

## Original Paper

# Teaching Academic English with the Production-Oriented Approach: A Case Study

Yingwei MA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, CHINA

Received: October 29, 2023      Accepted: January 29, 2024      Online Published: February 19, 2024

doi:10.22158/wjer.v11n1p81

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v11n1p81>

### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to explore how to apply POA to EAP teaching in China and test its effectiveness through a case study. Three key issues are discussed: the design of the course structure of EAP under the guidance of POA, the implementation of POA in teaching academic English and the effectiveness of POA in increasing of students' academic English proficiency. It is found that the ideal framework of Academic English consisted of integrated modules, instead of a linear arrangement of the units. Three key factors in the POA teaching process include: motivating tasks in an academic setting with both communicative and linguistic challenges, enabling tasks with corresponding scaffolding and evaluating strategies, and a combination of teacher's evaluation and peer review with co-produced rubrics for assessment. The results of the study demonstrate the efficacy of the production-oriented approach in enhancing students' academic English proficiency, specifically in the areas of speaking and writing.*

### **Keywords**

*academic English teaching, EAP, POA, motivating, enabling, assessing, scaffolding*

## **1. Introduction**

With the accelerated development of economic globalization and the globalization of higher education, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has become one of the hotspots in the reform of language education in Chinese universities. EAP, as a branch of English for Special Purposes (ESP), is one of the most popular language courses in the universities all around the world (Hyland, 2006), as it helps students to learn academic language and improve their professional learning and research skills at the same time. However, the challenges of mastering English in an academic context are also being recognized, leading to the exploration of new teaching approaches. The production-oriented approach (POA) has been widely recognized as one of the most effective approaches in language teaching, especially in Chinese universities. However, most POA related research is on general college English

teaching due to the relatively late birth of EAP teaching in China.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on EAP Teaching at Abroad

The research on general academic English teaching in universities originated in the 1960s, mainly as a result of the rich teaching experience by universities in popular study abroad destination countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States in order to help international students from non-English-speaking countries to adapt to university studies (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

Halliday and Strevens (1964) first proposed that language teaching should be based on the description of language in specific communicative situations, such as academic communication. This is of great significance to EAP teaching and research. They further proposed five key factors in academic English teaching: authentic discourse, instruction based on communicative tasks, customized materials for learners, adult learners and curriculum designed with a practical purpose. In recent years, studies have begun to examine students' needs and their academic background. Klimova (2015) emphasized the importance of analyzing students' needs and developing a coherent course and sequence of learning. Irshad and Anwar (2018) highlighted the significance of conducting a needs analysis to inform the curriculum design process. These studies collectively underscore the need for a student-centered approach that considers the specific needs and context of the learners.

### 2.2 Research on EAP Teaching in China

Research on the teaching of EAP in China started relatively late, but in recent years the attention by the researchers and scholars in Chinese universities has been increasing. Sun and Li (2011) pointed out that teachers and researchers need to prioritize research in ESP, which is essential in the teaching reform of language education in Chinese colleges and universities. According to the survey conducted by Cai (2010), academic English emerges as a crucial yet deficient component in college English education in China. Cai (2014) compared general college English teaching and academic English teaching, and suggested that employing Project-Based Learning (PBL) in academic English teaching is preferable as it can foster students' critical thinking, independent learning, and research abilities. Xie (2013) and Gong (2015) elaborated on the teaching strategies of general academic English courses and the design of undergraduate academic English courses respectively.

### 2.3 Previous Study on POA in EAP Teaching

The Production-Oriented Approach in language teaching, as proposed by Wen Qiufang, highlights the importance of language output and scenarios of using language. The three instructional principles of POA are "learning-centered", "learning-using integration", and "whole-person education", while the teaching hypotheses include "output-driven", "input-enabled", and "selective learning". Therefore, a typical POA teaching process contains three phases: motivating, enabling, and assessing, during which the teacher's role is emphasized (Wen, 2015). Since then, POA has been widely discussed and explored in Chinese universities with its solid theoretical foundation and unique advantages.

