

An Empirical Research of Teaching English/Chinese Interpreting on Production-Oriented Approach

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Abstract

Core teaching theory proposed by Production-Oriented Approach (POA) is coherent with teaching goals of college English/Chinese interpreting course. POA has significant effect on improving the situation of “separation from learning to application”. This article reports a teaching experiment based on POA showing the teaching design and detailed teaching process, aiming to establish a systemized and dynamic teaching model. Questionnaires and interviews were collected and conducted as the major data. There were also discussions and reflections on the teaching experiment.

Keywords

English/Chinese Interpreting, POA, empirical research, teaching experiment.

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to change the status quo of English/Chinese interpreting class in China, namely, “more attention on teaching and less on practicing” and “more emphasis on language learning and less on communicative competence”. Chinese scholars have been working very hard to explore a more efficient teaching methodology to solve the problem of “separation from learning to application” in English class. Production-Oriented Approach (POA) is a pedagogical innovation in ELT field based on the theory of second language acquisition, aiming to improve the efficiency of college English class. As a localized theory in China, POA advocates the combination of input learning and output application. After years of practice and development, POA has formed a complete theoretical system and draw wide attention from experts and teachers in China. For the past several years, an increasing number of domestic English teachers have made continuous attempts to employ this theory into teaching process.

However, there are few empirical studies describing the details and effect of POA theory application. Even less is known about the training approach, teachers’ beliefs and students’ response to this theory. Based on this, this article reports a one-semester experiment which applied this theory into college English/Chinese interpreting class.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Interpreting Teaching Research

Interpreting teaching research in western countries covers four major areas, basic curricular setting issues (Gile,2001;Pöchhacker,2004), student selection(Pöchhacker,2004), interpreting performance assessment (Pöchhacker, 2004) and teaching methods for developing interpreter’s skills (Mackintosh, 1995; Gile, 1984).

While in China, interpreting class was just an assisting course set to improve foreign language skills in the last decade of the 20th century. Until 21st century, interpreting teaching has been developing rapidly. Research on interpreting teaching mainly involved interpreting skills training, little research has been done on areas like interpreting teaching syllabus, contents and teaching/learning methods.

2.2. Production-Oriented Approach

In traditional teacher-centered approach, teachers take the lead, and then students follow. In learner-centered teaching, students are no longer passive receivers of knowledge; instead, they are “active participants in learning and co-constructors of knowledge” (Meece, 2003)

Under the direction of three teaching hypotheses of “output-driven”, “input-enabled” and “selective learning”, Chinese scholar Wen Qiufang, a professor from Beijing Foreign Studies University, put forward a truly novel method—Production-Oriented Approach, namely, POA. As a localized theory, POA meant to fit well with English teaching environment in China. POA theory is composed of three phases--motivating, enabling and assessing, in which the teacher plays an important role of mediation.

2.3. Need Analysis

Needs Analysis (NA) was well established in the mid-1970s when learner-centered approaches to language teaching were gaining popularity. NA is a vital prerequisite for developing a course because it forms a rational basis for all the other components of a systematic language curriculum” (Iwai et al, 1999). Its importance in curriculum design has been widely recognized (Yalden, 2000; Brown, 2001; Hutchinson & Waters, 2002).

A well accepted definition of NA was given by Brown (2001). He defined NA as “the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students”. In this definition, “learning needs” means “a gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state” (Berwick, 1989). Simply put, they are “the gap between what is and what should be” (Brindley, 1989)

3. METHODOLOGY

The author attempted to apply POA theory into interpreting class and carried out one-semester teaching experiment in ZISU. ZISU is a provincial university, and in China a large majority of universities are run by provincial governments (Wang 2008). There are two types of interpreting course in ZISU. One is for English majors and the other is for non-English majors. The present study is concerned with the latter one. All participants are sophomores from one class, altogether there are 36 people. The teaching experiment lasted for 16 weeks, with 2 hours each week. The whole teaching processes were videoed. Peer colleagues were invited to observe the teaching process from time to time. In the same time, students were required to write reflective diaries once a week. After the experiment ended, open-ended questionnaires were collected among the students and peer teachers. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with teachers who observed the teaching process.

Research Questions:

1. Whether or not POA pedagogy is efficient in improving college students’ interpreting performance?
2. Are there any difficulties when carrying out POA pedagogy among class? For students? For teachers?

3.1. Research Design

Interpreting skills include competence in source language comprehension, working memory, note taking, attention allocation, pressure handling and language transition skills. It’s a complex set of skills. Only when an interpreter handles all the above-mentioned skills, can he/she converse source language into target language smoothly and efficiently. In light of this, interpreting skills training is the core content of interpreting teaching. In addition, the activity of interpreting also serves the function of cross-cultural communication, thus an interpreter

also should have a good knowledge of cultural background information and basic communicative strategies to cope with cultural related issues. Last but not least, good mental quality is also an important guarantee for successfully carrying out an interpreting task. To summarize, a diversified dynamic interpreting training model should at least cover the following areas: input comprehension training, output expression training, context analysis training, cross-cultural knowledge building and mental quality training.

