

Applying Production-oriented Approach to College English Classrooms: A Teaching Experiment

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Abstract—The study aims to apply Production-oriented Approach (POA) to oral English teaching at college level and test its effectiveness. The paper presents the theoretical basis and features of POA. Then the paper illustrates a teaching experiment under the guidance of POA. We elaborated the design ideas and a step-by-step teaching procedure, namely motivating, enabling and assessing. The result of the experiment suggests the application of POA can improve teaching effect and promote interaction as well as cooperation among students. Finally we put forward some suggestions on the design and practice of POA.

Keywords—production-oriented approach; English teaching; task; scaffolding

I. INTRODUCTION

To improve students' language proficiency, especially the ability to use language, has long been an aim of college English teaching reform. In reality a large amount of time in English classes is spent on text understanding and language skill teaching, while production skills are rarely involved [1]. Under this teaching approach language learning and language use is separated to some extent. In order to overcome the weakness of language teaching Chinese scholar Wen Qiufang presents POA (production-oriented-approach) based on language research and teaching practice of up to ten years. It's a pedagogical innovation in university English teaching in China. POA is aimed to overcome the weakness in foreign language teaching, i.e. learning and using being separated. It focuses on the production of language. All the teaching activities in the classroom are designed to encourage and facilitate production of language. The effectiveness of teaching, under POA, is judged by students' production such as a report, an interview, an essay, etc.

II. THE FEATURES OF POA

In order to promote language production teachers follow certain steps. The teaching procedure of POA is composed of three steps, namely motivating, enabling and assessing. In the motivating step teachers motivate students' learning by creating appropriate communication settings and designing tasks with potential value of communication. In the enabling step, teachers help students to make selective learning so that students can accomplish production tasks; That is to say,

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teachers provide students with learning materials necessary for the task. While students acquire language, content and structure that is needed for the tasks through selective learning of the materials. The third step is assessing. Teachers make an evaluation after students accomplished their tasks [2]. To sum up POA has three features. Firstly, the integration of language learning and language using. POA puts great emphasis on language use. All teaching activities are centered on the application of language. Secondly, Teachers serve as scaffolding in the whole teaching process. Teachers get involved and provide necessary assistance throughout the whole teaching process. Thirdly, the evaluation of language production is made by both teachers and their students [3].

III. TEACHING EXPERIMENT

Guided by the teaching principle of POA, the author made an experiment in college English teaching. A unit from the textbook *New Horizon College English (Book 1)* is taken as an example to practice the approach and test its effectiveness. The subjects of the practice are 86 freshmen from the school of Computer Science and Information Security. The practice lasts two weeks with 2 class periods each week.

A. Teaching Objectives

There are two teaching objectives for this unit. The language objective is to teach how to talk about past experiences. And the communication objective is to teach how to conduct an interview.

B. Task Design

In this task students are assigned to conduct an interview. They are provided with two pieces of reading material about the persons to be interviewed. They will work in groups of four. One of them plays the role of an interviewer; one plays the role of an interviewee. The rest two play the role of audience. There are two factors taken into consideration when designing the task. One factor is the degree of difficulty. The teacher provides two pieces of reading materials about the persons to be interviewed. So it is not very hard for students to design proper questions and corresponding answers for their interview. The other factor to be considered is the communication value of the task. Conducting an interview is a task they are most likely to take in their future life and work. Therefore it is a

good chance to improve their communicative skills through the task.

C. Teaching Procedures

The whole procedure will follow three parts under the guidance of POA, namely motivating, enabling and assessing.

