

An Experimental Study of College English Teaching under the Production-Oriented Approach in NCEPU

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Abstract-*This study examines the effectiveness of production-oriented approach in college English reading and writing teaching. Sixty-eight students in their first-year study participated in this study. They were assigned the control group (CG, thirty-four students from the discipline of power engineering) and the experimental group (EG, thirty-four students from the discipline of electronic engineering). Pre-test indicated no significant difference between CG and EG in terms of reading and writing performance. During the teaching experiment, the two groups were taught under the traditional teaching approach and POA respectively. Subsequent post-test revealed that CG showed significant increase in reading skills as compared to EG, and that no significant difference was found between CG and EG in writing scores, but EG in general did much better in word choices, content and structure in writing. Possible reasons for the findings are explained and further suggestions for implementing POA effectively are put forward.*

Keywords- *Production-Oriented Approach; College English; Teaching Effectiveness*

1. INTRODUCTION

Level-based college English instruction could neither stimulate students' interest in English learning nor meet the demands and requirements of students in North China Electric Power University (NCEPU). (Ren, 2016; Ren and Wang, 2018a) To regain some students' interest in English learning and possibly develop interests among others, we introduced the Production-oriented Approach (POA) (Wen, 2015, 2016, 2017) into our college English classes and carried out reforms with regard to teaching objectives, teaching materials, teaching methods and assessment. (Ren, 2017; Ren & Wang, 2018b, 2018c, 2018e) The motivation behind this teaching reform is that POA-related experimental studies have indicated effectiveness of POA in college English teaching (Zhang, W.J., 2015, 2016, 2017; Zhang, L.L. . 2017; Chang, 2017). For example, the study conducted by Zhang, L.L. (2017) indicated that experimental group (EG) showed significant increase in listening and writing skills though significant decrease in reading skill in comparison with that of the control group (CG). The survey by Zhang, W.J. (2016) indicated that both students and co-workers had positive feedback toward this new teaching approach. In her recent study, Zhang, W.J. (2017) experimented on college students' English writing quality under POA. The result showed that while no significant differences were found in the global, the experiment group outscored the control group in respects of content, structure and language; and that the experiment group's writing production contain more newly-taught target linguistic items than that of the control group. These studies seemingly offer empirical evidence for us to

conduct teaching reforms in college English teaching under POA.

In view of the empirical studies aforementioned and taking into consideration the reality of our college English instruction, we carried out the English teaching reform in NCEPU. Our teaching experiment lasted for a semester. (Ren and Wang, 2018c) Our previous study has indicated that POA is effective in stimulating students' motivation in college English learning (Ren and Wang, 2018d).

The aim of this study was to confirm that POA could improve students' writing performance compared with the traditional teaching method. This study also aims to investigate the effect of POA on students' reading proficiency. According to the previous studies, it was found that POA is effective in improving students' writing (Zhang, W.J., 2017; Zhang, L.L., 2017) while may cause students' reading skills to decline (Zhang, L.L., 2017). Based on these findings, it is hypothesized that POA could bring more positive effects to students' writing and may not be so effective to cultivate students' reading skills.

The research questions to be addressed from this research are the following:

- (1) Could POA improve students' reading proficiency in comparison to traditional teaching approach?
- (2) Could POA improve students' writing proficiency in comparison to traditional teaching approach?

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were sixty-eight first-year students from two college English classes in the spring semester of 2017 in NCEPU. They represented two different discipline areas of electronic engineering and power engineering.

Students of power engineering (Class one) were assigned to the control group instructed under traditional teaching approach and those from electronic engineering (Class two) were assigned to the experimental group instructed under POA. Each class consisted of thirty students respectively. Pre-test revealed that the two classes were not different in reading and writing proficiency level, $p=.291$ and $p=.508$ respectively. In the final statistical analysis, all of the sixty-eight students' data were examined.