Based on what we talked above, my interpreting training model mainly talks about two aspects: basic interpreting skills training and specialized training. The former one includes note taking, memory training, and attention allocation training, and so on. The latter one means concentrated training such as sight interpreting, numbers interpreting, idioms interpreting, etc. Under the guidance of “Motivating, enabling and assessing”, my interpreting teaching class could be divided into three periods, “before class——on class——after class”, with an effort to create an authentic scene by using videos and recordings of international conferences, providing students with multiple observing and practicing opportunities. In order to gain a better understanding of the source language, students mobilized all available nonverbal factors like intonation, postures etc. In the meantime, they made every effort to organize their expressions for better reaching the audience. For different teaching content and contexts, the teacher meant to establish an interpreting resource library and create an authentic interpreting atmosphere by using integrated teaching method of words, graphs, audios and internet. Meanwhile, various output tasks with direct and clear features were also set up at different links, creating enough possibilities for bringing out students’ potential into full play. Teaching design based on POA theory laid much emphasis on cultivating students’ interpreting competence in real situations and improving output efficiency. Thus it helped to realize transition from teacher-centered training mode to a learner-centered one.

3.2. Research Process

Apart from interpreting skills, interpreters should also possess qualified intercultural communicative competence and rich background knowledge. Thus interpreting teaching should accomplish its dual goals of language using ability and cross cultural communication competence. For language goals, students should not only have a good command of vocabulary, expressions, language structures and terms that are required in finishing interpreting tasks, but also master tactics and strategies like conversion, addition, omission, domestication, foreignization, etc. For cultural goals, students should cultivate cross cultural consciousness and abilities to deal with cultural differences.

The teaching goal of POA should start with input which aims at mobilizing students’ initiative and end with productive output. Following the procedure of “mobilizing—enabling—assessing”, this article will elaborate specific teaching procedures from three phases.

Phase 1. Mobilizing

At the beginning of the semester, the practitioner presuppose possible interpreting interactive scenes and design mobilizing tasks with potential interactive values according to a certain topic, establish systematic interpreting resource including text resources, audio resources and video resources. Here text resources mainly refer to related teaching materials, for example, conference speech notes, interview manuscript and encyclopedia knowledge on the internet. Press conferences, conference speaking, celebrity interviews, teachers’ demo classes are all video resources. Based on teaching goals and students’ knowledge reserve, the teacher selected practicing material in different interpreting genres (consecutive interpreting, liaison interpreting etc), fields(economics, finance, international communication etc.) and scenes(opening ceremony, press conference, business negotiation etc), conducting interpreting training in different steps, and upload theme-related vocabulary, expressions or terms to the

teaching platforms. In this phase, students should preview learning materials and search for related background knowledge by themselves.

When designing mobilizing tasks, the teacher should fully allow for students' language levels and cognitive abilities. Tasks should not only be challenging but also be attainable after learning. Sometimes tasks should be set according to different levels. Based on the given topic, students were guided to imagine all kinds of possibilities and difficulties when accomplishing the interpreting task. During this process, students realized their deficiency in language skills or communicative competence and feel the sense of hunger to study. Soon afterwards, the teacher assigned specific tasks for the students: 1. To introduce China's places of interest to foreign delegations. 2. To introduce Chinese cuisine and traditions to foreign tourists. The teacher analyzed steps to do the task, and organized interpreting practice among students in pairs. Students then selected information to fulfill the task and uploaded their performance videos to the platforms after class. The teacher also made micro-videos about related interpreting skills used in the task and uploaded the micro-videos to the teaching platforms too. During the mobilizing phase, students tasted the sense of hunger and aroused their enthusiasm and desire to study.

Phase 2. Enabling

Enabling is a key step in POA teaching procedure. According to the teaching goals of cross-cultural interpreting course, the teacher designed output enabling task of simulating different characters. During class hours, the whole class was divided into several groups, with 3-4 members in each group playing the roles of foreign tourists, Chinese tourist guide, interpreters. The teacher always played the role of mediator, not only assigning tasks or inspecting tasks, but also played the role of scaffolding. The teacher selected suitable input material, guided students to processing the material and filled the shortage of students' tasks. After the task finished, the teacher played on-site interpreting videos. Students then compared their performance between training videos and onsite practicing videos and came to a better understanding of their shortage in language and skills. After finishing a couple of enabling tasks, students felt more desired to make up for their shortage.

