

Teaching Strategy of Public Speaking and Debating to College Students within the Context of Nurturing Global Competence

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, the mission of higher education has expanded beyond knowledge dissemination to include the cultivation of globally competent citizens. For English majors, public speaking and debating are the ultimate application of their core studies. They transform passive analytical skills into active performance. This paper argues that courses in public speaking and debating, traditionally focused on rhetorical skill and persuasion, are uniquely positioned to serve as a critical platform for developing global competence. The paper begins by deconstructing the multifaceted construct of global competence, then critically examines the limitations of traditional public speaking and debating pedagogy, which often overemphasizes linguistic fluency and rhetorical technique at the expense of cross-cultural understanding, critical analysis of global issues, and ethical engagement. The core of the paper proposes a comprehensive pedagogical framework of four segments for transforming these courses. The conclusion posits that through this deliberate pedagogical recalibration, public speaking and debating courses can evolve from being mere training in eloquence into powerful, transformative experiences that equip students to engage, lead, and collaborate effectively in a diverse and complex global society.

KEYWORDS

Global competence; Public speaking; Debating; Cross-cultural communication; Critical thinking

1 Introduction

The 21st-century global landscape is characterized by unprecedented interconnectivity alongside profound challenges—climate change, geopolitical tensions, public health crises, and economic interdependence—that transcend national borders. In this context, the purpose of higher education is being redefined. It is no longer sufficient to produce graduates who are merely knowledgeable in their disciplines; there is an urgent need to cultivate global competence, equipping them with the capacity to navigate, understand, and act responsibly in a complex world. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines global competence as “the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development” (OECD, 2018, p. 4).

Within this educational paradigm shift, the disciplines of public speaking and debating hold immense, yet underutilized, potential. Traditionally, these courses have been cornerstones of liberal arts education, aiming to develop students' abilities in argument construction, persuasive delivery, and critical listening (Lucas, 2020). However, the conventional approach often operates within a monocultural or nation-centric framework. The “public” addressed is frequently imagined as a homogeneous, native-speaking audience, and the “debates” often revolve around domestic socio-political issues. This narrow focus fails to prepare students for the realities of cross-cultural interaction and global civic engagement.

This paper contends that public speaking and debating courses must be fundamentally reimagined to align with the imperative of nurturing global competence. By strategically integrating cross-cultural perspectives, global issues, and ethical considerations into their core fabric, these courses can transform from arenas of rhetorical performance into dynamic laboratories for global citizenship. This paper will first elaborate on the core dimensions of global competence and their implications for communication. It will then critique the current gaps in traditional pedagogy. The central contribution is a detailed, four-pillar framework for a transformed pedagogical strategy, encompassing objectives, content, methods, and assessment. The ultimate goal is to provide a roadmap for educators to leverage the power of oracy in developing the next generation of empathetic, critical, and effective global actors.

2 The dimensions of global competence and their communicative demands

Global competence is not a singular skill but a composite of interconnected knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Deconstructing this concept is essential to designing targeted pedagogical interventions. This paper adopts a synthesized model comprising four key dimensions, each of which places specific demands on public speaking and debating.

2.1 The ability to analyze global and intercultural issues critically

This dimension involves moving beyond a superficial understanding of world events to grasp their complexity, interconnectedness, and root causes. Students must learn to analyze issues like digital inequality, migration, or sustainable development from multiple disciplinary and geopolitical perspectives.

Communicative Demand: Speeches and arguments must be underpinned by rigorous, multi-source research that acknowledges the global dimensions of a topic. Students must learn to construct nuanced claims that reflect an understanding of systemic causes and transnational impacts, avoiding oversimplified or ethnocentric explanations.

2.2 The capacity to understand and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives

This goes beyond knowing about different customs; it involves cognitive empathy—the ability to “decenter” from one’s own worldview and understand how others see and interpret the world (Byram, 1997). This includes awareness of differing communication styles (e.g., high-context vs. low-context, direct vs. indirect), values, and social norms.

Communicative Demand: Effective communication requires audience analysis at a deep, cross-cultural level. A speaker must adapt their message, evidence, and delivery style to be persuasive and respectful to a culturally diverse audience. In debate, it involves recognizing that the very premises of an argument may be culturally contingent.

2.3 The skill to engage in open, appropriate, and effective interaction across cultures

This is the practical application of the previous dimension. It is the ability to manage communication in situations where misunderstandings are likely, to negotiate meaning, and to build relationships across cultural divides (Deardorff, 2006). It encompasses linguistic flexibility, behavioral adaptability, and the management of ambiguity.

Communicative Demand: This dimension is best developed through authentic or simulated interaction. It requires students to practice active listening, ask clarifying questions, and respond thoughtfully in real-time to unfamiliar or challenging viewpoints, moving beyond debate as a “war of words” toward dialogue and collaboration.

2.4 The disposition to act for collective well-being and sustainable development

This is the ethical and agentic component of global competence. It instills a sense of responsibility as a global citizen and the motivation to contribute positively to the world. It links critical understanding to ethical action.

