



Public Speaking and Storytelling as Strategic Communication Competencies in Student Academic Competitions

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of higher education in the contemporary era places students under a dual demand: to achieve academic excellence while simultaneously possessing communication competencies that actively support their performance in competitive events. This study examines the role of public speaking and storytelling in enhancing student performance in prestigious competitions, particularly the Outstanding Student Selection (Mawapres) and the Campus Ambassador program. A qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design was employed, and data were gathered through in-depth interviews with four purposively selected informants who had direct experience in such competitions. This study is conceptually grounded in the Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000) and the Deliberate Practice Theory (Ericsson et al., 1993), which serve as the primary theoretical foundations for the research. Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that public speaking reinforces structured, confident, and persuasive message delivery, while storytelling functions as a strategic communication instrument that cultivates emotional connection and sustains audience engagement. Both competencies operate synergistically: public speaking establishes the structural foundation, whereas storytelling amplifies impact and enhances message memorability. Students who had mastered both skills consistently demonstrated superior performance during jury presentations and selection processes. This study contributes theoretically to communication science by asserting that public speaking and storytelling are not merely technical skills but strategic communicative tools that directly shape academic achievement outcomes. Practically, the findings offer a foundation for designing integrated communication training programs within university student development units.

Keywords: Public Speaking; Storytelling; Strategic Communication

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan dunia pendidikan tinggi dewasa ini menempatkan mahasiswa pada tuntutan ganda: unggul secara akademik sekaligus memiliki kompetensi komunikasi yang mampu mendukung pencapaian prestasi dalam berbagai ajang kompetisi. Penelitian ini mengkaji peran public speaking dan storytelling dalam meningkatkan performa mahasiswa pada ajang bergengsi seperti Pemilihan Mahasiswa Berprestasi (Mawapres) dan Duta Kampus. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif berjenis studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap empat informan yang dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan pengalaman mereka dalam kompetisi tersebut. Penelitian ini didasarkan secara konseptual pada Teori Narrative Transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) dan Teori Deliberate Practice (Ericsson et al., 1993), yang menjadi landasan teoretis utama dalam penelitian ini. Analisis data mengikuti model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang mencakup reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa public speaking memperkuat penyampaian pesan secara terstruktur, percaya diri, dan persuasif, sementara storytelling berfungsi sebagai alat komunikasi strategis yang meningkatkan koneksi emosional dan keterlibatan audiens. Kedua kompetensi tersebut bekerja secara sinergis: public speaking menyediakan fondasi struktural, sedangkan storytelling memperkuat dampak dan daya ingat pesan. Mahasiswa yang menguasai keduanya menunjukkan performa yang lebih unggul dalam presentasi di hadapan juri dan proses seleksi. Penelitian ini berkontribusi secara teoretis pada kajian ilmu komunikasi dengan menegaskan bahwa public speaking dan storytelling bukan sekadar keterampilan teknis, melainkan alat komunikasi strategis yang secara langsung memengaruhi hasil pencapaian akademik. Secara praktis, temuan ini dapat dijadikan landasan dalam merancang program pelatihan komunikasi terpadu di lingkungan unit pengembangan mahasiswa perguruan tinggi.

Kata kunci: *Public Speaking; Storytelling; Strategic Communication*

INTRODUCTION

Academic competitions for university students have undergone considerable transformation over the past decade. Prestigious events such as the Outstanding Student Selection (Mawapres) and the Campus Ambassador program no longer evaluate participants solely on the basis of academic grade point averages. Instead, communication competency has been elevated to a critical assessment criterion. Within this context, students are expected to articulate ideas clearly, represent their personal identities compellingly, and create a favorable impression before a panel of judges through structured and persuasive oral communication. This phenomenon reflects a broader paradigm shift in graduate competency standards, which now extend beyond disciplinary knowledge mastery to encompass the ability to convey that knowledge effectively to diverse audiences.

Public speaking, defined as the skill of delivering messages orally before an audience, occupies a central position in the development of student communication competencies. This skill encompasses three interrelated dimensions: the verbal dimension, involving lexical choice and argument structure; the paraverbal dimension, encompassing intonation and speech tempo; and the nonverbal dimension, comprising gesture and eye contact. Together, these dimensions determine the overall communicative effectiveness in public settings. A growing body of research affirms that public speaking proficiency significantly contributes to increased student self-confidence, persuasive capacity, and message delivery effectiveness in both academic and competitive contexts (Rahmayanti et al., 2024; Oktavianti & Rusdi, 2019; Muchlis & Pujianto, 2022).

Alongside public speaking, storytelling has emerged as an increasingly relevant communication strategy within educational and competitive settings. Storytelling is not merely a narration technique; it constitutes a communication strategy that integrates data, personal experience, and emotion into a coherent and compelling narrative. Daherman and Moekahar (2021) found that applying storytelling methods significantly improved students' public speaking abilities by encouraging more structured, contextual, and communicative message construction. Similarly, Julaihah (2022) confirmed that storytelling produces measurable improvements in students' speaking skills within formal contexts.