Researchers have studied the application of POA in language teaching from different perspectives. Zhang (2019), Zhang (2020), and Chen and Wen (2020) elaborated on the effectiveness of POA in EAP teaching respectively. According to Zhang Y.'s study in 2019, POA makes students' learning goals clearer, makes students more active in class, and has higher learning autonomy. Research by Zhang (2020) showed that POA improves learners' literature reading, paper writing and public speaking abilities, stimulates learning motivation, strengthens students' academic ethics, and cultivates their critical thinking skills. Chen & Wen's study found that POA worked well in teaching academic writing, contributing to the improvement of the quantity and quality of nominalization in academic writing. Zhang (2017) confirmed the teaching effectiveness of the POA through action research, which helps to solve the problem of "separation of learning and use of English" in Chinese universities, and concluded that POA is applicable to both general English teaching and EAP teaching in colleges and universities. In summary, research on EAP teaching has progressed significantly, both internationally and in China. Although the related research in China began late, it has received increased attention, for EAP teaching has become an important part of college English teaching in China. The Production-Oriented Approach (POA) has gained attention in the community of language teaching in Chinese universities since Wen Qiufang proposed the approach. The application of POA in EAP teaching has shown promising outcomes in improving students' academic performance and bridging the gap between learning and using English in university settings. Nevertheless, due to the relatively late start of academic English education in China, the research on output-oriented approach in the field of academic English teaching is still insufficient.

### **3. A Case Study in Dalian University of Technology: Teaching Academic English with a Production-Oriented Approach**

#### *3.1 Case Description*

*Academic English (Academic English I, Academic English II)* is designed as a general EAP course for non-English major undergraduates of Dalian University of Technology in China. Course units are organized around different topics of interest and help students develop their skills in reading, listening, speaking, and writing in an academic context, such as participating in tutorials, giving presentations, and writing abstracts. The course aims to provide support for students whose future studies will be conducted in English.

When teaching *Academic English*, teachers encountered various challenges and difficulties. Some major issues included students lacking motivation, and a deficiency in critical thinking when reading and writing academic texts. In such a context, the production-oriented approach is employed to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The study is directed by the following questions:

- (1) How to design the course structure of *Academic English* with the production-oriented approach?
- (2) How to implement POA in teaching *Academic English*?
- (3) Is POA more effective in increasing students' academic English proficiency compared to the

traditional way of teaching?

### 3.2 Participants

The study was conducted in 2022/2023 academic year in the Department of Mechanical Engineering of Dalian University of Technology. Two teachers and 58 students participated in the study. The students were the first-year undergraduates. Among them 13.8% were female and 86.2% were male. The students were divided into four groups through the whole academic year. According to the English placement test, the student's English level ranged from B1 to B2.

### 3.3 Procedure

#### (1) Conducting the needs analysis

First of all, a survey of *Academic English* study needs was conducted, with a purpose of collecting students' voices and helping the teacher improve the teaching objectives.

#### (2) Revising the course structure based on POA principles

The commonly-used, linear course structure was revised in order to provide more reasonable contexts for students' language products. The design of course structure is often overlooked because the units are usually organized in a sequential manner, typically progressing from one unit to the next in a linear fashion. With the guiding principles of POA, it's time for the teachers to think of a better way to organize the units.

#### (3) Implementing POA in teaching *Academic English*

The three phases of a typical POA teaching process, motivating, enabling, and assessing, were interpreted in detail in the context of teaching *Academic English*.

#### (4) Testing the effectiveness of POA in teaching *Academic English*

58 students were put into experimental groups and control groups to compare the improvement of English proficiency after two semesters' intervention. The experimental groups received the POA instruction, while the control groups continued with traditional teaching practices. The students were examined by an online English proficiency test based on iTest system twice. The first test was given before the first semester (September, 2022) and the second test was given at the end of the second semester (May, 2023). Listening, reading, and writing were tested on the system, while speaking was evaluated by the teachers. By comparing the results between the experimental groups and the control groups, the teachers could determine if POA had a significant impact on students' learning.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 A Summary of the Needs Analysis

According to the three principles of POA, namely, learning-centered principle, learning-using integration principle, and whole-person education principle, the teaching and learning activities of *Academic English* should be carefully planned, effectively organized, and based on the students' practical needs in their future academic life. A needs analysis was conducted before the semester began in September 2022, revealing three major findings. Firstly, the most significant learning objectives

included delivering successful presentations, writing academic papers, and engaging in tutorials and seminars. Secondly, the results indicated a preference for interactive activities and practical tasks to enhance the language learning experience. Lastly, the analysis highlighted challenges in memorizing and using academic vocabulary, difficulties with academic writing conventions, and a lack of confidence in public speaking.

