

Application of Production-Oriented Approach in College English Instruction in China: A Case Study

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Abstract

With effective learning as its core principle, Production-oriented Approach (POA) was developed to address the problems of English classroom instruction in China, such as text-centeredness, the separation of learning and using and “dumb English”. This study applied POA to college English classroom instruction in order to examine its effects on English learning and explore its implications for English instruction in the EFL context. Twenty-two second-year students majoring in Applied English in a Sino-US cooperative education program participated in the study. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to the students at the end of each unit and the semester, and semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants to elicit information about students’ motivation, engagement, reflections upon their learning process, and perceptions on the POA class. A variety of assessment tools, including the Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment approach, were applied to evaluate students’ performance and progress. The study revealed that POA played a positive role in stimulating students’ learning motivation and enhancing students’ communicative competence, especially in speaking and writing. However, the implementation of POA should also be adapted to learner’s variables and needs so that POA can realize its values and create successful results in practice.

Keywords: production-oriented approach, college English instruction, effective learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Present Study

English classroom instruction in Chinese universities has undergone rounds of reforms over the past decades. Remarkable innovations have been made in order to improve students’ English proficiency levels with flourishing teaching methodologies introduced to promote the effectiveness of English instruction in Chinese colleges and universities, such as Task-based Learning, Project-based Learning, Outcome-based Education, Flipped Class, Blended Teaching, etc. As a result, the English teaching modes in China’s higher education has shifted from teacher-centeredness to learners-centeredness, text-oriented approach to communication-oriented approach, and teaching English for general purposes (EGP) to teaching English for specific purposes (ESP). However, these methodologies, most of which are based on SLA theories, also met constraints in China’s context even though they had contributed to the development of English teaching in China to some extent at different times. Hence, there is a growing awareness of localizing SLA methodologies to meet China’s English learning context (Yu, 2019). The Production-oriented Approach (POA) is one of the efforts made to adapt the classic SLA pedagogical theories to the social, cultural, and historical contexts of English education in China (Wen, 2015).

English education in China has made significant achievements through decades of development, as mentioned above. However, there are still problems in English instruction at the higher education level. First, in practice, college English classes are still dominated by teacher-centered lecturing and less engaged students. Second, due to the limited classroom time, large class sizes and traditional classroom culture, a majority of college English teachers are stick to the traditional “top-down” and “bottom-up” methods in their classes where the text is taken as an end rather than a means of learning (Wen, 2016a). Under the influence of the above two teaching modes, teachers invest most of the class time in explaining vocabulary, grammar, and the meaning of the text, inevitably focusing on the transmission of knowledge rather than the cultivation of communicative competence. Accordingly, students have limited opportunities to practice language skills but passively follow the lectures

without thinking for themselves. As a result, students are not able to apply what they've learned in real-life contexts, nor can they develop their communicative competence, critical thinking, autonomous learning, and comprehensive language ability which are crucial for their career and personal development. On the other hand, teachers are also faced with challenges such as large class sizes, lack of advanced pedagogical knowledge, lack of practical assessment tools, deep-rooted examination-oriented classroom culture, etc. In this context, POA was initiated by Professor Wen (2015) to tackle these problems such as separation of learning and using, "high investment and low effectiveness"(Cai, 2006), and "dumb English"(Dai, 2001) in English classroom instruction in China, aiming to improve students' productive ability, knowledge application ability and overall humanistic qualities.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The current study applied POA in the specific college English teaching settings to examine its effects on improving teaching efficiency, and at the same time to provide insights into how to implement it in practice to ensure positive results. The study indicated that the application of POA in college English instruction changed the old mindsets of teaching and learning on both teachers and students and played a positive role in enhancing students' engagement, communicative competence, and application abilities. Furthermore, the study drew attention to the issue that teachers should always adapt their teaching strategies to students' variables and realize the values of POA in a specific EFL context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Origin of POA

