

HYBRID MODELS OF TEACHING PUBLIC SPEAKING IN ENGLISH IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract. *The scientific work discusses the impact of hybrid models of teaching on the enhancement of English public speaking skills in higher language education in Republic of Azerbaijan. The study examines the disparity between undergraduate students' robust theoretical language proficiency and their constrained capacity to communicate smoothly and confidently in practical academic and professional settings. The work highlights significant methodological, psychological, and organizational obstacles that can impede successful public speaking instruction based on contemporary teaching and learning practices. An investigation also covers various hybrid teaching models, such as station rotation model, flipped classroom model, and project-based learning (PBL), emphasizing how the incorporation of online and in-person forms improves public speaking practice, alleviates stress and anxiety levels, and boosts student engagement. The particular emphasis is placed on the multilingual environment of Azerbaijani undergraduate students, in which the interference from Azerbaijani or Russian influences English public speech creation. Interestingly, the findings indicate that hybrid learning enhances options for personalized and repeated practice via asynchronous activities, whilst maintaining crucial aspects of live interaction and spontaneity during in-class oral presentations. At the same time, the scientific work acknowledges significant limitations, including disparities in access to digital resources and differing levels of digital literacy among the undergraduate students.*

Key words: *hybrid learning, public speaking, English language teaching, higher education, undergraduate students, station rotation model, flipped classroom, project-based learning*

Introduction

Recently, there have been notable changes in the higher language education of Republic of Azerbaijan. The traditional teaching methods that have long been utilized in teaching and learning context among foreign language teachers, linguists, and interpreters [Harmer, 2015] are being replaced by more adaptable, technology-driven, and practical communication-focused methodologies. This transition is especially prominent in the realm of spoken foreign language instruction, specifically in the context of English public speaking. On a daily basis, language students, studying at various universities in Azerbaijan, including Baku State University, Khazar University, and Azerbaijan University of Languages can encounter a seemingly straightforward challenge – to confidently and effectively deliver academic speeches in front of a broad audience. However, beneath this apparent simplicity, a complex web of methodological, psychological, and organizational issues remains hidden.

The significance of hybrid learning in the realm of the English language teaching for non-native speakers is driven by multiple interconnected factors. One such factor is

the persistent lack of dedicated class time for practicing oral communication skills. Curriculum emphasis on grammar, translation, reading, writing, and listening [Renau, 2016] often leaves limited opportunities for actual speaking practice. Additionally, there exists a widening disparity between the educational expectations placed on undergraduate students and practical demands of the professional world. Employers increasingly prioritize graduates' ability to effectively communicate in English, such as presenting at local or international conferences, engaging in discussions, debates, seminars, round tables, and delivering public speeches, over mere knowledge of theoretical language rules. Finally, the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has demonstrated that online educational formats are not only feasible but in certain respects more efficient than traditional in-person methods [Tarkar, 2020]. Undergraduate students have acquired new skills, such as utilizing online collaborative platforms or providing online feedback to a certain issue. The focus now lies not on the necessity of digital resources but on effectively incorporating them into the instruction of public speaking while preserving essential elements, such as live interaction and spontaneity.

The emergence of hybrid models involves more than a mere blend of online and offline elements; it requires a strategic integration of the advantages of each format. In the context of public speaking, this entails conducting preparatory activities, such as pronunciation practice, argument structuring, and self-reflection through recording, asynchronously in a digital setting, while the crucial aspects of an actual live performance before an audience are retained in a face-to-face setting. This division enables a significant augmentation of speech practice, alleviates undergraduate students' apprehension, and fosters an environment conducive to profound contemplation. Besides, the scientific novelty of the work is its pioneering effort to methodically outline hybrid approaches for instructing English public speaking context of higher language education in Republic of Azerbaijan. What is more, the practical importance of the work stems from the potential for its content to be applied directly by English language teachers in higher education settings, particularly in designing curricula for courses, which focus on oral, intercultural communication, rhetoric and stylistics, teaching and learning, educational management, Business English, and other subjects associated with public speaking phenomenon.

