Original Paper

Research on Academic English Writing Teaching Based on Production-oriented Approach

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Abstract

Academic English writing is a challenging task in college English. Under traditional teaching methods, although teachers invest a lot of energy and time, little effect is achieved. This paper is based on the Production-oriented Approach proposed by distinguished Professor Wen Qiufang. Under the guidance of the teaching concept and teaching assumptions of this theory, this paper, taking a specific writing topic as an example, elaborates on how to design the three phases of motivating, enabling and assessing. In order to verify the effectiveness of this teaching method, the paper also analyzes and summarizes the collected questionnaires and interview texts. Academic English writing teaching guided by the Production-oriented Approach can help students reduce anxiety, make students' input learning more targeted, and greatly improve their reading and writing abilities.

Keywords

production-oriented Approach (POA), academic English Writing, input, output

English writing is not only an essential component of English study, but also reflects the level of students' English proficiency. It also affects students' future development and is a decisive factor of their achievement in academia—the basic prerequisite and important guarantee for participating in academic exchanges and conducting academic research. In view of this, the present paper attempts to apply "Production-Oriented Approach" (POA) to academic English writing teaching in college, with the purpose of increasing students' participation in writing process and improving their academic English writing competence. The term *academic English* in this paper is not equivalent to English used in scientific research articles. Instead, it refers to the formal English used in academic study. Various essays and reports written by university students fall into the category.

1. Theory of Production-oriented Approach

Cultivating English writing skills is a significant ingredient of foreign language teaching, but it is a relatively weak part in colleges and universities. In Chinese universities, there is no specially-designed English writing courses for non-English majors. The usual practice is: when one unit is finished, the English teacher assigns students to write a composition related to the text they have learned. The teacher may have spent a lot of time and energy correcting essays, but students get little benefit. There exists a serious problem in English writing: college students prefer to make use of expressions and sentence patterns they learned in middle schools, neglecting those newly acquired in texts they just finished in college; therefore, producing simple and dull articles. Many students' English writing levels cannot be significantly improved. Therefore, how to enhance writing ability in English is an urgent issue to be solved in college English teaching.

Based on the theories of Krashen's "input hypothesis" and Swain's "input hypothesis", Professor Wen Qiufang puts forward "Production-oriented Approach" (POA) to deal with the long-standing problem of "the segregation of learning and application" in foreign language study in China. Its theoretical system consists of three components, namely, Teaching Concept, Teaching Hypothesis and Teaching Process (Figure 1), among which Teaching Concept is the guiding ideology of Teaching Hypothesis and Teaching Process. Teaching Hypothesis provides theoretical support for Teaching Process, and the guiding ideas and theories proposed in Teaching Concept and Teaching Hypothesis are tested and realized by means of Teaching Process.
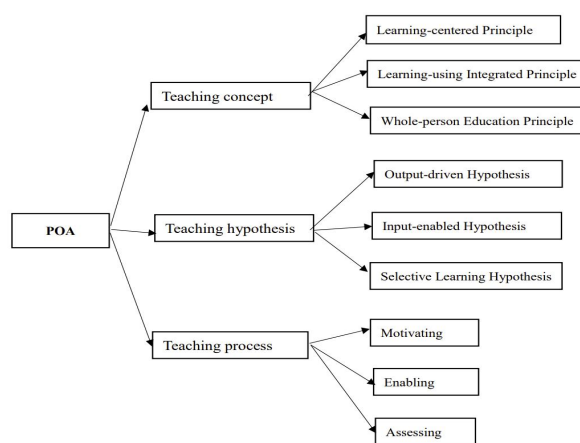

Figure 1. Theoretical System of POA

Most conventional theories about foreign language teaching insist that language input is the prerequisite for language output. Therefore, foreign language teaching normally follows the principle of "input first, output later". POA, however, has fundamentally changed this sequence. It emphasizes that foreign language teaching should be "output-oriented" and arrange teaching steps in the order of "output→input→output", connecting input learning and output goals closely. This approach believes that "output" should be the initial step in students' learning so as to allow them to discover their own

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shortcomings. Only in this way can students purposefully absorb knowledge from the "input" step, and conduct "output" again effectively.