#### 4.2 The Revised Course Structure Based on POA Principles

Based on the needs analysis, the original course structure was revised to move away from the traditional text-centered and input-based style of teaching. Originally there were 15 units in *Academic English I* with the purpose of increasing the students' overall ability of using English in an academic setting. However, it's rather difficult for the students to recognize the relationship between the units, leading to a lack of motivation. Following the principles of POA, the semester plan was adjusted into integrated modules to achieve a better result. Instead of a linear arrangement of all the units, they were put into five modules centered around the module tasks. Within each module, three units (reading, writing, listening & speaking) worked together to achieve the learning objectives. Figure 1 explains the five integrated modules of *Academic English I*.

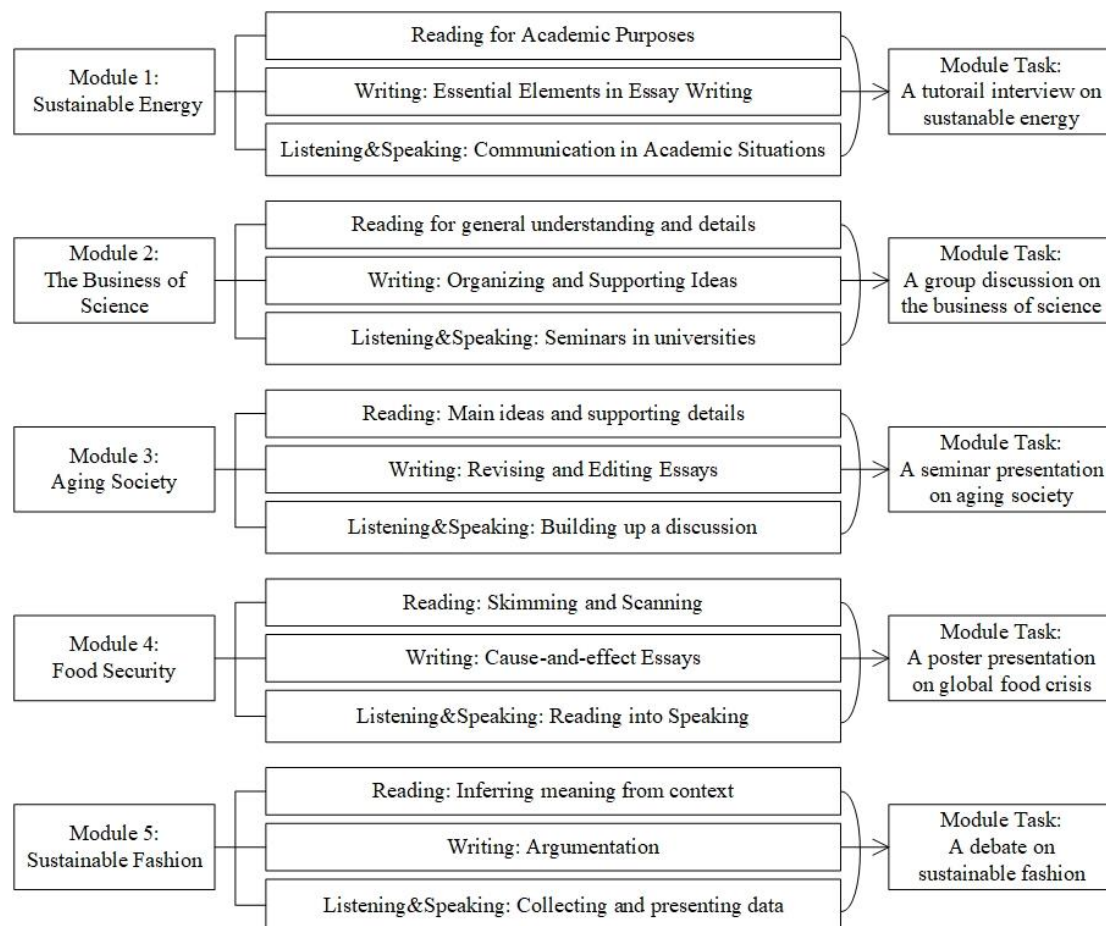


Figure 1. Revised Course Structure of *Academic English I*

### 4.3 Implementation of POA in Teaching Academic English

The process of teaching with POA involves three stages: motivating, enabling, and assessing. Teachers play a crucial role in each stage, which includes guiding, designing, and providing support, as well as facilitating and consulting (Wen, 2016). While the principles of POA may remain the same all the time, the implementation of POA in an Academic English class should consider the academic context, specialized vocabulary, critical thinking skills, research skills, and students' study needs to effectively engage students and achieve learning objectives. Therefore, the implementation of POA in teaching *Academic English* bears its unique features.

