

College English Reading Instruction in North China Electric Power University: The Production-Driven Approach

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Abstract

Production-oriented approach may provide us with a brand new perspective to our current college English reading instruction. Under this approach, teaching reforms need to be initiated in respects of teaching objectives, teaching materials, teaching methods and assessment. Instructors are required to design appropriate output tasks to stimulate learners' motivation in reading. In addition, a wide variety of teaching activities need to be designed to fully involve students in classroom activities and ensure the completion of output tasks. The teaching materials should not only be aimed at improving students' language knowledge, but also is conducive to students' cross-cultural competence. Finally, immediate assessing and delayed assessing should be employed to guarantee the best possible learning results.

Keywords: college English reading instruction, production-driven approach (POA), teaching principles, teaching hypothesis, teaching process

1. Introduction

College English instruction is an integral part of tertiary education. The goal of college English instruction is to cultivate students' comprehensive abilities, especially speaking, writing and translating abilities so as to enable them to communicate effectively in their future work and social interaction, improve their autonomous learning, and enhance their cultural awareness.

College English reading instruction, an indispensable part of college English, has been present since the time when it was introduced to Chinese universities decades before. Being the main source of language input, reading provides the basis for comprehensive language abilities. A lot of practice has proved that reading can enlarge students' vocabulary, develop their language competence in writing, listening, speaking, translating, etc., broaden their linguistic and cultural knowledge, and strengthen language awareness and logical thinking. Therefore, it is of great significance to improve students' reading competence.

Taking into account some major problems our English reading instruction is now met with in terms of teaching approaches, teaching objectives and assessment, it is of emergency for us to initiate teaching reforms. Production-oriented approach (POA for short), put forward by Wen (2015, 2016, 2017), may provide us with a brand new perspective to our current college English reading instruction. This approach is an attempt to construct college English instruction classrooms in Chinese universities. It advocates learning-centered principle, learning-using integration and cultivation of students' critical thinking and cross-cultural competence. In addition, it places emphasis on the importance of output tasks to the improvement of students' competency. Furthermore, this approach requires teachers to assume different roles on different stages of student learning. If this approach proves to be feasible and fruitful as is indicated by some scholars (Zhang, L.L., 2017; Zhang, W.L., 2015, 2017), it then deserves our effort to put it into effect, through which English reading instruction could be hopefully improved.

This article continues with an introduction of POA, including its three components, namely teaching principles, teaching hypothesis and teacher-mediated teaching process. After discussion of problems in current reading instruction in the following section, important connections are made in the last section between POA and college English reading instruction.

2. Production-Oriented Approach (POA)

Production-oriented approach (POA) originates from output-driven, input-enabled hypothesis (Wen, 2013, 2014) yet is distinct from output-driven hypothesis in that *production* covers a wider range of skills than *output*. *Production* not only covers speaking and writing as is indicated by *output*, it also includes interpreting and translating (Wen, 2015).

POA is composed of three components: teaching principles, teaching hypothesis and teacher-mediated teaching process. Teaching principles refer to “learning-centered”, “learning-using integrated” and “whole-person education”. Teaching hypothesis includes “output-driven”, “input-enabled” and “selective learning”. Teaching process refers to three phases: motivating, enabling and assessing. Teacher’s mediation is present at every phase. The three principles are guidelines which determine the direction and overall goals of classroom instruction. Teaching hypothesis offers the theoretical basis for the teaching process. And the teaching process reflects and illustrates the principles while testing the hypotheses. (As is shown in Figure 1)

