Teaching Public Speaking Over the Decades
A Literature Review from the 1930’s to the 2000’s

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Author Information:
Public speaking has always been both a professional and personal interest of mine. My interest began in elementary school with my parents playing cassette tapes of great speakers during long road trips. Those speakers inspired me through their words and I in turn began to desire to inspire others through speech. In high school, I pursued speaking through joining the forensics team in the category of extemporaneous speaking and qualified for nationals twice. Seeing the necessity of effective communication in a military career, I continued to refine my speaking and communication skills and now have the privilege to teach public speaking at the United States Military Academy.

After teaching public speaking for several semesters, I was curious what historically has been taught on the subject. Just as there have been cultural changes in America over the past decades, it would stand to reason that the evaluation of what is considered proficient public speaking would change as well. Therefore, I decided to conduct a literature review in hopes of finding treasures of the past to apply to my current public speaking curriculum and to provide insight on how public speaking has changed or stayed the same.

Topic Overview

This literature review conducts a preliminary overview of teaching public speaking from the 1920s to 2000s. One book was selected to represent each decade and analyzed for trends. While one data point per decade precludes definitive conclusions, it does provide a glimpse into how public speaking has changed and remained the same throughout the 20th century and slightly beyond. Further, it is a basis to determine what may or may warrant further study. The following relates the trends that I found throughout the decades.

The concept of “voice” was interesting to see moving throughout the past. It seemed to be incredibly important in the 1920s and diminished throughout the 30s and 40s. It then resurfaced slightly in the 1960s and 1980s and now no significant mention of a speaker’s voice was mentioned in the books representing the last two decades. Mostly, what is covered is under the concept of “voice” is pronunciation and strength of voice. I would offer the hypothesis that voice may not be as important the more recent you move through the literature because of the pervasiveness of modern voice amplification technology . . . primarily microphones. In the past, a speaker was required without aid to project their voice across large audiences.

Nonverbal communication is sporadic from our 1920 selection until the 1990s. It appears in books representing the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, and then skips two decades and comes back consistently over the last 20 years. Topics consisting of gestures, body position & stance, as well as appearance are discussed. Recent communication research (within the past 20-30 years) has substantiated that the vast majority of communication in non-verbal rather than verbal.
Consequently, the discovery of this fact may be a contributor of it appearing in our later books consistently. Prior to the science proving the importance of nonverbal communication, people may have only intuitively realized the impact while others did not and accordingly omitted the discussion.

One interesting pattern I found that may indicate a cultural anomaly within public speaking was the specific mention of parliamentary procedure. The books representing the 1960s and 1970s both make it a point to discuss this. No other book referenced it in any significant manner. It reminds me of the concept of oral communication around the time of Cicero during the Roman Republic. People were interested in public speaking as a means of influence in the public arena . . . specifically in politics and their aspirations to be politically influential. This may indicate a cultural attitude in the 1960s and 1970s that was similar. Perhaps, Americans during this time period connected public speaking with government and politics as the main utilization of public sparking and therefore it was necessary to incorporate into these books.

Another indicator of a potential cultural shift and technological development is the appearance of addressing audiovisual needs beginning in the 1980s. None of our selections prior to the 1980s mentions the incorporation and/or addressing of how to use audiovisual aids in their writings. While there were technological devices utilized in public speaking prior to the 1980s, it wasn’t until the ‘80s that they were widely available and used extensively by all levels of society.

One surprise I found was a lack of extensively addressing the mechanics of constructing a speech. This speech construction concept references a focus of walking a reader through creating a speech and offering very detailed recommendations on how to do this. In fact, only three of our selections incorporated this as a significant part of their writings. It appeared in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. No definitive conclusions can be drawn from this of course and I struggle with even proposing a hypothesis. The most I can offer is that perhaps these books represent not basic public speaking techniques but more advanced ones. In other words, people who are and will be content with operating at the basic skill level would not purchase books on public speaking. However, those people who self-educate and are serious about improving their basic skills would purchase books to improve. Therefore, most authors may not have felt a need to place much emphasis on the basics.

Overall, the trends across many decades of public speaking just seem to indicate a general fluctuation in their importance and the time allocated to each. However, one concept seems to have taken importance across the decades and is a focus within all of these books. That concept is considering a speaker’s audience when creating a speech. All of these selections make significant mention of audience analysis and working your speech to insure an audience responds and understands. The manners and techniques fluctuate slightly, but the underlying fundamental that the audience is a key component remains consistent.

