

Original Paper

The Effect of Production-Oriented Approach on College Students' English Writing Performance

Xiaoyu Chen¹ & Manli Long^{1*}

¹ Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

* Corresponding author, Manli Long, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

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Abstract

*This quasi-experimental study compared the effects of the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) and the traditional Product Approach on college students' English writing performance. Participants were 58 second-year non-English major students from two intact classes at a university in Hubei Province. The experimental group of 29 students received POA instruction, and the control group of 29 students received Product Approach instruction over a six-week intervention. Writing pretest and posttest were administered. Data were analyzed using independent-samples *t*-test, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, and Mann-Whitney *U* test. Results showed that: (1) there was no significant difference between the two groups in the pretest; (2) the experimental group made significant progress from pretest to posttest, with an effect size of $r = 0.77$ (large effect), while the control group did not; (3) between-group comparisons revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in both posttest scores and gain scores, although the effect size for gain scores was $r = 0.26$ (small effect). It is concluded that POA is statistically superior to the Product Approach. This study provides empirical evidence for the application of POA in writing instruction.*

Keywords

Production-Oriented Approach; Product Approach; English writing; quasi-experimental study; effect size

1. Introduction

How to improve students' writing ability has long been a core concern in college English writing instruction. The traditional teaching model has been dominated by the Product Approach, which is based on behaviorist learning theory and holds that writing competence can be acquired through repeated practice of language forms and imitation of model essays. Pincas (1982) summarized the teaching process

of the Product Approach into four stages: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. Through model essay demonstration, mechanical drills, imitative writing, and independent composition, this approach helps students gradually master writing conventions (Cai, 2001; Pincas, 1982). With clear teaching objectives and well-defined operational procedures, this approach is particularly suitable for stages where students need to consolidate their language foundation or prepare for examinations, and therefore it is still widely used in current college English writing instruction.

However, the Product Approach focuses exclusively on the written product (Chen, 2005), often neglecting the thinking processes involved in writing and the subjective role of the learner, which easily leads to the problem of separating learning from using. In response to this problem, Professor Wen Qiufang and her team systematically constructed the Production-Oriented Approach (POA), a foreign language teaching theory with Chinese characteristics. This theory emphasizes both the process and the product of language production, advocating that instruction must achieve predetermined teaching goals and facilitate genuine learning (Wen, 2015). At the level of teaching procedures, POA forms a cyclical chain of Motivating – Enabling – Assessing where the motivating stage stimulates learning motivation through communicative production tasks, the enabling stage provides scaffolding in terms of content, language and structure, and the assessing stage embeds evaluation into the learning process through teacher-student collaborative assessment, thus promoting learning through assessment (Wen, 2016).

Although existing research has confirmed the effectiveness of POA in improving writing performance from both theoretical and practical perspectives (Wen & Bi, 2020; Wen & Sun, 2020), quasi-experimental comparative studies specifically targeting college English writing instruction with the traditional Product Approach as a control are still relatively few. Therefore, the present study attempts to adopt a quasi-experimental design to compare the effects of POA and the traditional Product Approach on college students' English writing performance, report effect sizes, and describe the instructional design in detail, hoping to provide some practical reference for the effectiveness of POA in writing teaching. The specific research questions are: (1) To what extent can the Production-Oriented Approach improve college students' English writing performance compared with the traditional Product Approach? (2) What factors or pedagogical procedures within the POA framework may account for its differential effectiveness? (3) What implications does this study offer for the application of POA in college English writing instruction and for future research?

2. Research Design

2.1 Participants

The participants were 58 second-year non-English major students from two intact classes at a university in Hubei Province. The experimental group (29 students, 4 males and 25 females) received POA instruction, and the control group (29 students, 7 males and 22 females) received traditional product-oriented instruction. The two groups used the same teaching materials and had the same writing content. Pretest scores showed that the two groups were homogeneous before the experiment. Both classes were

taught by the same instructor with more than 10 years of teaching experience.

2.2 Experimental Group Teaching Procedure

The POA teaching experiment lasted 6 weeks, with 4 class hours per week (two sessions of 90 minutes each), totaling 24 class hours. Teaching was organized around three thematic units: Environment, Education, and Technology. Each unit followed the Motivating – Enabling – Assessing cyclical chain (Wen, 2018). The Environment unit is used as an example to illustrate the design and implementation of each stage.

2.2.1 Motivating stage (approx. 15 minutes).

The core goal of this stage is to stimulate learning motivation and make students aware of their own deficiencies in production (Wen, 2015). To this end, the teacher first played a clip of Greta Thunberg's climate action speech to create cognitive conflict around the issue of whether individuals can influence the environment. Then the teacher presented a communicative scenario, a classroom debate: students were asked to prepare a debate script (i.e., the first draft of an argumentative essay) on the topic "Individuals can do nothing to improve the environment; only governments and large companies can make a difference". The task was communicatively authentic and cognitively challenging, requiring students to clarify their position and list arguments supporting both the role of governments, companies and individuals. Students independently completed a debate preparation sheet without prior preparation. In the process of attempting to produce, they revealed common problems (e.g., vague position, empty examples, lack of contrastive linking words), thereby creating a sense of hunger and providing precise input needs for the subsequent enabling stage.