POA was developed from the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), and interaction hypothesis (Allwright, 1984; Long, 1983), but overcame their limitations and adapted them to China's EFL context. Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) holds that language learners should be exposed to a substantial amount of comprehensible input to achieve communicative fluency. He assumed that speech would "emerge independently in time after the acquirer has built up linguistic competence by understanding input" (Richards, 2008:182), which was questioned by other researchers. The input hypothesis drew attention to the role of comprehensible input, and the notion of comprehensible input has manifested its significance in language teaching, but the implication that "success in a foreign language can be attributed to input alone" (Brown, 2002:281) exaggerated the function of input and belittled the role of output in language learning. Input is essential for language acquisition, but it is not sufficient for learning a language, especially when it comes to language production. Swain (1985) completed the idea by putting forward the Output Hypothesis, which suggests that "understanding and producing language are different skills and the second can only be developed by pushing the learner to produce output" (Johnson, 2002:95). Then, the Interaction Hypothesis involves both input and output, claiming that "when a learner interacts with someone, the learner receives input and produces output and it is in the interaction process that acquisition occurs" (Johnson, 2002:95). However, neither of them manifested that in certain EFL stages, output also serves as the driving force for effective learning, especially for the take-in of the input (Wen, 2015).

POA attempts to "break away from the outdated assumptions about the hierarchy of language learning—input over output...—that were promulgated as part of the early 20th century ideology of language and language learning known as audiolingualism" and challenges the notion that "listening and reading should precede speaking and writing" (Matsuda, 2017:468). Instead, it has developed a teaching procedure that starts from output activities and ends with output activities while input serves as the mediator or enabler.

2.2 Teaching Hypotheses

To overcome the weakness of the above three hypotheses and adapt them to Chinese settings, Wen (2015) developed a series of hypotheses of POA which consists of the out-driven hypothesis (ODH), input-enabled hypothesis (IEH), selective learning hypothesis (SLH).

ODH argues that "language learning with language output can achieve better outcomes than learning without output" and output can serve both as a driving force and a learning outcome (Wen, 2016a:531). In other words, with specific output tasks as the end, students are stimulated to learn intentionally and actively, so they are apt to improve their learning efficiency. In the output-driven stage, students are required to try the productive activities and then realize the gaps in their knowledge and language skills. By doing so, students would become more motivated and engaged in learning the input materials.

IEH assumes that "output-driven learning with appropriate enabling input materials leads to a better result" (Wen, 2016a:531). With appropriate input materials, students are able to go beyond the text and expand their

knowledge, thus becoming more prepared for the output tasks. IEH advises teachers to provide relevant input materials timely for the students to fulfill the productive tasks (Wen, 2015). It is noted that the enabling input materials should be tailored to the productive tasks so that students can learn effectively and improve their productive abilities.

SLH is derived from the premise that “success in classroom learning depends in part on the ability to bias memory processes towards retention of the most important information, rather than least important information” (Hanten et al., 2007:586). SLH maintains that learning efficiency is higher when learners process the input selectively with the focuses on specific productive activities (Wen, 2015). SLH advises teachers not to devote the classroom time to interpreting every detail of the text or other input materials, which is tedious and ineffective. Instead, teachers should select the input materials for deep processing, practice and memorization in accordance with the requirements of the productive tasks and students’ needs (Ren & Wang, 2018).

2.3 Teaching Principles

POA Classroom instruction is directed and guided by three teaching principles: Learning-centered principle (LCP), Learning-using integration principle (LUIP), and Whole-person education principle (WPEP).

LCP advocates that all the teaching activities should be designed to guarantee effective learning (Wen, 2015). LCP opposes teacher-centeredness and also challenges the popular learner-centeredness. Wen (2016a) argued that under the learner-centered principle, teacher’s functions are reduced as “a facilitator, consultant and helper” and learning are too dependent on learner’s autonomy, which has shown its limitations in adults language learning settings and China’s EFL context. On the contrary, under LCP, the teacher’s professional function has been reemphasized as “a director, designer and organizer” in classroom instruction (Wen, 2016a). To bring it into play, teachers are expected to be creative, resourceful and flexible. They should employ all possible means to engage students in learning, tailor the teaching strategies to students’ characteristics and different contexts, and plan classes skillfully to promote effective learning.

