking contest:

- One way for students to improve their public speaking skills and win public speaking competitions is to practice, practice, practice.

- Other strategies include creating a clear structure, controlling anxiety, getting feedback, and ultimately engaging the audience.
- By encouraging students to participate in such activities and to show them the pedagogical objectives from the very beginning.
- Teachers can give speakers special certificates related to public speaking activities .
- By working more on the skills of speaking like Dale Carnegie does in his books and on writing interesting and original ideas that suit a spoken speech.
- Avoid tight deadlines.
- Allow students more time to get prepared.
- Close supervision on the part of the coach.
- Respect deadlines.
- Check plagiarism.
- Reward students (a mark, a prize....).
- Including public speaking in the English teaching program so that students benefit from the practice at a larger scale much in the same way they do kholle.
- It is time to consider replacing public speaking with "Big Debaters" since public speaking has been the primary focus for the last decade. While public speaking helps develop individual skills, "Big Debaters" focuses on developing teamwork in addition to enhancing other skills that public speaking promotes.
- In the 21st century, teaching and training students to work collaboratively in teams is crucial, particularly since the CPGE program, by nature, tends to encourage individualism and self-centeredness. This approach can lead to difficulties in their future careers.

7. DISCUSSION

Through the close analysis of CPGE teachers' interviews, this study has attempted to display the importance of public speaking contest in Moroccan CPGE in enhancing students' speaking skills in their academic, professional and daily endeavors. It spotted also. The major difficulties CPGE students encounter and their causes and suggest possible solutions. It is clearly deduced that CPGE students face many difficulties in public speaking which are aligned to many factors:

Firstly, they have Fear and anxiety to talk publicly. They have not given chances through different speaking activities to develop their public speaking skills. Stage fright is crippling their participation and performance. In addition, Students most of the time find it very

challenging to use public speaking techniques that are crucial to deliver an efficient public speaking. What is more, the overloaded program in CPGE does not allow students to try other extra-curricular activities and to find enough time for rehearsing and training.

To overcome these challenges and improve their level in public speaking, CPGE teachers suggest the following points:

Students should be introduced to the art of the public speaking by their teachers in classes and during training. They have to understand that they can improve their public speaking skills and win public speaking competitions through more practice. Hence, students should be encouraged to participate in public speaking activities and to know the pedagogical objectives from the very beginning and be rewarded about their good performances.

8. CONCLUSION

The study aims to assess the experience of public speaking contest in Moroccan Tertiary Education, namely CPGE classes. It uses a qualitative design to get a deep understanding of the research problem. The study results revealed that CPGE students encounter many challenges in the public speaking contest which are the outcome of many factors. According to CPGE teachers' output, most students are not familiar with speaking English publicly before an audience. In addition, most students do not master the skills of public speaking. They need educational spaces and more activities to sharpen their speaking skills. In this respect, CPGE teachers suggested that students should be motivated to speak and express their views regularly and be introduced to the techniques of public speaking gradually starting from simple to complex. They should also be given enough time to do more practice and training to prepare well and get self-confidence through good performances. Finally, rubrics should display clearly to students to know what they are supposed to do in the public speaking contest.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Many recommendations and implications should be drawn from the results of this study:

- 1-As future engineers, CPGE students should be motivated to enhance their public speaking skills. They are highly required academically, at workplace and in daily practices.
- 2-CPGE students should be introduced gradually to the techniques of public speaking and follow well-structured rubrics .

3- Creating an optimal educational atmosphere and good spaces are crucial to enhance students' speaking skills.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

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