Communicative Demand: The ultimate aim of speaking and debating becomes not just to win, but to inspire positive change. Speeches should move beyond critique to propose feasible, ethically-grounded solutions. Debates can be structured around designing collaborative action plans, fostering a mindset of shared problem-solving rather than mere opposition.

3 Limitations of traditional public speaking and debate pedagogy

Despite their potential, traditional approaches to teaching public speaking and debating often fall short of fostering these dimensions of global competence. Key limitations include:

3.1 Form over substance: the overemphasis on rhetorical technique

The pedagogical focus is frequently skewed toward the mechanics of delivery—vocal variety, eye contact, gesture—and the structural formula of arguments (e.g., the Toulmin model). While these are important, an exclusive focus can produce polished speakers who lack substantive, globally-informed content. The “what” is overshadowed by the “how.”

3.2 Culturally homogeneous content and context

Course materials, example speeches, and case studies are predominantly drawn from Western (often Anglo-American) contexts. The assigned topics tend to be nationally focused (e.g., U.S. healthcare policy, a U.K. domestic issue), failing to compel students to engage with transnational perspectives. The classroom itself is treated as a monocultural space, ignoring the diverse cultural backgrounds students may bring.

3.3 The Adversarial paradigm of debate

Traditional parliamentary or policy debate formats often reward aggressive refutation and the demolition of an opponent’s case. This can entrench a binary, “us-versus-them” mindset that is antithetical to the collaborative, bridge-

building ethos required for global competence (Wolvin, 2022). The goal becomes victory, not understanding.

3.4 Assessment focused on individual performance

Grading rubrics typically evaluate the individual speaker's language proficiency, organization, and delivery. They seldom include criteria for cross-cultural sensitivity, ethical reasoning, depth of global analysis, or the ability to collaborate effectively with diverse teammates, thereby failing to incentivize the development of these crucial competencies.

4 A four-segment pedagogical framework for global competence in public speaking and debating classrooms

To address these limitations of a traditional model, a systematic overhaul of pedagogy is required to better meet the challenges of the global competence requirements. The following framework outlines four interconnected strategic segments.

4.1 Restructuring learning objectives by integrating Chinese cultural elements

The overarching goal should be redefined as: To equip students to construct and deliver insightful, persuasive, and ethically-grounded oral arguments on global issues for diverse and cross-cultural audiences as well as domestic issues. This can be broken down into specific, measurable objectives:

In a cognitive aspect, students will be able to research and synthesize information from diverse international sources to construct a multi-perspective analysis of a global challenge. In a skill-based aspect, students will be able to adapt their verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to enhance clarity and persuasiveness for a specified non-native or international audience. Also students will demonstrate empathy and openness when engaging with perspectives that conflict with their own, managing disagreement constructively. Students will design and present communication that proposes actionable, sustainable, and collaborative solutions to global problems.

However no English teaching would be successful with integrating the Chinese cultural elements which are the root of our students. To better meet global challenges, students must adhere to our own cultural backgrounds. Here the author would like to mention a structured framework for integrating Chinese cultural elements into English public speaking and debating courses, designed to foster cultural confidence and global communication competence. Curriculum content will be redesigned around themes such as "Benevolent Governance and Modern Governance" and "Harmony in Diversity and Civilizational Coexistence." The ecological wisdom of "Harmony Between Humanity and Nature" will be integrated into climate change debates, while the vision of a "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" will be employed to deconstruct geopolitical issues.

The key objective is to revitalize the contemporary value of traditional wisdom. For an example: students will be guided to apply the "Doctrine of the moderation" to deconstruct extremism and reflect on international relations principles through the lens of "Do Not Impose on Others What You Yourself Do Not Desire." Philosophical perspectives such as "Following the Way of Nature" will be introduced in debates on technology ethics, while the ecological wisdom of "Harmony Between Humanity and Nature" will inform discussions on sustainable development. In this way, traditional culture becomes an intellectual resource for addressing modern challenges. Through comparative analysis of Eastern and Western governance philosophies, students will develop cross-cultural critical thinking skills.

4.2 Integrating globally significant and intercultural content

The curriculum must be deliberately internationalized. The course contents should be structured around modules focused on pressing global issues such as "The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence," "Climate Justice and the Global South," "The Future of Global Public Health". Examples should be diverse. Such as analyzing speeches by global leaders like Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai, or Ban Ki-moon, paying close attention to their use of culturally-specific narratives and values to appeal to a universal audience.

On Sept 10, 2025, the American political activist Charlie Kirk was assassinated and it shocked the whole world. The author quickly seized the opportunity to introduce this real-world, controversial scenario to class which requires careful pedagogical handling to ensure the discussion remains productive, educational, and safe for all students.