LUIP calls for the integration of learning and using, which means the input materials should directly serve the purpose of fulfilling productive tasks so that the students can effectively obtain new knowledge and skills. Under LUIP, the text is used as the means to fulfill the productive tasks rather than an end (Wen, 2016a). Students have to go beyond text comprehension and explore other resources to fill the gaps in their knowledge and language skills. At the same time, they should apply what they have learned through input to the productive tasks (Wen, 2016a). By doing so, the input is linked seamlessly to output. LUIP aims to “overcome the weakness in current text-centered, input-base, top-down English instruction in China” and calls for the attention on both learning and using language simultaneously (Wen, 2016a:529).

WPEP maintains that as a humanities subject, English education aims not only to develop students’ language proficiency but also to produce “socially developed and globally aware citizens” (Wen, 2016a:530). In other words, English education on the whole aims to cultivate students’ critical thinking, autonomous learning, problem-solving ability, and cross-cultural competence along with language competence, as is also stated in the National Standards for the Teaching Quality of Undergraduate English Majors in General Colleges and Universities issued by China’s Ministry of Education (2018). Wen (2015) pointed out that teachers can foster the students’ humanistic qualities by carefully selecting teaching topics and input materials conducive to the students’ personal growth, and skillfully designing the classroom activities such as pair or group work, writing journal, duty report and class presentation. These activities are beneficial to the cultivation of students’ team spirit, leadership, and habit of independent thinking and self-reflection. Furthermore, Wen (2015) emphasized that it is unnecessary to allocate extra time for the education of these goals, which can be realized within classroom instruction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Orientation

The current study aims to examine the effectiveness of POA in the specific EFL settings at ZYUFL and draw insights into how to put the values of POA into play in practice. The study was directed by the following questions:

- (1) To what extent POA could enhance students’ engagement and promote learning efficiency?
- (2) How to implement POA in real practice to ensure its effects in the specific EFL context?

3.2 Participants

Twenty-two second-year students majoring in Applied English participated in the study, including five males and seventeen females. All of them had scored at least 5.5 in IELTS test in order to be enrolled in the Sino-US cooperative education program, in which the specialized courses are taught by teachers from the U.S. partner university while the college English courses are taught by teachers from ZUYFL. The students in the program demonstrated a relatively higher level of English proficiency than the average second-year students. However, they were required to have a good command of language competence, especially in speaking and writing, to meet the program's standard.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were handed out to students at the end of each unit and the semester to investigate their motivation, engagement, and perceptions on the POA class. Semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants were conducted to elicit information about students' reflections on the learning process, self-evaluation of their performance, and perceptions. Students' writings were collected and rated online through the website www.pigai.org. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were presented in the form of percentages. The interviews were recorded, and the key points were highlighted for analysis.

4. The Implementation of POA in College English Instruction

In order to study how to apply POA in college English course specifically and investigate its effects on students' engagement and learning efficiency, the author implemented POA in the course entitled Comprehensive English 3, which is a compulsory course for second-year students in ZYUFL, with the goals to train students' integrated language skills and comprehensive humanistic qualities. Blended online and offline teaching are incorporated into the teaching process in order to realize the teaching goals. In this paper, unit 1 has been taken as an example for illustration.

4.1 Topic and Theme

The unit theme is "discovering yourself." There are two texts in this unit: text A *catching crabs* and text B *We are all dying* (Greenall & Wen, 2016). Text A was used for in-class instruction while text B was assigned for autonomous learning.

Text A is a story about a university student discussing his ideas on his future career with his father and how his father encourages him to make right choice through discovering himself. In the story, the writer first described his worries and confusion on the eve of graduation. In view of this, his father took him to catch crabs to help him make decisions. By observing the Crab Bucket Syndrome, the father taught his son not to follow the conventional expectations and peer pressure, but to learn more about himself, that is to find out where his interests are, what his strength is and how he wants to work (Greenall & Wen, 2016).

4.2 Teaching Objectives

Teaching objectives in this unit mainly involve three constituents: language knowledge, language skills and cognitive skills, which conform to the principles of POA.

For language knowledge, students are expected to master the relevant vocabulary, useful expressions and new sentence structures.

