

The Application of the POA in College English Teaching

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Abstract Since the 1980s, English language teaching for non-English majors has been an integral part of general education in higher educational institutes in China. It aims to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness. To accomplish these goals, numerous researches have been done to decide what the most suitable teaching methodology is for Chinese students. The Production-Oriented Approach (POA), proposed by professor Wen Qiufang, advocates that all teaching activities in the classroom should be aimed at students' productive output, and students are expected to participate actively in genuine communicative activities. As a foreign language teaching theory with Chinese characteristics, the POA is currently widely used in foreign language teaching with remarkable teaching effects. However, as to the teaching procedure and how to apply this methodology to English teaching, teachers are often confused as there are different interpretations of the POA. This paper designed a 6-session teaching plan based on the theoretical framework of the POA. Through this 6-session teaching experiment, students were found to be more motivated and more eager to learn. They were equipped with enough input enabling materials for their final productive output. Teaching and learning were, therefore, more explicit and efficient. In the meantime, this kind of teaching is highly demanding for both teachers and students, whose joint efforts are required to bring out the better outcomes of college English teaching. With a clear description of the teaching procedure which includes three phases—motivating, enabling and assessing, this paper aims to shed some light on a possible new way of college English teaching in China.

Keywords POA, College English Teaching, Challenges

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, English language teaching for non-English majors has been an integral part of general education in higher educational institutes in China. It focuses on the holistic and humanistic education of students, aiming to cultivate students' cross-cultural communication abilities and interpersonal skills. In *the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)*, which served as the national syllabus for teaching English as a foreign language at the college level in China, the teaching goals of college English courses for the non-English-majors are defined as:

To develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions, they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges. [1]

To accomplish these goals, numerous researches have been done to decide what the most suitable teaching methodology is for Chinese students.

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA), a new TEFL theory proposed by professor Wen Qiufang, has been developed over the past decade "with the aim of improving

English classroom instruction at the tertiary level in Mainland China" [2]. This theory advocates that all teaching activities in the classroom should be aimed at students' production and students are expected to participate actively in genuine communicative activities. As a foreign language teaching theory with Chinese characteristics, the POA is currently widely used in foreign language teaching with remarkable teaching effects.

In this paper, a 3-week (6-session) teaching experiment based on the POA was conducted, aiming to test the effectiveness of this teaching methodology and shed some light on a possible new way of college English teaching. The following is a detailed description of the whole teaching procedure.

2. Literature Review

Since the POA was proposed, China has seen a surge in research on this theory, the theoretical system of which has been continuously tested, revised, and improved over many years of exploration and practice. Generally speaking, researchers mainly use POA to study language skills from theoretical and empirical dimensions.

Theoretical studies mainly design teaching models for skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, aiming at providing effective guidance for teaching activities and improving students' language productive ability. Zhao Jingna [3], for instance, explored a new model of oral English teaching, which is output-oriented. She organically combined oral assessment (output), classroom teaching (input) and extra-curricular oral training (output) to form an interactive and mutually reinforcing oral English training system.

The empirical studies mainly apply POA to college English teaching to test its feasibility. For example, Zhang

Wenjuan [4] showed in a two-week teaching trial that the POA could greatly increase students' writing level, particularly their mastery of the target language in the writing process, as well as their interest in English writing.

According to the CNKI database, however, the majority of the research focuses on the analysis and debate of how POA theory is coupled with English curriculum development or in a theoretical sense. Besides, empirical researches are not enough compared with current theoretical researches. [5] This paper, therefore, makes an attempt to apply POA to college English teaching by providing a detailed description of the teaching procedure and test the effectiveness of the theory according to the 3-week teaching experiment.

3. Implementing POA: An Example

In this part, the second unit of the textbook *iEnglish Two* (published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2020) was taken as an example to design the teaching procedures based on the POA. The topic of this unit is "Friendship we live by", which introduces views about friendship. It consists of two texts, *iExplore 1* "Friendship's Like Buying a House" and *iExplore 2* "Are Your Friends an Elevator or a Cage?".