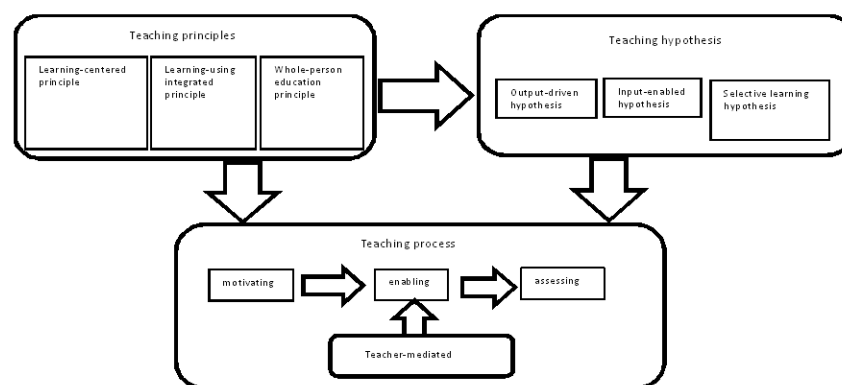


Figure 1. The production-oriented approach (POA)

2.1 Teaching Principles

“Learning-centered principle” holds that all classroom activities are designed to guarantee effective learning. This principle proposes that teaching objectives must be achieved and effective learning should be promoted. Classroom activities can take many forms: lectures, group discussions, and individual activities, etc. These different forms serve different teaching objectives. Teachers are expected to take appropriate forms to meet the teaching targets, which is especially true when they take into account the fact that hours of college English instruction in many universities have been largely reduced. Therefore, when we design each teaching procedure, we should focus more on what students could acquire instead of who is playing a dominating role in the classroom. (Mercer & Dawes, 2014; Wen, 2015).

“Learning-centered principle” poses a big challenge to “student-centered principle” which is currently popular both at home and abroad. There is no denying the fact that “student-centered principle” has shattered the traditional view of foreign language instruction in China which has failed to meet the needs of students and concerned merely the teaching flow. Nevertheless, student-centered principle may be misleading as it may marginalize teachers’ parts in classroom on the one hand and exaggerate students’ roles on the other. According to this principle, teachers and students have different roles to fulfill. Teachers are entitled as facilitators, helpers or consultants whose duty is to offer opportunities for student interactions while students are perceived to play a decisive role in teaching objectives, content and schedule. Under this principle, English teaching fails to pay enough attention to the coherence and relationships between teaching and learning (Xiahou, 2013). The roles assigned to teachers and students could not guarantee that students structure and master the new knowledge automatically, nor could it lead to the fulfillment of teaching objectives and improvement of learning efficiency on the part of the students. Currently, some scholars have been critical of this principle. (Kirschner et al., 2006; Wen, 2015, 2016, 2017)

Learning-using integrated principle holds that learning and using should be combined. This principle calls for an integration of learning and using in classroom instruction. According to this principle, texts are just means by which students could fulfill their output tasks. An obvious advantage of this principle is that learners of different

levels, whether they are at the high level or low level of English proficiency, could complete output tasks of varying complexity within their capabilities. This principle is an opposition to material-centered instruction. Traditional College English instruction prioritizes text-learning, taking texts rather than students' comprehensive abilities in English as their teaching goals. In accordance, instructors usually highlight the structure, main ideas as well as language points and possibly writing techniques in the texts. The obvious drawback of this practice is that there seems to be a long time lag between language input and language output; the inert knowledge (Larsen-Freeman, 2005) that students have received cannot be put into immediate practical use (Wen, 2014).

Whole-person education principle maintains that foreign language instruction aims to improve students' comprehensive English proficiency and critical thinking, autonomous learning and cultural awareness. Recently, this philosophy has won wide support among scholars (Yang, 2007; Wang, 2011, 2013; H. Wang, & S. Wang, 2011; Wen, 2015) and without doubt has set higher standard for college English instruction than that tends to treat English as a tool of communication. These two aims can be achieved through careful selection of topics and teaching materials and skillful design of teaching activities. Specifically, the instructors need to invest some time to carefully select topics and materials that are conducive to the sound development of the students and that could raise students' awareness of intercultural communication. In addition, the instructors have to be very skillful in designing classroom instruction activities, either by group work to enhance their collaborative spirit or by assessment to improve students' abilities to objectively evaluating their peers' strong points and weak ones.

