

Study on English Public Speaking Teaching from the Perspective of Memetics

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Abstract: This paper, based on Memetics, discusses language imitation, communication and variation integrated in English public speaking teaching. Guided by Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, students complete easier cognitive learning such as memorizing and understanding the language memes which would be further applied, analyzed, evaluated, and created in class for new speech cases with the help of teachers. This teaching strategy gives full play to a more communicative use of English in making public speeches and provides evidence for innovative teaching reforms.

1. Introduction

Memetics, based on the Darwinian evolutionary theory, is to explain cultural transmission by interpreting a universal connection between matters and the evolutionary law of cultural transmission.^[1] Its core term, meme, was first mentioned in *The Selfish Gene*, derived from the mimicry of the gene and was created due to the similar morphology of Gene. While the gene is the basic unit of a cell, the meme is the basic unit of culture, and there are similarities between the inheritance of the former the imitation of the latter. In view of this, the study integrates the cultural factors of "gene" with its replicability and transmissibility into the teaching design of English public speaking based on the cognitive law presented by Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. It aims to improve the learning effects and provide references for teaching reforms.

2. Memetics and language teaching

In the process of meme reproduction and transmission, language is an important bearer, or language itself is a kind of meme which is presented through phonology, vocabulary, syntax and discourse. In 2003, Professor He, Ziran studied the relationship between Memetics and social discourse, and analyzed language memes, pointing out that language is imitated by individuals and then replicated and spread among groups, similar to a "viral infection".^[2] According to Memetics, language memes are transmitted through four stages: assimilation, memorization, expression and transmission.^[3]

This is a great fit with Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives in terms of the cognitive stages of remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.^[4] The assimilation and memorization of language memes refers to the successful

entry of those linguistic symbols into the new individual memory system. In other words, from a language teaching perspective, new language forms are accessed and understood by learners. In this repetitive and reinforced language practice, language memes become more influential on the "host" and would be gradually internalized through cognitive activities such as "application, analysis, and evaluation". Finally, the language memes are extracted and appropriately "altered or created" to enter the external world where they can be perceived and received by others, spreading from one host to more hosts. Thus language communication takes place in a more acceptable and unified way.

The three-dimensional relationship between memetics, language and culture, and the educational objectives helps teachers better practice the output hypothesis, namely comprehensible output proposed by Swain in EFL teaching. Chinese Professor Wen also pointed out that this output practice is the key to language acquisition, in which learners constantly check the grammar and vocabulary of the target language involving accuracy and appropriateness, and develop their autonomous language learning.^[5]

3. Memetics and English public speaking

The National Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) published by the Ministry of Education clearly states that education should "adapt to the requirements of the country's economic and social opening to the outside world, and cultivate a large number of international talents who have a global perspective with a good understanding of international rules, and can participate in international affairs and competitions". The language and cultural competence required for English speechmaking is in line with the characteristics of such international talents. "English public speaking class is a special course that integrates the language skills of

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listening, speaking, reading, writing, and watching, and turns out to be effective in motivating students to practice speaking, enhancing their confidence in public speaking, and improving their oral skills. Which has been proven by many scholars.^{[6][7][8]} The ability to think logically and creatively in public speaking is also a dimension that English education in China's universities has begun to focus on in recent years.^[9] From a linguistic and cultural perspective, the replicability and transmittability of language memes provide new views for English public speaking teaching. Memetic theory confirms the importance of recitation, as repeated memorization allows language memes to be deeply stored in the host's cognitive system, and through reorganization and construction, they can be transmitted in different ways, so that scientific imitation and recitation can greatly improve the learning of various language modules including phonological intonation, grammatical and syntactical structure, as well as vocabulary.^{[10][11][12]} These research foundations provide the basis for continuous improvement in the teaching design of English public speaking course.

Memetic research on English speech class is becoming more and more fulfilled, but there is still a potential need for in-depth exploration of teaching strategies to help students identify and practice language memes. This paper, based on one-semester English speech class, focuses on certain teaching units and analyzes the acquisition process of language memes, guided by Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. The study aims to build an instructional design for English public speaking class which provides students with an independent and active learning path driven by "language memes".