40 freshmen, non-English majors from Soochow University, were involved in the teaching experiment. Like average college students, they had a relatively large amount of receptive knowledge but limited experience of using English for communication. During the teaching experiment, they were supposed to finish the unit in 6 sessions (3 weeks) and complete the presentation for the unit project. After the experiment, the author collected feedback and evaluations from students through their presentations, interviews, etc.

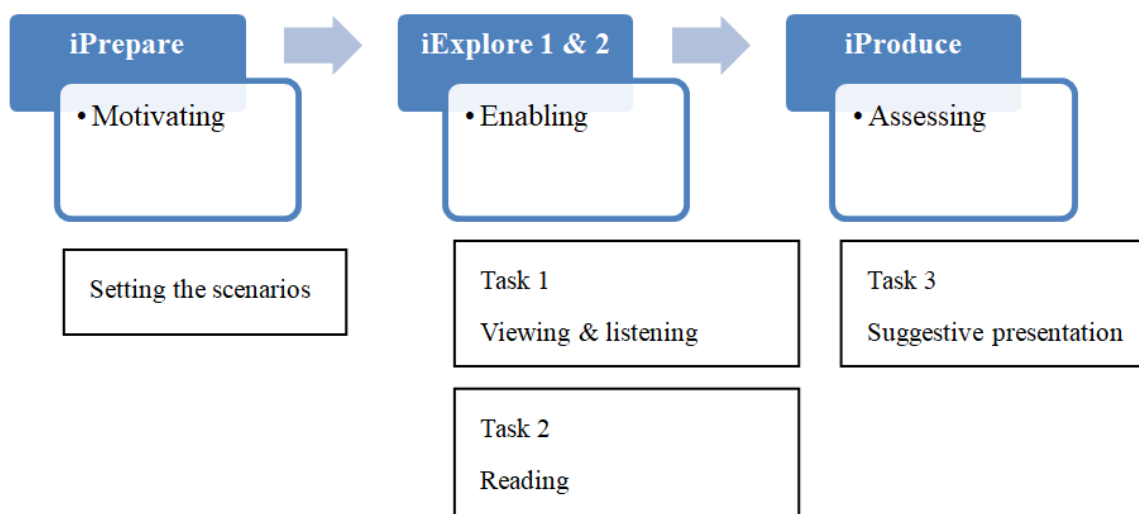


Figure 1. Structure of Unit 2, *iEnglish Book 2*

3.1. Teaching Objectives

College English teaching at Soochow University aims to improve students' English proficiency and language skills (especially their productive skills) through various kinds of training; cultivate their cross-cultural communication skills; and most importantly, ingrain China's longstanding and unique traditions, culture, and values into students, make them ready for today's globalized world and also make them messengers of the values they embody.

Therefore, after learning the unit, students were supposed to

- 1) at the language level, master new words, expressions, and useful sentence structures related to the topic, and identify the rhetorical devices of simile and metaphor;
- 2) at the knowledge level, understand the importance of friendship, examples, elements, and some rules about it, therefore, expand their knowledge base.
- 3) at the ability level, the unit project for them was a topic-related speech/report, designed to train their speaking skills and cultivate their ability to tell Chinese stories in English and therefore spread the traditional Chinese culture to the world;
- 4) at the same time, the teaching of the unit was designed to help students develop morally sound values, especially in making friends.

3.2. A Description of the Teaching Plan

Wen [2] proposed that the POA consists of three components: (a) teaching principles; (b) teaching hypotheses; and (c) teacher-mediated teaching processes. The teaching principles include "learning-centered", "learning-using integration", "cultural communication" and "key competency"; and the teaching hypotheses are "output-driven", "input-enabled", "selective learning" and "learning by assessing". The teaching processes contain three phases, each mediated by the teacher: motivating, enabling, and assessing. Following these principles and hypotheses, the teaching experiment was designed to be online and offline combined and included 3 phases: motivating (online, before class), enabling (offline, in class) and assessing (online and offline, in and after class).

3.3. Three Phases of Teaching

3.3.1. Motivating

Different from other teaching approaches, motivating is the initial phase of the POA. Unlike the "lead-in" or "warm-up" activities in traditional English teaching, the motivating phase assigns students scenarios that might

relate to their future lives, thus arousing students' interest and eagerness in learning.