This study is conceptually grounded in the Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000) and the Deliberate Practice Theory (Ericsson et al., 1993). Narrative Transportation Theory explains that audiences become more cognitively and emotionally engaged when messages are presented in the form of compelling narratives, leading to greater attention, persuasion, and message retention. In competitive settings such as Mawapres and Campus Ambassador, the ability to transport judges into meaningful stories enables participants to communicate ideas more persuasively and establish stronger emotional connections. Complementing this perspective, Deliberate Practice Theory emphasizes that expertise is developed through structured, purposeful, and continuous practice supported by feedback and reflection. Applied to public speaking and storytelling, this theory suggests that communication excellence is not an innate talent but a competency that can be systematically cultivated through repeated practice, performance evaluation, and continuous improvement.

Despite the growing body of literature addressing public speaking and storytelling as separate phenomena, studies that explicitly connect both competencies to student achievement within competitive academic contexts remain scarce. Rosvita et al. (2025) demonstrated that theme-based storytelling can enhance speaking skills, yet the competitive context was not specifically examined. Likewise, Muchlis and Pujianto (2022) investigated the effectiveness of public speaking training without integrating storytelling as a competitive communication strategy. This gap is particularly significant given that in Mawapres and Campus Ambassador selections, participants are assessed not merely on the substance of their ideas, but also on how they construct narratives, sustain jury attention, and leave a lasting impression.

This study aims to conduct a thorough analysis of the roles played by public speaking and storytelling in supporting student achievement in Mawapres and Campus Ambassador competitions. Specifically, it explores how both competencies are applied in competitive situations, identifies the factors that influence their use, and examines their synergistic impact on participant performance. The findings are expected to offer theoretical contributions to the field of communication studies while providing practical recommendations for those responsible for student development programs in higher education institutions.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. The choice of a qualitative approach was grounded in the research objective of gaining an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences in utilizing public speaking and storytelling within competitive academic contexts. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) argued, qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher seeks to explore the meanings that individuals attach to a social phenomenon in a contextual and holistic manner. The case study design was selected because it affords the opportunity to investigate a phenomenon deeply within the specific boundaries of a real-world situation (Yin, 2018).

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) prior participation in Mawapres, the Campus Ambassador program, or national-level scientific presentation competitions; (2) active involvement in public speaking activities; and (3) willingness to share information openly. Four informants from different academic programs were identified, providing sufficient diversity of perspective. They are referred to by their initials: MA (20 years old, national Mawapres participant), DN (21 years old, active Campus Ambassador), JA (20 years old, winner of a national scientific presentation competition), and TM (22 years old, Campus Ambassador and public debate participant). The study was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia. The number of participants was considered sufficient based on the principle of analytical sufficiency and thematic saturation, as the final interviews yielded no substantially new themes, categories, or meanings relevant to the research objectives. Contemporary qualitative research emphasizes that sample adequacy is determined by the richness and completeness of the data rather than by statistical representativeness, particularly in focused case studies involving information-rich participants (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data were collected through three complementary techniques. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of 60 to 90 minutes per informant. Interview guides covered themes including competitive experience, communication strategies employed, perceptions of public speaking and storytelling, and reflections on their impact on performance. Second, limited observation was conducted on video recordings of each informant's competition presentations, with a focus on verbal

and nonverbal communication patterns. Third, document analysis was carried out on portfolios, training notes, and accessible jury evaluation transcripts.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three primary stages. The first stage involved data reduction, a process of selecting and focusing the raw data obtained from interviews and observations according to the study's central themes. The second stage entailed data display, in which information was organized into thematic matrices and descriptive narratives to facilitate the identification of patterns and inter-data relationships. The third stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions based on patterns consistently observed across the entire dataset. Data credibility was ensured through source triangulation—confronting interview data with observation results and documentary evidence—as well as member checking, whereby informants reviewed and validated the researcher's preliminary interpretations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Result

Based on the analysis of in-depth interview data, presentation recording observations, and documentary evidence, three primary themes emerged that describe the roles of public speaking and storytelling in students' competitive achievements: (1) public speaking as the structural foundation of competitive communication, (2) storytelling as a strategy for message amplification and emotional engagement, and (3) the synergy of both competencies in producing superior communicative performance.

Theme 1: Public Speaking as the Structural Foundation of Competitive Communication

All informants stated that proficiency in public speaking provided a solid foundation for navigating the pressures of competition. Public speaking was understood not merely as the ability to address a crowd, but as a comprehensive communication system encompassing argument management, vocal control, anxiety regulation, and real-time message adaptation to audience context. Informant MA articulated this clearly:

"In competitions, a strong idea alone is never enough. The jury has limited time and attention. How we frame our ideas, how we open powerfully, maintain the flow, and close

memorably, that is what truly determines whether our message lands or simply evaporates. I learned that through repeated public speaking practice."