Main Body

Undergraduate students who have experienced delivering a prepared speech to a broad audience understand the distinction between possessing theoretical language knowledge and being able to speak fluently, persuasively, and confidently. This disparity becomes particularly apparent in the language education practices in Republic of Azerbaijan, particularly during the instruction of public speaking skills. Undergraduate students in the language faculties from various universities in the country, such as Baku State University, Khazar University, and Azerbaijan University of Languages can consistently demonstrate notable achievements in written examinations, academic writing tasks, and translation assignments per academic semester. However, when faced with the challenge of delivering impromptu or "unplanned" speech [Zeynalova & Allahverdiyeva, 2017, p. 97] in a group setting, they experience the emergence of internal inhibitions and obstacles. Interestingly, the development of oral communication skills in future foreign language instructors, educational managers, philologists, and translators presents distinct characteristics that

set this group of students apart from those in non-linguistic disciplines. One key aspect is their heightened level of linguistic introspection [Gibbs Jr, 2006], as language undergraduate students possess a keen awareness of their mistakes and demonstrate proclivity towards perfectionism. Other than that, the breadth of the vocabulary utilized by the future educators and translators should be of a specialized nature, encompassing academic and professional terminology across various styles rather than merely common language. Furthermore, public speaking in English transcends a mere educational task, instead serving as a prototype of future professional endeavors, such as lecturing, presenting research results at local or international conferences, workshops, or working as simultaneous interpreters.

A review of the current instructional methods employed in higher language education in Azerbaijan reveals a predominant reliance on scripted monologues. Under this traditional approach, undergraduate students are assigned a topic, craft a written response outside of class, commit it to memory or closely paraphrase it, and deliver it orally. Whilst this methodology enhances memory retention and the organization of information, it minimally addresses critical attributes, such as adaptability, versatility, and responsiveness to an audience. Moreover, the socio-cultural context of Azerbaijan should not be overlooked. Within the indigenous communicative practices, delivering monological speeches in the mother tongue adheres to distinct rhetorical and stylistic standards characterized by heightened emotions, frequent repetitions, and direct messages to the listeners. When these familiar patterns are translated into the English-language speech, interference can occur, and undergraduate students may either speak English structurally in Azerbaijani, which can sound unnatural to a native speaker, or, on the contrary, they become excessively restrained, fearing to violate the norms of English rhetoric and stylistics. It must be mentioned that English proficiency levels among undergraduate students in language faculties can vary significantly, with the graduates from specialized lyceums and gymnasiums, typically demonstrating a B2-C1 proficiency level of English; however, conversely, learners who have attended public schools can often commence their studies at a B1 level of English [CEFR, 2001]. Taking this situation into consideration, among undergraduate students of language faculties, there are high-achieving students who may feel apprehensive about making mistakes in front of less proficient peers, as well as students with certain language knowledge gaps who may be hesitant to present a material in front of more advanced individuals. Such anxieties are further heightened during public speaking, and a potential solution could involve a hybrid approach that incorporates various work formats to cater to undergraduate students with different English proficiency levels.

The issue of motivation can also be considered as a crucial aspect that should not be neglected. Numerous undergraduate students in language faculties perceive public speaking in English as an academic exercise that can be disconnected from real life. To illustrate, the success of a future foreign language teacher depends on their ability to engage their audience (i.e., students) during the English lessons, as well as lectures and seminars, as it determines whether students will stay attentive or become disengaged. It is the responsibility of teaching methodology to demonstrate the link between academic tasks and real-world professional demands, with hybrid teaching and learning approaches potentially serving as a pivotal tool in bridging this gap. Nonetheless, in the higher language education landscape of Azerbaijan, a noteworthy factor is the prevalence of multilingualism [Ismailova, 2025]. The majority of undergraduate

students, apart from being fluent in both Azerbaijani and English, also possess varying degrees of proficiency in Russian or Turkish. Consequently, instances of interlanguage interference mistakes can be observed to be increasingly varied, with such manifestations as transference of Azerbaijani grammatical structures into English and blending of Russian word formations.