The instructor's primary role is to act as a facilitator of critical thinking, not a commentator on the individual. We begin the discussion with guided questions that focus on the ecosystem of extremism: "What societal conditions can lead an individual to believe political violence is justified"? "How does dehumanizing language in media or online platforms contribute to a climate where violence seems acceptable"? and "What are the warning signs of radicalization that

communities can look for”? This approach depersonalizes the issue, making it a lesson on media literacy, rhetorical analysis, and social psychology, rather than a debate about the figure himself.

Following this foundation, the class conducted a formal debate around a carefully worded motion that shifts focus from the specific event to the underlying principles. A proposition like, “This House Believes that Highly Polarized Political Rhetoric is a Direct Threat to Social Stability” is highly effective. This forces students to research and present evidence on the links between language, political polarization, and real-world violence, using the hypothetical scenario as one potential case study among others. To ensure a balanced and respectful environment, establish and enforce clear ground rules: arguments must be evidence-based, personal attacks are forbidden, and the humanity of all people must be respected. Conclude the session with a reflective debrief, asking students to consider potential solutions. Pose questions like, “What responsibilities do political leaders, media outlets, and social media platforms have in cooling rhetoric”? and “How can individuals engage in political discourse without contributing to further polarization”? This final step is essential, as it moves students from identifying the problem towards envisioning constructive solutions, empowering them to be agents of thoughtful dialogue rather than passive observers of division. And students all have positive feedbacks on this live content, saying their global competence has been greatly enhanced.

4.3 Implementing experiential and collaborative teaching methodologies

Another important issue is the teaching methodologies to be adopted in a global context classroom. We need to move beyond the teacher-centered model to create immersive, interactive learning experiences. Preferably a task-based approach should be employed to task student groups with a complex, real-world problem (e.g., “Develop a campaign to reduce single-use plastics on campus and in the local community”). The final deliverable is a collaborative presentation to a panel of “stakeholders,” requiring them to integrate scientific, economic, and cultural arguments. Also we need to heed the importance of technology.

One approach is to adopt the technology-enhanced virtual exchange approach: to partner with a university in another country to create a “globally networked classroom” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011). This approach has been adopted in Zhaoqing University among Japanese language majors when they cooperate a discussion on line with a Japanese sister university. Students can collaborate on projects or engage in structured debates via video conferencing platforms, providing firsthand experience in navigating time zones, accents, and different communication norms.

Other possible methodologies include simulated international forums: such as model the United Nations, the World Economic Forum, or international climate negotiations. Students are assigned to represent different countries, requiring them to research and advocate from that nation's perspective, often defending positions contrary to their personal beliefs. This is a powerful exercise in cognitive empathy and multi-perspective analysis. Thanks to the development of AI and computer sciences, the channels are much easily accessible nowadays as long as the teacher is willing to prepare and motivate the students in the process.

4.4 Designing multi-dimensional and process-oriented assessment

A multi-dimensional and process-oriented assessment framework moves beyond simply evaluating the final speech or debate performance to create a holistic profile of student growth. This requires developing rubrics that assess not only the traditional pillars of public speaking—content, structure, and delivery—but also incorporate critical dimensions like critical thinking, audience adaptation, and reflective practice.

For instance, a debating assessment might separately score a student's research quality, their use of evidence during refutation, their listening and note-taking skills during the opponent's speech, and their ethical and respectful engagement. This multi-faceted approach provides a more accurate and fair evaluation by recognizing that effective communication is a composite of diverse, interdependent skills, and it values the intellectual labor behind the performance as much as the performance itself.

To effectively capture the journey of learning, this model must be fundamentally process-oriented. This involves implementing a continuous assessment cycle that includes low-stakes, formative tasks long before the high-stakes, final presentation. Key components are a process-portfolio containing outlines, multiple drafts of speeches, and annotated research; structured peer feedback sessions that train students to give and receive constructive criticism; and guided self-reflection memos where students analyze their own strengths and areas for improvement. This shift from a singular judgment to an ongoing dialogue about development reduces performance anxiety, encourages pedagogical risk-taking, and empowers students to become self-regulated, lifelong learners of communication.

5 Conclusion

The challenges and opportunities of the 21st century demand a new kind of graduate—one who is not only a skilled communicator but also an informed, empathetic, and responsible global citizen. The traditional public speaking and debating classroom, with its narrow focus on rhetorical prowess within a monocultural frame, is ill-equipped to meet this demand. However, as this paper has argued, these courses possess an inherent structural affinity with the goals of global competence education.

By deliberately and systematically implementing a framework that restructures learning objectives, internationalizes content, embraces experiential methodologies, and reforms assessment, educators can transform these courses into powerful engines for global learning. This transformation requires a shift in the instructor's role from a coach of technique to a facilitator of global dialogue and critical inquiry. The recalibrated public speaking and debating course becomes a microcosm of the global public sphere—a space where students learn to navigate difference, articulate complex ideas, listen across divides, and use their voices not merely to persuade, but to understand, to connect, and to contribute to a more just and sustainable world. This is not a marginal improvement but a necessary evolution, aligning the ancient art of rhetoric with the urgent needs of our time.

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