2.2.2 Enabling stage (approx. 45 minutes).

This stage aims to help students transition from input to output through progressive scaffolding in content, structure, and language (Wen, 2015; Qiu, 2020). In content enabling, students brainstormed arguments on both sides, a model essay provided by the teacher and filled in an argument table, extracting concrete examples (Germany's Energiewende policy, Patagonia, the UK consumer boycott of single-use plastics, the Greta movement), thereby giving concrete support to abstract arguments. This design followed the principle of "selective learning", allowing students to choose input materials according to their production needs. In structure enabling, the teacher explained the four-paragraph structure of a discussion essay (introduction – role of governments/companies – role of individuals – conclusion), emphasized the expression of a partial agreement stance, and had students write imitative opening paragraphs, body paragraphs, and concluding paragraphs, learning the linking words for causal, contrastive, and hypothetical argumentation, thus achieving "integration of learning and using". In language enabling, through matching exercises, gap-filling, and other activities, students mastered core environmental vocabulary and upgraded expressions (e.g., pivotal, myopic, detrimental, synergistically) and practiced inverted sentences, subjunctive mood, and concession structures. Finally, students used the content, structure, and language knowledge they had acquired to write a group of sentences expressing opinions, preparing them for full composition writing.

2.2.3 Assessing stage (approx. 30 minutes).

This stage adopted the “Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment” (TSCA) approach (Wen, 2016), embedding evaluation into the learning process. After students independently completed a full essay (no less than 250 words), they used a simplified IELTS writing rubric (task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy) to conduct peer assessment, making specific suggestions for revision. This allowed students to reflect on their own weaknesses while evaluating others’ work, thus promoting learning through assessment. The teacher selected typical essays for whole-class commentary, focusing on common problems (e.g., unclear stance, disconnect between examples and arguments, inappropriate use of linking words), thereby consolidating the teaching objectives. After class, students revised and submitted their final drafts based on the feedback, and the teacher included them in electronic portfolios as part of formative assessment.

2.3 Control Group Teaching Procedure

The control group followed the traditional Product Approach, using the four stages proposed by Pincas (1982): familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. It should be noted that in the free writing stage, this study retained teacher feedback and student revision, which to some extent incorporated process-oriented feedback, but the overall orientation remained product-focused, consistent with the core characteristics of the Product Approach. The teaching lasted 6 weeks (4 class hours per week, total 24 class hours), organized around three units (Environment, Education and Technology), each unit taking about 2 weeks (8 class hours). A typical class session (2 class hours, 90 minutes) for the Environment unit is described below.

2.3.1 Familiarization stage (approx. 30 minutes).

This stage aimed to acquaint students with the basic requirements and assessment criteria of the writing task. The teacher first presented the IELTS writing assessment criteria (task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy) so that students understood the evaluation dimensions of a good essay. Then the teacher showed a model essay on the same topic (Individuals can do nothing to improve the environment; only governments and large companies can make a difference), analyzing its four-paragraph structure (introduction – role of governments/companies – role of individuals – conclusion), argumentation methods (exemplification, cause-effect, comparison/contrast), and linguistic highlights (inverted sentences, subjunctive mood, upgraded linking words). The teacher highlighted the concrete examples used in the model essay (Germany’s Energiewende policy, Patagonia, the UK consumer boycott of single-use plastics, the Greta movement) and guided students to extract imitable sentence patterns and vocabulary.

2.3.2 Controlled writing stage (approx. 20 minutes).

This stage focused on mechanical language practice, aiming to consolidate students’ mastery of the core linguistic items of the unit. Students completed gap-filling, sentence transformation, and translation exercises based on the model essay, practicing core environmental vocabulary (e.g., environmental degradation, carbon footprint, renewable energy) and upgraded expressions (pivotal, myopic,

detrimental).

2.3.3 Guided writing stage (approx. 20 minutes).

The teacher provided a writing framework template (e.g., for the introduction: concession + contrast + stance; for the body paragraph: topic sentence + concrete example + causal chain) and asked students to imitate the model essay structure to write paragraphs on a similar topic under the teacher's guidance. Students completed the paragraph writing in class, while the teacher circulated and provided immediate feedback.

2.3.4 Free writing stage (approx. 20 minutes).

Students independently wrote an opening or body paragraph for a short essay based on what they had learned in this session. After class, students revised and submitted a complete essay, and the teacher provided written feedback. This stage retained the core feature of the Product Approach – focusing on the final written product – while adding necessary teacher feedback to facilitate learning, representing an adaptive modification of the classical model.

The teaching procedures for the other units (Education and Technology) were similar, following the same four stages but with model essays and practice materials on the corresponding themes. The above teaching procedure reflects the typical features of the Product Approach: using model essays as a template, teacher-centered instruction, emphasis on the accuracy of language forms as the main evaluation criterion, and students mastering writing conventions through imitation and mechanical practice (Chen, 2005; Pincas, 1982).