In the textbook *iEnglish Book 2, iPrepare* of Unit 2 matches with the motivating phase, which presents two scenarios of to-be-finished tasks:

Situation 1

Soochow University is holding an annual English speaking contest. The topic for this year is: Friendship is _____. You are going to take part in the contest and give a speech on this topic.

Situation 2

Your college has established a website for overseas students, which contains a column highlighting the outlook of Chinese people on various issues. The theme of this month is "Friendship is ____". You are going to contribute a report to this column about your classmates' views on friendship. How do you describe their views? How can you present the reasons behind their views?

These two scenarios were assigned to students before class through online learning platform. These two tasks were quite challenging for freshmen whose speaking and communicative abilities were relatively low. The POA assumes that since these scenarios are likely to happen in students' real lives, students will be motivated to learn and grasp what the unit teaches to avoid the possible embarrassment and failure in the future.

The second step of the motivating phase is to ask students to try out the designated productive tasks. Students are required to make an audio or a video of their speech as well as the report. Through their initial trial, students could realize what they lack for these productive tasks:

1. I don't know the related expressions with friendship. My vocabulary is not large enough for me to express freely on this topic.
2. I have limited information about different views on the topic.
3. I don't know how to organize my ideas in the speech/report.

This step aimed to help students realize their deficiencies in English learning, and stimulate their enthusiasm to complete the tasks, thus preparing the brain for learning.

The last step of motivating is to explain to students what they are supposed to achieve upon completion of this unit. At the end of the unit, students could check whether they can achieve the goals and assess the effectiveness of their learning according to the following objectives.

Table 1. Teaching objectives of Unit 2 (cited from Wang et al. [6])

Objectives	Tasks
talk about friendship using new vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewing (iExplore 1&2) Reading (iExplore 1& 2)
identify the rhetorical devices of simile and metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharpening your skills (iExplore 2)
explain some unspoken rules and different views about friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading text (iExplore 1) Understanding the text (iExplore 1)
clarify the reasons and ways to build up a win-win friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading text (iExplore 2) Understanding the text (iExplore 2)
write a report on people's views about friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unit project (iProduce)
express personal opinions about friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading texts (iExplore 1 & 2) Unit project

3.3.2. Enabling

As Zhang Wenjuan [7] said, the second phase is called "enabling", which is the essential part of the teaching of the POA as the IEH (Input-enabling hypothesis) and SLH (Selective-learning hypothesis) are brought to the fore and tested in this phase. Enabling means instruction must follow a series of steps designed and guided by the teacher, who sets up scaffolds for students and leads them from being less competent to more skilled and able. During this phase, Wen [8] maintains that teachers should not simply or arbitrarily assign productive activities to students but rather find ways to guide students in learning step-by-step from their existing knowledge base, in a Zone of Proximal Development, expanding their linguistic systems and rhetorical devices gradually and progressively. For Unit 2 of *iEnglish Book 2*, there are two texts as enablers and four sessions were assigned in this phase.

In session 1, some extra input materials for students were chosen to read and listen as a Warm-up, aiming to help students build their language for the unit project. For example, several friendship quotes and proverbs were included in the teaching as they exemplified the importance of friendship.

- Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods. (by Aristotle, Greek philosopher)
- When at home, one depends on one's parents, and when away from home, one needs the support of friends. (Chinese proverb)
- A bosom friend afar brings distant land near. (by Wang Bo, Chinese poet)

Also, some examples of great friendship in history were shown to students: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi, Oath of the Peach Garden (friendship of Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei) and Li Bai and Wang Lun, which they could cite in their future presentations.

Then, students were asked to have a group discussion on

the elements of friendship. After their discussion, they were shown certain characteristics that most friendships share, including kindness, love, sympathy, empathy, honesty, loyalty, mutual understanding, enjoyment of each other's company, trust, etc..

All the above inputs were carefully selected by the teacher as they were relevant to the final productive tasks by providing enough words and expressions related to the topic. They could help students build up an active vocabulary around the theme of friendship.

In session 2 to 4, some more input enablers were given to students. Teacher chose and explained some difficult expressions and sentences from the two texts of *iExplore*, helping students have a thorough understanding of the texts contextually and linguistically.

