

Exploring the Production-Oriented Approach in *English through Films*: A Case Study at the College English Department, Soochow University

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Abstract

This study explores the application of the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) in the context of teaching English through films, aiming to enhance language acquisition and proficiency in the dynamic field of language education. The POA, which emphasizes active participation and practical application within the learning process, has received significant attention in recent years. By examining the implementation of the POA in an *English through Films* course at a university setting, this study investigates how the approach can effectively improve students' language skills. The research delves into the nuances of utilizing films as a medium for language learning and assesses the impact on students' language abilities, with a focus on their active engagement and practical application of the learned knowledge. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on innovative language teaching methodologies and offer insights into the effectiveness of the POA in enhancing language acquisition through film-based learning.

Keywords: the Production-Oriented Approach, *English through Films*, case analysis

1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of language education, innovative methodologies continually emerge, aiming to enhance language acquisition and proficiency. One such approach, the production-oriented approach (POA), has garnered attention for its emphasis on active participation and practical application within the learning process (Wen, 2018a). This study delves into the application of the POA within the context of teaching English through films, focusing on its implementation and outcomes within the College English Department at Soochow University, China.

In recent years, the integration of multimedia resources, particularly films, has become increasingly prevalent in language instruction (Rokni & Ataee, 2014; Yaseen & Shakir, 2015). Films offer a rich tapestry of linguistic nuances, cultural insights, and real-life scenarios, making them valuable tools for language learning (Kabooha, 2016). Coupled with the principles of the POA, which prioritizes experiential learning and language production, the incorporation of films into the curriculum holds promise for fostering a more immersive and engaging learning environment.

Soochow University, renowned for its commitment to academic excellence and innovation, provides an ideal setting for investigating the efficacy of this pedagogical approach. Within the College English Department, instructors of the course *English through Films*, have embraced the challenge of integrating films into their instructional practices, seeking to harness the potential of visual media to enhance students' language proficiency and cultural competence (Zhang & Wei, 2022).

This study aims to explore the practical applications of the POA in the course *English through Films* at Soochow University. Through a combination of qualitative analysis and empirical evidence, this study endeavors to contribute to the growing body of literature on innovative language teaching methodologies. By elucidating the nuances of employing the POA within the context of film-based instruction, it is hoped that this research will inform educators and curriculum developers in the field of language education, inspiring further exploration and refinement of pedagogical practices.

2. Literature Review

The POA, rooted in the input hypothesis by Krashen (1985) and the output hypothesis by Swain (1995), evolved from the “Output-Driven Hypothesis” (Wen, 2008) to the “Output-Driven, Input-Enabled Hypothesis” (Wen, 2014) and ultimately formed a comprehensive theoretical system. This approach emphasizes the integration of input and output skills, aiming to enhance students’ ability to use the language effectively in communication.

Since its inception, the POA has garnered significant attention from scholars in language teaching and second language acquisition. Professor Rod Ellis from Curtin University in Australia has provided positive feedback, suggesting that teachers should evaluate their courses appropriately, receive training on teaching materials, and provide students with opportunities for personal expression at the end of each unit. He also emphasizes the importance of cultivating students’ social interaction abilities and using descriptive evaluations of classroom processes (Ellis, 2017). Other scholars, such as Paul Kei Matsuda from Arizona State University and Paola Vettorel from the University of Verona, have also expressed appreciation for the POA, noting its clear principles and guidelines that can guide Chinese university English teachers to update their classroom practices and help students become active language users (Matsuda, 2017 & Vettorel, 2018).

The POA is gaining recognition and attention within the academic community in China as well. Numerous empirical studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of the POA in real-world teaching scenarios. These studies often involve classroom observations, questionnaire surveys, teacher-student interviews, and language proficiency tests. The results of these studies provide valuable insights into how POA can be effectively integrated into English language teaching, offering practical strategies and recommendations for teachers. Lu Wenxia praises that the POA is conducive to stimulating students’ learning motivation and helping them better clarify their learning goals (Lu & Zhu, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design for this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the POA in English language learning in *English through Films*. By employing a case study methodology, this research seeks to provide an in-depth exploration of the implementation and outcomes of this approach within the College English Department of Soochow University.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. Through qualitative data collection methods such as questionnaire, interviews, observations, and document analysis, this design facilitates the in-depth examination of students’ engagement with and responses to the application of the POA in *English through Films*.