2.2 Materials and Instruments

We selected for our reading and writing instruction the New Standard College English, which was published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing, China in 2016. The reasons for choosing this course book were as follows. To begin with, this course book opens a window for students to learn about different cultures, traditions and customs and values due to its diversity of reading materials, which are classified according to themes and offer different perspectives toward a specific issue. The obvious advantage is that students could, by analyzing different points of view toward a specific topic, form critical ideas toward the questions in discussion and possibly enhance their language proficiency in the process of presenting their own perspectives. In addition, by presenting the materials that explore the relationship between human beings, nature and society, students could raise their social awareness and become whole persons. The pre-test aims to measure the participants' reading and writing proficiency. As for reading, four reading passages were selected from the nationwide English tests. Each passage was provided with five multiple-choice questions. Participants were required to select from these choices the ones they believed to be most appropriate for the questions raised. As for writing, the participants were required to write a short essay on the theme of teacher-student relationship. Their writing was rated on choices of words, structure, clarity, and coherence.

In order to compare the learning results of the two groups, we designed a test with reading and writing materials in the post-test. To guarantee the reliability and validity of our test, the materials were selected from the nationwide English Tests for college English learners. It was composed of two sections: the first section was made up of four reading passages. These reading materials are meant for cultural element understanding. For each passage there were five multiple-choice questions. Students were required to choose the choices they believe were the best answers. The primary aim of this part is to, by means of these questions, test students' mastery of critical reading

skills, such as synthesis, analysis, inference, deduction and evaluation.

The second section was writing. Students were required to write a short essay on the theme of Christian Love and Confucian Love. Their writing was rated on choices of words, sentences, structure, clarity, and coherence.

2.3 Procedure

The teaching experiment consisted of pretest, the main session and the post-test. All the sessions were held during the regular class time and in the regular classroom with the cooperation of an instructor in charge of the two classes in spring semester of 2017.

Before we began our teaching experiment, the pre-test was administered to test whether the two groups were different in reading and writing proficiency level. In the main session, the two groups were instructed under different approaches, with the control group taught under the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) while the reference group the traditional teaching approach.

Table 1. Differences in teaching approaches employed in this study

	Teaching Approaches	
	Traditional approach	POA
Selection of teaching materials	Course book	Course book+ relevant materials from websites or others sources
Means of teaching	Lecturing, occasional student participation	Student-learning centered, discussion, presentation
Role of instructors	The leading role	The mediating role
Role of students	Passive	Active
Emphasis of language input	Yes	Yes
Emphasis of language output	Not really	Yes

To be specific, at the beginning of each unit, students from the control group are required to discuss some questions on a certain topic. The motivation behind this discussion is to stimulate interest and relate to the topics they are dealing with. These questions may not be difficult, so that students could get involved in the class activities as quickly as possible. During the learning period, students are asked to master the language points, structure and main ideas of a

text. In order to achieve this purpose, teachers led the classroom activities by illustrating the key words with example sentences and putting forth a number of questions concerning the text structure and main ideas. Students are expected to respond to these questions by utilization of relevant reading skills.

Students from the experimental group were required to brainstorm the possible answers to questions concerning the Chinese tradition and culture. These questions may be a little challenging yet not beyond their capacity. The underlying reason is that students could, in doing so, be aware of the possible difficulties in cultural knowledge and proper use of English or possibly great demand of English vocabulary. This may stimulate students' desire to acquire new knowledge in order to fill the gap between what they expect to output and what they could actually do. During the learning stage, students are presented with a series of reading materials apart from the text book. They are required to find the words and expressions as well as sentence patterns that could be used to complete their output tasks. They are also required to select from the reading materials the relevant information concerning their output tasks, and by means of synthesis analysis and evaluation, form their own ideas toward the questions in their output tasks. The teaching psychology behind this practice is to encourage students to put what is learnt into practical use.

In the post-test, the two groups were examined to test whether significant differences could be found in their reading and writing level.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

The test papers were collected after both pretest and posttest and were then scored by the researcher and the instructor. With respect to reading materials of both the pretest and the posttest, a correct answer for each multiple-choice question received a score of 2 while the wrong answer or no response would be given zero point. Therefore, a maximum score per participant was 40 points (20 multiple-choice items *2 points).

