

Divergence and Convergence of Speech Education between China and the United States from the Perspective of University General Education

Ruya Niu*, Yongkang Zhao

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, Zhengzhou 450046, Henan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract

Marked disparities exist between China and the United States in both the connotation and extension of speech education. From the perspective of university general education, an in-depth examination of the origins of divergence, the variations in practice, and the pathways toward integration holds both theoretical and practical significance. The fundamental sources of divergence lie in distinct cultural genes, collectivism versus individualism; political traditions, literary remonstrance versus civic debate; and educational philosophies, moral orientation versus pragmatism. These underlying contrasts have resulted in systematic differences across multiple dimensions, including educational philosophy and objectives, instructional content and models, and assessment systems and standards. By advancing the transition from skill transmission to literacy integration, pursuing a balance between moral emotion and rational argumentation, and constructing a process-oriented and multidimensional evaluation framework, this study explores an innovative developmental pathway grounded in cultural self-awareness and cross-cultural integration. The ultimate goal is to establish a speech education system that is both rooted in indigenous cultural spirit and oriented toward global vision and future development, thereby promoting the continuous innovation and reform of university general education.

Keywords

China-United States comparison;
General education; Speech education;
Rhetorical education

Online publication: August 26, 2025

1. Introduction

The intellectual genealogy of general education in China can be traced back to 1940, when the distinguished

scholar Qian Mu first articulated the principle of “integrated intellectual cultivation” in his seminal essay *Reforming the University System*. Subsequently, Mei

and Pan further elaborated this conception by proposing that “general knowledge should constitute the foundation, whereas specialized knowledge should serve as its extension in *Understanding the University* ^[1].” As the cornerstone of higher education, general education is entrusted with the mission of transcending the narrow orientation of vocational or technical training. Its primary purpose lies in the cultivation of students’ transferable intellectual competencies and the holistic development of moral and personal character. It seeks to “endow individuals with the essential knowledge, abilities, cognitive habits, convictions, and refinement indispensable to life, thereby nurturing the comprehensive growth of both emotion and intellect ^[2].” The Harvard University Report on *General Education in a Free Society* further delineates the objectives of general education as fostering students’ capacities for critical thought, effective communication, sound judgment, and value discernment. This classical definition firmly establishes communicative competence as a foundational pillar of general education.

Within the conceptual framework of university general education, the capacity for precise expression and effective oral communication has emerged as a core intellectual competence and a foundational literacy essential to the formation of contemporary college students. Speech education, in this regard, should not be reduced to a utilitarian course for improving linguistic performance or rhetorical fluency; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive pedagogical enterprise that exerts a formative influence on both the intellectual and affective dimensions of the individual, thereby facilitating the integrated development of mind and character ^[3]. The telos of such education lies not in the cultivation of “eloquent sophists,” but in the holistic nurturing of morally grounded and intellectually autonomous persons.

Despite its pedagogical and moral significance, existing scholarship on speech education remains predominantly confined to descriptive analyses of its historical evolution, disciplinary orientation, curricular design, and activity systems. From the standpoint of general education, systematic and theoretically informed comparative investigations into the paradigms of speech education in China and the United States, two paradigmatic contexts of educational philosophy and practice, remain notably underdeveloped. Against this backdrop, the

present study endeavors to examine, through the lens of general education, the cultural and philosophical sources of divergence, the pragmatic variations in pedagogical practice, and the pathways of epistemic and institutional integration between Chinese and American models of speech education. The ultimate objective is to contribute theoretical insight and empirical reference for the innovation of general education and the advancement of talent cultivation in contemporary higher education.

2. The cultural and philosophical origins of divergence in Chinese and American speech education

As one of the “three instruments for the transmission of civilization”, speech embodies profound educational connotations and possesses an inherently pedagogical nature ^[4]. The differences between Chinese and American speech education are deeply rooted in their respective cultural genes, political traditions, and educational philosophies, which collectively constitute the fundamental origins of their divergence.

2.1. Cultural gene divergence: “Collectivism” and “individualism”

The divergent cultural genes of China and the United States constitute the fundamental origin of their differences in speech education. Rooted in the cultural ethos of collectivism, Chinese speech education traditionally discourages overtly confrontational or excessively individualistic expressions that challenge authority or emphasize personal distinction. Instead, it values implicitness, restraint, and rhetorical moderation, requiring speakers to take into account a wide array of contextual factors, such as collective interests, social harmony, and interpersonal relations. Speech, in this context, often assumes a socio-political function, serving to disseminate official policies or promote mainstream values, and thus tends to resemble a performative report or ritualized presentation rather than a forum for dialectical reasoning or logical confrontation. Emphasis is consequently placed on the creation of emotional resonance, aesthetic atmosphere, and communal harmony rather than on adversarial argumentation.