3.2 Participants

Participants include EFL instructors from the College English Department of Soochow College, Soochow University and 537 second-year, non-English major students with an intermediate English level from Soochow University. Purposeful sampling is utilized to select participants who have experience with or are currently involved in teaching or learning English through films using the POA.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Questionnaire: A questionnaire is administered to students to gather quantitative data on their experiences and perceptions of the implementation of the POA in *English through Films*.

Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews are conducted with English instructors to gather insights into their perspectives, experiences, and strategies regarding the implementation of the POA in *English through Films*. Interview questions are designed to explore pedagogical approaches, challenges faced, and observed outcomes.

Classroom Observations: Observations of *English through Films* classes are conducted to observe teaching practices, student engagement, and interaction patterns. Detailed field notes are taken during observations to capture relevant information.

Analysis of student performance and assessments: Course syllabi, lesson plans, instructional materials, and student work samples are collected and analyzed to understand the design and implementation of the POA.

4. Implementation of the POA in *English through Films*

4.1 Teaching Objectives

Nowadays, new requirements have been proposed for college English teaching and talent cultivation. Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Education System and Mechanisms, published by Chinese government in 2017, point out that universities should “take talent cultivation as the central task and comprehensively improve their talent cultivation capabilities” and “pay attention to cultivating core competencies that support lifelong development and adapt to the requirements of the times (Zhang & Wei, 2022)”. In accordance with Opinions, professor Wen Qiufang proposes six core competencies in the POA that serve as essential skills for language learners (Wen, 2018b). These competencies, i.e., provide a comprehensive framework for language acquisition and development.

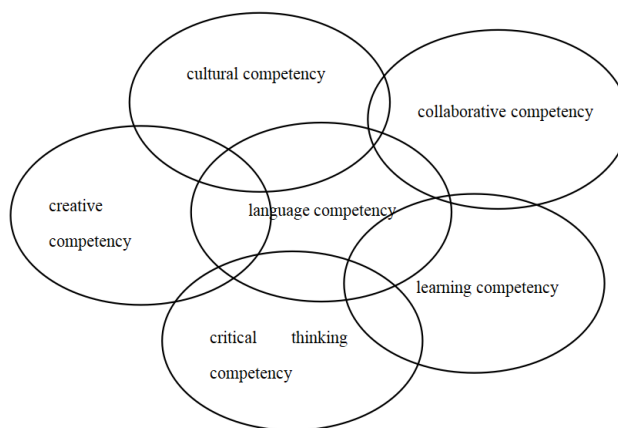


Figure 1. Six core competencies (Wen, 2018b)

Based on these six core competencies of the POA, *English through Films* aims to develop various competencies in language learners.

- (1) Language competency objective: Enhance vocabulary acquisition, improve listening comprehension, and reinforce grammatical structures through exposure to authentic language use in films.
- (2) Learning competency objective: Foster autonomous learning skills by encouraging students to reflect on their learning process, set goals, and self-assess their language proficiency.
- (3) Critical thinking competency objective: Develop analytical skills by encouraging students to analyze plot developments, character motivations, and themes portrayed in films critically.
- (4) Cultural competency objective: Increase intercultural awareness by exposing students to diverse cultural contexts, practices, and perspectives depicted in films.
- (5) Creative competency objective: Stimulate imagination and creativity by encouraging students to engage with film content creatively through storytelling, role-playing, or film analysis.
- (6) Collaborative competency objective: Foster teamwork and communication skills by engaging students in collaborative activities such as group discussions, film analysis projects, or film-based presentations.