1) Motivating

TABLE I. TEACHING STEPS OF THE MOTIVATING PART

Step 1	A communication setting created by the teacher
Step 2	Initial try of students on the communication activity
Step3	Illustration of learning objectives and production task by the teacher

This is the first part of the whole teaching process. In order to stimulate students' learning desires, the author designs a communication setting, where students will realize the significance of a task and feel their language deficit through their initial trial. After that the teacher tells students about the teaching objectives and production task [4]. In this part the author presents the pictures of Lewis Hamilton, a British Formula One racing driver, and Shakira, a Colombian singer and songwriter. Then the author shows the background of the task: If Hamilton or Shakira is invited to a radio program and students are going to conduct an interview as the presenter of the program. After that an initial try on the task is encouraged by the teacher. Students are advised to work in groups and raise some questions they want to ask Hamilton or Shakira in the interview. In their group discussion students feel rather challenging to find out proper and relevant questions about the stars because they don't know how to interview a star and they also lack enough information about the person to be interviewed. Under this circumstance they feel incompetent and a desperate desire for further learning, thus learning enthusiasm being aroused. Finally students are shown the learning objectives and the production task. The production task is to conduct an interview on Hamilton or Shakira and present it in the class. The learning objectives are as follows: one is to talk about the life experiences of Hamilton or Shakira; the other is to learn how to keep a conversation going in communicating with other people. The first objective focuses on language and the second on communication skills.

2) Enabling

According to POA, the enabling part involves three principal procedures: 1) The teacher tells students about the production task; 2) Students make selective learning with guidance and check from the teacher; 3) students practice production with guidance and check from their teacher.

For students this is the most time-consuming and challenging part. Therefore the teacher must mediate the whole process and offer necessary help. The role that a teacher plays in the process is like scaffolding. Scaffolding is the support given during the learning process. It is tailored to the needs of students with the intention of helping them achieve their learning goals. Cao Qiaozhen, based on her teaching practice of college English, summarized two types of scaffolding: the vertical one and the horizontal one [5]. The vertical scaffolding means that teachers divide a big production task into smaller

ones according to the language proficiency of students. The horizontal scaffolding means, for every task, teachers provide aids in language, ideas and discourse structure.

Under the guidance of POA the author also provided the vertical scaffolding and the horizontal scaffolding. As shown in the first table, the teacher breaks the task into three smaller ones so that the students can easily follow and accomplish step by step. At the same time the author offers help in ideas, language and discourse structure in order to equip students with language skills needed to fulfill their tasks.

TABLE II. SUB-TASKS OF PRODUCTION TASK

Production task: conduct an interview and present it in the class	Task 1: discuss and organize ideas for the interview
	Task 2: prepare for the interview
	Task 3: present the interview to the class

TABLE III. HORIZONTAL SCAFFOLDING BY THE TEACHER

Ideas	Read an introduction to two famous people and underline the pieces of information that students think are interesting or important.
language	The speaking skills of keeping a conversation going.
Discourse structure	Listen to an interview in a radio program and imitate the structure of it

As far as this teaching practice concerned the author offers students appropriate input materials relevant to the production task, helps students deal with the materials in a selective way and finally enables them to accomplish the task.

a) Task one: discuss and get ideas for an interview.

In this part the students are asked to read an introduction to two famous people, Lewis Hamilton and Shakira. This is a process of selective reading because they only pick up information that they will use in the following interview. They are going to underline the information they think are important or interesting.

b) Task two: prepare for the interview

In this part students will work in groups of four and prepare for the interview. They will first choose who will be the guest for their interview, Hamilton or Shakira? Then they decide the roles of each member in the group. After that they write down a list of interview questions based on the reading material and group discussion.

c) Task three: present the interview

This is the last step of the task. In this part students will present their interview in the class. They will role play the interview in front of their classmates. In this process students used English in a creative way instead of regurgitating [6].

Table three shows the horizontal scaffolding offered by the teacher. The teacher enables students to conduct an interview from ideas, language and discourse structure.

As for as ideas are concerned, students will read two pieces of reading materials about Hamilton and Shakira. They work in groups of four to select useful information for their interview from the reading materials. That information will be used in

their interview afterwards. Then they will design two or three questions based on the reading material and find out answers to those questions as well. For example, the questions may be like these: As a world-famous singer, what is Shakira's achievement in music? What did Shakira do to help others? When did Shakira start her career of music?