For language skills, students are expected to develop specific reading skills, speaking skills, and writing skills shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teaching objectives: language skills

Reading skills	Speaking skills	Writing skills
Understand the writing style of the text	Develop descriptive and narrative skills	Use evidences such as a story, figures or your own experience to support your argument
Use narrative devices in argumentation	Give advice on how to get to know yourself	Update narrative writing skills
Interpret the underlying meaning	Give opinions by comparing and contrasting	

For cognitive skills, students are expected to learn to think for themselves and think philosophically about life.

4.3 Teaching Process

The teaching procedure of POA includes three phases: (1) motivating, (2) enabling, and (3) accessing. Classes are designed according to the above three phases. (See Figure 1)

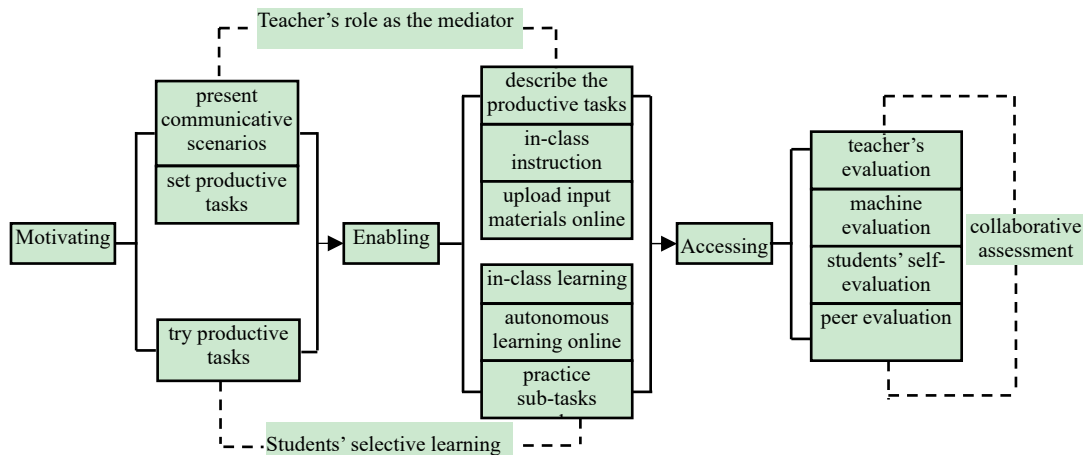


Figure 1. Teaching Procedure of POA

(1) Phase 1: Motivating

According to the POA model, in the stage of motivating, teachers first present the scenarios for the productive tasks and arouse students' interests and enthusiasm to use English for communicative purposes. Students are supposed to try the productive tasks and realize their deficiencies. Then the teacher makes explicit the learning objectives and requirement of specific tasks so that students will be stimulated to learn intentionally. According to POA, the scenarios should simulate the authentic situations students might encounter in their future work or studies. The productive activities are mainly oral and writing tasks, including journal writing, survey report, role-play, class presentation, and the like.

In this unit, two scenarios were set according to the topic and teaching objectives:

Situation 1: On the eve of graduation, you and your classmates are in a seminar concerning about graduates' career planning. You are discussing students' anxieties and ambitions. At the end of the seminar, you are expected to offer tips on how to overcome the fears and make the right choices for your career and life.

Situation 2: On a forum named "Employment Challenges of Graduates: Problems and strategies", you are going to make a speech on the topic *Discovering yourself* with your own experience and perspectives.

Productive tasks relevant to the scenarios were designated and segmented into several sub-tasks in the next stages, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Productive tasks and sub-tasks

Scenario	Productive task	Sub-task
Situation 1	Write a journal on the topic <i>Students' anxieties and ambitions about future careers</i> , using quotes, examples, and other evidences with explanations to support and strengthen your thesis.	1. Group work: make a questionnaire on the topic and discuss 2. Make a group presentation on the data collection and analysis 3. Role-play: describe the fears or worries about future career and life, and then give each other advice in turn.
Situation 2	Make a speech on the topic <i>Discovering yourself</i> , showing your critical perspectives on the topic.	1. Story-telling: some anecdotes in your life that you are inspired to discover yourself. 2. Watch relevant videos online and summarize the main idea of each video.