4.2 Teaching Procedures

4.2.1 Motivating

The initial stage of the POA is “motivating”, where instructors prioritize creating an atmosphere that fosters enthusiasm and curiosity among students. In contrast to the typical “lead-in” or “warm-up” activities in traditional language instruction, motivating requires the instructor to clearly articulate the scenarios of tasks to be completed and how they can realistically occur in students’ future experiences (Wen, 2016). Unlike traditional language teaching methods, where warm-up activities may serve merely as icebreakers, the POA emphasizes the explicit presentation of tasks and their potential significance in students’ daily interactions or professional endeavors. Wen argues that by making tasks explicit and illustrating their practical relevance, instructors can effectively motivate students to engage in language production (Wen, 2008). This phase aims to activate students’ intrinsic motivation by highlighting the usefulness and applicability of language skills in real-world contexts.

The following table presents specific tasks and requirements during the motivating phase.

Table 1. Tasks, requirements and goals of the motivating phase

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tasks | The instructor outlines pertinent communicative scenarios. | Learners engage in the necessary productive task. | The instructor clarifies learning aims and productive tasks. |
| Requirements | Select scenarios possessing significant communicative value and the subjects for interaction should be cognitively challenging. | Help students identify their challenges in completing the necessary productive tasks and ignite their motivation to address these shortcomings. | Facilitate students' understanding of both communicative and language-related objectives; inform students of tasks and specific requirements. |
| Goals | Stimulate students' curiosity. | Enable students to recognize their areas of improvement. | Assist students in understanding instructional objectives and desired outcomes. |

In the class of *English through Films*, instructors implement Motivating by making explicit scenarios of to-be-finished tasks and how they plausibly might happen in students' future lives. Take "Pride and Prejudice", Unit 5, *English through Films*, for example. Two scenarios are described by instructors:

Scenario 1: You have been extended an invitation to participate as a guest on the reality TV program, "You're the One." During your conversation with the host, you will be sharing your perspectives on marriage and describing the qualities you seek in an ideal partner.

Scenario 2: Your school is organizing an international students' forum. The theme is "History and Culture". You are attending the forum and will give a speech on the Regency period in Britain. What would you say?

Students are encouraged to try out the assigned productive tasks by themselves before class. Through this initial trial, students may recognize precisely what they may be lacking in for the tasks: whether it's insufficient knowledge about the topic, uncertainty in expressing themselves in English despite having adequate knowledge, or difficulty organizing information effectively. By identifying their challenges, students gain clarity on where to focus their learning efforts and are motivated to learn when they come to the classroom.

In the last step of Motivating, instructors explain what students are expected to achieve at the end of the unit. The following are the linguistic objectives of the unit, "Pride and Prejudice".

- (1) Understand the plot, characters, themes, and key events depicted in "Pride and Prejudice."
- (2) Expand vocabulary through exposure to diverse language expressions.
- (3) Improve reading and writing skills through discussions, reflections, and written assignments based on the film.

As for the communicative objectives, students are expected to be able to summarize and discuss the main ideas and messages conveyed in the movie; enhance listening and speaking skills by actively engaging with dialogues and monologues; gain insights into the social, cultural, and historical context of the Regency era in England through exploration of societal norms, gender roles, and class distinctions depicted in the film. These objectives may pose a significant challenge for students prior to undertaking the unit. However, after two learning sessions, students are expected to attain these objectives through the "enabling".

4.2.2 Enabling

Enabling, the essential part of the POA, involves guiding students through a structured sequence of steps crafted by the instructor, aiming at progressively enhancing their capabilities. During this phase, instructors facilitate learning by providing structured support and scaffolding, helping students transition from lower to higher levels of proficiency. The emphasis is on gradually building students' language skills and confidence through a systematic progression of activities.

The following table presents specific tasks and requirements during enabling phase.

