An Overview of Production-oriented Approach

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Abstract: *Production-Oriented Approach is a new language teaching approach that integrates strength of Chinese traditional instructional approaches and Western pedagogy, aiming to tackle problems of input-output separation in language teaching in Chinese universities. More than five years since this approach has been published and many Chinese scholars have applied POA to classroom practice. This paper introduces basic concepts of POA approach, and then make a literature review on its application form, theoretical system, teaching procedures and effectiveness. Finally, three aspects that need further explored in the future are introduced.*

Keywords: Production-oriented approach, Foreign language teaching.

1. Introduction

The production-oriented approach (POA), proposed and improved by Professor Wen Qiufang and her team since year 2015, borrowed ideas from on Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis, and Long's interaction hypothesis, and has been continuously developed into a pedagogical model in improving English classroom instruction at the tertiary level in Mainland China (Wen, 2015). Integrating the strengths of Chinese traditional instructional approaches and Western pedagogy, it is based on the "output-driven-input-approach hypothesis" which engages learners in production. This teaching approach is designed to improve the efficiency of language teaching in Chinese context (Illes, 2018).

After five years of development, many attempts in POA have been made in foreign language teaching and certain results can also be detected statistically. According to the statistics data from CNKI, POA has inspired many TEFL practitioners and researchers (Zhang, W.J., 2020), from 5 journal papers admitted in CNKI in 2015 to 294 papers in 2020. Based on literature review, the paper sorts out literature related to the "Production-oriented Approach" in Chinese EFL classroom on the basis of statistical analysis, and analyzes the current studies in the light of application pattern, theoretical system, teaching procedures and effectiveness, aiming to deepen the understanding of POA theory and to guide foreign language teaching practice.

2. The Production-oriented Approach: Theory

2.1 Teaching Principles

The POA consists of three instructional-related components, namely principles, hypotheses, and procedures. The teaching principles include learning-centered principle, learning-using integration, and whole-person education principle (Wen, 2016a). In learning-centered language teaching, a formal and well-planned school instruction is emphasized in contrast with family education, and teacher's professional role as a designer, organizer, and director of English instruction is highlighted again. Learning-using integration principle means that language input activities seamlessly weld output practices, and thus what has just been learned can be consolidated by using it successively. The principle of whole-person education maintains that language teaching is not only an

instrument, but also a responsibility to cultivate socially-developed and globally-aware citizens (Wen, 2016a). Ways to achieve these goals can be a careful selection of materials and optimized organization of activities.

2.2 Hypotheses

The POA has three teaching hypotheses, namely output-driven, input-enabled, selective learning hypothesis. Output-driven hypothesis reverses the order of learning, regarding productive tasks as both an internal driven force at the beginning and an eventual outcome at the end of the unit (Sun, 2020c). Input-enabled hypothesis maintains that the apposite-chosen materials and delicate-designed activities can allow students to finish tasks that are currently beyond their proficiency level, thus achieving their zones of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Selective-learning hypothesis suggests that the above two hypotheses can only lead to better outcomes if the input is exclusively according to what is needed for productive activities.

2.3 Teaching Procedures

The four hypotheses serve as a theoretical foundation for the three teaching procedures: motivating, enabling, and assessing (Sun, 2020c). As shown in Figure 1, in the initial motivating phase, the teacher describes to-be-finished tasks and ask students to make attempts, and students are expected to find their language gap to complete the required assignment. Identifying the gap(s) arouses students' interests to learn more, and then the teacher explains the learning objectives. In the enabling phase, the teacher selects pertinent material and carefully designs sequential activities to provide scaffolds in the form of language, content, and structure. Sequences in one teaching session are usually progressive, from easy to the difficult ones that require more advanced cognitive and linguistic skills (Qiu, 2017). There are two kinds of assessment in the POA: the instant and delayed assessment. The former one refers to the "ongoing diagnostic and formative assessment" (Wen, 2016a) that occurs in the enabling phase. The latter one is "delayed", and it takes place during the next class based on the students' after-class output. There are internal cycles during each phase, and these three acts form external cycle to perpetual this process. Motivating identifies competency gaps, Enabling fills them, and Assessing adjusts and optimizes teaching strategies, thus setting new Motivating tasks. It also clearly defines the roles of teachers and students and emphasizes that teaching

procedures should be of teacher-guided and teacher-student co-constructed.