#### 4.3.1 Motivating

Presenting students with effective driving scenarios is the first challenge in implementing the POA approach in an *Academic English* class. Unlike the communicative scenarios in general college English class which are usually familiar to the students, the scenarios in academic English class should be challenging enough to stimulate students' desire to express themselves and not too far away from the students' life. Generally there are three steps.

Firstly, the teacher describes the communicative scenario for the task. The communicative scenario for using academic English involves situations where the students need to engage in academic discourse to convey information, share ideas, and participate in discussions within an educational context. In such scenarios, language serves as a tool for effective communication and collaboration in academic settings. The teacher may show the students videos about tutorials, discussions, seminars, speeches and presentations, workshop, and research meeting, etc. In this way, the students are put into a meaningful, communicative scenario.

Secondly, students try out the required task. The chosen topic for each module should relate to the students' university life and intellectually challenging. The teacher may assign the students some documentaries, videos, or readings about the unit topic to give them some background knowledge. The students then can try out the given task and realize they are lack of necessary language skills and knowledge. For example, in module four *Food Security*, students tried out giving a poster presentation on global food crisis and they listed a few challenges they have met. The challenges can be divided into two categories, communicative and linguistic.

Communicative challenges include: "I know very little about global food crisis." (C1) "I find it hard to speak confidently in front of my class." (C2) "How can I get key information on global food crisis from the sources?" (C3) "I have never produced an academic poster before, so what should I put in a poster?" (C4) Linguistic challenges include: "What should I say at the beginning of a poster presentation?" (C5) "How can I explain a causal relationship in a clear way?" (C6) "I have got very limited vocabulary on this topic and I could not find the right words to convey my ideas accurately." (C7) "My pronunciation is poor." (C8)

Thirdly, the teacher explains learning objectives and task requirement. With all kinds of challenges and difficulties identified by the students, the students have a rough idea of what they are going to expect in

the new lessons. The teacher explains the learning objectives of the units and their relationship with the module task. The students then realize the current difficulties and challenges are their main learning goals in different units. In the example above, C1 and C3 will be the focus in the reading unit, C6 and C7 will be the focus in the writing unit, and C2, C4, C5, C8 will be the focus in the listening & speaking unit.

#### 4.3.2 Enabling

The second phase of POA is enabling, which means instruction must follow a series of steps designed by the teacher to lead students from being less to more able (Wen, 2016). In this phase, the role of the teacher is more like a designer, a facilitator, and a mentor. As a designer, the teacher breaks the module task into several sub-tasks and design the scaffolding activities for the students. As a facilitator, the teacher helps the students choose the most important materials to learn and give necessary tips for the learning strategies. As a mentor, the teacher monitors the students' learning process and give necessary feedback.

Among all these activities, scaffolding is the most important because it gives students help and support as they receive and produce new language or content. It is the teacher's essential job to facilitate and ensure the acquisition of knowledge and new abilities with well-designed scaffolding activities. The main scaffolding strategies for EAP reading class include glossary, pictures, videos and reading materials. The main scaffolding strategies for EAP writing class include writing samples, useful phrases and expressions, and mind maps. The main scaffolding strategies for EAP listening and speaking class include model presentations, language boxes, and pronunciation and intonation practice. With the help of scaffoldings, students may have a pleasant and confident learning experience. By the end of each lesson, the teacher will check whether the students meet the requirements of the sub-tasks. The means teachers use to examine whether students have achieved learning goals vary depending on the teaching content. In reading classes, word tests and summaries are usually the focus, in writing classes, composition is usually the focus, and in listening and speaking classes, group exercises are the focus. Table 1 shows the scaffolding and evaluating activities in the sub-tasks of Module Four *Food Security*.

**Table 1. Scaffolding and Evaluating Activities in Enabling Phase of Module Four**

Subtasks	Scaffolding strategies and activities	Evaluation
Sub-task A: Understanding food security	1. Key vocabulary for understanding Zero Hunger 2. Video on State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023 3. Reading materials with exercises: <i>Diet and Sustainability</i> <i>The Challenge of Feeding 9 Billion People</i> <i>Closing the Yield Gap</i>	1. A quiz on the vocabulary 2. Making a summary for the article

Sub-task B: Explaining a causal relationship	1. Identifying and ordering cause and effect phenomena: Video on Dealing with the Situation	Write a short essay on the causes and consequences of global food crisis
	2. Drawing a fishbone diagram of the causal relationship	
	3. Transitions and connectors for a causal relationship	
Sub-task C: Giving a poster presentation	1. Analyzing the structure of an academic poster	1. Make a poster based on reading
	2. Expressions for referring to various parts of a poster	
	3. Modeling correct pronunciation, intonation, and speaking pace	2. Practice presenting the poster in groups

#### 4.3.3 Assessing

The third phase of POA is to assess students' final language product. Assessment plays a crucial role in enhancing the teaching and learning of language as it provides valuable insights for both teachers and students, supports instructional decision-making, and contributes to the overall effectiveness of teaching. Wen (2016) established teacher-student collaborative assessment. Traditionally, it is the teacher who decide the evaluation both in class and after class. Here in the collaborative assessment mode, the students' role is highlighted. There are three steps in the assessment.