1.1 The Teaching Concept of POA

POA has three teaching concepts, namely, Learning-centered Principle, Learning-using Integrated Principle and Whole-person Education Principle.

Learning-centered Principle is different from Student-centered Principle for the latter overstates the role of students while marginalizes that of teachers. Although POA also agrees that students are the main participants in classroom teaching activities, it stresses that teachers are the decision-makers and designers of these activities. Goals and effects achieved from classroom teaching largely depend on teachers. Therefore, POA advocates that Learning-centered Principle in teaching mirrors the essence of education more directly and clearly.

The conventional foreign language teaching model deals with one unit in a textbook in three steps: explaining the text structure, explaining language knowledge points, and handling after-class exercises. During this procedure, students do not have enough opportunities to participate in active learning and cannot promptly transfer what the teacher explains to their own output results, which is impossible for them to apply what has been learned. POA proposes that foreign language teaching should fulfill the integration of learning and application. "Learning" refers to input (listening and reading), and "application" refers to output (speaking and writing). In other words, POA enables students to use while learning, and to learn while using, so as to achieve the combination of learning and application.

The guiding ideology of Whole-person Education Principle states that foreign language is not only a tool of communication, but also a quality education course. Cultivating students' humanistic quality is one of its educational goals. The input of language materials and the selection of activity content in foreign language teaching play a critical role in helping students establish a correct outlook on life and values, strengthen patriotism, and improve national self-confidence.

1.2 Teaching Hypothesis of POA

The design of POA teaching process is based on three teaching hypotheses: Output-driven Hypothesis, Input-enabled Hypothesis and Selective Learning Hypothesis. The Output-driven Hypothesis proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang is different from Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) and Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995). Krashen's Input Hypothesis only emphasizes the role of input in learning foreign languages while ignoring the role of output. Although Swain's Output Hypothesis attaches importance to both of input and output, it does not clarify that how output facilitate input learning effect.

The Output-driven Hypothesis proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang in POA not only confirms the role of input and output in foreign language teaching, but also changes the typical practice of "input first, output later" in traditional teaching. Instead, it recommends that the right teaching sequence is "output→input→output".

The Input-enabled Hypothesis holds that without output drive as the premise, if the teacher directly

provides input to students and organizes them to participate in interactions for knowledge construction, learning efficiency will inevitably decline. Although these interactive activities can partially help students learn from each other's strong points and activate certain knowledge, learning efficiency for students' self-learning awareness and foreign language proficiency vary greatly. Therefore, the Input-enabled Hypothesis voices that teachers should provide students with appropriate input materials based on their interactive communication so as to effectively expand students' knowledge and language system and upgrade their output level.

The Selective Learning Hypothesis of POA, as the name suggests, means that students select useful content related to the output task from a large amount of input materials for cognitive processing. This learning method is more purposeful, reducing cognitive load and improving learning efficiency.

2. Academic English Writing Teaching under the Guidance of POA

The author teaches in a Polytechnic University and the students are freshmen of non-English majors, using the textbooks "*Academic English for Energy*" (1-2 volumes) to be completed in the first two semesters. At the end of each semester, each student is required to submit an academic English essay of about 1,500 words as part of the English formative assessment score. In order to fully reflect the characteristics of our university specialized in energy, students are inspired to examine and analyze energy issues in today's world, and think deeply about the relationship between energy, human civilization and well-being. The selected essay topic is related to energy.

The teaching process in POA is composed of three phases: Motivating, Enabling and Assessing. In order to help students effectively complete the paper entitled *Roles of Renewable Energy in Fighting Climate Change*, the author designed teaching steps according to the principles proposed by POA, and formulated a teaching process consisting of motivating, enabling and assessing. In accordance with the requirements of the output goals, the teacher selected appropriate input materials, guided students to participate in the writing process, and gained insights in the repeated cycle of "output, input, output". Finally, the students' output should be constantly close to the assumed output target.