Figure 1: Teaching Procedures in POA (Sun, 2020c)

3. Literature Review of Production-oriented Approach

This paper applies “advanced research” in CNKI and Web of Science to literature analysis, by searching key word “production-oriented approach” both in Chinese and English and then screening out SSCI& CSSCI journal articles from July, 2015 to Jan, 2021. Figure 2 shows the number of SSCI journal articles that related to POA.

Figure 2: Number of SSCI & CSSCI journal articles about POA published

3.1 Studies on Application Pattern

The research on application patterns mainly focused on college English teaching such as writing (Zhang, 2017; Zhang & Tao, 2017; Zhang, 2020), listening (Qi & Shi, 2016); courses for English major such as translation and interpretation (Lai & Zhu, 2018); courses in lesser-known languages, such as Germany (Zhan, 2019) and Sinhala (Jiang, 2019). Besides, applications of POA can also be found in teaching Chinese as a second language (Liu, Wang & Xu, 2020; Gui & Ji, 2019; Wen, 2018). This kind of research applies the three key aspects of POA, namely, “motivating”, “enabling”, and “assessing”, to relevant courses, and provides real-life application scenarios with a specific unit as an example, thus clarifying teaching objectives and the specific steps and procedures.

Papers related to the application of POA to college language teaching, courses for English major, and non-universal language courses have been leading a dominant role since Professor Wen introduced this innovative method to academic field. However, ESP courses are relatively rare in both theoretical research or practical applications with only two papers investigating ESP course design framework for engineer students (Du, et al, 2019), and another one on business letter writing (Fan, 2019). The exploration of using POA to teach ESP courses is an emerging attempt, and the

combination of English for Special Purposes and POA should be the focus of research in the next phase.

3.2 Studies on Theoretical System

In 2015, Wen Qiufang first put forward the theoretical framework of POA, and POA has been taking shape by a comprehensive analysis from teaching ideas to teaching procedure. Since then, this theory has undergone rounds of revision through discussion and practices by a few scholars. In the period of 2016-2017, researches mainly focused on the revision of the dialectical relationship between “motivating”, “enabling” and “assessing”, and the refinement of the teaching hypotheses (Wen, 2017b; Zhang, 2017). After two times of revisions, POA’s three teaching components finally form a circular closed loop. Besides, the positive role of “accessing” is affirmed in the teaching process, and Wen Qiufang (2016b) also proposed a new form of “Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment”. In 2017, Wen (2017a) published a paper titled “A theoretical framework for using and evaluating POA-based teaching materials” in Chinese Foreign Language Education. After that, scholars started to try to establish effective principles for textbook compilation and procedures for using POA-based teaching materials in the classroom teaching in order to enhance students’ key competencies through the use of materials. During that time, the research of teaching materials mainly combines POA with the dialectical research paradigm (Bi, 2019; Chang, 2017; Qiu, 2017). Another dimension of studies on theoretical system that worth mentioning is the studies on systematic comparison between POA and other language teaching approaches (Bi, 2019; Deng, 2018; Tang, 2020; Wen & Bi, 2020). The combination of dialectical research paradigm with POA and the distinction between POA and similar foreign language teaching approaches are also important research directions for the future.

3.3 Studies on Teaching Procedures

“Motivating”, “Enabling” and “assessing” are three integrative parts of POA during language teaching classes and studies have been conducted respectively.

First step is “Motivating”. Zhang Lingli (2020) applied theory of motivation to College English teaching practice by adopting dialectal research (DR). With two rounds of motivating practice by using the POA-based textbook *iEnglish*, a clear picture of three steps and their effectiveness in a specific case is given.