Table 2. Tasks, requirements and goals of the enabling phase

| | | | | |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tasks | The instructor provides guidance on how to complete the productive tasks, the resources to be provided or sourced, and the learning goals to be accomplished. | The instructor breaks down a complex productive task into smaller, manageable mini-tasks and supplies students with the necessary supporting materials for each one. | Students selectively read or listen to the provided materials while the instructor offers guidance and assesses their learning outcomes. | Once students have completed their selective learning of the provided materials, they engage in practicing a mini-productive task. |
| Requirements | Familiarize students with the tasks, procedures, and specific requirements for each step. | Ensure that students can articulate the logical connections between each mini-task and understand how segments of the provided materials relate to each mini-task. | Enable students to select relevant ideas, language, and/or discourse structures from the given materials | Encourage students to apply the knowledge they have gained from the provided materials to successfully complete their productive task. |
| Goals | Enhance teaching effectiveness; students to generate output tasks; | Empower | Enhance students' productivity skills. | English language |

In *English through Films*, instructors implement Enabling by assigning students manageable mini-tasks as well as offering them supporting materials. For example, one of the overall productive activities for “Pride and Prejudice” is to share perspectives on marriage and describe the qualities one seeks in an ideal partner. To accomplish this activity, students must first finish two sub-activities—analyzing Mr. Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s virtues respectively and comparing different couples in the film—that enable them to carry out the more challenging activity.

To help students accomplish these two tasks, instructors provide the following supporting materials for students:

- (1) Film Clips: Provide selected film clips featuring key moments involving Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, and other couples in “Pride and Prejudice”. Ask students to analyze these clips and identify instances where virtues are demonstrated by the characters.
- (2) Visual Aids: Use visual aids such as character maps, timelines, or charts to visually represent the virtues of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, as well as the relationships between different couples in the film. Visual aids can help students organize their thoughts and make connections between characters more easily.
- (3) Worksheets or graphic organizers: Provide worksheets or graphic organizers, including sections for listing character traits, providing evidence in the film, and reflecting on the significance of these virtues. These worksheets help prompt students to identify and analyze the virtues of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth separately.
- (4) Character profiles: Create character profiles for Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, outlining their background, personality traits, strengths, weaknesses, and key moments in the film that highlight their virtues. This can serve as a reference guide for students as they analyze and compare the characters.
- (5) Literary Criticism Articles: Provide excerpts from literary criticism articles that analyze the characters of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth in “Pride and Prejudice”. These readings can offer students different perspectives and interpretations to consider as they analyze the virtues of the characters.

With these enablers, instructors guide students in learning step-by-step from their existing knowledge base, in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), expanding their linguistic systems and rhetorical devices gradually and progressively (Wen, 2015).

4.2.3 Assessing

According to the POA, assessment can be categorized into two types. The first is ongoing diagnostic and formative classroom assessment that takes place in the enabling phase when students do selective learning or practice their mini-productive tasks while the second is achievement assessment, which refers to the assessment undertaken at the next round of classes through students’ repeated practice outside class to check whether the students have achieved the objectives of the unit learned (Wen, 2018a).

Table 3. Tasks, requirements and goals of the assessment phase

| | | | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tasks | Instructors and students set up criteria of assessment together. | Students submit their products to instructors. | Instructors and students evaluate the typical products collaboratively in class. | Instructors and students evaluate the remaining products after class. |
| Requirements | Make criteria clear, comprehensible and easy to check by students themselves. | Submit the product with an acceptable format before the deadline. | Instructors prepare before class to ensure that evaluation comments are to the point and relate to students' production; enable all students to participate in assessment by all means. | Put each student's personal products with assessments in portfolios as part of the grade for this course. |
| Goals | Evaluate students' language production skills; | Provide constructive feedback to students based on their language production; | Enable students to take ownership of their learning by providing self-assessment and reflection; | |

In *English through Films*, instructors use a combination of formative and summative assessment methods to keep track of students' progress and evaluate their overall language learning outcomes. Formative assessments, such as quizzes, class discussions, and peer feedback, provide ongoing feedback to guide instruction and support student learning. Summative assessments, such as exams, presentations, and portfolios, measure students' language proficiency and achievement of learning objectives.