In contrast, American speech education, shaped by

the cultural foundation of individualism, places a high premium on personal expression and self-realization. It encourages students to articulate their ideas courageously, directly, and with clarity; to defend their own positions; and to present their distinct perspectives and needs. The pedagogical objective is to empower students to become visible, heard, and acknowledged through active expression. Within this paradigm, speech is regarded as a fundamental competency for self-expression, social influence, and civic participation, an indispensable literacy for personal development and social mobility. It also serves as a crucial avenue for individuals to manifest their intellectual autonomy, rhetorical talent, and leadership capacity.

2.2. Divergent political traditions: “Literary remonstrance” and “civic debate”

As a form of socio-discursive practice, speech is profoundly shaped by the political culture within which it operates. Under China’s political tradition of “literary remonstrance”, speech functions as an elite-oriented art of persuasion exercised within a vertical power hierarchy, emphasizing the symbolic and cultural capital of language as well as its influence upon those in authority. This tradition endows speech with distinctive discursive characteristics. In terms of discursive subjectivity, speech has historically been intertwined with bureaucratic identity and classical scholarship rather than with the universal cultivation of civic literacy. In terms of rhetorical strategy, it places exceptional emphasis on literary elegance, implicitness, and authority. Consequently, the function of speech was largely confined to vertical communication within bureaucratic systems rather than horizontal deliberation among different social groups. This deep-seated structure persisted into modern times, leading speech education in China to focus primarily on emotional appeal, structural integrity, and the transmission of positive moral values.

By contrast, the American tradition of “civic debate” conceives of speech as a deliberative instrument for public participation, highlighting the rational force of argumentation and the persuasive efficacy of discourse. As a nation constituted through a social contract among immigrant communities, the very process of America’s founding can be regarded as an extended act of public

oratory and debate, a mechanism for reconciling diverse interests and constructing political consensus. Historically, American speech education has undergone four stages of evolution: inception, integration, sustained development, and adaptive transformation^[5]. Throughout this trajectory, public speaking competence has consistently been regarded as an indispensable civic skill, one that enables citizens to participate actively in democratic processes, shape public opinion, and fulfill civic responsibilities.

2.3. Divergent educational philosophies: “Moral orientation” and “pragmatism”

The value orientations and pedagogical trajectories of speech education in China and the United States distinctly reflect two divergent philosophical foundations, moral orientation and pragmatism. The Chinese tradition of moral-oriented educational philosophy closely intertwines speech with moral cultivation and social edification, emphasizing the classical tenets that “speech is the voice of the mind” and “rhetoric must be grounded in sincerity.” Within this framework, speech is conceived as fundamentally anchored in virtue, with its primary function residing in the expression and consolidation of moral values and collective emotions through normative, affectively charged discourse. Consequently, speech transcends mere knowledge transmission, information exchange, or technical performance, evolving instead into a distinctive method, practice, and paradigm of moral education.

By contrast, the American tradition of pragmatic educational philosophy foregrounds the instrumental and functional dimensions of speech, situating it within a framework centered on problem-solving and civic engagement. Speech is thus regarded as an effective means to address concrete issues, achieve personal aims, and facilitate social progress. This orientation renders American speech education highly application-driven, emphasizing practical outcomes and communicative efficacy. As a result, speech instruction in the United States remains closely attuned to real-life contexts, characterized by pronounced instrumental rationality and a problem-oriented ethos. The divergence in these philosophical foundations has led to systematic differences in the two nations’ approaches to speech education, manifested in goal-setting, curricular content,

pedagogical design, and evaluative frameworks.

In essence, Chinese speech education is rooted in collectivist culture, centralized political tradition, and moral-oriented pedagogy, thereby privileging emotional resonance, aesthetic expression, and the normative transmission of cultural values. While American speech education, emerging from individualist culture, democratic deliberative politics, and pragmatic educational goals, places greater emphasis on logical persuasion, critical reasoning, and individual empowerment.

3. Divergent practices in Chinese and American speech education

From the perspective of general education, the practices of speech education in China and the United States exhibit systematic differences across multiple dimensions, including educational philosophy and objectives, curricular content and instructional models, as well as assessment systems and evaluative standards.