In an interview, the interviewer, interviewee and audience will take turns to speak and make responses as well. So it is essential for students to keep their conversation going well in the interview. In order to help students conduct a smooth conversation, the teacher introduces skills of keeping a conversation going. 1) Ask questions. Questions are not only for starting a conversation, but also for keeping the conversation going. After the first question, ask follow-up questions, especially open-ended questions to make a conversation move forward. 2) Give extra information. When answering questions try to give extra information such as whom you did something with, when and where you did it, how it was. 3) Make comments. It is an effective way to make a conversation partner to go on talking by making comments on what he/she says. Some common expressions are: That sounds great! , Really? , or I don't believe you! By providing the scaffolding students can conduct the interview smoothly and successfully.

In terms of discourse structure, the teacher provides the outline of an interview, the introduction, body and ending. In this way the teacher helps students to learn how to start an interview, what should be done in the middle of an interview and how to end an interview. Besides some common expressions for each part will be presented to help students make a complete interview.

3) Assessing

The assessing step is aimed to evaluate the learning effect of students. Moreover remedial teaching will be given based on common problems in order to improve the quality of students' production. The assessment is both from the teacher and peers of students. When each group presents their interview in the class both students and the teacher will evaluate the work from the following aspects. First, did they use certain speaking skills to keep the conversation going? Second, does each member in the group play their due role during the interview? For example, did the interviewer ask good and relevant questions? Did the interviewed give proper response to those questions? Third, did they conduct a complete interview?

After the presentation of each group one or two students will be asked to make a comment based on the standard given by the teacher. The teacher will also point out the strong points and things to be improved for each group. After all group finished their task, the teacher will evaluate the group work in a general sense. Besides the teacher will give some advice on the common problems of the presentation.

D. Feedback and Suggestions on the Application of POA

1) Feedback of the Teaching Experiment

After the teaching experiment the author reviewed some students and recorded the responses and evaluation from them in order to test the teaching effect and figure out problems that students encountered in the teaching experiment.

The evaluation from students mainly covers the following aspects. To begin with, they consider the class is more interesting and effective. The production task assigned is quite appealing to them and they have the chance to work with their group members and present their work in the class. In the process they practiced their language skills and communication skills. Secondly, students feel they can get more help and feedback from their teacher. In the teaching process a difficult task is divided into smaller ones, which students think enable them to accomplish a task step by step. For each step they can get assistance from their teacher in language, ideas, communication skills, etc. Finally, the teaching experiment enables them to have an active participation in the class. They think the group work makes each member in the group have a share in the discussion and presentation of the production task.

Despite the positive feedback listed above, in interviews that follow the experiment, some students told the author their difficulties in the learning process. For example it's difficult for some students to accomplish the task within the given time, especially those whose English level is relatively low.

2) Suggestions on the application of POA

From the teaching experiment and feedback from students the author had a deeper understanding of POA and summarized the following suggestions.

On the one hand, all tasks should center round the production activities in order to achieve the integration of language learning and language using. When designing learning tasks teachers should choose proper input material and carry out selective learning among students based on learning tasks. And all the tasks are intended for the completion of production activities.

On the other hand, teacher's roles are expected to change elastically and multiply depending on the teaching context. The teacher gets actively involved in the teaching process. They play the role of a facilitator, designer, assessor, helper, etc. Therefore teachers need to shift their roles depending on different teaching situations.

IV. SUMMARY

The author applied the production-oriented approach to design and give an English speaking class. In the teaching practice students feel stimulated to learn English through the completion of a task. They can finish a task with the help from the teacher. After the task they also receive feedback from their peer and the teacher, which made them reflect on their work and make improvement constantly and promptly. From the responses of students the author is convinced this is an effective approach to English learning. Under this approach language learning and use are incorporated in a language task. By doing the task students can not only improve their language proficiency but also their communicative skills and teamwork spirit.

Despite the positive outcome there are still some problems to be solved in further research and teaching practice. For example in a big class with diverse English competence how can the teacher design proper tasks and help the production of languages tasks. Whether the language ability achieved in a

learning task can be transferred to another needs further research.

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