2.1 Instructional Design for Motivating Phrase

The Motivating phase is divided into three teaching steps. (Table 1)

Table 1. Three Teaching Steps in Motivating Phase

Teaching phases	Motivating		
Teaching steps	Step 1. The teacher presents communication scenario.	Step 2. Students attempt to accomplish communicative activities.	Step 3. Teachers explain teaching objectives and output tasks.

Firstly, the teacher presents a communicative scenario as follows. Traditional fossil fuels have emitted a large amount of pollutants in combustion, accelerated the process of global warming, brought about severe devastation to ecosystem, and even threatened human health. Based on such current situation, human beings are actively exploring renewable energy sources to replace conventional ones. The assigned academic essay, entitled *Roles of Renewable Energy in Fighting Climate Change*, need to be submitted at the end of the semester. The output task should conform to the language characteristics of academic papers, with a complete structure, clear logic, and orderly argument.

Next, students attempt to accomplish the communicative activity. They try their essay writings after class and come to realize not only the obstacles they encounter in the writing process, but also the gap between their tentative essay and the final output task required by the teacher.

In the third teaching step, teachers explain the teaching objectives and output tasks. Teaching objectives include language objectives and communicative objectives. In terms of language objectives, students need to master vocabulary and phrases related to traditional energy and renewable energy. By analyzing and comparing energy texts they have read, students should summarize typical sentence patterns used in academic English papers, understand the writing style of papers, and apply them to their own writing practice. For communicative objectives, students need to grasp the basic elements of an academic English paper, screen out the arguments related to the paper from numerous literature materials, and be able to explain the reasons for or against a certain point of view. In this way, it is possible for students to complete a paper with coherence and logical argumentation.

2.2 Instructional Design of Enabling Phrase

The Enabling phase is mainly divided into three teaching steps. (Table 2)

Table 2. Three Teaching Steps Involved in Enabling Phase

Teaching phase	Enabling		
Teaching steps	Step 1. Teachers decompose the output task into multiple sub-tasks and clarify the specific steps, requirements and objectives for completing each sub-task.	Step 2. Students learn selectively according to their personal circumstances and output needs.	Step 3. Students practice output, while teachers provide guidance and inspection.

Initially, the teacher decomposes the output task into multiple sub-tasks and clarifies specific procedure, requirements and goals for each sub-task. This output task of the current writing is split into two sub-tasks. To begin with, students need to understand the characteristics of renewable energy and

compare them with those of traditional energy sources. Next, they should write an argumentative essay to explain the role of renewable energy in slowing down global warming. In order to complete this output task, teachers need to enable students' performance from three aspects: content, language and structure.

In terms of Content enabling, the teacher provides students with a video entitled *Renewable Energy 101* and an article *What is renewable energy?* as input materials. Students deepen their understanding of renewable energy through group discussions and detailed study of the input.

With regard to Language enabling, the teacher selects two English academic papers from professional journals as model papers, and a graduation thesis as "the negative sample". Through comparative study, students are guided to master typical sentence patterns and key words commonly applied in academic English papers.

Structural enabling is mainly realized through paper demonstration, structural analysis, and imitation learning. The teacher instructs students to analyze the structures, logical relationships, different development patterns of paragraphs, as well as the methods of argument elaboration. In addition, students are inspired to locate the existing problems in "the negative sample " to avoid similar mistakes when writing their own papers.

When students conduct selective learning based on their personal demand and output needs, they pay no attention to other less relevant content. In accordance with the requirements of the principle of selective learning, when teachers guide students to read the two designated papers, they should mainly focus on the use of key expressions and sentence patterns, master the method of writing abstracts, literature reviews, conclusions, and the overall structure of the article as well.

In the third step, students practice their output, and the teacher provides guidance and inspection. After fulfilling the selective learning stage, students try to write their own papers. Due to the limitation of class time, most writing tasks need to be completed after class. For the problems arising in each part, the teacher promptly points them out and analyzes the reasons, discusses and corrects them along with the students.