With regard to the writing assignment, the participants' essays were scored by both the researcher and the instructor with regard to their choices of words, sentences structure, clarity and coherence. Scores from both the researcher and the instructor were then averaged, and these average scores would be the final ones for the essays of the participants. The maximum score per participant was 15 points.

The statistics were then entered into Excel for data analysis. One-way ANOVA was conducted at the level of .05 to examine the difference between the two groups with respect to the dependent variables.

2.5 Results and Discussion

The first aim of the study was to investigate the effect of POA on students' reading performance. One-way ANOVA revealed significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the two groups in reading performance with the control group

significantly better than the Experimental group. According to table 2, the mean scores for the control group was higher than the experimental group on the variable of reading, with the mean score for the control group 26.36, ($sd=3.38$) and the mean score for the experimental group 23.83, ($sd=5$). This indicated that the control group did better than the experimental group in reading. And this difference reached significance. This result seems to indicate that POA may not be that effective in improving students' reading performance compared with the traditional teaching approach. This finding is consistent with what Zhang, L.L. (2017) found out in her study on the effectiveness of POA. According to her study, POA may cause students' reading skills to decline.

Table 2. Summary of post-test results

Dimensions	Group	N	Mean	SD	P-value
Reading	Control Group	34	26.76	3.38	0.003855
	Experimental group	34	23.83	5	
	Total	68			
Writing	Control Group	34	9.49	2.31	0.4751963
	Experimental Group	34	9.09	2.25	
	Total	68			

The possible reason may be that students mainly pay attention to the information that is required for the output tasks, including the content, language items and structures in selective reading, while taking no notice of the analysis of discourse structure and difficult sentences.

The second aim of the study was to explore the effect of POA on students' writing performance. One-way ANOVA showed no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between the two groups in writing performance. As can be seen from table 2, the mean scores for the control group was slightly higher than the experimental group on the variable of writing, with the mean score for the control group 9.49, ($sd=2.31$) and the mean score for the experimental group 9.09, ($sd=2.25$). However, this difference did not reach significance.

While no significant differences were shown in the global in writing performance, the experimental group performs much better than the control group with regard to words, content and structure. This finding was also consistent with what Zhang, W.J. (2017) had indicated in her study on the effect of the production-oriented approach on college students' English writing quality. In her study, the "content", the "structure" scores of the writing and the "language" of the experiment group significantly outscored that of the control group; in addition, there were more newly-taught target linguistic items in the writing production of the experiment group than that of the control

group. The sample essay in the Appendix can be served as an example.

The possible explanation may be that by putting emphasis on output tasks, teachers divert students' attention from their traditional way of English learning, and guide the students to focus their attention on the words, structures and the ideas essential for the completion of output tasks. And this can be accountable for from the perspective of noticing hypothesis (Schmidt 1990, 1995, 2001). This hypothesis proposed that for learners to learn some aspects of language, they must consciously notice them for any subsequent processing. That is, noticing on the part of the learner is necessary for input to be intake. By focusing their attention on the linguistic items necessary for the output tasks, students would make conscious efforts to put these linguistic items into practical use.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to investigate the effect of POA on college English learners' reading and writing performance. The finding of this study indicates that POA may not be that effective in improving students' reading performance in comparison with the traditional teaching approach. In addition, the finding seems to suggest that POA may be a better choice in improving students' writing quality compared with the traditional teaching approach in that POA could stimulate students to make conscious efforts to put what is learned from the reading materials, be it new words, ideas, structures, into their own writing practice. Based on these findings, in order to enhance students' reading, it seems that the teachers might as well adopt the constructive dimensions from traditional teaching approach, such as the emphasis on text structure analysis and the drill of reading skills. These dimensions could facilitate students' global understanding and understanding of detailed information of a given text. In order to improve students' writing quality, we could introduce POA into our classroom instruction since it is especially effective in focusing students' attention on the information that is required for the completion of the output tasks.

Regarding the limitations of this study, further research is necessary. First, because this study was small in scale, it would be imprudent to generalize its finding too broadly. Next, further studies are needed to investigate the long-term effects of POA on students' reading and writing performance.

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