4. Instructional design guided by Memetic theory

According to Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the cognitive processes from lower to higher level are: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Under this guidance, the English speech instruction based on Memetic theory aims to help students identify, understand, and memorize high-quality speech language memes, and further create new ones for speechmaking. In this process, critical thinking activities are particularly necessary for students to analyze and evaluate the appropriateness of language, which develops students' metalinguistic competence and advances their cognitive training. The natural transmission of language memes occurs in the following dimensions: education and knowledge, use of language and information exchange. This has inspired the author with more than 10 years of teaching experience in English public speaking, to practice one-semester teaching design consisting of the following three parts:

4.1 Understanding language memes in speeches

Language memes first need to be noticed, understood and accepted by the host.^[13] In English speech class, teachers should guide students to identify quality language memes based on the communicative goals of the speech, and then help them remember and understand them. For example, Stephen Lucas lists four communicative goals for speech introduction ^[14] in his textbook *The Art of Speech*, shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Communicative goals and strategies at the speech introduction

Communicative goals	Specific Strategies
1. Attract the audience	Connecting the topic to the audience; clarifying the importance of the topic;
2. Build good relations	Being aware of cultural differences and showing good will
3. Build speaker's	Presenting professional qualifications or experiences
4. Preview the speech topic	Using transitional expressions

Considering the language quality and cultural significance, we selected the opening part of Yang Lan's speech Cultural Programs and the 2008 Olympic Games

to analyze the language memes and their corresponding communicative strategies to help construct semantic coherence within the speech, shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Communicative goals and language memes at the opening of Yang Lan's speech

Communicative goals and strategies	English language memes (words, phrases or sentences)
1. Attract the audience and stimulate interest (giving examples, telling stories)	For example (ancient football in China; Forbidden City; the Temple of Heaven, the Great Wall) ; So now you will probably understand why..... You are going to have a great time in Beijing. Many people are fascinated by Many people are fascinated by ; There are a lot more wonderful and exciting events waiting for you in...; Which will amaze you and delight you.
2. Build good relations with the audience (showing greetings)	
3. Build speaker's credibility (showing identity and qualifications)	Yang Lan's identity (a famous cultural ambassador)
4. Preview the speech topic (using transitions)	Before I introduce , let me tell you one thing first about.... ; Beyond all of that.....

Students identify, understand and remember the language memes, including words, phrases and sentences extracted from the opening part of Yang Lan's speech. This

relatively basic cognitive activity can be carried out in students' independent learning process before or after class, and teachers can give feedback in class to explain the

function of language memes and inspire students to find out more that students have missed. Discussions on these hidden memes are important since more advanced metacognitive activities in Bloom's taxonomy would be developed, because students might reflect on their autonomous learning and have a better understanding of what language memes are in English speeches.

4.2 Replicating language memes in speeches

The core of memetic theory lies in reproduction and transmission, so the role of memorization in English public speaking teaching plays a key role. However, unlike traditional "memorization" going on in a drilling and repetitive way, speech memes are more context-related and hosts are more active in identifying language memes and recreating new memetic patterns for communicative purposes. After analyzing and sorting memes out from quality speech input, teachers inspire students to use personal perceptual experience focusing on the parts of speech that fit the speech topic and then to practice recitation. This stage incorporates the educational objective of "analyzing" and lays the foundation for the higher cognitive mechanism of "applying and creating". Take Martin Luther King's speech *I have a dream* as an example, due to its historical and political features, it is challenging for students to recite the whole piece of speech, so teachers can pick up a number of paragraphs beginning with "I have a dream that " as replicable syntactical patterns. Firstly, students understand the content of each paragraph, and then discuss through group work to analyze the logical arrangement of dream concepts from large to small according to spatial dimension, say from "country" to "Georgia Red

Mountain", and then to "Georgia Red Mountain", "Georgia's Red Hills", then "Mississippi", and finally to "my home", all of which revolve around one core, namely "racial equality". This juxtaposition of sentences but progressive organization of the speech not only touches the audience deeply, but its inherent logic helps learners to understand and remember, and teachers can further inspire students to explore "What is my dream" and try to replicate similar sentences and rhetorical techniques.