(2) Phase 2: Enabling

This phase is essential for POA in that it relates to IEH and SLH, linking learning and using (Wen, 2016a). In this stage, teachers describe the productive tasks specifically, provide scaffolding for students and guide them to complete the productive tasks step by step. It should be noted that enabling activities don't merely refer to the provision of the input materials, but also include output activities organized during the class, which function as the enabler (Qiu, 2020). For example, each productive task is segmented into several output tasks which are viewed as the enablers. Furthermore, the enabling activities should be designed according to students' present English levels to help them approach their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and become more competent to gradually finish the productive task.

In practice, there were four major steps in the enabling phase. First, students were informed of the necessary language items such as vocabulary, useful expressions and discourse structure by learning the text. At the same time, students were familiarized with the topic and were inspired to generate their ideas on the topic through text. In this unit, the first text *Catching Crabs* was instructed during the classes while the other one was assigned for autonomous learning, as mentioned above. Unlike the traditional classes, text instruction under POA focuses on relevant language knowledge and ideas rather than a detailed explanation of every aspect of the text. Then, apart from the text instruction, the teacher uploaded relevant input materials online to prepare students for each task. For example, the both texts' relevant language points such as words, expressions and sentence structures were listed online together with other input materials, which included mainly exemplary essays, videos and speeches of relevant topic. Next, students selectively learned the input materials provided by the teacher and they were also encouraged to search other materials needed to make up the information gap existing for the accomplishment of the tasks. Finally, students practiced the output tasks while the teacher prompted them to use what they had learned from the selective materials to make sure they could apply the input materials into the completion of output tasks (Ren & Wang, 2018). According to Wen(2016a), these steps could be rearranged and repeated according to the pedagogical situation until the students accomplish the productive tasks.

The productive tasks were divided into sub-tasks to enable students to finish the more difficult and complex productive tasks step by step. Accordingly, each sub-task was designed for a specific learning objective (See Table 3), building scaffolding from words to sentences and discourse structures.

Table 3. Learning objectives of sub-tasks

Sub-task	Learning objective
1. Group work: make a questionnaire on the topic <i>Students' anxieties and ambitions about future career</i> and discuss	Get to know how to collect data for an argumentative essay
2. Make a group presentation on the data collection and analysis.	Get to know how to analyze, present the data and use it as evidence in the journal
3. Role-play: describe the fears or worries about future career and life, and then give each other advice in turn.	Master the relevant language expressions Use relevant sentence structures in giving advice
4. Story-telling: some anecdotes in your life that you are inspired to discover yourself.	Apply skills of narration in argumentative essay Master the relevant language expressions
5. Watch relevant videos online and summarize the main idea of each video.	Grasp relevant ideas on the topic Master the new words and expressions for the speech

(3) Phase 3: Assessing

The assessment of POA consists of formative assessment and achievement assessment. The first one is applied in the enabling phase when students' works on sub-tasks are evaluated timely. The second one is applied when students submit productive tasks (Zhang, 2017; Wen, 2016b).

POA advocates Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment on the concept that students can make better achievements through learning the criteria and applying it to evaluate their own works. The implementation of collaborative assessment involves four steps. First, the teacher should set up the grading criteria jointly with the students at the beginning of the class. Second, the teacher selects some students' works unanimously as samples for discussion. In this process, students are asked to comment and score each work according to the grading

criteria, and then revise it for better revision. After that, the teacher makes his/her evaluation of the sample work and provides a better revision. Third, the teacher discusses common problems among the students. Finally, students are assigned to peer evaluate or self-evaluate the rest products after class (Wen, 2016b).

In practice, different kinds of assessments were implemented to promote learning, including teacher's evaluation, students' peer evaluation, self-evaluation, and machine evaluation. (a) Machine evaluation. For assessing the writing tasks, students were required to submit their products in the website www.pigai.org where journals were scored according to a set formula. Before the deadline, students could revise and submit their writings several times to get a higher score. After they finished the final products, the teacher displayed excellent journals in the class. (b) Peer evaluation. As for the assessment of students' oral tasks, peer evaluation is favored. The teacher made comments on the performance first, and then students were asked to make their evaluations according to a grid given out to each student so that students could better understand the criteria and make evaluation accordingly. (c) Teacher's evaluation. At the completion of this unit, the teacher conducted a quiz to check students' learning results on the new linguistic knowledge. (d) Portfolio. Each student was required to set up a portfolio at the beginning of the semester to keep records of the assessments and witness their progress.

The Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment approach engages students to participate in every classroom activity actively. In traditional classrooms, when a student is doing his/her oral presentation, the other students usually do nothing, nor do they give feedback or even pay attention. The Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment "raises the awareness of the importance of goal setting, formative assessment and feedback" (Pollo, 2017:466).

5. Results and Implications

The implementation of POA in college English courses can change the traditional class landscape where classes are dominated by lecturing and absent-minded students. The findings of this study showed that POA improved teaching efficiency in the following ways. First, under the POA model, students have demonstrated to be more interested and engaged in the learning process. According to a questionnaire made to investigate students' motivation, 79% of the respondents showed they were more willing to go beyond text comprehension and explore more about the unit theme than before. 68% of the respondents felt that with clearer learning goals in mind, they were more involved in class activities than before. In the interviews, students said that they obtained a sense of fulfillment after the productive tasks. Second, POA can promote students' learning efficiency by integrating learning and using simultaneously. Students have shown their awareness of using evidence to support their thesis on their writing task. Most of them used the data they collected as well as the anecdotes in their writings, making their argument sounder and more logical. For example, student A wrote:

"48% of the students want to be successful in a profession...while only 5 students want to have more freedom...And 6 students are eager to be rich."

Student B wrote:

"As university students, the biggest fear is not being able to graduate. All the 24 students (7 are final year students) showed they are afraid of being unable to graduate successfully. 23 out of 24 students fear of failing the exams, among them, 7 are final year students."

In terms of content, they expressed more of their own ideas in their writings than repeat what the text said. Furthermore, a majority of students have applied more or less the new vocabulary in their journals. For example, the new words and expressions such as *high-flyers*, *ambitious*, *peer pressure*, *map out*, *follow sb's path*, *be pulled back* were frequently found in students' writings. As for the oral tasks, students had more space to deliberate on their speech. It was noted that students could apply some new vocabulary in their speech, and they were more conscious of using evidence, transitional devices and discourse markers to make their speech more coherent and fluent. In the interviews, the respondents said that they were more prepared for the speeches, so they felt more confident to speak in front of the class. Finally, at the end of the semester, 84% of the respondents thought what they learned in this course was practical. 76% of them thought they had made progress in learning strategies during this course.

The implementation of POA has also posed challenges for both teachers and students. First, teachers should always update their pedagogical knowledge, change their old habit of teaching, and refresh their pedagogical expertise. Secondly, teachers should tailor their teaching methods to the characteristics and needs of students. The teaching objectives and classroom activities should vary according to students' levels of English proficiency. It's also necessary for teachers to modulate the teaching pace based on students' situations. Thirdly, in the assessment process, it is recommended that a series of criteria should be set up and vary according to different

tasks so that students can conduct self-evaluation and target their learning without difficulties. Last but not least, blended online and offline instruction is recommended in order to release the pressure of limited class time and extend the learning of input materials. On the other hand, students have their fair share of responsibilities too. They are expected to step out of their comfort zone, change their mindset on learning English and regard the productive task as a learning opportunity rather than an added assignment so that they can embrace the challenge and engage in effective learning.

6. Conclusion

POA has been developed as a response to the weakness of English classroom instruction in China and devoted to solving the problems existing in China's EFL context. The concepts and principles of POA resonate with various existing theoretical perspectives on language teaching and learning (Matsuda, 2017). For example, the ideas of learning driven by productive tasks with real practical values, the construction of authentic scenarios and collaborative assessment approach all can be viewed and justified in the light of social constructivism.

The value of POA has been proven by many English teachers and researchers in China (Ren, 2018; Zhang, W., 2017; Zhang L., 2017). However, as it's acknowledged by many researchers and experts, no one method can suit all kinds of situations of learning in this post-method era (Polio, 2018). In this sense, teachers should make alterations in different contexts to make it into full play, which is also embodied in the core spirit of the POA theory.

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