3.1. Divergences in educational philosophy and objectives

Chinese speech education is characterized by an orientation that may be described as content-centered and society-oriented. In pedagogical practice, speech is conceived primarily as an effective vehicle for knowledge transmission and ideological education. The content of speech is required to adhere to certain norms of propriety, emphasizing the accurate reproduction and systematic presentation of predetermined ideas. Its overarching aim is to serve collective purposes such as value guidance, emotional mobilization, and model exemplification, reflecting a pronounced instrumental and socially adaptive orientation. Consequently, its direct connection to the cultivation of critical thinking and the formation of civic consciousness remains relatively weak. At the level of higher education, specialized courses in speech are not commonly offered. Within university curricula, there are neither dedicated programs in speech studies nor degree tracks directly associated with public speaking^[6]. Speech competence is typically categorized as a specialized skill or extracurricular talent, rather than being integrated as a core literacy required for all students.

By contrast, the United States demonstrates a

markedly different orientation. According to Morreale, the proportion of American universities requiring public speaking as a general education course increased from 50.2% in 2006 to 79.4% in 2016^[7]. Unlike China's emphasis on content conformity and collective alignment, American speech education is guided by the core principles of diversified development and individual empowerment, underscoring the cultivation of critical thinking, creativity, and leadership through speech activities. It conceives of speech as a central medium for expressing viewpoints, engaging in rational dialogue, and constructing consensus within the public sphere. The learning objectives in American speech education are both explicit and operationalizable: students are expected to design and deliver speeches effectively for diverse audiences and complex communicative contexts, while also engaging in active listening and constructive feedback. This goal design directly corresponds to the cultural emphasis on freedom of expression, rational critique, and democratic participation, thereby reflecting a strong competence-oriented and civic-educational dimension.

3.2. Divergences in instructional content and pedagogical models

In terms of curricular content, speech education in China primarily emphasizes the mastery of linguistic fundamentals and the cultivation of expressive techniques. Instruction focuses on areas such as speech manuscript writing, the use of kinesics and facial expression, and practice in commonly employed speech forms across specific contexts. However, the scope, depth, and systematic treatment of topics such as logical reasoning, audience analysis, and argumentative rebuttal remain limited and require further enhancement. In classroom practice, students' chosen speech topics tend to revolve around the interpretation of assigned themes or the promotion of mainstream social values, often featuring grand or morally edifying subject matter. Pedagogically, Chinese speech instruction typically integrates two dominant modes, theoretical lecturing and practical exercises, with the former occupying a substantially larger proportion of class time. Instruction often centers on teacher demonstrations or imitative study of canonical speeches, reflecting a teacher-centered orientation.

In contrast, contemporary American speech

education, as documented in the Foundational Communication Course Survey Report, structures its curriculum around several major domains: informative speaking, persuasive speaking, speech anxiety management, audience analysis, critical thinking training, listening skill development, and language use^[8]. The content of American speech education is thus characterized by a high degree of structuralization and systematization. Courses are typically organized into modular units based on speech types, such as persuasive, impromptu, and special-occasion speeches, and place strong emphasis on reasoning and argumentation. Students are expected to employ academic data, authoritative sources, and empirical evidence to avoid logical fallacies. As a fundamental communicative practice, speech has long been celebrated as “the most popular foundational course in American universities,” a testament to its indispensable status within U.S. higher education^[9,10]. Most class time is devoted to student-led presentations, peer evaluation, and real-time feedback from instructors.

3.3. Divergences in assessment systems and evaluation standards

In China, the assessment of speech education primarily relies on standardized scoring systems. With respect to content, evaluation focuses on the ideational depth, value correctness, and completeness of the speech manuscript. In terms of delivery, emphasis is placed on linguistic fluency and eloquence, clarity and accuracy of pronunciation, and the expressiveness of emotion and affect. In essence, while attention is given to the content of the speech, factors such as verbal fluency, stylistic grace, emotional appeal, and stage presence are also accorded substantial weight. Indeed, the meticulous assessment of logical coherence and evidential reliability may at times be subordinated to the more holistic evaluation of overall “impression” or “momentum.” Consequently, public speaking in the Chinese context tends to resemble a performative display, emphasizing aesthetic and affective effects.

By contrast, evaluation standards in American speech education are more refined, transparent, and systematized, with a pronounced focus on process-oriented assessment that compels every student to engage in public

expression. Regarding content, evaluators pay particular attention to the clarity of thesis formulation, logical rigor, adequacy and validity of evidence, and the coherence and clarity of structure. As for delivery, attention is given to communicative immediacy, natural and confident demeanor, and interactive engagement with the audience. The overall effectiveness of a speech is measured not by its formal beauty but by whether it successfully engages the audience and achieves its communicative purpose.