(1) Language Proficiency Assessment: Instructors assess students' language proficiency by evaluating their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in the context of film-based activities. Use comprehension questions, discussions, and written assignments to measure students' understanding of dialogue, vocabulary, and grammar structures presented in films.

(2) Critical Thinking Assessment: Instructors design assessment tasks that require students to analyze and interpret film scenes, characters, themes, and cultural elements. Encourage students to critically evaluate the portrayal of language and culture in films and express their opinions through written reflections or class discussions.

(3) Collaborative Learning Assessment: Instructors incorporate group activities or collaborative projects where students work together to analyze films, discuss language usage, and solve language-related tasks. Evaluate students' collaboration skills, teamwork, and contributions to group discussions or projects.

5. Observations and Results

5.1 Student Engagement and Participation

The implementation of the POA in *English through Films* has significantly enhanced student engagement and participation, leading to improved performance in various aspects of language learning. For example, students became more actively involved in classroom activities. The motivating phase of the POA, which highlights the relevance and practicality of language skills in real-world contexts, successfully ignited students' curiosity and motivation. Students were more eager to engage in productive tasks, such as analyzing film clips, discussing character motivations, and reflecting on themes. This active participation not only made the classroom atmosphere livelier but also facilitated deeper learning and understanding.

Also, the POA encouraged collaborative learning, where students worked together to complete tasks and solve problems. Teachers noticed that students effectively communicated with each other, sharing ideas, and perspectives. This collaboration enhanced their teamwork skills and ability to complement each other's knowledge. Additionally, students were more willing to seek help from peers and teachers, creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

5.2 Questionnaire

After implementing the POA in *English through Films* for a term, 537 students completed a questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of the teaching model, which was designed to gather quantitative data on students' experiences and perceptions. The questionnaire contains a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative and qualitative data.

A descriptive statistical analysis of the answers given by the students revealed that on a general level, students considered the implementation of the POA in *English through Films* as effective. Most of the participants believed that the instructional approach was effective in enhancing their language abilities and maintaining their engagement. As to the question: To what extent do you feel that this course has helped improve your language skills in English? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "Not at all" and 10 being "Significantly". Nearly sixty-seven percent of the students strongly agreed that the teaching model of *English through Films* has helped improve their language skills significantly.

The majority of the students strongly agree that this teaching model facilitates their independent learning, communication and interaction, the acquisition and expansion of more English language knowledge, helps complement each other's knowledge and enhances their problem-solving abilities as well as critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, more than half of the students believe that the teaching content is highly practical, easy to comprehend, innovative and vivid, diverse and rich.

Table 4. Facilitation of Learning and Communication

| Statements | Agreement Level | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| This teaching model facilitates independent learning. | Strongly Agree/Agree | 97.58% |
| This teaching model facilitates communication and interaction. | Strongly Agree/Agree | 95.53% |

Table 5. Language Knowledge and Problem-Solving Abilities

| Statements | Agreement Level | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| This teaching model facilitates the acquisition of English knowledge. | Strongly Agree/Agree | 96.09% |
| This teaching method enhances my problem-solving abilities. | Strongly Agree/Agree | 96.56% |

Table 6. Critical Thinking and Teaching Content Evaluation

| Statements | Agreement Level | Percentage |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| This teaching method enhances my critical thinking skills. | Strongly Agree/Agree | 96.36% |
| The teaching content is practical, easy to comprehend. | Strongly Agree/Agree | 92.93% |

5.3 Teachers' Interviews and Reflective Journals

An analysis of the interviews conducted with the teachers as well as the reflective journals submitted showed that implementing the POA in *English through Films* is beneficial for improving students' motivation, ability to gather information as well their team spirit.

T1: "In previous teaching, the teacher was responsible for analyzing the themes, the characters in the films, and students passively received information, resulting in a relatively dull classroom atmosphere. Now, with production-oriented instruction, students are more active in class, and the atmosphere is livelier."

T2: "After students are informed of the unit tasks, they have clear objectives, so they will actively seek information to help themselves complete the tasks. In this process, students' ability to gather information and their teamwork skills are both enhanced."