MA's statement reflects a strategic awareness that public speaking in a competitive context is not merely about the courage to stand before an audience, but about the deliberate architecture of a message. In a similar vein, JA emphasized the dimension of self-confidence as something that develops progressively through repeated practice:

"At first, I trembled every time I had to step forward. But after practicing consistently, classroom presentations, internal competitions, and eventually national ones. I realized that confidence is not a talent; it is a muscle that must be trained. The more I performed, the better I became at reading the room and adjusting the rhythm of my delivery."

Observation of JA's recorded presentation at a national competition revealed a consistent structural pattern: an opening with a rhetorical question that immediately captured attention, argument development with smooth transitions, and a closing that left a strong thesis statement. This pattern suggests that public speaking proficiency had been internalized as a strategic competency rather than a mere speaking habit.

Theme 2: Storytelling as a Strategy for Message Amplification and Emotional Engagement

All informants identified storytelling as the element that transformed their presentations from simple information delivery into memorable communicative experiences. DN, drawing on experience as a Campus Ambassador, described how personal narrative became a powerful communication instrument:

"I learned that jury members are human beings. They do not only evaluate content, they also sense who is standing before them. When I wove in real stories about my journey, about failure and how I recovered, the atmosphere in the room shifted. There were moments when I saw jury members genuinely nodding and smiling. That is what I was aiming for."

DN's account reveals a function of storytelling that extends beyond simple narration, it becomes an instrument for constructing emotional connection that reduces the psychological distance between the speaker and the audience. TM offered a complementary perspective on storytelling's effect on sustaining jury attention:

"Statistical data matters, but if it is only data, the human mind tires quickly. I always frame data within a story, here are the numbers, but here also is the human reality behind

them. When I tell the story of one concrete person affected by the issue I am addressing, the jury connects with my message in an entirely different way."

This finding was corroborated by observations of TM's recorded presentation, which demonstrated the use of a three-act narrative structure, initial situation, conflict or challenge, and resolution, that effectively sustained audience engagement throughout the presentation. This pattern aligns with the principle of narrative transportation as described in the persuasive communication literature.

Theme 3: The Synergy of Public Speaking and Storytelling in Superior Communicative Performance

The most prominent finding of this study is that public speaking and storytelling do not function as independent skills but as two mutually reinforcing components within a competitive communication system. When asked to reflect on their best performances, all informants consistently described moments in which both elements merged harmoniously.

MA described the integration of the two as follows: public speaking provided the framework and control, while storytelling supplied the soul and resonant power. JA confirmed that the most significant improvement came when he began embedding narrative elements into the public speaking structure he had already mastered, resulting in presentations that were not only logically coherent but also emotionally stirring.

Portfolio documentation and jury feedback records indicated that all four informants consistently received high scores on the criteria of 'message delivery effectiveness' and 'audience engagement', two indicators that directly reflect the integration of public speaking and storytelling. This confirms that the synergy between both competencies is not merely perceived by the informants themselves, but is also recognized and valued by professional jury panels.

Table 1. The Roles of Public Speaking and Storytelling in Student Achievement

Informant	Role of Public Speaking	Role of Storytelling	Impact on Achievement	Context
MA (20 y.o.)	Builds structured, persuasive arguments with a strong opening and memorable closing	Frames experiences of failure and recovery into an	Outstanding performance in a social innovation presentation	Mawapres (National)

		inspirational narrative	before a national jury	
DN (21 y.o.)	Increases self- confidence and ability to adapt messages to audience characteristics	Builds emotional closeness with the jury through personal journey storytelling	Successfully captured jury attention; awarded Best Campus Ambassador	Campus Ambassador
JA (20 y.o.)	Delivers content systematically with smooth transitions between arguments	Inserts narrative illustrations to reduce audience fatigue from technical data	Heightened confidence and presentation depth in national scientific competition	National Scientific Competition
TM (22 y.o.)	Commands the stage with calculated vocal management and deliberate gesture	Frames statistical data within a three-act narrative that sustains jury attention	More effective communication ; messages are memorable and easily recalled by judges	Campus Ambassador & Public Debate

Source: Researcher's Own Compilation, 2026

Table 1 demonstrates that despite the differing competitive contexts of the four informants, ranging from the national Mawapres, the Campus Ambassador program, a national scientific competition, to public debate, the role patterns of public speaking and storytelling remain consistent. Public speaking predominantly operates on the structural and technical dimension, while storytelling functions on the emotional and relational dimension. The consistency of this pattern reinforces the validity of the finding that the synergism of both competencies constitutes a strategic factor applicable across diverse competitive contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and simultaneously extend the existing understanding in academic communication literature. The role of public speaking as the foundation of competitive communication competency aligns with Rahmayanti et al.