Next is “enabling”. A step-by-step design of in practical teaching guided by the POA is provided by Qiu Lin (2017). This article summarizes theoretical principles for the teachers to accomplish such a design, demonstrates them with examples, and verifies effectiveness. It is revealed that the theoretical principles developed from Qiu’s own teaching practice are important and useful for designing effective language activities. These language activities are proved to be beneficial to students. Qiu (2017) further refines the connotations of the indicators of effectiveness of enabling activities. First is precision, whether enabling activities align output goals and address output difficulties; Second is progressivity, that is to say enabling activities should

gradually increase the cognitive difficulty of language processing and decrease teacher scaffolding; Last is diversity. To be specific, enabling activities should be achieved with multi-modality, enriching input modalities and expanding output forms. Later, Qiu (2019) uses a dialectical research paradigm to continuously optimize the theoretical framework of enabling effectiveness. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, Zhang (2017) proposes the principle of “learning zone” in enabling and suggests that “appropriateness” should also be one of the indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of activities. James (2018), from the perspective of learning effectiveness, believes that the judgment of effective enabling is based on the ability to apply the acquired communicative and linguistic skills to similar situations, so “transferability” should also be one of the criteria for evaluating effectiveness.

The third one is “assessing”. Assessing mainly focus on its pattern and attainment of productive objective. According to Sun Shuguang (2020), the Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment (TSCA) is a new method of assessment proposed by Production-oriented Approach (POA) to meet the challenges of teachers’ heavy working pressure in assessing students’ written or oral production. Sun (2020a) proposes important implementing principles in TSCA, they are: a focused and goal-oriented assessment before class, problem-driven in class, recommendations of students’ applaudable work after class. Examples of how to propel TSCA in the POA to achieve the purpose of “assessment being learning” are illustrated in the paper as well.

As for the assessing of attainment of productive objectives, Bi Zheng (2017) evaluates the degree of completion of productive objectives through the use of POA teaching materials. Through focus group interview, classroom observation and analysis of students’ production of 56 freshmen, this paper put forward three indicators of the attainment of productive objectives, namely “The degree of engagement”, “The sense of fulfillment”, and “The quality of students’ production”. Results have shown that these criteria are comprehensive and appropriate.”

3.4 Studies on Effectiveness

Research on the effectiveness of POA has been conducted mainly through controlled experiments, comparing the overall level of English learners, various English skills, and the effectiveness of instruction for students at different levels (Qi & Shi, 2016; Zhang, 2017). Zhang (2017) found that through one semester POA teaching experiment, it significantly improved students’ listening, speaking and writing skills, but decreased reading skills; POA had the greatest improvement for intermediate and high levels English learners, and students’ motivation to learn was explicitly increased. The application of POA to English teaching can also improve students’ optional English output and oral English output to some extent (Qi & Shi, 2016). Apart from these benefits, POA can also enhance students’ humanistic quality such as critical thinking skills and intercultural compacity, which exactly correspond with whole-person education principle of POA. POA is beneficial to unlock students’ potential of language learning, and help cultivate students’ humanistic quality and thinking ability. However, from the research present, the forthcoming challenge in the future is how POA can

effectively improve English reading skills and how to develop effective activities for low-level English learners.

4. Future of Production-oriented Approach

4.1 ESP and POA

Teaching English for Special Purpose is an extension of common college English teaching, and it is an important teaching approach to further develop students’ language ability. In other words, only by extending college English teaching to ESP teaching can we truly cultivate talents needed in the society (Cai, 2004). ESP combines specific disciplines with English and aims to develop learners’ ability to use English to solve specialized problems. Qin Xiubai (2003) outlines the principle of authenticity in ESP teaching, that is, the content of the materials comes from the authentic scenarios and the activities inside and outside the classroom should reflect the socio-cultural context. The main feature of ESP is Authentic texts together with authentic tasks (Coffey, 1984). This is in line with POA’s teaching philosophy of developing students’ ability to produce “authentic, potentially communicative” tasks. Liu Fagong (2001) summarizes main characteristics of English for Special Purposes. First, the learner has a clear purpose, for example, the ability to use English within a professional discipline is more prominent. Second, teaching content is often specialized. When it comes to the use of POA, “selective learning hypothesis” and “learning-using integration principle” can also develop students’ ability to use English as a medium for communication in specialized disciplines. Table 1 reveals the compatibility of POA and ESP approach.