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The research instruments were a writing pretest and posttest. The pretest was a CET-4 writing task, and the posttest was an IELTS writing task. The pretest type matched the teaching content before the experiment, while the posttest type matched the teaching content during the experiment. Both tasks were argumentative essays and used the same scoring rubric; therefore the study focused mainly on the relative progress of the two groups (between-group comparisons). The scoring rubric consisted of five dimensions: content completeness, discourse structure, linguistic accuracy, vocabulary richness, and writing conventions, each worth 3 points, with a total score of 15 points. Two experienced English writing teachers independently scored the essays blind, and inter-rater reliability was acceptable. The average of the two scores was taken as each student's writing score.

SPSS 26.0 was used for data analysis, with the significance level set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Based on the normality test results of the data, independent-samples t-test (with Welch correction when variances were unequal), paired-samples t-test (or Wilcoxon signed-rank test), and Mann-Whitney U test were used. Effect sizes were evaluated according to Cohen's (1988) standards.

3. Results

3.1 Homogeneity of Pretest Scores

Before the experiment, an independent-samples t-test (Welch correction) was conducted on the pretest

scores of the two groups. The results showed that the pretest scores of the experimental group ($M = 7.19$, $SD = 2.43$) and the control group ($M = 6.84$, $SD = 1.64$) did not differ significantly, $t(49.12) = 0.632$, $p = 0.530$, indicating that the two groups had comparable writing levels before the experiment.

3.2 Changes within Each Group from Pretest to Posttest

To examine the effect of each teaching method on writing performance, the pretest and posttest scores of each group were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (since the differences were not normally distributed). The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Scores within the Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Pretest (M ± SD)	Posttest (M ± SD)	Z	p	r
Experimental (n=29)	7.19 ± 2.43	8.36 ± 2.27	-3.867	< .001	0.77
Control (n=29)	6.84 ± 1.64	7.17 ± 1.65	-1.891	.059	0.35

The experimental group's posttest scores were significantly higher than their pretest scores ($p < 0.001$), with an effect size $r = 0.77$ (large effect). Among them, 22 students improved, 3 declined, and 4 remained unchanged. The control group's posttest scores were not significantly different from their pretest scores ($p = 0.059$); on average, the control group improved by 0.33 points.

3.3 Between-Group Comparisons

To compare the effectiveness of the two teaching methods, an independent-samples t-test was first performed on the posttest scores, and then gain scores (posttest minus pretest) were calculated and compared between groups using the Mann-Whitney U test (because gain scores were not normally distributed).

Table 2. Summary of Between-group Comparisons

Comparison	Statistical method	Test statistic	p	Effect size
Posttest scores	Independent-samples t-test	$t(56)=2.282$	0.026	$d=0.60$
Gain scores	Mann-Whitney U	$U=295.5, Z=-1.973$	0.049	$r=0.26$

As seen in Table 2, the experimental group had significantly higher posttest scores than the control group ($p = 0.026$, $d = 0.60$). Because the experimental group's pretest mean was slightly higher than that of the control group (by 0.35 points), gain scores were further analyzed. The between-group comparison of gain scores showed that the experimental group's mean rank (33.81) was higher than that of the control group (25.19), $p = 0.049$, effect size $r = 0.26$.

3.4 Summary

In summary, the two groups did not differ significantly at pretest; the experimental group made significant progress from pretest to posttest (large effect), while the control group did not; in between-

group comparisons, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in both posttest scores and gain scores. Based on gain scores as the main indicator, this study concludes that the Production-Oriented Approach is significantly more effective than the traditional Product Approach in improving students' writing performance.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This six-week quasi-experimental study compared the effects of the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) and the traditional Product Approach on college students' English writing performance. The main findings are: the experimental group made significant progress after POA instruction (large effect), while the control group did not; between-group comparisons showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group, although the effect size for gain scores was small ($r = 0.26$).

The significant improvement of the experimental group (large effect) is consistent with previous research (Zhang, 2017). From the perspective of instructional design, POA's Motivating – Enabling – Assessing cyclical chain may help alleviate the problem of separating learning from using: the motivating stage triggers learning needs, the enabling stage provides progressive scaffolding, and the assessing stage deepens understanding through teacher-student collaborative assessment (Wen, 2015, 2016). The lack of significant improvement in the control group is consistent with Chen's (2005) critique of the Product Approach. Its four-stage model (Pincas, 1982) may have limitations such as passive reception, mechanical practice lacking communicative purpose, and feedback relying on one-way teacher correction.

The gain scores comparison gave $p = 0.049$, effect size $r = 0.26$ (small effect), indicating that although POA has a statistical advantage, its practical effect is modest. This may be related to the short intervention duration (only 6 weeks), the teacher's familiarity with the approach, and the differences in pretest/posttest task difficulty.

The study has several limitations: short intervention duration, small sample size ($N = 58$), different pretest and posttest task types, and the lack of affective variables. Future research should extend the intervention period, expand the sample, use parallel test forms, and incorporate qualitative data. Based on the findings, it is suggested that teachers consider applying POA in writing instruction and avoid over-reliance on the Product Approach's model imitation and mechanical practice.

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