(2024), who established that mastery of public speaking significantly enhances students' communicative competence. However, the present study introduces an additional dimension by demonstrating that, within the specific context of Mawapres and Campus Ambassador competitions, public speaking evolves beyond a speaking skill into a comprehensive communication management system that encompasses argument architecture, attention management, and real-time message adaptation before a jury panel.

From a storytelling perspective, these findings reinforce and deepen the results reported by Daherman and Moekahar (2021), who identified a significant influence of storytelling methods on students' public speaking abilities. The present study advances this understanding by identifying the specific mechanism through which storytelling operates in competitive settings: it not only improves speaking skills at a technical level, but also facilitates the construction of emotional connection that reduces the psychological distance between the participant and the jury. This mechanism relates closely to the concept of narrative transportation in the psychology of communication, wherein audiences who are 'transported' by a narrative tend to be more receptive to the message and more susceptible to persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000).

The finding regarding the synergy between both competencies represents an original contribution that has not been explored in depth in prior research. Rosvita et al. (2025) addressed storytelling techniques in relation to speaking skill development, while Julaihah (2022) examined the effect of storytelling on public speaking ability; however, neither study explicitly modeled the synergistic interaction between public speaking and storytelling within the context of prestigious student competitions. The present study fills this gap by demonstrating that when public speaking provides structure and control while storytelling injects emotional resonance, the two collectively produce a quality of communication that exceeds the sum of its individual components. Similar observations have been reported in recent communication studies demonstrating that narrative-based communication strengthens emotional engagement by making messages more authentic and memorable. Within educational communication, storytelling enables speakers to humanize abstract information, thereby increasing audience attention and facilitating deeper message comprehension (Pratama & Yuliani, 2023).

From a self-development perspective, informant JA's characterization of self-confidence as a 'muscle that must be trained' indicates that public speaking competency

in competitive settings is not a fixed or innate trait but rather a dynamic capacity that can be cultivated through deliberate practice. These findings are also consistent with studies from Rahmayanti et al. (2024) and Sari & Kurniawan (2023) which emphasize that effective public speaking extends beyond linguistic competence to include audience adaptation, message organization, and speaker credibility. Public speaking is viewed as a strategic communication competence that enables students to convey ideas systematically while building confidence and establishing persuasive interactions with audiences.

A finding deserving particular attention is the role of self-reflection in the process of mastering both competencies. All informants explicitly mentioned the importance of reviewing their own recorded presentations, carefully examining jury feedback, and consciously identifying areas for improvement after each performance. This process reflects a metacognitive component in communication learning that has thus far received insufficient attention in the design of public speaking training programs at universities. Effective programs need to incorporate structured reflection sessions, not only practice sessions, as an essential component.

This study also reveals contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of public speaking and storytelling in competition: the characteristics of the jury panel, the session format (monologue versus question-and-answer), and the themes specified by the competition. Informants who demonstrated the greatest adaptability to these variable factors, namely MA and DN showed the most consistent performance across contexts. This suggests that effective competitive communication training must simulate realistic variations in context rather than rehearsing only a single, predictable scenario.

Taken as a whole, this study reinforces the argument that communication competency, particularly public speaking and storytelling, constitutes a critical variable that mediates the relationship between the quality of students' ideas and their actual achievement outcomes in competition. Consequently, institutional investment in student communication competency development programs is not a supplementary service but a core component of any serious strategy for cultivating high-achieving students.

CONCLUSION

This study consistently demonstrates that public speaking and storytelling play mutually complementary and synergistic roles in supporting student achievement in academic competitions such as Mawapres and the Campus Ambassador program. Public speaking functions as the structural foundation, providing argument frameworks, vocal control, and anxiety management in competitive situations. Storytelling, in turn, operates as a communication amplifier that transforms information delivery into a narrative experience engaging the emotional dimension and fostering a stronger connection with the audience.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in the synergistic modeling of both competencies: when public speaking supplies structure and control, storytelling injects emotional resonance, and together they produce a quality of competitive communication that surpasses the individual contribution of either component. This constitutes a perspective that has not been explicitly articulated in the prior literature.

In practical terms, the findings recommend that universities integrate public speaking and storytelling training in a unified, rather than separate, framework within student achievement development programs. Effective training programs should encompass progressively structured practice sessions, simulations of varied competitive contexts, and structured feedback-based reflection components. The limitations of this study include the relatively small number of informants and an institutional scope that does not fully represent the diversity of Indonesian higher education institutions. Future research is encouraged to expand the sample, employ a mixed-methods design, and explore moderating variables such as study program characteristics, level of competitive experience, and the intensity of training programs undertaken.

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