POA interpreting teaching procedure always takes teachers as the scaffold and students as the major learning body. Teachers provide a large amount of enabling material, accompanied by a couple of output tasks. By following carefully designed training route, students absorb and internalize input material and converse it into actual output abilities. High-intensity, multi-task output training will promote students to use language creatively and accomplish the teaching goals. During three stages of "before class—on class—after class", students realized the unification of learning, internalizing and automating interpreting abilities. With the help of scaffolding from the teacher, students strengthened their attention and participation for learning language, skills and cultural knowledge, realized all-round development in various dimensions of language, culture and interaction.

Phase 3. Assessing

The assessment of output could help teachers understand teaching effect and help students know about their performance. Thus it is an indispensable link in POA teaching procedure. In the beginning, teachers put forward the judging rules and her own comments. Then students joined in the discussion about judging criteria and later they commented in groups about their own performance and others', and offered advice. In simulated interpreting training, the teacher at first showed authentic videos and then asked students to do interpreting tasks by turns. And later played students' performance videos one after another, with each one simultaneously played with the authentic videos. In that case, students could evaluate their own performance by reference to the professional interpreters' performance. At last, teachers praised their efforts for attaining the task, pointed out the inappropriate behaviors in their

performance, and carried out corrective teaching regarding their mistakes. Students then took remedial actions before proceeding to the following task. In this dimensional teaching model of “before class—on class—after class”, teacher’s comments were of great importance. She uploaded assessment to the teaching platform, made effective convergence to the following mobilizing task and motivated students to refine their interpreting performance. After several rounds of practice and feedback, students achieved significant achievement in their output production. They not only mastered the vocabulary, phrases, and terms appropriately, but also use interpreting strategies proficiently. As a consequence, students gained great confidence after one semester’s training.

All in all, POA teaching theory brought out a brand new way of thinking for improving interpreting teaching efficiency by combining simulated training and authentic practice.

4. Data Collection

After teaching experiment, the researcher conducted questionnaire survey among class and held semi-structured interviews. Altogether there were 36 questionnaires distributed among the class. 33 of them were collected and two peer teachers accepted the interview.

4.1. Feedback from Students

According to the questionnaire results, students generally benefit from POA pedagogy. There was 91% of them (30/33) said they improved a lot in linguistic knowledge, interpreting skills and cross-cultural consciousness. One student wrote in the comment, “Our teacher disassembled the interpreting task into different stages, with specific goals in each stage. Tasks are always challenging, arousing our interest and cultivating our strain capacity.”

A large majority of students hold positive attitudes towards the teaching method. They considered teaching content useful, challenging, and appealing. They also learned how to cope with stress and emergency. Learning effect has been improved significantly.

4.2. Feedback from Peer Teachers

There were two peer teachers (L and S) accepted semi-structured interviews after the semester ended, with each interviews lasting for 30-40 minutes. According to the manuscript transcribed from interview recordings, both teachers hold positive attitudes toward POA pedagogy. L teacher said, “Under the guidance of POA pedagogy, teaching goals has been set up very clearly, with the output production as the principle line. Each stage has a certain task, with each task equipped with corresponding input material. Students’ initiatives were brought into full play.” Teacher S said, “Challenging tasks has aroused students’ learning interest, grasped students’ attention. Students could keep alert throughout class period”

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Benefit from POA Teaching Practice

The teaching procedure of “mobilizing—enabling—assessing” aroused students’ positive emotional experience. Mobilizing tasks aroused students’ desire to learn. Simulating on-site practice created authentic interactive settings. Output tasks with interactive values made students feel the practicability of teaching material and mobilized their initiatives. The mediating function of teachers lowered students’ sense of anxiety when completing tasks and endows them with confidence and self-recognition. This has proved again that emotional factors matter a lot in foreign language teaching. Positive emotional experience is the main advantage of POA pedagogy.

Information technology has created favorable conditions for carrying out POA based interpreting teaching innovation. There are a great variety of internet resources which

broadened students' and teachers' horizon, optimized teaching content and format, broke time limitations of traditional course setting and improved students' participation to a large extent.

5.2. Problems existed in POA Teaching Practice

When applying POA teaching theory, the author noticed that all the task designing, material selection, and instant comment of the output links are very challenging. However, the biggest challenge lies in the transition of teaching idea. Teachers should provide more targeted and instructional input, follow the rule of step-by-step process, and strike a balance between teachers' function of scaffolding and students' independence.

6. SUMMARY

POA, as a localized theory, enlightens college English teachers in Chinese context. Guided by POA teaching theory, the author adopted total novel teaching process of "mobilizing—enabling—assessing", transformed college English/Chinese interpreting class and received satisfactory feedback. However, there's still limitation to the current research in learning objects, data collecting method, and teaching process designing. For future research, there should be more participants for teaching experiment and conclusions should be verified in a much more variety of learning environment.

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