Table 1: Compatibility of POA and ESP

	ESP	POA
Teaching Objective	English as medium for specialized disciplines	realistic and obtainable communicative and linguistic objectives
Teaching Material	Authentic text	relevance rather than matching, relevant ideas for production activity
Motivation	Clear purpose to learn English	Output-driven with students’ inner driving force
Activities	Specialized words, syntax	Selective learning, goal-driven, problem solving

From the table we can tell that ESP attaches great importance to students’ ability to “use” English, manifesting the combination of professionalism and practicality. Meanwhile, ESP is highly compatible with Learning-using integration principle (LUIP) of POA, and it can be integrated with POA in training program, syllabus, textbook development and curriculum design in the future.

4.2 Task-based Language Teaching and POA

Since Production-oriented approach (POA) has been proposed, one of the most frequently-asked questions is “To what extent is POA different from task-based language teaching?” (Wen & Bi, 2020) POA and task-based language teaching have natural similarities and are easily confused. Deng (2018) compares POA with task-based language teaching in terms of pedagogical principle, hypotheses and procedures of Task-based Language Teaching with those of Production-oriented Approach, and pointed out the advantages of POA. It has been found that, both approaches

highlight the principles of “whole person education” and “learning by doing, but they hold different view on “learning-centered learning” or “student-centered learning”. As for teaching hypotheses, both of them value the effect of input and output, but TBLT emphasizes more on output with less attention to input, but POA maintains input-output integrated. In teaching procedures, two approaches attach different importance to assessment on learning. Based on the comparison, this article argues for three strengths of Production-oriented Approach. Similar results can also be found in Tang (2020)’s research, this paper holds that POA is suitable for China’s English teaching, and reasons lies in that POA motivates students to learn more, and students are more likely to gain a sense of fulfillment. However, in Wen Qiufang (2020)’s latest paper on this topic, although she makes comparison between POA and TBLT from the basic unit of teaching, the teaching syllabus and materials, and teaching procedures, she reaches to a conclusion that there is a lack of suitable methods to compare the effectiveness of these two approaches. Besides, such a comparison is not necessary, as each method has its own specific use. Since language teaching is a complex system, teachers are advised to choose the reasonable part of these two approaches that suits their teaching goals and apply it to classroom practice.

4.3 Assessing and POA

The Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment (TSCA) is a new method of assessment proposed by the Production-oriented Approach (POA) to tackle the challenges of teachers’ heavy workloads in assessing students’ written or oral production (Sun, 2020a). However, few studies up to date have illustrated guiding principles of TSCA (Sun, 2020a, 2020b). A study has justified its effectiveness of TSCA before, in and after class, saying that whole assessment is focused and goal-oriented and it is a carefully planned systematic assessment. Studies on TSCA in POA are still to be explored, and future studies can also dig into assessment catering to students’ individual differences while focusing on the common problem. Besides, since assessment is mainly based on appropriateness and achievement of output goals, specific characteristics of indicators for evaluation also need to be further refined.

5. Conclusion

This study reviewed POA-related studies in China from 2015-2020. It focuses on the analysis of current research, and puts forward some aspects that need further illustration. Lots of efforts have been made by Chinese scholars to make extensive explanations on what has already been known about the POA and give insight to teachers on how to design POA-based activities and how to optimize L2 teaching for students at the tertiary level with real-life instructions (Sun, 2020c). As for future research orientation, this paper concluded that POA is suitable to be applied in ESP teaching and more detailed ESP classroom design is needed. What’s more, although featuring natural similarity, task-based language teaching and POA are not comparable, might as well say there are no available means to make comparison at least for now. In terms of assessing activities, TSCA is a newly-developing perspectives that needs to be refined. Overview of these studies show anticipative and bright future

in improving language education in China. POA in China is ever-growing and these articles serve as useful guidance, arousing researchers’ interest in adopting POA, and can hopefully trigger continued practical and theoretical discussion to maximize the effectiveness of university language teaching.

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