Reproducing linguistic modalities is not simply mechanical recitation, but is a cognitive process of "understanding and analyzing". Students select and reorganize speech memes based on speech topics, into transitional structure or other functional parts such as speech introduction and conclusion for better communicative effects. In addition to the textbook, TED Talks and other public speech occasions provide good resources of speech memes that are "practical, update and quality".

4.3 Applying and creating language memes in speeches

After completing the first two stages, students have acquired a large amount of speech memes in forms of phrases and sentences. They further construct their own speeches, reaching for the cognitive process of "applying and creating" according to Bloom's Taxonomy. Taking an informative speech *Introducing my hometown* for an example, students apply the language memes at the introduction part of Yang Lan's speech in Table 2 and recreate their own sentences. A comparison of students' original independent script and imitative one is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Application and creation of speech memes

Original copy without relying on memes	Imitative copy based on memes
There are big mountains and the scenery is very beautiful. I believe that you will like them very much. My hometown is famous for traditional activities, such as dragon dance and parade in ancient costumes.	You are going to have a great time in my hometown XXX. Many people are fascinated by the beautiful mountainous scenery. There are a lot more wonderful and exciting events waiting for you, such as dragon dance and parade in ancient costumes which will amaze you and delight you.

It is obvious that imitative copy recreated by students turn out to be more accurate in language and richer in content, which has been challenging for Chinese students in EFL output practice who have spent years on grammar learning and reading comprehension. The quality speech memes provide students with precise linguist framework which can be fulfilled with personal stories and opinions. Compared with traditional way of making English speeches by totally independent thinking and writing, it is more effective to draw on language memes from quality speeches. With more efficient production, students are to become more motivated and confident. However this advanced cognitive process of "applying and creating" needs to be repetitively practice under the guidance of teachers so that students can develop an ability of detecting language memes which are fit for personal speeches. In addition, in-class group discussions and peer

assessment activities help to promote critical analysis and reflection on the use of speech memes.

5. Teaching effect and reflection

The one-semester experimental teaching practice has achieved remarkable effects but also requires further improvement in the following aspects:

5.1 Improved language competence

More than 90% of students in the final reflection report stated that by identifying and memorizing quality speech memes they were better at organizing thoughts with precise and vivid language. Easier handling of speech language made them feel less anxious about speaking in

public and spent more time on finding supporting materials for the speech content, involving examples, statistics or quotes. On the other hand, the repetitive and creative use of language memes in various speech tasks, including vocabulary, phrases and sentences, increased students' language practice and helped them improve oral skills. Moreover, students experienced constant revision and reflection and develop critical and creative thinking through teacher feedbacks and peer evaluations.

5.2 Enhanced communication awareness

A public speech is not a one-way language delivery, while it has to reach communicative effects, requiring the speaker to stick to his or her speech purpose throughout dynamic interaction. Students reflected that they had paid more attention to the functional parts of speeches, such as beginning and ending, transitional expressions, as well as other pragmatic use of language in making persuasion, description and clarification. Speech memes helped them accomplish these communicative purposes and realize how important these language memes are in making speeches more structured and organized. In autonomous learning period, students can find speech samples from reliable sources, such as TED Talks with a large amount of update themes covering a variety of subjects delivered by credible speakers mostly from English-native countries. It is no doubt that TED Talks would be one of qualified corpus for collections of speech memes. Driven by personal interests and motivation, students gradually develop autonomous learning abilities of making English speeches.

5.3 Further teaching reflections

Teaching for one semester is not sufficient to objectively and comprehensively prove the positive effects of Memetic theory on English public speaking teaching. This trial teaching approach needs to be further refined into every teaching unit and become part of curriculum design concerning teaching strategies. More investigation should go to the assessment link on how to evaluate students' use of speech memes in a multiple way. In pre-class and post-class assignments, how to supervise students remembering and understanding speech memes and how to give them timely feedback is also key points. Due to limited in-class teaching, students' independent learning of language memes needs to be developed, which may contribute to life-long English learning.

Students also pointed out in their reflection that it was more difficult to apply the language memes in impromptu speeches, Q&A sessions and debates which are highly critical and spontaneous. In light of this, more instructions should go to the students' internalized and comprehensive application of speech memes, which would be the topic for the later research with more scientific research methods.

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