The concept of hybridity suggests that “students can plan their learning more effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with faculty and fellow students both face-to-face and in cyberspace” [Mossavar-Rahmani & Larson-Daugherty, 2007, p.70]. Traditional in-person classroom settings offer real-time, face-to-face interactions, immediate feedback from both teacher and peers, and also the opportunity to determine audience reception. However, such settings can be constrained by time limitations, inadequacies in affording every undergraduate student ample ordinary or public speaking opportunities for comprehensive skill refinement, and can be hindered by the pressure associated with public speaking in a formal setting. Conversely, online platforms can facilitate self-recording, external self-assessment, delayed feedback reception, self-placed learning, and the ability to review various class recordings repeatedly [Amin & Paiman, 2022]. Nevertheless, online formats present challenges, such as limited personal engagement, diminished accountability due to the ease of disengaging or becoming distracted, and a notably absent authentic audience crucial for honing public speaking skills, which deprives undergraduate students of responses that are vital for improvement.

As a matter of fact, it is important to understand that there are several types of hybridity, and not all of them are equally productive for developing public speaking skills. The initial type is known as *station rotation model* where “students can study part of the material or complete assignments online and then meet in regular classroom setting for discussions, practical exercises, or other learning activities” [Yukhymenko et al., 2024, p. 187]. For instance, one group of students can present short oral presentations to the teacher and a selected audience, while another group of students can participate in online tasks, such as recording such oral performances, analyzing them based on the specific rubric, engaging in interactive pronunciation exercises, or completing self-assessment checklists. Other than that, the station rotational model has been implemented at Azerbaijan University of Languages. In this model, during “*English Language Skills*” class, second-year undergraduate students in the Faculty of English and German Languages were divided into two groups and were delivering five-minute public speeches on a selected topic in the auditorium, whereas another group worked simultaneously via *Zoom* platform, recording video responses on the same topics. Those responses were then shared for peer review, and undergraduate students appreciated the online format for its ability to allow for multiple re-recordings, which helped reduce performance anxiety and enhance the quality of oral responses during in-person sessions. As a result, second-year undergraduate students were better prepared for offline oral presentations.

The second type is known as *flipped classroom model*. This model allows teachers to focus more on classroom activities and address any issues that arise, and it enables success in overcrowded classrooms [Yildirim & Kiray, 2016]. The logic of this type is that theoretical material or preparatory exercises are transferred to an online environment for self-study at home. Undergraduate students can, for example, engage with video lectures, covering such topics as the history of public speaking, its structure,

various argumentation strategies, and methods to captivate an audience. They participate in interactive activities aimed at identifying stylistic or rhetoric devices, practicing pronunciation of specific phonemes, and developing intonation patterns through speech recognition software (e.g., *Babbel*, *ELSA*, *Andy English*). Besides, during in-person sessions, the focus is on the practical application of an assigned material, live performance, immediate error correction, and improvisation. Class time is dedicated to hands-on activities rather than direct instruction of a particular material that can be self-taught, thereby increasing opportunities for practical engagement with the audience [Arends, 2012]. Apart from that, it is crucial to underscore that the hybrid model extends beyond platform selection. The focus is not on specific software, such as *Zoom* or *MS Teams*, nor is it focused on platforms, such as *Blackboard Collaborate* or *Google Classroom*. Rather, it pertains to fundamental principles, guiding organizing of meaningful interactions.

The station rotation or flipped classroom model addresses the coordination of both online and offline interactions in terms of time and location, whilst ***project-based learning (PBL)*** focuses on the organization of student content and motivation. According to Larmer & Mergendoller (2010), a project is meaningful when it meets two requirements. To succeed, students must see their work as personally meaningful and a worthwhile endeavor. Additionally, a meaningful project serves an instructional purpose, and well-designed and well-implemented PBL is beneficial in both ways. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather serve to supplement each other, and hybrid format is well-suited for the execution of language projects, particularly those that involve public speaking. For instance, undergraduate students can form small groups to select a topic of societal importance and develop a 10-minute public speech. This process includes utilizing online platforms for discussing and sharing materials, recording initial versions of their written document (e.g., in *Google Docs*), and scrutinizing presentations of different speakers. The subsequent offline phase culminates in a live, real-time oral group presentation, incorporating the elements of spontaneous speaking and responding to questions by audience. Likewise, each undergraduate student can individually conduct an interview with an experienced orator, scholar, or teacher whether in Azerbaijan or worldwide, whether online or in person, and subsequently, delivers and records an oral presentation on the interviewee's perceptions on public speaking in our modern era. Additionally, in project-based learning, the act of communication no longer serves merely as a teaching activity directed towards the teacher. It is transformed into a means to accomplish a tangible objective, namely to persuade, educate, motivate, or receive input from an audience, such as fellow students or guest professionals.