Broadly speaking, public speaking in the American context functions less as a “performance” and more as a dialogic act of communication. In simpler terms, Chinese speech education approximates an “inward-oriented expressive” model, emphasizing the proper, decorous, and aesthetically refined articulation of internal thoughts, emotions, or predetermined content. Its underlying logic centers on transmission, adaptation, and harmony. American speech education, by contrast, can be conceptualized as an “outward-oriented persuasive” model, aimed at training students to assertively project ideas outward, seeking to influence and persuade others. Its internal logic is grounded in argumentation, critique, and competition.

4. Pathways toward the convergence of Chinese and American speech education

The purpose of tracing and comparing the divergences between Chinese and American speech education is not to render a value judgment regarding their relative merits, but rather to explore, through the selective assimilation of their respective strengths, a path toward the innovative development of general education grounded in cultural self-awareness and cross-cultural integration. The practical realization of this integrative vision may be approached from the following three dimensions.

4.1. Advancing from “skill transmission” to “literacy integration”

At present, speech education in China remains, to a considerable extent, dominated by a skill-oriented pedagogical model. Instruction typically focuses on external performative techniques such as the standardization of pronunciation and intonation, the use of gestures and kinesics, and the formulaic structuring

of speech manuscripts. While this model may enhance students' fluency and formal proficiency in the short term, it also risks attenuating the essential functions of speech as an embodiment of thought and a medium of value communication. In his *Historical Study of Speech Education*, Gray identified "rhetoric" as a recurring keyword in many of the most representative American studies on speech education^[11]. This observation indicates that American speech education largely inherits the classical Western rhetorical tradition, conceptualizing speech as an integrative practice that unites reflection, argumentation, and communication. Inspired by this perspective, the key to integrating Chinese and American paradigms of speech education lies in a fundamental reorientation of its pedagogical focus, that is, shifting from skill transmission, which privileges external performance, to literacy integration, which aims at the holistic development of the individual. Essentially, this transition represents an evolution from instrumentalism to humanism in educational values.

In practical terms, this transformation necessitates the construction of a competence-centered curriculum and activity framework. Instruction should no longer be governed by mechanical drills, but should instead be designed around the cultivation of critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and other key competencies. Within this framework, the objective of speech education transcends the mere completion of a successful performance; it aspires to cultivate students as reflective, expressive, and communicative agents, thereby restoring the humanistic and educative essence of speech education.

4.2. Striving for a balance between "moral emotion" and "rational argumentation"

Chinese speech education has been profoundly shaped by its traditional cultural heritage, particularly the Confucian emphasis on moral virtue and emotional resonance. Guided by this value orientation, it places strong emphasis on whether the content of a speech demonstrates moral rectitude, linguistic dignity, and emotional sincerity, as well as on its capacity to convey and reinforce ethical values. However, such a moral-emotional focus can sometimes lead to an overreliance on affective appeal at the expense of rational analysis. Although American speech education theoretically acknowledges the triadic

rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, in modern pedagogical practice it accentuates the primacy of logical argumentation. Instruction places particular importance on constructing chains of reasoning, supporting claims with empirical data, and maintaining logical rigor in argument development. This rational and evidence-based orientation facilitates the cultivation of students' critical thinking and structured expression, yet an excessive emphasis on technical argumentation may also render speech styles overly detached or impersonal, thereby diminishing their emotional warmth and humanistic appeal.

An ideal model of speech education should thus strive for a dialectical unity and equilibrium between moral emotion and rational reasoning. On the one hand, it should nurture sincerity of attitude and appropriateness of emotional expression; on the other, it must systematically cultivate students' logical reasoning and evidential competence. Only through such an integrated pedagogical approach can moral and rational dimensions be organically unified within both educational philosophy and instructional practice. Within a speech education system grounded in the fusion of emotion and reason, students would develop not only moral sensibility and humanistic concern, but also critical reasoning and argumentative competence, thereby enabling their speech to embody both emotional appeal and intellectual persuasion, achieving the genuine unity of truth and sincerity.

4.3. Constructing a "process-oriented" and "multidimensional" evaluation system

Within the framework of general education, speech education should never remain at the level of abstract theorization; rather, it must be grounded in a specialized, professional, and scientifically informed system of curriculum evaluation. Looking toward the future, speech education requires the establishment of a comprehensive evaluation system centered on the principle of learning promotion, characterized by process orientation and multidimensional assessment.