2.2 Teaching Hypothesis

Output-driven hypothesis holds that output is both the motivation and goals of language learning. According to this hypothesis, output tasks are more likely to stimulate students' desire in and enthusiasm of English learning than input tasks do and therefore could enable the students to achieve better results. For one thing, students may come to appreciate the communicative value of output tasks in raising their cultural awareness and improving future work; for another, they may come to realize the inadequacy of their stored knowledge in the fulfillment of the output tasks, which will inspire them to take more active roles in knowledge acquisition.

Input-enabled hypothesis posits that desirable results could be yielded if instructors provide learners with appropriate language input tailored to the output tasks that are designed to meet the needs of students of varied English levels.

Teaching hypothesis posits that selective learning is more efficient than non-selective learning (Hanten et al., 2007; Miyawaki, 2012). "Selective learning" refers to the selection of useful information from the input material for deep processing, practice and memory in accordance with the requirements of the output tasks. This hypothesis is consistent with psychological reality. The attention span and memory of a person is limited within a period of time. To guarantee positive learning results, it is essential that one select from varied resources the most important and relevant ones for further processing (Hanten et al., 2007). In addition, this hypothesis is consistent with social reality as individuals usually look for input materials driven by reality, i.e. the output tasks.

2.3 Teaching Process

The teaching process includes three phases: motivating, enabling and assessing. These phases are teacher-mediated in that teachers may assume the roles of guide, design and scaffolding.

POA places motivating phase at the very beginning of a new lesson. Motivating consists of three stages:

- 1). Situations and topics concerning future studies and work are introduced. Students may have not experienced these situations and topics, but they may perceive the possibility of the occurrence and are aware of the challenges they may face in discussing these topics.
- 2). Students make attempts to complete these deceptively simple and common output tasks, which may put them into an embarrassing situation, thereby arouse their interests and enthusiasm for learning.
- 3). Teachers inform the students of the communicative and language objectives and output tasks they are expected to fulfill. These language objectives are meant to serve the communicative goals, therefore words, phrases and language forms irrelevant to the communicative objectives will not be listed in the language goals. As far as the output tasks are concerned, they fall into in-class tasks and out-class ones. Teachers are expected to offer different objectives and output tasks to students of different levels in an effort to ensure that their potential could possibly be given full play.

Enabling includes three phases: First, teachers describe the output tasks, decompose the tasks into subtasks and explicate the steps involved in completing the tasks. Second, students carry out selective learning while teachers give instructions to them to make sure that they could select from the input the content, language forms and

discourse structure appropriate for the completion of the output tasks. Finally, students put what has been selected from the input into practice while teachers offer instruction to students to make sure that they could apply what they've learned from selective materials to output tasks.

There are two sorts of assessing: immediate assessing and delayed assessing. Immediate assessing refers to the assessment that teachers give to students toward their learning results of selective learning and practices in classroom. Immediate assessing could enable teachers to adjust their teaching schedule. Delayed assessing refers to the assessment that teachers give to students toward the results of the practices outside the classroom. According to POA, two requirements have to be met in delayed assessing. First of all, both teachers and students should engage in developing the assessment criteria of learning. Second, teachers need to, in written forms, inform in advance the students of the deadline and way of submitting their learning outcome.

3. Current Situation of College English Reading Instruction in North China Electric Power University

Currently, our College English reading instruction has met with some major problems. To begin with, the teaching approaches may be partly responsible for this undesirable situation. Up till now many instructors employ the traditional teaching method, which fails to stimulate students' interest in reading. Usually instructors would ask the students to read passages in a given time, and then provide explanation for key words and phrases as well as long and complex sentence structures, and finally ask the students to finish the after-text exercises.

This traditional teaching approach has serious flaw. Many instructors do not inform their students of the reading objectives and relevant reading skills. As a consequence of this, language learners may not truly understand the text despite their mastery of language points. Many scholars have mentioned that the results would be undesirable if instructors focus on analysis of sentence structure and phrases. Without necessary culture input and training of reading skills, reading instruction turns out to be a course which aims at language knowledge acquisition, therefore is uninformative and ultimately fail to meet language learners' expectations.