2.3 Instructional Design for Assessing Phase

Assessing falls into two types: immediate assessing and delayed assessing. Immediate assessing refers to the assessing given by teachers to some selective learning and writing tasks completed by students in class. It can help teachers adjust the rhythm of the class and provide remedial teaching. For delayed assessing, teachers and students should study the specific assessing standards together, and students submit output results to be jointly evaluated by both teachers and students. Students submit the first draft of the thesis, and the teacher evaluates it based on the assessing criteria. Then the students may revise his draft several times and generate the final draft of the thesis. During this process, the different drafts must be "diagnosed" repeatedly that students' output and learning effectiveness can be continuously improved.

3. Teaching Effect Feedback

When the academic English writing process based on POA came to an end, the author distributed questionnaires to students to pick up their feedback on learning effects and teaching effects, expressed in three aspects as follows.

3.1 Reduced Writing Anxiety

Students believed that such writing teaching based on POA relieved their anxiety in writing, because their teacher provided multiple assistance and inspections on their manuscripts, pointed out the strengths and weaknesses, and put forward specific improvement suggestions. Such guidance made them no longer feel helpless or fearful in writing.

3.2 Targeted Learning

Students generally believed that English writing was not closely related to what they learned in class. However, under the guidance of POA, papers analyzed by teachers in class were of great help to their writing. The typical sentence patterns and the logical structure of the sample papers explained in class can be applied to their own paper writing. Equipped with these practical knowledge and skills, students were able to apply what they have learned in writing papers, and truly realize the leap from "learning English" to "using English".

3.3 Improved Literacy Skills

In order to complete the thesis, students not only had to analyze the three articles provided by the teacher in depth, but also read a large amount of relevant literature after class, collect and summarize information, and finally reflect them in their papers. This process will undoubtedly improve their literacy skills.

Applying POA to academic writing teaching enhances students' learning motivation, promotes their ability to use English in professional fields, and lays a solid foundation for them to fulfill output tasks in their future professional studies. In addition, in order to complete the output tasks, students need to do a lot of reading after class, which undoubtedly helps to cultivate academic literacy and ability.

Using POA to guide academic English writing teaching is a huge challenge for foreign language teachers. In the teaching phases of Motivating, Enabling and Assessing, teachers must design definite steps and goals, and each step needs to be refined specifically. Teachers should play an intermediary role in each teaching phase, build proper "scaffolds" for each student and provide appropriate help on the basis of full understanding of the various status of students. As students' cognitive level improves, teachers have to adjust the "position" and "height" of the "scaffolds" so that they can neither hinder students' initiative nor cause too much frustration to students. Meanwhile, students constantly discover their own output deficiencies, study in a targeted manner in the enabling phase, and overcome writing deficiencies in the assessing phase and achieve some progress gradually.

As a major reform in foreign language teaching theory, POA reverses the conventional teaching sequence of "input first, output later". The teaching concept and hypotheses composed in this theoretical system provide ideological and theoretical support for the design of teaching processes. It

emphasizes that foreign language learning should use output to drive input, which is accomplished through repeated "output-input". Students find out their own weak points in output, which is their motivation to selectively accept input information and apply it to output writing. In this way, students make progress in every "output-input" process. Therefore, the input under POA theory is not "learning for the sake of learning", but "learning for the sake of output", demonstrating the philosophy of students' active learning.

4. Conclusion

In order to solve the problem of "the segregation of learning and application" in English writing, the author used POA in the teaching practice to guide students' academic English writing, which improved not only students' reading ability but also their knowledge construction ability. Moreover, language proficiency and independent learning ability have been significantly enhanced, exhibiting the Whole-person Education Principle advocated by POA. In addition, during the teaching process guided by this approach, students can not only get targeted help from teachers, but also have a clear objective in the learning process and use the knowledge they have learned to solve problems during the task.

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