The teaching, however, centered more on identifying and synthesizing information, which helped students obtain ideas from the texts. For example, students were asked to read the introduction (Para. 1) and the conclusion (Para. 7) to understand the organization of the text. Then teacher explained that the author distinguished a friendship from other relationships in the very beginning and suggested an unusual perspective on the topic. As for the concluding paragraph, Epicurus' saying—"Of all the things that wisdom provides to help one live one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship. Eating or drinking without a friend is the life of a lion or a wolf"—was explained to help students understand that the end of the text emphasized the importance of friendship.

In Viewing and speaking, students were assigned task 1 to share their opinions and express their personal views on and attitudes toward friendship. The following questions served as enablers for them:

- What would you compare friendship to? Why?
- What's your attitude toward loyalty and usefulness of friendship?
- What would you do if you find a friendship becomes disappointing?

In Reading, students were given task 2. They were guided to work in groups to read the text in five minutes and find the author's views on friendship.

Table 2. Mini-productive task 2 in class

Groups	Questions	Paragraphs
Group 1	What do people usually do to deal with a failing friendship?	Para. 3
Group 2	What are the conflicting views on friendship?	Para. 4
Group 3	Why does the author compare friendship to buying a house?	Para. 6

The two tasks could be taken as the mini-productive tasks for the final Unit project. They were designed to help students to know some unspoken rules and various views about friendship mentioned in the text, which could help them develop morally sound values, especially in making friends. In the meantime, they aimed to teach students how to summarize others' views so that they could effectively carry out the Unit project.

It should be noted that, during the process of students' trying out the two tasks, enough scaffolds should be provided to help students approach their zones of proximal development.

(3) Assessing

As for the assessment, the ongoing diagnostic and formative classroom assessment that took place in the enabling phase, was carried out all the way during the whole process of students' learning and practicing the mini-productive tasks. Students were assessed as whether they actively participate in classroom activities and make any progress. And the achievement assessment, which was undertaken to check whether students have achieved the objectives of the unit, was to assess students' language products: a speech or a report on friendship. Therefore, the assessment was both formative and summative.

With enough input enablers, students were required to draft a detailed outline of their presentation (speech or report) after class and were asked to take a further reading of the texts which could help polish their language. Before their presentation, criteria of assessment were given to students so that they could refer to these requirements to polish their speech or report. The following three aspects were included in the criteria: content, structure and language.

3.4. Content

Students were supposed to include the following aspects in their speech/report:

- Friendship's meaning and importance in my opinion;
- Different people's views about friendship and reasons behind their opinions;
- Your summary.

3.5. Structure

Students were reminded that their presentation should consist of the following three parts:

Table 3. Structure of a presentation

Introduction	Explain the purpose of the report or tell an introducing story of the speech.
Main body	Group different viewpoints from different angles (e.g. how important friendship is to different people, what is the nature of friendship, what important qualities friendship involves, etc) Present the reasons behind their viewpoints
Conclusion	Make a summary of all the viewpoints and give the presenter's own view about friendship

3.6. Language

Students were expected to make full use of the expressions they'd learned from the texts, for example, expressions related with personal opinions about friendship.

These criteria were made clear, comprehensible and easy to check by students, therefore providing guidelines for students to follow in preparing their presentation.

In session 5 & 6, when students gave their presentations in class, evaluation was done by making comments on the following aspects and completing the checklist.

Table 4. Evaluation checklist

Checklist	Score (1-5)
The presenter states his/her ideas clearly and logically.	
The examples have been properly selected and can support the view.	
The language of the presentation is clear and accurate.	
Expressions from the texts are used.	
Visual aids are used to help with illustration.	
The presenter's voice is loud and clear enough.	

Apart from teacher's evaluation, students were also expected to make peer assessment and give comments on others' presentation. This kind of collaborative assessment could arouse student's interest in learning and engage them more in classroom activities than teacher's feedback alone.