Firstly, the teacher and the students create the rubrics for evaluation together. Rubrics are widely seen as an effective teaching tool because they help students understand expected learning outcome better, and then make decisions about their current level of learning to inform revision and improvement (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). In the traditional language class, the students usually get a result of evaluation from the teacher without understanding the gap between their current level and the expected one. Here the students get fully involved in creating the rubrics and they have to understand every detail in the rubrics in order to give effective feedback later. Secondly, the students revise and edit the assignments based on the rubrics for evaluation until the submission or the presentation. At the same time, the teacher monitors the students' progress carefully and gives necessary feedbacks. Finally, the students do the peer review under the guidance of the teacher and the teacher evaluate the assignments after class. It's necessary for the students to get involved in peer review in *Academic English* class, for they should be prepared for the real-world situations. In this way can the students understand they speak and write for a specific group of audience in the academic world, and they always get positive or negative feedback.

## 5. Results and Discussion

This section outlines the results of the study before and after two semesters' intervention in the experimental and control groups, which sheds light on the effectiveness of POA in teaching *Academic English*.



**Table 2. Students' Academic English Proficiency Test Result (September, 2022)**

Group	Listening (30)	Speaking (20)	Reading (30)	Writing (20)	Total (100)
Experimental Group 01	21.0	12.0	24.0	12.0	69.0
Experimental Group 02	20.0	13.0	22.0	11.0	66.0
Control Group 01	20.0	11.0	22.0	13.0	66.0
Control Group 02	22.0	13.0	23.0	11.0	69.0

Table 2 shows the academic English proficiency test result in September, 2022. It includes scores for the Experimental Group 01, Experimental Group 02, Control Group 01, and Control Group 02 in the Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing sections. The total scores, 69, 66, 66, and 69, indicate that the students in each group had a similar English proficiency level before the experiment.

**Table 3. Students' Academic English Proficiency Test Result (May, 2023)**

Group	Listening (30)	Speaking (20)	Reading (30)	Writing (20)	Total (100)
Experimental Group 01	23.0	14.0	25.0	14.0	76.0
Experimental Group 02	22.5	15.0	24.0	14.0	75.5
Control Group 01	22.5	12.5	24.0	14.0	73.0
Control Group 02	23.0	14.0	23.5	13.0	73.5

Table 3 shows the academic English proficiency test result in May, 2023. For Experimental Group 01, the total score increased from 69 to 76, while for Experimental Group 02, the total score increased from 66 to 75.5. The control groups also showed improvements, but with slightly smaller increases compared to the experimental groups. The experimental groups generally showed larger improvements compared to the control groups, indicating potential progress in performance under the guidance of POA for the experimental groups over time.

**Table 4. Average Rate of Increase in Different Sections of the Test**

Groups	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Total Score
Experimental Groups	11.0%	16.0%	6.6%	22.0%	12.3%
Control Groups	8.5%	10.7%	5.6%	12.9%	8.6%
Difference	2.5%	5.3%	1.0%	9.1%	3.7%

Table 4 illustrates the differences in the average rate of increase across different sections of the test. Overall, the experimental groups exhibited higher rates of increase in all sections compared to the control groups. The most significant disparity (9.1%) was noted in the Writing section. The experimental group demonstrated a substantial 22.0% increase in the Writing section, whereas the control group experienced a 12.9% increase, indicating a notable gap in students' writing performance between the two groups. Additionally, the experimental group also showed a considerably higher increase (16.0%) in speaking compared to the control group (10.7%). However, the differences in the average rate of increase in listening (2.5%) and reading (1.0%) were not as pronounced as those in writing and speaking. These distinctions underscore the effectiveness of the POA implemented in the experimental groups in enhancing students' English proficiencies. Specifically, the results indicate that POA has significantly impacted the students' proficiency in writing and speaking in the experimental groups.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has identified that the course framework of Academic English under the guidance of POA consists of integrated modules, instead of a linear arrangement of the units. The units in each module are led by a meaningful task in the communicative scenario in academic settings. This structure is fully supported by the hypothesis of POA, according to which, students learn better and faster when focusing on producing language output. At the same time, with 3 units around the same topic within one module, the students have enough exposure to rich and comprehensible language input.