Overall, the findings show that implementing the POA in *English through Films* significantly enhances students' motivation, ability to gather information, and team spirit. Teachers have observed a shift from a passive reception of information to a more active and vibrant classroom atmosphere. Specifically, one teacher noted that in previous teaching methods, the teacher was solely responsible for analyzing film themes and characters,

leading to a dull classroom environment. However, with the POA, students are now more engaged and active in class. Also, because students are given clear unit tasks, they, therefore, actively seek information to complete these tasks, thereby improving their information-gathering abilities and teamwork skills. Overall, the POA in *English through Films* is beneficial for fostering a more dynamic and collaborative learning environment.

6. Discussion

6.1 Benefits of Implementing the POA in *English through Films*

Generally speaking, implementing the POA in *English through Films* offers numerous benefits for language learners and provides a holistic approach to language learning.

(1) Enhanced Students' Motivation: Students are more engaged and motivated when they are actively involved in the learning process, rather than passively receiving information. Films can provide a stimulating and enjoyable context for language learning, making students more interested and eager to participate while the POA assists them in identifying their areas of improvement and how to enhance their skills.

(2) Active Learning and Engagement: The POA emphasizes active learning, where students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process and engage with the material in meaningful ways. This can lead to deeper understanding and retention of the material being studied.

(3) Enhanced Language Skills: By presenting analyses of films in English, students gain valuable opportunities to hone their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in a meaningful and authentic learning environment. This can lead to improved fluency, accuracy, and overall proficiency in the language.

6.2 Challenges Faced by the Teachers as well as the Students

In the implementation of the POA in *English through Films*, both teachers and students encounter a range of challenges.

For teachers, one of the primary hurdles is designing tasks that are both meaningful and authentic, while also ensuring they align with the students' language proficiency and interests. Additionally, teachers must navigate the complex balance of fostering active participation and critical thinking among students, while also maintaining a structured and focused learning environment. Moreover, teachers face challenges in adapting the POA to the specific needs and characteristics of their students. This includes understanding how to effectively integrate film analysis into the curriculum to enhance language learning, as well as assessing students' progress and providing feedback in a way that is both informative and motivating. Furthermore, the transition to a more student-centered approach, as advocated by the POA, requires teachers to let go of traditional control over the classroom and embrace a more facilitating role, which can be daunting for those accustomed to more directive teaching methods.

Students, on the other hand, also encounter challenges in adapting to the POA within *English through Films*. Some may struggle with the increased level of autonomy and responsibility required for active participation and task completion. Additionally, students with lower language proficiency may find it challenging to engage deeply with film content and express their ideas effectively in English. The requirement to analyze and critique films in English can also be a significant challenge for students who are not yet confident in their language abilities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored the practical applications of the POA in the *English through Films* course at Soochow University. Through a comprehensive analysis, incorporating both qualitative and empirical evidence, the study has demonstrated the effectiveness of the POA in enhancing language learners' various competencies, including language, critical thinking, cultural, creative, and communicative skills. By examining the nuances of implementing the POA within a film-based instructional context, this research has provided valuable insights into innovative language teaching methodologies.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on language teaching and learning, particularly in the realm of utilizing multimedia resources such as films to foster comprehensive language proficiency and critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, the positive feedback from students and the observed improvements in their language production skills, as well as their engagement and participation in the course, underscore the potential of the POA to revolutionize language education. Ultimately, this study hopes to inspire further research and the adoption of the POA in various educational settings to enhance the overall effectiveness of language teaching and learning.

While this paper has attained specific research outcomes, it does have certain limitations. The research solely

concentrates on implementing the POA teaching theory in *English through Films*. Additionally, the duration of the teaching experiment is relatively brief, and the selection of research subjects lacks comprehensiveness. In future research endeavors, it is imperative to broaden the research sample for the teaching experiment and prolong the duration of the experiment. This will serve as a foundation for enhancing the quality of English teaching.

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