4. Results

After the teaching experiment, the research group collected the students' learning experience and evaluation of teaching through interviews. As for the effectiveness of the teaching method, the majority of the students held a positive attitude, reckoning "various sub-tasks improve classroom efficiency and help us make full use of the time

in class". As for the learning achievement, a vast majority of students thought "having achieved a great deal" in terms of language knowledge, cultural awareness, and communication skills. Besides, fast paced and output-oriented teaching can fully motivate students' interest in learning. "Since I'm given a task and know exactly what I'm expected to do, I am eager to learn the relevant information taught by the teacher." said one student.

From students' feedback, it is clear that the POA is indeed feasible and effective for English learning as most of the students in the experimental class performed well in terms of language, ideas, and organization. Some students, who did not even give public speaking a second thought, delivered a speech/report successfully in front of the class. Through casual talks and interviews with students after the experiment, most students reported that since learning and using language were integrally joined, they were more eager to learn than before, which was in accordance with the output-driven hypothesis (ODH) of the POA. Wen [9] claims that once students understand the value of a productive task and become aware of what they lack for fulfilling the task, they will become more active and more engaged in studying the enabling materials. Output serves as a driving force for students in language learning and motivates them to grasp new knowledge.

Besides, since students are given enough input enablers for their productive activities, they know exactly the words, expressions, contents and even structure for their presentation. Two corresponding tasks in class effectively facilitate the completion of the output. All they need to do after class is to digest all the information they've obtained in class and prepare for the speech/report. The input enablers serve as the scaffolds, leading students to approach their own zones of proximal development [10].

5. Challenges

5.1. Challenges to Teachers

Teaching based on the POA poses great challenges to the teachers. Teachers need to spend more time and energy planning their teaching, dealing with both the classroom activities and the after-class feedback from students. For example, to plan this 6-session teaching experiment, the teacher devoted a large amount of time in accordance with the selective learning hypothesis of the POA. Selective learning means that only what is relevant to the assigned productive activity is to be chosen and learned as the input enablers. This hypothesis assumes that output-driven learning with enabling input materials can lead to better outcomes when the input is selectively processed with a specific purpose for a productive activity [11]. During the teaching experiment, because of the limited time in class, the teacher had to select language inputs carefully to fulfill

productive activities. These enablers such as viewing and speaking activities, reading materials, had to provide students with "relevant ideas, linguistic expressions and discourse structures" [2]. Searching these materials will definitely take up a large amount of time.

Besides, the role of a teacher in the POA teaching model has been transformed to become "a mentor, a designer, a leader, an organizer and a motivator of learning interest". Teacher not only provides the best language learning environment for students, but also plays an important intermediary role in "guiding, assisting, promoting and encouraging learners' language learning" [12]. Therefore, teachers must improve their own teaching skills to give comments and effective guidance. Besides, teamwork needs to be brought into full play in planning the teaching, which may be more efficient and creative.

5.2. Challenges to Students

Challenges brought to students are also multifaceted. Firstly, unlike traditional English teaching which pays more attention to improve students' reading and writing skills, teaching based on the POA creates more opportunities for students to speak up. Therefore, overcoming shyness to express themselves in English is the most obvious challenge for students. Then, students are required to be fully engaged and actively participate in classroom activities as this kind of teaching provides more interactions in class. Also, the mini-productive tasks and the Unit project are quite challenging for students, especially those whose oral English is not that good. Moreover, understanding the input enablers and producing the output have set a higher demand for students as they ought to have higher abilities in managing time, working in a team, searching information and communicating in English. To have a better performance in class and communicate effectively with classmates in English, students need to spend more time and energy on practicing after class, which requires a higher level of self-discipline [13]. However, these challenges prove to be meaningful and worthwhile if students can truly follow the instructions and complete the designated assignments.

6. Conclusion

Through this 6-session teaching experiment, the research group has made a preliminary attempt in college English class to try the POA. Students were found to be more motivated and more eager to learn. They were equipped with enough input enabling materials for their final productive output. Teaching and learning were, therefore, more explicit and efficient. In the meantime, this kind of teaching is highly demanding for both teachers and students, whose joint efforts are required to bring out the better outcomes of college English teaching. However, the

teaching design still needs improvement, such as how to closely relate the design and the textbook, and how to adjust the level of task difficulties directed at students of different English abilities. All these problems will be addressed in the future research.

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