Other instructors do introduce the cultural notes, but they, too, spend too much time on the explanation of grammar and translation, an immediate consequence of which is that language learners could not guarantee their reading amount and teaching progresses too slowly.

Still other instructors use a lot of questions in class in an attempt to highlight the central role of language learners in language learning. Undoubtedly this has to some extent aroused learners' interest and altered instructors' role in language instruction. Yet it may still give rise to some problems. To start, since the key points and different points rely on the design of questions, this may inevitably pose challenges to those articles that deny questions. In addition, too many questions may fill the students with stress and frustration. Finally, this question-driven teaching approach may deprive the students of the opportunities to enhance their critical thinking if the questions are poorly designed and fail to enhance the learners' understanding of the articles.

In addition, some reading materials are poorly selected, hopelessly outdated and inappropriately arranged. Take the course books we now use. They were published at least ten years ago. Most of the themes have lost their appeals to the students since they are no longer the heated issues; so has some uses of language. As a consequence of this, the course books fail to arouse the students' interest in reading.

Finally, students can have access to all sources of information in an information era. Owing to the rapid development of information technology, students could gain easy access to information from different places at any time anywhere. As a consequence, teachers on longer is the main source of information. And students do not rely on teachers for new information any more.

From what has been mentioned above, it is necessary that our college English instruction be reformed. The materials should be suitable to students' experiences, interests and needs. Textbooks should become the important window for students to face the society and understand the world and they should be taught with the combination of function and structure with the emphasis is laid on using English.

4. College English Reading Instruction Under Production-Oriented Approach (POA)

Reading provides a means to gain writing competence; reading provides learners with necessary language input (Hirvela, 2004). As is suggested by Tierney and Shanahan (1991), there is 25% to 50% overlap between reading and writing abilities. Therefore, reading instruction is of great importance in English teaching.

POA seems to be a feasible solution to our problems in current reading instruction. To conduct reading instruction effectively, teachers need to arrange teaching activities in accordance with the three teaching principles---"learning-centered", "learning-using integrated" and "whole-person education". Teachers need to alter their previous viewpoint of creating student-centered classrooms. On the contrary, our reading instruction

should be designed in such a way that learning could be truly taking place in class. To that end, teachers are strongly recommended to stimulate students to put what they have acquired from the input reading materials as well as their inert knowledge into practical use. Furthermore, teachers are required to, through reading instruction, improve students' comprehensive English proficiency and critical thinking, autonomous learning and cultural awareness to ensure their sound development.

This could be accomplished by careful selection of teaching materials and reasonable design of output tasks. In order to stimulate students' interest in reading, teachers may have to select reading materials suitable to their needs and design output tasks of practical value. In addition, to guarantee better learning results, the output tasks should be designed in a manner that is neither too difficult nor too easy so that students could on the one hand realize the inadequacy of their stored knowledge and on the other hand are inspired to take the challenges to accomplish these tasks.

During reading instruction, teachers have different roles to assume. They may have to introduce situations and topics related to their future studies and work to arouse their interests and enthusiasm for learning. They may need also to inform the students of the communicative and language objectives and output tasks they are expected to fulfill. They are also required to divide the tasks into subtasks and explicate the steps involved in completing the tasks and providing instructions to make sure that students could select from the input the content, language forms and discourse structure needed to complete the output tasks. Finally, teachers are advised to offer instructions and assessment to students to ensure that they could apply what they've learned from selective materials to the completion of output tasks.

5. Conclusion

Production-oriented approach may give new insight into our current college English reading instruction. Under this approach, teaching reforms need to be undertaken with regard to teaching objectives, teaching materials, teaching methods and assessment. Specifically, instructors are required to design appropriate output tasks to stimulate learners' motivation in reading. In addition, a wide variety of teaching activities need to be designed to fully involve students in classroom activities and ensure the completion of output tasks. Furthermore, teachers are expected to choose the teaching materials which are not only aimed at improving students' language knowledge, but also conducive to students' cross-cultural competence. Finally, immediate assessing and delayed assessing should be applied to guarantee the best possible learning results.

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