Emphasis should be placed on process-oriented evaluation. The assessment should encompass the entire preparatory process of speechmaking, including topic selection, research, outline drafting, and practice, thereby guiding students to value the intellectual labor underlying their preparation. This approach encourages students

to take risks and to embrace errors, shifting their focus from “How well did I perform in the end?” to “How did I prepare and improve step by step?”

A multidimensional evaluation system should also be introduced, manifesting in two interrelated aspects: the diversification of evaluators and the pluralization of evaluation criteria. The former calls for the deconstruction of the teacher’s evaluative monopoly by incorporating peer assessment and self-assessment, and even inviting external experts or simulated audiences to provide feedback, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive and objective appraisal. The latter requires the abandonment of rigid scoring rubrics in favor of differentiated evaluation standards designed in accordance with various types of speeches and stage-specific learning objectives. In this way, evaluation ceases to serve merely as a judgment of outcomes and instead becomes a meaningful learning process that promotes capability growth and reflective learning. By constructing an integrated system of process-oriented and multidimensional evaluation, the assessment no longer privileges naturally gifted speakers but instead rewards those who progress through continuous reflection, practice, and refinement. This truly embodies the principle of learning through assessment, redirecting the evaluative focus toward the holistic development of students’ comprehensive competencies.

In summary, the integration of Chinese and American models of speech education should be guided by literacy integration as the overarching pedagogical goal, the balance between moral emotion and rational reasoning as the core educational content, and a process-oriented and multidimensional evaluation framework as the structural foundation.

5. Conclusion

This study has systematically demonstrated the necessity and feasibility of constructing a speech education system within general education through the creative integration of Chinese and American pedagogical models. The defining features of this system lie in its integrative, practical, and developmental nature. It represents not merely an improvement in instructional methods but an elevation of educational philosophy, responding directly to the core competencies demanded by the new era. Looking toward the future, neither simplistic “borrowing without adaptation” nor self-enclosed traditionalism offers a viable path forward. The genuine solution resides in a form of integration grounded in cultural confidence. This entails a deep understanding of the philosophical foundations and operational logics of both traditions, while prioritizing indigenous distinctiveness and embracing diversity through mutual enrichment.

By creatively combining the Chinese strengths of value orientation and cultural continuity with the American emphases on rational argumentation and civic participation, it becomes possible to develop a new model of speech education within general education, one that is rooted in the soil of Chinese culture yet oriented toward global vision. Such an approach not only fulfills the intrinsic requirement of enhancing the quality of talent cultivation in higher education but also aligns with the imperative of the global era: to educate individuals who are articulate communicators, responsible citizens, and active contributors to intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding among civilizations.

Funding

This paper is a phased research outcome of the 2025 Graduate Education Quality Enhancement Project of Zhengzhou Aeronautic University: Graduate Workstation (Project No.: 2025YJSJD9), and the Henan Provincial Philosophy and Social Science “Education-Strengthening Province” Project (Project No.: 2025JYQS1052).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Mei Y, 2019, *The Meaning of the University*, Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House, China.
- [2] Wu Z, 2019, *A Study on the Assessment of Learning Outcomes in American Higher Education Institutions*, Beijing.
- [3] Li S, 2022, On the Concept, Value and Implementation Framework of Speech Education in Primary and Secondary Schools. *Modern Primary and Secondary Education*, 38(12): 1–7.
- [4] Liang Q, 2020, The Three Instruments for Transmitting Civilization, In *Collected Works of the Ice-Drinker's Studio*, Beijing Daily Press, 1: 167.
- [5] Sun L, 2013, The History, Current Situation, and Trends of Speech Education in the United States. *Educational Research*, 34(12): 136–143.
- [6] Chen Z, 2013, A Study of Speech Education in Chinese Language Departments of Universities. *Education and Teaching Forum*, 2013(27): 101–104.
- [7] Morreale S, 2020, Trends in the Introductory Communication Course from 1956 to 2016: A Systematic Review of Results from 11 National Survey Studies. *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*, 2020(3): 108–122.
- [8] Lin Q, 2021, The Attribution, Positioning, and Evolution of Speech Education: A Study Based on American Universities. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 43(11), 164–168.
- [9] Morreale S, Hanna M, Berko R, et al., 1999, The Basic Communication Course at U.S. Colleges and Universities: VI. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 1999(11): 1–28.
- [10] Morreale S, Hugenberg L, Worley D, 2006, The Basic Communication Course at U.S. Colleges and Universities in the 21st Century: Study VII. *Communication Education*, 55(4): 415–437.
- [11] Gray G, 1949, Research in the History of Speech Education. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 35(2): 156–157.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.