The second major finding is that teaching academic English under the guidance of POA has a distinct feature compared with teaching general college English. The module task, which is the final "production" of each module, is usually a combination of speaking and writing assignment. To begin with, the motivating tasks should be set in the real-world, academic scenarios, with both communicative and linguistic challenges for students. Next, the module task should be carefully broken into several sub-tasks, all of which have corresponding scaffolding strategies and evaluating activities. The teacher should be very familiar with different scaffolding strategies for listening, speaking, reading, and writing sub-tasks, and use them flexibly. Third, in the mode of teacher-student collaborative assessment, teachers and students work together on the rubrics for evaluation before doing the assignment; students get feedback and evaluation from both teachers and peers; students use the rubrics

for improving their works and learning from others, not just for evaluation.

This study has also found that POA has been more effective than the traditional way of teaching in increasing students' academic English proficiency. The most significant improvement is seen in students' test results in writing and speaking, which again proves the importance of output as the major driving force in language teaching.

The findings of this study provide a deeper insight for the application of POA in teaching academic English in Chinese universities. Although this study focuses on general academic English teaching, the findings may well have a bearing on the exploration of POA in other ESP courses. The most important limitation of this case study is the small number of participants in only one university. Further studies should include more participants on different levels in the colleges and universities in different regions. Continued efforts are needed to make POA more accessible to a wider language teaching community.

### Acknowledgement

This paper is the final report of *A Study on the Reform of Teaching General Academic English under the Guidance of POA* (No. ZGWYJYJJ11A059), which is funded by the 11th National Fund of Foreign Languages Education of China.

### References

- Cai, J. (2010). The Feasibility Study of EMI: A Case Analysis of Public Relation Course of Fudan. *Foreign Languages in China*, 7(06), 61-67+73.
- Cai, J. (2014). College English Education: A Return from GE to EAP. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (01), 9-14.
- Chen, H., & Wen, Q. (2020). POA-based instruction of nominalization in academic English writing course—Take enabling phase for example. *Frontiers of Foreign Language Education Research*, 3(01), 15-23+86-87.
- Flowerdew, J., & Peacock, M. (2001). "Issues in EAP: A preliminary perspective". In M. Peacock, J. Flowerdew (Eds.), *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes* (pp. 8-24). Cambridge University Press.
- Gong, R. (2015). Academic English Literacy Curriculum for Undergraduate Students: Backward Design. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, 36(04), 48-55.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Strevens, P. (1964). *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*. Longman.
- Hyland, K. (2006). *English for Academic Purposes: An Advanced Resource Book*. London: Routledge.
- Irshad, I., & Anwar, B. (2018). Designing English for Specific Purposes Course for Computer Science Students. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 5(1), 156-171.
- Klimova, B. F. (2015). Designing an EAP Course. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 634-638.
- Reddy, Y. M., & Andrade, H. (2010). A review of rubric use in higher education. *Assessment &*

- Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(4), 435-448.
- Richards, J. (1984). Language curriculum development. *RELC Journal*, 15, 1-29.
- Sun, Y., & Li, L. (2011). CBI and ESP and the direction of the reform of English major and college English teaching in Chinese universities. *Foreign Languages Research*, 2011(05), 1-4.
- Wen, Q. (2015). Developing a theoretical system of the production-oriented approach in language teaching. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 4, 547-558.
- Wen, Q. (2016). The production-oriented approach to teaching university students English in China. *Language Teaching*, 51(4), 526-540.
- Xie, Q. (2013). Research on the Teaching Strategy of English for General Academic Purposes Based on the Content-Based Instruction Philosophy. *Theory and Practice of Education*, 33(24), 51-53.
- Zhang, L. (2020). Exploring the Output-oriented Approach in the Teaching of Academic Writing and Presentation. *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*, 2020(02), 61-71+83.
- Zhang, W. (2017) An experimental study on the effect of the production-oriented approach on college Students' English Writing Quality. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 40(03), 377-385+438-439.
- Zhang, Y. (2019) *A Study of U-Learning Model Based on Production-Oriented Approach: With the Teaching Practice of English for Academic Purposes as an Example, Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, (03), 110-115.