In conducting this review, several ideas to incorporate into my public speaking class have come to mind. One of those is the concept of a speaker’s voice. There can be a lot of benefits of this to a military officer. This is especially so because often an officer does not have a voice amplifier available and therefore needs to work on their voice projection and strength. Another aspect is possibly increasing the focus on nonverbal communication. I think I can incorporate this to a greater extent. Perhaps I could even dedicate one speech to really have the cadets think and work through nonverbal communication – whether it is with gestures, body position, or facial expression.
This has been a great exercise to review many experts’ thoughts on teaching public speaking. What has been especially enlightening is the historical context to see how public speaking has been looked at across the centuries.

**Annotated Bibliography**

1920’s
This is a more unusual book on public speaking. Almost 50% of the book deals purely with a speaker’s voice. The topics on voice include breathing, pronunciation (vowels and consonants), voice quality, pitch (inflection and registers), force of voice as well as rates and pauses in speech. The other half of the book is split evenly between physical gestures and the construction of a speech.

1930’s
Carnegie’s book is primarily focused on the practical side of public speaking. He is teaching a skill rather than presenting a study of the subject. This aligns with his biography and success story. Topics covered in his book are self-confidence, getting and maintaining an audience’s attention, and one chapter (out of 16) on diction. He also includes three famous speeches/stories: Acres of Diamonds, A Message to Garcia, and As a Man Thinketh.

1940’s
This book was written by an academic, but for popular audiences. It is filled with anecdotal evidence from the best speakers of the day in order to convey speaking principles rather than focusing purely on technique and academic theory. Topics include: leadership through speaking, persuading an audience, keeping an audience interested, a chapter on voice, and non-verbal communication.

1950’s
This book focuses in great detail on the mechanics and the step by step process of writing a speech. It talks about writing an outline, focusing on your audience, thinking verbally vs. written communication, presents a variety of techniques of spicing up a talk. These spices include: dramatizing, conversations, stories, and variety. He also advocates revising and getting more specific and concise when speaking.

1960’s
Soper writes briefly about the whole gambit of speaking topics . . . but not in depth on very much. He begins with generalities and fundamental principles. He then covers research in various forms, one short chapter on non-verbal communication, and two chapters on voice and pronunciation. Following these he writes about different types of speeches as well as being persuasive. Lastly, he includes practical helps for his readers. These include: microphone speaking, parliamentary procedure and speeches for practice.

1970’s  
Orvin begins with helping the reader overcome stage fright. He then goes into how to research and perhaps more importantly, how to incorporate it most effectively into a speech. Following this, he briefly discusses audience analysis and delivery techniques. Finally he writes about speeches for particular occasions as well as a discussion on parliamentary procedure.

1980’s  
This book seems a little like a bridge book. For instance, the authors include a substantial section on voice mechanics . . . which is reminiscent of some of our earliest books chronologically. The three chapters covering these include the topics of vocal vitality, articulation, and solving problems concerning your voice. This book also includes chapters seeming discussing more modern topics such as being creative and ensuring you are not upstaged by your audio/visual aids. In addition to these above, the authors write about the mechanics of putting a speech together as well as walking the reader through a speaking engagement.

1990’s  
This book is primarily focused on two things: the audience and effectiveness. Everything that is covered is presented in light of these two concepts. Under the umbrella of audience she writes about customizing a speech to particular audiences, motivating an audience, and building rapport with the audience. Supporting the concept of effectiveness are the topics of presenting material in a memorable manner, editing material for its best effect, and non-verbal hints on speaking.

2000’s  
Humes’ book is a similar concept to Lee’s book in the 1940s. It is written for a popular audience and is based on anecdotal evidence from famous historical examples. Humes’ is very practical and straight forward in his assessments and recommendations. Much of his book is based on not conforming to tradition and offers specific techniques to make a speaker stand out in positive and professional ways. Some concepts are: pauses, story-telling, not over relying on audio/visual, and focusing on a theme.

In this book the authors seem to focus on a speaker’s audience and the persuasion of that audience. They discuss audience analysis in the traditional sense as well as across cultures. Further, topics such as structuring a speech for an audience and using language underpin this assertion. The authors present three chapters on persuasion topics. These include: general persuasive strategies, proposing and pitching, and developing leadership through speaking.

**References**