When it comes to the benefits of hybrid models of teaching public speaking, the first and foremost benefit is a ***significant enhancement in opportunities for public speech practice***. In a traditional auditorium setting, during a 90-minute lecture or seminar with a group of 15-18 undergraduate students, each of them typically can speak for no more than 5-7 minutes, which includes brief responses to posed questions. This duration is insufficient for the development of public speaking skills. By contrast, the hybrid models of teaching enable the transition of some sessions to an asynchronous online platform. Here, the undergraduate student records his/her speech at home, reviews and highlights strong sides and areas to improve, and consequently, gains 15-20 minutes of active speech practice outside the classroom, alongside an additional 5-7

minutes of in-person presentation. Furthermore, the quality of the practice is also elevated, as undergraduate students can refine unsuccessful segments at home before delivering a polished version in the auditorium.

Another benefit pertains to *alleviation of stress and anxiety*. Delivering public speeches in a foreign language is commonly considered one of the most anxiety-inducing teaching and learning tasks [Chanwimalueang et al., 2016]. Within a traditional auditorium setting, the apprehension of potential embarrassment in front of peers often impedes even well-prepared students. However, the process of asynchronously recording speeches at home mitigates such kind of anxiety. The absence of interruption or real-time evaluation provides a safe space for undergraduate students to make mistakes, stumble over the lexis, and starting over without severe judgement. Through repeated practice sessions in such a conducive learning environment, undergraduate students acclimate to the act of speaking on camera, resulting in decreased stress level by the time they engage in face-to-face oral presentations.

Nonetheless, it would be unjust to solely enumerate the benefits of hybrid models of teaching public speaking, and it is equally important to acknowledge the constraints of the hybrid format. The first and significant constraint is *lack of access to the necessary technical resources and infrastructure*. For example, in certain regions of Azerbaijan, there is inadequate availability of consistent broadband Internet services. Undergraduate students who reside in remote areas, such as in Ganja, Shaki, Lankaran, Astara, as well as the villages of Zardab or Tovuz regions, often have to rely on mobile Internet, which frequently does not meet the desired quality standards. Engaging in such activities as uploading a video for a public speech sample, recording and submitting students' public speeches, or participating in real-time online discussion boards necessitates a dependable Internet connection. Moreover, the situation becomes unjust when an undergraduate student is unable to participate in online teaching and learning activities not due to the laziness but due to the prolonged connectivity issues. To address this issue, instructors who utilize hybrid teaching approach should proactively assess the technical capabilities of their students and develop alternative activities for those who unable to fully participate in online ones.

The second constraint pertains to *levels of proficiency in terms of utilizing digital tools and digital literacy*. Interestingly, the “digital generation” of students who are expected to have a strong affection for the Internet [Donnison, 2004] may struggle with using video recording and speech analysis tools. While they are accustomed to passively engaging with the digital content, such as liking, sharing, commenting, or watching short videos on Instagram or TikTok, creating an educational video and reflecting on it via online discussion boards requires various skills. Besides, when transitioning to a hybrid learning model, undergraduate students can often experience a “technical shock” phase where they find it challenging to deal with certain technical aspects and express that public speaking in class is easier, thus overcoming such barrier necessitates patience and a brief overview of technical aspects of the issue.

Conclusion

To sum up, the need for hybrid models of teaching to develop public speaking skills in English in Azerbaijani higher language education context was initially prompted by questioning the reasons behind it. The significance of this problem formed the basis of the entire scientific work. Undergraduate students in language faculties are not merely those who only scrutinize a new language; they are future professionals in

the fields of foreign language teaching, philology, and translation studies. Proficiency in grammar, translation, and vocabulary use alone can be insufficient for such occupations, and effective public speaking requires such skills as involving the audience or handling unexpected questions. The traditional teaching methods are inadequate in preparing undergraduate students in such aspects, not because they are ineffective but because they were designed for various circumstances and time constraints in the auditorium. Other than that, different hybrid models of teaching, including station rotation model, flipped classroom model, and project-based learning (PBL) have their unique characteristics and applications. The main point to take away from this analysis is that hybridity involves the reorganization of time and types of activities. Finally, a thorough examination was conducted to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the hybrid models of teaching to develop public speaking skills.

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